

Non Human 101

Chapter 101: To Teach the Willing

Renn's blows were heavy. The kind of heavy that would let her win most confrontations purely because of the strength behind her attacks.

Most wouldn't be able to block them. Then once you add into the fact that no man, or woman, would ever expect such heavy blows from someone who looked so young...

I blocked another swing. This time she had aimed for my left thigh. "Tsk," she complained as she hurried to attack again, smiling all the while she did so.

Yes. She would be deadly. Even hardened warriors, people who spent most their lives on the battlefield, would be caught unaware. Even if one of them had just witnessed her kill a comrade, by cleaving him in two—armor and all, they'd still not properly prepare for the level of strength behind her blows.

After all how could they? Not only was her strength impossible for a human, she looked far too thin. Too small. Too weak.

Her appearance would be very useful to her, if she was willing to abuse it.

Blocking a quick stab to my chest, I slid my own blade along hers and sidestepped. Usually I'd give her a harsh lesson in following through so deeply, by delving the end of my own pommel into her face or stomach... But instead I just let her rush past me as I stepped aside.

She and I separated. For the first time in several minutes. That had been the longest confrontation yet, she had done nearly thirty swings that time.

Renn huffed as she slowly turned back around; staring at me with a look that told me she had realized her mistake.

"You could have hurt me," she said.

"Killed you," I corrected her. That was usually why those who taught in such situations would cause pain. The kind that made people never forget. The kind that made one never make the same mistake twice.

But I could neither hurt her to that level... nor did it seem I needed to.

Renn shifted a little, letting the point of her blade lower a bit. Not entirely, not all the way... She kept it pointed towards my stomach.

She had already learned not to let the sword fall out of position. The moment she did I'd charge forward, raising my speed and the strength behind my assault. As to punish her instincts.

Usually it took a handful of times before people realized it. She had understood on the first.

"How do you make my sword slide along yours so easily? Whenever I try that, yours skids to a stop," she asked.

"You're not accustomed to how much strength you're supposed to be using yet. Don't let it bother you, that will take time," I told her.

"Time..." she mumbled. She's started to notice a lot of my answers were rounding back to that.

It seemed to annoy her. But... it was the truth.

She could be a warrior. And not just because of her innate strength.

She was perceptive. She noticed the smallest things, and oddly did so very well. She noticed it when I shifted even just a little. She noticed it when I changed where my blade pointed, even if it was only the difference of a twitch of a thumb or finger.

It was undoubtedly thanks to her bloodline. Her ears let her hear what most couldn't dream of. Her eyes took in everything, and she was quick enough to process it and also react to it too. Her reflexes were

nearly as shocking as her strength. If she ever figured out how to harness them properly and combine them...

The woman before me would, if given the time and wasn't killed on her first true battlefield... could become a great warrior. A phenomenal one.

A better one than Yangli, even. Which would make Lilly all the more adamant about adding her to her flock.

Honestly I was glad. Yet at the same time...

"What's wrong?" Renn asked. She must have noticed my worry.

"Nothing," I said as I wiped my emotions off my face.

"Yes there is... What'd I do? I can't learn if you don't tell me what I did wrong," Renn glanced at herself, looking at her feet. She must have instinctively felt that her stance was wrong.

That was another reason to praise her. How many could understand so much in so little time? And do so just by feel alone?

Maybe she was a prodigy. At least of the blade. Would it carry over into other weapons? If her instincts could flow into the spear, or any other weapon...

Plus...

"Give yourself a moment. Catch your breath," I told her right as she stepped forward, to retry in her efforts to hit me.

Renn blinked, but nodded.

She stood up a little straighter, and I watched her ears twitch and adjust as she hefted the sword again. This time she kept it pointed a little lower than usual, but still high enough that I'd not attack her over it.

Did she realize her ears moved so much when she was focused? I could see the way she was trying to shift her body... looking for what was the most comfortable way to stand. Every so often she moved a foot, or shifted an elbow.

Her tail oddly didn't twitch much, at least in comparison to her ears. But I had also noticed she kept her tail a little too pointedly straight the entire time. She must be consciously keeping it as far away from the sword she held, and my own, as possible.

Smart, but I was going to have to get her to make that second nature. In time.

"Raise the sword a little," I told her.

She did.

"Point it forward a bit more. And bring it out a little farther," I stepped up to her and pulled up on one of the quillons, to help guide her to the correct height.

Renn's ears twitched a little oddly as I stood next to her, studying her.

I nodded at her as I stepped away. She still needed a lot of work, but honestly for her first time this was very... impressive.

If I had seen her amongst the trainees a lifetime ago, I would have picked her out to join my personal detachment.

Blinking away such thoughts, I nodded. "How long do you think you could stand like that?" I asked her. I needed to focus on the now. Plus I needed to keep myself from thinking of her as I would a soldier under my command.

That'd be dangerous. For not just her, but myself. For the Society.

"Like this...? I'm not sure. Hours for sure," she said.

"Let's find out, then," I said.

Renn didn't like the sound of that, but I was serious.

I watched her for a good moment, and slowly her ears and tail slowed in their twitching. Her stiffness died, and she eventually became natural. She stood up straight. Her eyes forward, her breathing even.

She looked as calm standing there, holding up that sword, as she would just standing and walking around town.

Walking around her, I studied the woman before me. The way she stood... the muscles coiling beneath now somewhat sweaty clothes.

After a few times around her, I nodded and took up a stance right next to her. On her left.

She glanced at me, but hurried to look away. As if she thought I'd yell at her if she lost focus for even a moment.

I hefted the sword and mimicked her stance perfectly. It was a little difficult, since she held the sword with both hands... and our frames weren't alike at all, but I managed it.

Renn didn't say anything as she studied me, and I slowly did the same as she.

I calmed myself. I loosed my muscles. I relaxed.

Renn gulped for some reason, but I ignored her as I stared forward. I picked a random tree, and kept my sword pointed at it. As if in waiting for it to charge at me.

And then I waited.

And waited.

Minutes turned into an hour. Then another. And the whole time, Renn stayed standing still right alongside me.

Renn's tail bumped me a few times, but each time it did she hurriedly moved it. She hadn't done so intentionally.

I focused on her breathing, and the way it sometimes changed. Every so often she took a deeper breath than usual... which made me wonder if it was something innate. Her lungs were fine; I had listened to her breathing before... specifically while she slept. But maybe excessive exercise was new to her. Her body likely needed a little more oxygen than her usual breathing allowed.

A bird landed a few feet away, and I heard Renn's ears twitch because of it.

Then I did it.

First I moved my right foot. Just enough. I pointed my toes a little more inward. I lined up my heel a little better. I shifted my shin just enough, that honestly she might not have been able to see thanks to my pant leg being a little baggy.

The bird hadn't noticed my movement, but Renn did. She turned her head, unworried, and studied me for a moment.

After a few minutes... Renn also moved her right foot to copy me.

I kept a smile from putting itself on my face as I then did the same to my left foot and leg.

She copied it too.

I wasn't able to stop my smile as I glanced at her. She noticed and beamed me a smile back.

Then I shifted my torso, and lifted my elbows a little. I made sure to do so in a way that fit her own frame and body, and not my own.

She copied it this time with eagerness. Her tail wildly danced as she copied my every movement.

After about half an hour, and the arrival of nearly a dozen more birds, I had her standing in the stance that fit her best.

"I see," she whispered with closed eyes.

"Do you?" I asked.

She nodded. "This is balanced, isn't it?" she asked.

"Is it?"

Renn glanced at me, and I could tell she was now doubting herself.

"Swing the sword," I offered her.

"Hm," she nodded and then took a deep breath. Yet right as she raised it up a little, as to swing it back down... she stopped.

Holding that stance, she blinked several times and then looked at me.

I nodded as she smiled and then brought the sword down.

The whoosh from the swing scattered the birds that had been gathering around us. They flew off into the sky with cawing complaints as Renn smirked in joy. "That was definitely easier," she said.

"Good. Can you stand in that stance again?" I asked, since she had stopped doing so.

"Oh. Right," she hurriedly put herself back into a ready position.

Stepping around her, I studied her once again.

"A little more fine-tuning and it'll work. Nothing a few years of practice won't fix," I said as I realized this stance made her butt look bigger.

"Years?" she asked, suddenly sounding worried.

"You didn't think you'd master it in a day did you?" I asked her.

"No... but are you going to teach me for years?" she asked.

"Not like we have anything else to do," I said. At least not at the moment.

She hesitated for a moment and allowed her sword to finally fall. Her point nearly touched the grass as she frowned at me.

"Why are you teaching me this Vim?" she asked softly.

"If you stay with me Renn... which you obviously seem to want to do, then conflict is inevitable. And during such conflict I'll not always be able to protect you to the point of keeping you out of the carnage," I told her my reasoning.

Renn's frown deepened, but she didn't argue.

"Plus you're... emotional, Renn," I said as I thought of the few times she had shown such emotions. Even a few weeks ago, back at that tavern where that man had killed the other. She had stepped forward, or at least would have tried to had I not stopped her. To protect that woman.

"Emotional..." she whispered the word as I nodded.

"Emotional. I don't fault you for that, by the way. So in my opinion, when the day comes your emotions... or simply fate itself, decides you must fight for your life or the life of others, I'd like you to at least be as prepared as possible. To handle yourself," I explained.

"You're talking about the tavern aren't you? Because I stepped forward to try and help that woman," she said.

"That and others. You also got emotionally vested in that family. The one who tried to hire us," I said.

"Melody..." she whispered.

I nodded.

"Also, Renn... there's nothing wrong with learning how to defend yourself and others. Personally I wish more of our members would do what you're doing right now. I wish I could teach more of us, I wish more would let me help them learn," I said as I hefted the sword. There were a few small rolls and bends now on the edges. But nothing bad at all, considering how hard she had swung her sword at me. I'd need to check her sword though, she didn't know how to properly divert force yet.

"You mean like how even Lellip doesn't want to learn, don't you?" Renn asked as she gripped her sword tighter. It wobbled a moment, thanks to her grip, and then settled down.

"Yes. Most would have tossed that sword aside the moment I handed it to them. Hell, most wouldn't have even took it from me Renn. To be perfectly honest... I had expected you to have done so," I said.

"I see... is that why Pram has been acting oddly the last few days?" Renn asked.

I nodded. "She worries I'm making you into another Lilly." Or well, another Yangli. But she didn't need to know about him. Not yet anyway.

"Ah..." Renn nodded, understanding.

The two of us stood in silence for a short time, and I glanced up to see what time it was.

We still had many hours of daylight left... but I knew this was probably a good time to stop. Even if she was willing to continue, too much at once was detrimental. Especially since it was her first lesson.

"We'll do this an hour or two a day from now on, depending on what we're doing. Even while we travel, as long as we can do it without drawing attention," I said. The two of us sparring would draw eyes, even as untrained as she was. She moved far too fast, and swung far too hard. Most would see two absolute masters of their craft, and that would draw unnecessary attention. Humans loved talking about those good with the blade. They hated war, but praised and made legends out of those good at it.

Renn nodded slowly, as if lost in thought.

"If this bothers you Renn, speak up now."

"No!" she stepped forward, and nearly dropped her sword into the ground. If it had been sharpened it would have dug into the grass at the point. "No... I want.... I need to do this. You're right," Renn quickly said as she hefted the sword, worried she had hurt it somehow.

"Good. At least one of us does," I said with a sigh.

Renn's ears twitched as she looked at me. "Don't lie, Vim. It doesn't suit you," she said with a smirk.

"Lie?" I asked. I didn't lie. I never needed to.

"You had been smiling, Vim. So it's obvious you were having fun too," she said softly.

Hesitating, I wondered if I had actually been smiling.

Me? Smiling? As I taught someone how to kill?

Renn smiled at me in a way that told me she was completely serious, and correct. I probably had a ridiculous face right now as well.

"I see."

Renn giggled as she carefully grabbed the sword at the edges. She ran her fingernail along it, and I heard the faint catch of her nail on parts where the metal had curled and dented.

I'd need to fix it later.

And...

I would need to be careful.

I was enjoying this. And most likely would continue enjoying it too.

No... the truth was I was enjoying her.

Lilly had willingly learned from me, as had Yangli... but they had not smiled while doing so. Their swings had not been out of pure joy of moving around and learning something new. Their swings had been of hate. Of anger.

They learned to kill.

Renn was learning simply because I was willing to teach her. Because she really did want to protect the Society. She wanted to help, if she could, and prove herself to me and the rest.

Spending time with me was probably also a good reason she was enjoying this moment.

"Come on let's go back. You're covered in sweat, so you probably need a good bath," I said.

"Is it that bad? It feels bad on my back especially..." Renn groaned as she reached around to touch her lower back. Her face told me she had been worrying about it.

"I asked Pram to ready the baths for you, so don't worry about it," I said.

"Just for me?" Renn asked with a weird smile as I walked over to the stone where I had laid the spears and other swords. I hadn't needed all of them... but habit had me grab them.

Putting my sword back into the leather bundle, I took Renn's as she offered it to me. It didn't take long to wrap them all up and sling them over my shoulder.

"See a single drop of sweat upon me?" I asked her.

Renn blinked as she stepped closer, studying me.

"That's not fair," she complained.

"So I have heard, often," I said.

Patting her back as I guided her back towards the smithy, I gently smiled at her. "You did well by the way. You might be able to join as a tiro one day. Maybe in a few years," I said.

"Tyro...?" Renn sounded out the word, obviously trying to think of what it meant.

"Means recruit, basically," I said.

"Oh. Well... I guess that is what I am, isn't it?" Renn smiled as she nodded, more than happy to accept the moniker.

"I suppose..." I guess the joke didn't work well with her since she wasn't aware to how deadly she actually was.

Hopefully she'd not find out anytime soon.

And hopefully... when she did...

She'd not come to love it.

At least not as much as me.

Chapter 102: To Clean Soot

The black soot was... thick. And mixed in was lots of sand too, though I wasn't entirely sure where it kept coming from.

This was the second time I've swept the floor of the furnace building, and somehow it felt as if there was more this time than last time. How was it possible? There wasn't any ash or gunk in the air, at least none visible... and...

"You're a quick learner Renn... plus you're strong. Stronger than me. But you really need to learn to control your strength," Lellip said from behind me.

I turned around mid-brush and saw her lift the bucket I had just tried to fix. She tilted it just enough that I could see the small hole near the end of the pail, indicating I had hit it far too hard or too much.

"Uh..." I sighed as I nodded in apology. That was the second time today I had failed, it seemed.

"It's all fine. That's the good thing about metal, Renn. You just hit it again. And again, until it does what you want it to... though I guess in your case it's try to not hit as much?" Lellip chuckled at herself as she tossed the bucket into the pile of other failed metalwork. Although not all of that pile was mine, it sure did feel like most of it was.

"Sorry Master," I said as I pushed another pile of black soot into the sunken hole in the corner of the room. Supposedly there was a larger hole beneath it that led outside, but Lellip hadn't showed me how it worked yet.

"As I said it's fine. That's the cool thing about metal. You can reshape it as many times you want. Add to it. Fix it. Break it. Make it into something else. You can give it life and purpose again," Lellip said as she tossed another metal object into the pile. Something she had been working on earlier this morning. Some kind of box shaped object.

"Does Vim fail?" I asked.

"He and my grandfather failed all the time. The problem with them is their failures were still... perfect to my eyes. So I'm not sure if I should say they failed or not," Lellip said honestly.

She held her grandfather in high esteem, so it was always a surprise to hear her include Vim when she spoke of him. She not only admitted, but accepted with ease, that Vim was as good if not better than her grandfather had been.

Which was a shock. How did Vim know how to do it so well? Was it simply because he was so old? That he had so much time to know and learn things?

Did that mean no matter what, as long as I dedicated time to it... I'd be able to master things too? Would I one day be like him, then? Able to build, fix, travel, and wage war all the while doing so flawlessly without failure?

"See this? This is one of the knives Vim made earlier. He gave it to me because he said it wasn't good enough, but I can't see any flaw in it," Lellip said as she hurried over to me.

I stopped sweeping as Lellip pulled out a small hand sized knife. Something told me it was more of a kitchen utensil than one for war and battle, but I kept my mouth shut as she turned the blade over to show me. She had already given it a handle and hilt, and she had designed little symbols into the middle of the blade already too.

"See that part? The fuller here? It's off too much, in his opinion. But honestly if I saw this hanging up at any other blacksmith's shop, it'd be considered a work of art, not a failure. My grandfather would have done the same. He'd have tossed it, even though it's perfectly fine," Lellip said with a hushed voice.

I nodded, even though I had absolutely no clue how to tell. It was... silvery, like the other things Vim had made. Which supposedly wasn't silver at all, but something else. Something special that didn't exist yet. Which made no real sense; since it was obvious they existed.

Reaching out, I tapped the edge of the small knife with a fingernail. The feel and sound told it me it was very sharp already.

So sharp that it made me shiver at the thought of Vim's other weapons being sharpened too.

"Sharp, yeah," Lellip nodded as she quickly hid the knife away. Likely to keep it safe and close, but also to make sure her mother never saw her with it.

Lellip didn't cherish it because it was a weapon, though. But because of its importance. What it was made of, and who made it.

"Would Vim's swords get that sharp?" I asked her.

"Oh even sharper," she said with a nod.

Great.

I had been swinging that sword every day for the last week under Vim's guidance... and honestly I was starting to realize just how dangerous it actually was.

Even as a blunt piece of metal, it was dangerous. For it to also become that sharp...

I squeezed the wooden rod handle of the broom I had been using, and imagine swiping the sword through it. While it was dull, I'd snap it in half without a thought. Yet while sharpened...

Would I even notice it? Even though this handle was nearly as wide as my wrist? And the wood was old and hard? Tempered and lacquered?

A part of me wanted to see what it felt like, yet the rest of me hoped I never found out.

Especially since it'd tell me just how easy it would be to cut into flesh and bone.

"Not much left. Here I'll help," Lellip noticed how little soot was left on the ground and hurried away to grab another broom.

I didn't try to stop her. She honestly was a bundle of energy. She always was running around and doing stuff, either working in the smithy or out in the fields that they used to grow food. There were also animals here they tended to, like chickens and a few goats.

Yet no matter how much work we did, there always seemed to be more and more. Like the soot we were sweeping up... We had just cleaned this up a few days ago! Yet here we were, doing it again.

I didn't mind helping, at all... but it did kind of feel like this place had been built with more people in mind. As if we were a dozen hands short.

It made me wonder what Vim did most the day, since he seemed to disappear sometimes. He did help out, whether on the farm, in the house, or here inside the smithy. Half of the day Lellip was teaching me by learning herself, while we both watched and helped Vim as he worked.

The oddest part was Vim always taught Lellip as he worked. Showing her and teaching her as he did... yet never did so for me. He'd let me watch, and I did so, but it was almost as if he was making it a point that he taught her and she taught me.

Returning to sweeping, I ignored Lellip's happy humming as she also went to sweeping nearby. With her help it'd not take much longer at all to finish up.

The floor was sand and dirt, mostly... Lellip had said it was so that no fires would get started. But there were also some sections of the floor that had brick. I had to be careful walking on them, since sometimes I'd trip on a brick sticking out of the dirt.

Once Lellip and I had gathered most of the black soot into the single corner, and started sweeping them into the hole that they used for it, I noticed the way her hands gripped the broom's handle.

Her hands were nearly as big as mine... and her thumb was twice as long as my own, and looked almost as if it had an extra joint. But that was a trait of her bloodline. Her parents had the same hands.

Those hands probably helped when she worked. There were a few tools I wished were a little smaller or my hands a little bigger, when I used them.

"Is a war coming, Renn?" Lellip then suddenly asked as she swept up the last bit of soot.

I flinched at the question, since it had sounded so... sincerely worried.

"Uhm... no? I hear there's a war in the south, but Vim thinks it will end soon I guess?" I said carefully.

"My parents worry a war is coming to us. To the Society," she said as she patted her broom against the dirt floor, as if to clean the bristles free. They were stained black from the years of soot, something told me they'd never get clean.

"I uh..." I wasn't sure what to say at all.

"Vim's never taught someone how to fight like he is for you, I guess. Is that why you're here? To learn how to make weapons, since we won't?" Lellip asked as she looked up at me with a worried expression.

My heart tinged in pain as I realized the poor girl had been holding this in for some time. It bothered me that I had allowed, and Vim as well, this very happy and energetic girl to get like this.

"I'm not planning to fight in any war, Lellip. Nor am I learning how to make weapons. Vim's teaching me to defend myself, thanks to my own request. But to be honest... if war actually came I'd probably be too scared to fight in it," I said to her softly.

Lellip stared at me for a moment, and then smiled. "You are a cat after all!" she said.

I smiled too, since I was glad to see her smile and hear her laugh... but it was a little uncomfortable to have that be the reason.

I was a cat, but was I being that scared of war so easily believable? I had actually thought my comment would have been interpreted as a lie... for her to have believed it so readily...

But that was for the best.

"Come on, let's put these back," Lellip quickly hopped around me and hurried to the spot where we hung the brooms on along the wall.

I joined her in putting the brooms up, and decided to take the time to make it clear to her over the next few days that Vim wasn't teaching me how to wage war. It wasn't the truth after all. He had been teaching me how to hold a sword. How to swing it without hurting myself. How to block, and parry, and...

I hesitated as I wondered if maybe that really was war. In my mind war was something grandiose. Something massive. Something that took hundreds, if not thousands, of people... but...

At the end of the day maybe that was all it was.

Pure violence.

"I think part of the reason you're still struggling with hammering is because you're swinging the swords too much. You need to be more gentle, and Vim's obviously not teaching you to be gentle!" Lellip said as we headed for the exit. She spoke nonchalantly, as if making small talk... but I knew she was mostly serious in her statement.

"That is possible," I agreed. Even though Vim had been intentionally trying to make me swing the sword with less strength lately.

Opening the large furnace doors alongside Lellip, we both paused as the door came to a stop. Vim peered his head out from behind the door, signifying he had been the one to stop it.

I pushed on it a little harder, even though Lellip immediately gave up. Yet no matter how hard I pushed, nor how abruptly, it didn't budge.

Just how strong was he...?

"Let's go Renn," Vim then said.

"What? Where are we going?" I asked. Surely he didn't mean leave as in... leave? We'd not been here a month yet, and he said we'd be here until the passes cleared! The nearby mountains were still covered in white snow!

"The mine," Vim said plainly.

Oh. I released a small breath of relief as Lellip groaned. I glanced at her, wondering what was wrong.

"I can't go there anymore..." she mumbled dejectedly.

"For good reason," Vim said.

"Then why are we going?" I asked. As far as I was aware most the mine was still empty. The village was still mourning the loss of those taken in the last cave-in, and were even debating not opening the mine back up at all and starting another elsewhere.

"Do you have a helmet for Renn, Lellip?" Vim asked her, ignoring my question and concern... which didn't make me feel much better about it.

"Sure do! Won't be one of her buckets either!" Lellip said as she hurried between the large door and Vim, heading for the storehouse.

Vim watched her go for a moment, and then glanced at me. "Bucket?" he asked.

"I uh... left a hole in one. That I was supposed to fix," I said with a shrug.

"Well buckets are supposed to have holes," he said.

"They are...?"

"One big one. At the top," he said with open hands.

"That's a bad joke," I said.

"It is full of holes," he nodded, agreeing.

I couldn't help it; I scoffed a laugh as I headed out of the furnace.

Vim closed the door behind me as I left, and I shook my head. "That was even worse!"

"Give me a second, I'm sure I got a better one in my bucket somewhere," Vim frowned as he spoke, as if he was actually contemplating what to say next.

We headed for the storehouse, and I watched as Lellip opened the storehouse door and went in. She seemed excited.

"Can she come? Since you'll be there?" I asked him.

"No. Her parents laid down the law. She's not allowed to go there anymore, if ever," he said firmly. He no longer had that tone he had just used, for making stupid jokes.

"I see..." I said softly.

"It's for her own good, Renn. Things happened," he said.

I nodded. I didn't know the full story of course, but had heard a general summary of it all.

She had been flirting with one of the young miners. One who had gotten stuck in the original cave-in... and her grandfather had gone in to save him. Resulting in more deaths than necessary.

While we walked towards the storehouse, I took the moment to glance around... and made sure no one else was within earshot. Lellip and her family couldn't hear as well as I or Vim, but they still had better hearing than most humans.

"Lellip and her family are worried. About me... or well, about what you're teaching me," I said softly.

"They should be," he said, in his normal tone.

I groaned, since that was not what I wanted to hear at all.

Maybe I was getting involved in something I didn't know about...

"What... what am I allowed to speak of, Vim? You've never really said," I said quietly.

Vim frowned as he paused for a moment. "What aren't you allowed to speak of?" he asked me.

"That's just it, I don't know?" I asked back.

"You're free to tell anyone anything you want Renn. Just make sure you know what you're saying and who you're saying it to," he said.

"All that tells me is there are things you don't want me to talk about, yet won't stop me from telling them either..." I groaned.

Before any more could be said Lellip appeared. She hurried out of the storehouse carrying metal helmets, and... some kind of weird looking glass box.

"Here ya are! I wasn't sure if you wanted one Vim," Lellip said as she handed him the pair of helmets. They were black, and looked and sounded like iron made.

"I did. Thank you. The humans would find it odd if I entered a mine without one, after all," Vim told her as he put one of the hats onto his head.

Once on, Lellip and I stared up at him for a moment... and only Lellip seemed unable to contain her chuckle at his appearance.

"What? I'll have you know I used to wear helmets like no one else's business," Vim defended himself, but had a smile as he did so... telling me he was fully aware of how silly he looked.

I reached out for the other helmet, and felt a little excited to try it on. I'd never worn a metal hat before.

But before I could grab it, Vim lifted it upward and over my head. I went still as he slowly lowered it on my head. I hurriedly laid my ears down flat, and was very thankful for him placing it on my head slowly. It would have hurt my ears had he just dropped it on my head.

The thing blocked some of my vision, and I had to push it up a little. "It's too big," Lellip groaned.

"Got any smaller ones?" Vim asked.

"That was the smaller one!" Lellip complained.

"Could make one real quick?" I suggested.

Vim sighed, and I could tell he wasn't in the mood to do so.

"I'll get you some pads, one second Renn," Lellip reached up, and I took the hat off and handed it to her. A moment later she bounded away, leaving the little glass box behind.

"Much better than making a new one," Vim nodded.

"Sorry my head's so small," I complained as I bent down to inspect the small box she had left behind.

Was it some kind of lamp? It had glass... windows on all four sides, yet something reflective on the top and...

"It's a lantern, Renn. Just made for the mines is all, so a little odd looking," Vim told me.

"Ah. What's that reflective stuff inside it? It looks like the stuff on some of the windows in the workshop," I said.

"Mirrors, Renn. Don't you remember the one at the mansio in Telmik?" he sounded concerned I hadn't noticed.

"Those are mirrors!" I picked the little lantern up and was shocked. Of course they were! Why hadn't I realized it...?

Well... maybe because the idea of using mirrors in such a way had been beyond me. They were so valuable... why waste them like this?

While inspecting the little metal box, I smiled as I stared at Vim through the translucent glass. He was visible, but it made him look odd. As if deformed a little.

"Did the hat hurt your ears?" he asked.

"No. It will be uncomfortable, but I'll be fine," I said. I used the lantern to hide my smile; he had been concerned over it.

We stood in silence for a moment, and I wondered if I should go help Lellip. She was adjusting it for me after all... and...

"Were you cleaning the furnaces?" Vim then asked.

"Huh?" I stopped messing with the little lantern as I suddenly became aware of something I usually didn't notice.

I was dirty.

"We uh... swept the soot out," I said, and wondered if I was as covered in the stuff as I probably looked. Had Lellip been as dirty? I hadn't even noticed...

"Well, you'll blend in at the mines at least," Vim said with a smirk.

"Exactly!" I agreed, even though my smile felt a little forced. Usually he didn't comment on how dirty I got, unless it was to tease me. Yet that hadn't really sounded like teasing earlier...

"Don't worry about it. You can bathe when we get back," he said.

"I wasn't... worried...?" I hated how my voice sounded. I had been worried, and hadn't sounded convincing at all!

"Hopefully this is all just needless worry," Vim then said softly.

Glancing at him, I hesitated as I noticed the way he was looking at the workshop. He wasn't looking at it, but something else. Something far away.

It was the same look he had back during the fires. When we had put the paintings of the Sleepy Artist to flame, to protect the Society.

"Vim...?" I wasn't able to say much else as Lellip emerged once more, this time holding the helmet high over her head, as if declaring victory over a triumphant enemy as she hurried back over to us.

Chapter 103: A Lone Mine

I lit the lantern and the entrance of the mine became much brighter.

"Oh!" Renn smiled as she looked more at the lantern than the mine it had just illuminated. She seemed to like the way its flame danced inside the mirror cage within the glass.

The metal mining helmet on her head shifted a little, even with the three layers of extra padding and straps that Lellip had added to it. But now at least it stayed on her head, and didn't crush her ears.

Turning I took a small breath and focused on the smell of the mine. I could smell the dirt. The grease of whale oil mixed with wood and metal. I could also smell rust... which told me that they had probably allowed one of the shafts to get flooded. Though based off the smell, it wasn't recent. Not even a few months ago, but years ago. The smell had seeped into the very dirt they were excavating.

"So uh... why are we here Vim?" Renn asked as she followed me. She walked with a small skip in her step, causing the lantern to cast dancing shadows as we headed into the mines.

"I want to see where my friend died," I said.

"Oh..." The light stopped moving, as Renn stopped walking. But after a few moments she returned to following after me.

"Ever been in a mine before?" I asked her.

"Nope."

"See these?" I pointed at a nearby mine timber. It had a pickaxe rested up against it.

"Hm," I saw her nod thanks to her smile. That smile drew my eyes sometimes, even when I didn't know it existed.

"Those are some of the only things keeping the mountain from burying you alive. If you want to join Nebl in his tomb, than feel free to go down any shaft that has yet to have them installed," I said.

"Can't I just stay with you? I bet that'd be the safest," Renn asked. She examined a pile of tools for a moment before hurrying over to me.

"Don't know if I could hold up a whole mountain on my own," I said.

"That's funny, since something tells me you'd survive it," she said.

I had before, but I'd not say that aloud.

Rounding a small mine cart, I studied the half empty cart as I walked past it. It had a bunch of black rocks inside.

Judging by the severe lack of people, the completely dead torches, and all the mining equipment scattered everywhere... it seemed the village indeed hadn't returned since the cave-in.

Mines this valuable weren't left alone for long... let alone for what was considered typical accidents.

"A cave in is normal for mines. Too normal for this level of abandonment," I said aloud.

"Really...?" Renn asked as we came to the first intersection. I paused for a moment to look up and down the different paths. One led ever forward, not descending. Another descended sharply enough to become dark rather fast... and the last one looked as if it went upward some distance down the path.

"Which way?" Renn asked.

"Lellip said it was deep. We'll try this way first," I said as I headed for the darkest pathway.

"How big are these things?" Renn asked as we headed down the path.

"Some can be huge. Last time I was here it was only a few miles worth of mines," I said.

"Miles?" Renn asked, and the echo her voice made me flinch.

Did I just use that word?

"A term used for great distances. A thousand paces," I said, and wondered why I always slipped up with her. A part of me hoped it was because I was thinking of other things, like my friend's death... but...

"A thousand paces... Your paces?" she asked as she got closer, to illuminate my feet.

"A pace is about two steps, Renn," I corrected her.

"Oh... Wow," she seemed to comprehend the distance it represented.

Great, now she'd probably use the term herself.

Reaching the end of the path, the mine now diverted two different ways. One was a little thinner than the other. The larger one had two small wooden rail paths, yet no carts anywhere around. Other had a pair of torches placed into the ground at the entrance, forming a cross.

"This is probably the one," I said.

"Hope so, can I tell you the truth? This place feels... wrong. Why's there wind down here Vim? It sounds..." Renn turned around. I glanced behind us, to see what she thought she was hearing.

There was nothing there of course, but I knew what she probably heard.

"The cries of the damned?" I teased her.

Renn quickly spun to look at me. The lantern she held clanked since she had moved so quickly, and I realized I really shouldn't have teased her in that way.

"I uh... I'm kidding. It's just the wind, Renn. Passing along the rocks and shafts," I said.

She obviously didn't believe me now, and I turned away to hide my flinch.

Sure. Tell the very astute woman with cat-like perception that the cries and wails she hears in the wind inside this pitch black mine were the souls of the damned. Oh did I mention that hyper-perceptive individual also has a penchant for religion?

"Vim. Vim!" Renn hurried to follow me as I walked past the two torches that were meant to warn off anyone from entering.

The lantern's shadows danced as she hurried to walk closer to me. The thin shaft was just big enough for her to walk by my side.

"It's the wind Renn, I'm sorry for teasing you," I said.

"Hmhm..." she made an odd noise as she turned to look behind us. She flinched and looked ahead, as if she had seen something.

If not for the very clear distress on her face, I'd almost bet she was messing with me.

We walked slowly, since this shaft had a rather strong decline. Under normal conditions I'd not worry over her tripping, but right now she was far too focused on the sounds she was hearing than she was where she was walking.

"Bad time to tell you I've never met a ghost?" I asked her.

"Oh. Best time. Perfect time," she said quickly.

"Well it's true," I said.

Renn glanced at me as I studied the left wall. It was growing smooth, thanks to the many months of mining. It looked almost as if it had...

Reaching out, I ran my fingertips along it. I didn't need to see the stains left on them to know that it was clay. Renn lifted the lantern a little, to let me see better. Sure enough the gray stains confirmed it.

"What's that?" Renn asked.

"The reason for the cave in, most likely. This is gray clay," I said.

"Clay...?"

I stopped walking as we arrived at another branch in the mine. This time it separated from the shaft we were currently in, leading to our right. This shaft continued onward, and based off the feel of the air it continued for some time.

"Clay like that doesn't absorb moisture well... yet when it does, it cracks and shifts easily. Not something you really want to trust," I said as I studied the ceiling. None of the gray clay looked elsewhere yet, but I knew how quickly earth could change. A few shovel scoops, and it's like you're in a different land.

Renn shifted a little, causing the lantern to dance as she looked behind us. Once again acting as if she had heard something.

I could hear the far off whistles and cries. I knew she was hearing them as I was... but odds were the hat and its padding were muffling her ears. Distorting the sounds just enough to make them easily misunderstood, and allowing her to hear things she shouldn't.

If not for the clay I'd have let her take the hat off.

"So uh... what now?" Renn asked, a little apprehensively.

She must really not like it here.

Taking a small breath, I tried to taste the lingering scents of death. A part of me thought I could smell something like it, but it was so diluted that I was questioning it.

What if I was only able to smell it because I wanted to?

"Do you smell anything odd Renn?" I asked her.

"Odd? This whole place stinks. I smell metals, oil, dirt... I think I smell water too," she said.

"Smell anything human?" I asked.

"A little. I smell their tools, and I sometimes catch a scent of sweat or blood... but who knows where it's coming from," she said.

I nodded, that was the same for me. But that didn't mean that blood was my friend's. Miners hurt themselves all the time. We could just be smelling old wounds, dried blood and whatnot. Knowing miners, there were probably even fingers and limbs buried here and there too.

"Let's check this one first, I suppose," I said as I headed down the new passage. This one was a little more normal. It had been widened already, and there were even torches perched onto the timbers that held it all up. None were lit of course, but it told me this was a more frequented path.

Renn grumbled as she followed me down it.

I'd ask if she wanted to leave, but something told me she'd grow even more unsettled if I did.

"Is this where the smithy gets all its ores?" Renn asked as we passed a wall of coal.

"Yep."

Quickly the coal took over. Becoming not just a single wall, but the whole shaft itself. The black rocks were pointy, and all over the floor was the soot and crumbling remains of whoever had dug at the walls and ceiling.

Entire chunks of usable coal were scattered on the ground, which was a little odd. But not, if I considered this shaft had been affected by the shift of the cave in.

We were getting close.

"Why was this shaft dug out so much more than the last?" Renn asked.

"Coal's valuable," I said.

"Oh."

So far I'd seen copper, hematite, the clay... now coal. They all seemed to be layered upon one another more than not.

This mine would have been better as a surface mine. Not that they had the proper technology to do it that way.

"Dead end?" Renn asked as she lifted the lantern a little to study the open area we found ourselves in.

My eyes focused on our right, where another shaft had obviously been started... and...

"Oh," Renn realized it as she took a single step forward... as to better illuminate the cave in.

Black coal, brown dirt, gray clay and rocks... the mix was an obvious mess. The shaft had caved in, and so had half the mine around it. Another shaft to the left, which might not have been entirely created yet, had also succumbed to the weight.

Stepping up to the pile of rocks, I studied the dozens of timbers not only in the pile but around it.

"Nebl had tried to re-enforce this area before heading in. Before trying to clear out what was probably a cave-in deeper into this shaft," I said as I made out the obvious.

"Re-enforce...?" Renn tried her best to stand next to me as to help light up the scene. I didn't bother telling her there was no need.

I could have come in here without that lantern.

"So this is a cave-in? Looks like an avalanche," Renn said as she looked around.

"It basically is," I said as I glanced around at the rest of the room. They had opened this area up, probably with the intentions of making it another hub. One to let them really mine out all the coal and other stuff they found here.

Had the clay been their downfall? Or had they rushed? Too many shafts at once maybe? It did look as if they had planned to expand nearly six different ways from here. Too much for this soil.

What was interesting though was Nebl's handiwork. It was part of the reason the cave-in hadn't been worse. I put a hand on one of the large timbers holding up what looked to be a huge rock. It wasn't free or loose, of course, but it had been a great aid in keeping the rest of this room from falling down as well.

"Did he put these all up while it was collapsing?" Renn asked as she too examined another timber. That one was paired with another, supporting each other as they held up a section of earth.

"Not likely. There was more likely another smaller cave in, deeper down that way... He had done this as to try and start dislodging the rocks as to unbury whoever had gotten stuck. This was preemptive, not reactive," I said.

"Preemptive," she repeated the word, and I realized once again I had used a word she wasn't familiar with.

I needed to stop that. Renn was far too astute. And too smart for her own good.

If she used such words openly, where the wrong people could hear her... she'd draw attention. The wrong kind.

Either I needed to be more mindful of myself, or I needed to simply teach her why those words shouldn't be said aloud. At least not in certain company. She was intelligent, she'd understand.

But if I did that she'd wonder where those words came from... and why I knew them but no one else did and...

"Focus," I told myself. This was more important right now.

"Hm?" Renn obviously heard me, but I ignored her worried glance as I knelt down to study a footprint.

One that had dug into the coal.

It wasn't mine either.

Nebl's foot wasn't as big as mine. But it was clearly his. The grooves of rubber, where his toes had probably dug into the earth first, were obviously visible.

He had exerted himself here. But why? It was several feet from the collapse, and any timbers...

If this collapse had happened afterwards then...

"Vim," Renn drew my attention as she knelt in front of something near the collapse. Near a large timber sticking out, broken in half.

Something reflective was in front of her. Something that didn't belong in a mine.

Walking over to it, I sighed as I stared at Lellip's handiwork.

"Lellip's," Renn said with a sad tone. She couldn't take her eyes off it.

The little plate was made of steel. Something she shouldn't have been able to craft on her own. But it was obviously not perfected. I could see the impurities. She had made it to honor him, and hadn't done a very good job... but she had designed a lovely poem into it.

"His real grave," I said.

Renn sniffed.

Deciding to leave it be, I stepped away and went to the farthest section I could. The closest I could get to the original shaft's location. I had to round the cave-in, and walk under a dangerously unprotected ceiling... but...

Walking up to a wall of black, I laid my hand on it and tried to listen. As close as possible.

I could hear wind. I could hear the echoes beyond the wall.

There was open space beyond this cave-in. Probably not too far from it either.

I tapped the coal with a solid knuckle. A piece of it broke off thanks to the impact, and I closed my eyes to listen.

There was the sound of wind above me.

The falling crumbs from my tap echoed up throughout the mine.

Renn's feet as she shuffled to look at me. Her very small whine which trembled from inside her, from sorrow and pain and worry. Grief and fear, mixed together.

Her breathing. My breathing. Her ears and tail as they brushed what they were connected to.

I blocked it all out and focused entirely on the world before me. The mountain before me.

Tapping the coal again, I heard the thump roll along the stones. I heard it shuffle tiny grains of sand, and unsettle the tiniest of rocks deeper in the wall... and then I heard the sound of debris falling off a wall opposing me, and landing on an open floor. It was muffled, but obvious.

Opening my eyes, I shifted at the realization that the open area wasn't far at all. Probably the distance that was between Renn and myself right now. I glanced back at her, and found her still standing near Lellip's little plate of steel. She was staring at me with watery eyes.

Chances are this cave-in had only happened here. Not taking out the whole shaft, but just this area.

I'd ask Renn for conformation, but she said she'd never been in a mine before.

No... I should ask.

"Renn, come here. Take your hat off for a moment," I said.

Renn happily obliged. She laid the lantern down a few feet from me and took the helmet off with a relieved huff.

Once she did, I watched as she flinched and hurriedly moved her ears around. That hadn't been a flinch from pulled hair or a pinch, but because of the sudden influx of loud noises. At least to her.

After a few moments she nodded as she stepped up next to me, up against the wall.

"What are we listening for?" she asked, excitedly happy to help.

"Cries of the damned?" I asked her. She immediately lost her happy smile and glared at me, so I quickly pointed to the wall. "I'm going to flick the wall. See if you can hear anything odd when I do," I said.

"Flick the wall...? Is that what you had been doing? It sounded as if you hit it," she complained as she nodded and stepped forward. She pointed her ears at the wall and closed her eyes. She nodded again, to let me know she was ready.

Reaching out, I went ahead and flicked the wall. This time a little harder than the last two times.

Renn's eyes furrowed as she focused, and I wondered if the initial impact had been loud enough to hurt her.

Then as I heard the sounds reverberate throughout the mine... Renn tilted her head quickly, and her frown suddenly became a worried look.

"Uhm... Something flicked back," she said worriedly.

Frowning at her, I wondered if she had never heard a real echo before. Surely not? One didn't need to be in a cavern or mine to hear them... even open plains and fields could and...

But then she jumped with a small yelp, and I heard it this time too.

"Vim!" she reached out to grab onto my arm, but I ignored her as I put my forehead against the wall.

And there—sure enough.

Something... or rather someone, knocked on the mountain on the other side. A very heavy thump.

Reaching out, I knocked on the coal rock in three times in quick succession.

Three slow knocks came back.

"Vim?" Renn's voice didn't sound as terrified now as I slowly leaned back and realized the truth.

"He's alive," I whispered.

Chapter 104: Renn - Nebl

My helmet shifted as I hurriedly dumped the wheelbarrow. The black coal clunked loudly as it fell to the ground.

The effort wasn't too strenuous. Nothing more than I had been doing back at the smithy... but it was still hard for some reason. I felt exhausted, even though I knew I could do this for hours more. Especially since the cause was so great.

Pushing the wheelbarrow back to the other side of the area, I watched for a tiny moment as Vim swung the pickaxe. It struck the wall of stone, causing tiny rocks to splatter all around.

He was digging into the wall several dozens of feet away from the caved in area, and had also done so away from the black coal. Even though every so often he ran into it, Vim didn't seem to like digging that stuff out.

I put the wheelbarrow near one of the piles of rocks and dirt he had accumulated. It was actually two piles away from the one he was making now, but he didn't want me near him as he actually dug. He had worried I'd get hurt by the chipped rocks that flew every time he swung.

Picking up one of the shovels I went to filling the wheelbarrow. It was monotonous, and probably the hundredth time I had done so, but it was all I could do to help.

Vim hadn't wanted me to do any of the actual mining, just in case something happened.

He had almost convinced me to leave the mine entirely as he worked... If not for his friend being in danger, Vim would probably have never given in and allowed me to help. I paused a moment when I heard a strange thump.

The pick had gotten stuck in the wall.

With a heavy oomph he pulled his pickaxe free of the wall. A large boulder fell, following the tug free.

Quickly finishing with the wheelbarrow, I pulled it aside as Vim hefted the big rock and quickly tossed it away, over to the other wall. It landed with a heavy thump and rolled a few feet.

While I emptied the wheelbarrow I wondered if I would have been able to toss that rock aside as easily.

With a huff I returned, and once again filled the wheelbarrow up with the smaller rocks and dirt.

It was repetitive, and made me wonder how humans did it day in and day out. This wasn't just hard, it was... annoying. Moving the dirt made a bunch of dust go into the air, making it hard to breathe. I had wrapped a part of my shirt up over my mouth and nose, but it didn't seem to be helping much.

To think I had thought sweeping soot had been annoying. I'd never complain over that again.

"Hold on," Vim mumbled as he dug deeper.

Seeing Vim so seriously focused made me forget about all my complaints, and I hurried to follow suit.

What seemed like hours went by, and at first what had seemed like little progress... quickly turned into results. Dumping the wheelbarrow once again onto a massive pile, now almost as tall as myself, I glanced over at where Vim was and found him a distance away.

He was now outside the little lantern's reach. I had lit a few torches for him, but had only put two inside the little... hallway looking area he was creating. He no longer was swinging a pickaxe but was instead using a shovel. He was now more so digging than not.

It was actually rather surprising at how much earth he was moving. Dozens of massive boulders and rocks were scattered around the room, and there were three piles of smaller debris similar to the one I had made. Vim wasn't just breaking the wall apart, he was moving it too.

There were also now three rows of timber supports hanging above Vim's head. Although he was in a rush to save his friend... he was being smart about it. Methodical. I had helped him push one of those beams into a subsection of wall he had cut out, and was very surprised at how he had done it. He had put another piece of wood on top of it, and against it, to better support it in a way that didn't need nails it seemed.

"Renn I'll need another pickaxe in a second," Vim said as he shoveled a pile aside and out of his way.

"Got it," I left behind the wheelbarrow and hurried to find another. This would be the third he's broken since he's started...

Was it because of his strength, or was it normal? I had no idea.

Leaving the cave, I headed down the large shaft that led outward. I knew where a pile of tools was now, thanks to my earlier searching.

Taking a left, I entered the dark and small shaft that was now illuminated by a single torch. It flickered as I passed it and found the pile of tools right outside, at the other crossroads.

Picking up two pickaxes, another shovel, and another torch just in case I carried the bundle back to Vim.

Thanks to Vim, and the torches, there were more noises in the mine. More echoes. More odd... strange sounds. Every so often I thought I heard a voice. One that cried out from somewhere behind me.

I hoped it was just the wind, or the fact that my ears were somewhat blocked by the padding and metal helmet... but I had heard them even with the hat off.

I'd wonder if it was Nebl, if not for the fact that it sounded... like a woman talking, not a man's voice. It was unnerving.

Ignoring it to the best of my abilities, I returned to the oddly comforting sound of Vim digging. He huffed sometimes, even though he didn't sound or look exhausted.

Putting the tools down near his hallway, I stepped back and wondered how much longer it'd take. He was far enough that he'd soon need to put another support timber in... at least by the looks of it.

The pile near him was not as large as the others had been. It seemed most of this section was large rocks instead of small clumps of dirt. He was working on getting a large white rock out right now, which kind of glistened in the torchlight.

"Funny," Vim said as he put the shovel aside and went to grab the rock.

"Hm?" I stepped aside since I knew he'd soon be carrying the massive rock out and tossing it to a corner.

"This is quartz," he said, and then took a small breath as he pulled it out of the wall.

A few loud echoes filled the cavern as smaller rocks and clumps of dirt fell to the ground and onto other rocks. He shifted, and I watched as Vim carried a rock twice his size out of his little hallway.

He shuffled a little as he rounded me and with a grunt he dropped the thing a few feet away. It sunk into the ground, and didn't roll away at all.

"Quartz..." I stared at the shiny rock, and noticed it had ripples and patterns in it.

"I think we're almost there... I think I heard him earlier," Vim said as he stared at his handiwork for a moment.

"Did you?" I asked, excited. Although Vim seemed very, very confident that it was Nebl... there hadn't been any real verification yet. Someone was definitely knocking on the other side, but...

Though honestly, who else than one of us could survive for months in a sealed off cave?

No food. No water. Little air... maybe even none anymore.

It made me wonder how long I could last in such a condition. Days, sure. Weeks even, I could confidently say... but months?

Vim nodded as he entered the hallway and walked up to the section of wall he had just been working on. He scraped at it with his hands for a moment and then stopped as to listen.

Stepping into the hallway, I slowly lifted my helmet so I could also lift my ears upward. I got them at enough of an angle and focused on the sounds in front of me.

"I hear breathing," I said. And not mine or Vim's.

"Nebl?" Vim asked, raising his voice. I flinched at his voice, and blinked a few times. In this sealed off cave his voice was loud. Deep. It hurt a little.

For a long moment there was nothing. Nothing but Vim's voice echoing throughout the mine... until we heard a cough.

A very distant and rough cough.

One from a man's throat. One that sounded...

"Hit the wall if you can hear me Nebl!" Vim shouted.

It took less than a moment for a heavy fist to smack what sounded like dirt, just beyond the wall in front of us.

"He's right there..." I whispered.

"Step back Renn. Out of the way," Vim ordered.

I barely made it out of the hallway before Vim got the shovel back into his hand. He pierced the wall, and in a flurry of movements Vim dug out another massive hole in the wall.

Staring at Vim's face as he hurriedly dug out the rest of the wall, I watched as the protector grimly dug. His face was covered in soot and dirt, yet his eyes were focused. Clear. Steady.

Then he froze.

Mid swing of his shovel, Vim stared at something I couldn't see. At this angle I could only see the blackness of the wall he was digging away.

Then I saw a hand, nearly just as stained as Vim's face.

Vim dropped the shovel and grabbed the familiar hand. The one that was huge, with a strangely shaped thumb.

Hurrying into the hallway, I couldn't believe my eyes as I watched Vim kneel in front of the hole he had dug. Nebl and Vim held hands as Vim smiled at his friend through the little bit of opening left between Nebl's arm.

"How you been Nebl?" Vim asked his friend.

I couldn't see Nebl, but I saw the way his arm and hand shivered. They began to tremble wildly, clenching tighter and tighter onto Vim's hand.

It was a good thing Vim had grabbed his hand and not me. Such an intense grip would have probably...

Vim quickly went to digging out the rest of the wall with his other hand. He scraped massive chunks of dirt and black stone away with each swipe, hurriedly doing what he could to get to Nebl.

My eyes filled with tears as Vim dug his friend free from his tomb. Without letting go of his hand, Vim pulled Nebl out of the hole that hadn't even been big enough for him yet, and was wrapped in a hug.

Nebl clung to Vim's waist, and heaved a great sob. The sound had been so deep, so pure; it made me sob alongside him.

Vim ignored his friends cry, and my own, as he finished pulling Nebl out of the dirt. He stepped back away from the wall and a few steps closer to me—closer to the nearest torch.

While Vim knelt and allowed Nebl to fall to his knees, I quickly went and grabbed the lantern. The one that lit up the area much better than the natural fire of the torch.

Returning to Vim and Nebl, I noticed something very shocking thanks to the light.

He was filthy, but that was to be expected. Vim and I were too. No... what was surprising was how small Nebl was. He seemed about my size in height, although broad shouldered and thick of arm.

He was shirtless, and his right pant leg was torn... revealing a dried injury... but otherwise...

Vim studied his friend as Nebl quickly got control over his sudden relief. His deep chest heaved as he nodded and patted Vim on the shoulder. "Thank you," a scraggly voice said. One that sounded... faded, broken.

Nebl turned his head, and flinched at the lantern. I was about to step away, and try to cover the light, but Vim stopped me with a wave. He wanted me to get closer.

I brought the lantern closer but felt bad for doing so. Nebl flinched and shut his eyes, as if the light burned him. A glance to the hole he had just been pulled from, and I saw the reason as to why.

It was pure darkness in there.

Vim reached out for the lantern and I gave it to him. He used it to check his friend for injuries. Other than a lot of scrapes and cuts, the only real one seemed to be his right leg. It looked...

"Broke it. I put it back," Nebl said with clenched teeth as Vim touched his leg.

Ah... so the bone had stuck out from the damage. Was that why he had gotten stuck? Something told me he would have been able to dig himself out, as Vim had just done... even with the leg in that condition.

In fact...

Staring at Nebl's hands, I saw the lack of fingernails and the blood. Most of it was fresh.

He had been clawing on the other side, digging with his bare hands.

I gulped as Vim took a small, sharp breath. He studied his friend with patient, yet knowing eyes... and...

Nebl was pale. And I could see more bone than not, thanks to how thin he was. Even his thick shoulders and chest looked... sunken in. Somehow the thick layer of dirt and soot on him made it more apparent.

His hair was long too, but it almost looked as if his hair continued down his neck and to his back... maybe one of his non-human traits?

"My family," Nebl then said, as he tried to peer out of his eyes. Was he looking for them?

As he glanced around, I realized he might have heard them. Not recently of course... but... Surely they had come here. To see if he could have been saved. Or at least he had to have heard Lellip, when she had brought that little plate... Knowing her she had sat there for hours talking to her grandfather. Crying even.

My emotions welled up again, and I hurriedly tried to push them down. I didn't do very well at it. "Should I go get some water?" I asked Vim, and hoped neither he nor Nebl noticed my shaking voice.

"Hurry to the house for me. I'll have to carry him slowly," Vim said as he put the lantern down.

I nodded quickly and turned to go, to run. "Renn!" Vim stopped me.

He gestured to the lantern, and I realized he was right. I had only lit torches around here, and not anywhere else.

Taking the lantern, I spared one last glance at Nebl as Vim slowly stood up, hefting his friend in his arms.

"Thank you," Nebl whispered weakly.

"Let's go," Vim said, stepping forward.

Walking in front of Vim, I anxiously stayed near them until we left the mine... and then broke out into a full on sprint for the smithy.

Chapter 105: Vim – Handprint

Nebl was still asleep.

Sitting on a stump, I stared at the house and the buildings looming around it. The blast furnace was the only one burning, but that was to be expected. Its gray smoke went high up into the sky, telling me there wasn't much wind down here or up there.

"Three days..." I whispered, wondering how much longer it'd take for him to wake.

He had been malnourished. Dehydrated. Weak.

Not a surprise, of course. Nearly three months he had spent buried in that mine. Even for our kind... even for Nebl, that was a testament to his tenacity and will.

A strong man... in many more ways than one.

It was probably time to start separating certain members. Not physically. At least in classification. There were those like Renn and Nebl, and then those like Jelti and Henrietta.

Those who could do what no human could and those who were nearly human themselves.

I'd bring it up with the chronicler the next time we were at the Cathedral... she probably already had such a system in place, no matter how accurate. It'd be hard to rely on hers though, since she'd be blinded by what she thought she saw and not what was actually there.

For now I had more pressing concerns.

Such as keeping my mouth shut.

I took a small breath and wished it didn't irk me so much.

I should be happy. Thrilled. Beyond excited just as the rest of them were. Lellip had actually passed out from relief upon seeing her grandfather still alive. Pram had wept. She had knelt before me and wept for hours. Thanking me in such a way I had worried over her baby. Such prolonged emotions, and prostration, wasn't too wise.

And Drandle kept a distance. He had only come to his wife's side after I had intentionally got up and left the house, to escape her groveling.

Squeezing my knee, I closed my eyes and did my best to forgive him. Or at least enough so as to not kill him.

My anger wasn't justified after all. He had done nothing, as far as I could tell. Drandle had done nothing to cause the cave in. He had not endangered his family in any way, and had in fact done all he could to keep them safe. Even to the point of risking his daughter's ire, by banning her from the mine and village for the foreseeable future.

Yet he had also not tried to save Nebl either.

My knee protested as I squeezed it tighter, but I ignored it.

Nebl had only woken for a few moments upon bringing him home. He had smiled at his family, said Pram's name and then fallen back asleep. In relief. So I hadn't been able to find out the exact turn of events that led us to here. But waiting was also something a protector needed to be efficient at.

A part of me had expected him to die there on the spot. Which would have... honestly been bad. To bring him back only for him to die in their arms. It would have been closure, but the wrong kind.

Luckily he still lived. And was growing stronger. We had bandaged his wounds, reset his broken leg, and his daughter had gotten some thin soup down his throat.

It'd not take long for him to wake and be back on his feet.

He's sustained worse injuries... although maybe his body had never been taken to this level of neglect.

Honestly... other than myself, and a few of the Monarchs.... who could survive such a thing? Without damage, as well?

Shifting a little, I thought of my friend's body. He had lost more than half his weight in that cavern. He had looked as thin as Renn, at least in the waist and legs.

Nebl had always been short, but never skinny. Never weak.

"Bastards..." I whispered, and realized I was getting angry again.

Focusing on my breathing, I groaned. I really should leave this place soon... but I knew I couldn't. Not only could I not leave until Nebl woke up...

Glancing upward, to the west, I stared at the snowy peaks in the distance. I could cross those... but could Renn?

No, I knew she could. She was far more hardy than she seemed to be. Hardier than even the image I had of her in my mind.

I'd need to correct that. She deserved better than for me to judge her as I did the others.

She had worked a whole day in the mine with me, without rest or stop.

Once again proving herself to me, even if she didn't realize it.

A little fox appeared to my left. It made a noise at me as it sniffed the air, probably wondering what I was.

It could see me, and knew I was real... yet couldn't smell me.

Which was funny, since I still had stains from the mines all over my body.

Looking at my forearm, where Nebl had grabbed me... I stared at the outline of his hand-print.

He had grabbed me desperately, as if in disbelief.

It was very likely he had not believed I was real, and probably hadn't believed it even upon my touch.

The man hadn't really believed he was safe until he had seen his family. Had heard them call his name.

"Yes... I should be happy," I told myself.

With my voice the little fox squeaked and darted away, causing bushes to scatter as it ran away.

Glancing at it, I apologized lightly to the small animal. It wasn't its fault I was so...

Wrong.

A door opened. My eyes scanned the house's frame until I found the cause. A pair of pointed ears turned left and right... until they faced my way. The rest of the head followed, and Renn's smile grew several times larger as she saw me.

She stepped out of the house and closed the door behind her. Barely. She broke out into a run, hurrying up to me.

It was obvious what news she was carrying, thanks to the tears on her face and the smile they fell upon. "He's awake!" she shouted loudly as she got closer.

I nodded and allowed the relief to calm me down a little. "Good. That's good," I said, and meant it.

She nodded quickly as she came to a stop in front of me... and seemed suddenly unsure of herself. "Not going to go say hi?" she asked.

"I'll let his family do the honors first," I said.

Renn blinked a few times, and her tail twitched a little oddly as her smile softened. "I see," she said gently.

Looking away from her strange gaze, I studied the house. Nebl's room was on other side. Second floor, with an open access stairwell straight to the furnace. It was why I hadn't heard or seen his wake myself.

"I assume he seems fine?" I asked. She'd not be so happy if he had woken in pain or with issue.

"Ah, seems so. Yes. He even sounded a little growly, he wanted supper," she said with a smirk.

"Good," I nodded. That was Nebl. The stubborn blacksmith.

The memory of him weeping for a moment upon my finding of him made me think of the only other time he had done such a thing.

He hadn't wept for only a few moments then. But that had also been because of anger. Pure anger and sorrow.

The weeping the other night had been...

Glancing down to my shirt, I couldn't make out anywhere that he could have cried upon, but I knew there should have been.

That was the first time I had heard my friend actually cry from relief. Pure relief.

A better reason, if any.

"Did... had there been another animal here?" Renn asked as she looked around.

"A small fox was here earlier," I said.

"Oh. It smells funny," she said.

Probably pissed itself as it ran away, startled by me.

"How are you Renn?" I asked, changing topics. Both for her and myself.

"Huh? Oh... I'm fine?" she glanced at herself, as if she thought I had actually seen something wrong with her.

There wasn't, at least visibly. But I had heard her weeping last night. It had been some time since she had cried herself to sleep, so I had thought possibly it wasn't from emotions or whatever troubled her soul but something else. Something physical.

Renn hopped around a bit, to stand a little more in front of me. She twirled for a moment, to make sure to display to me that she was in fact in good health.

"You'd tell me if you were hurt, I hope," I said.

"Of course I would?" she said as if it was obvious.

Yes. She probably would. Renn had her own secrets, but stuff like that didn't seem to be things she kept hidden. From anyone.

"How about you Vim? Why haven't you cleaned yourself up yet? I know you like the idea of being stinky, but the rest are worried about you," Renn said as she pointed at me.

I liked the idea of smelling bad? Me?

"I'm sure Nebl would prefer a bath first," I said.

"They have two baths, Vim..." She said with a small smile.

Ah. True. They did. They had one in the house and one behind the smithy, heated by the blast furnace's excess heat.

"Hm... I suppose I should. Don't want to get him infected or anything," I said as I stood from the stump.

She nodded quickly. "Right!"

"No you can't join me," I told her.

Renn hesitated, but her smile didn't disappear. "Of course! I mean... I'm going to go help them prepare dinner in a moment. I think," she said, as if suddenly unsure of herself.

Glancing at the house, I noticed that there was indeed now some smoke coming from one of the chimneys. The one that led to the kitchen.

"Oh uh... also," Renn got my attention before I could step away and head for the smithy baths.

"Hm?"

"Are we uhm... going to start training again? It's been a few days, Vim," she said softly.

"We will. Tomorrow we'll start again, I promise," I said.

"Okay," she nodded, and looked away. She seemed to have expected my answer it seems. Yet still it had made her happy to hear.

Sorry Renn... right now I'd be...

Glancing at my forearm, where Nebl's print remained... I wondered why this was bothering me so much.

Nebl was a friend. I not only saw him as such, I openly said it aloud. Not just to Renn either.

Yet...

I wasn't supposed to have friends.

"Vim?" Renn tilted her ears at me, seeming worried for me.

"Sorry. Actually, mind doing me a favor?" I asked her.

She blinked as she nodded quickly, expectant.

"Let me know when they... leave him be for a moment. So I can talk to him privately," I said.

"Oh... okay..." she nodded gently. She had been hoping for something else but seemed more than willing to help me out.

"Sorry I didn't invite you into the bath," I said to her.

She smirked and laughed as she turned and darted off, her tail dancing in the air as she hurried back to the house.

Watching her return inside, I took a deep breath and felt a little better.

I'd thank her later. Even though there was no way she'd know that she had actually helped me calm down a little.

Glancing behind me, I quickly found the small gravestone Lellip had made.

She had pushed it over, but had still left it there. I knew the entire family would ignore it from this point on, until it got overcame by the forest and time. Disappearing forever, from sight and memory.

"Fools," I stepped away and headed for the bath. Cursing them... and myself.

Chapter 106: Renn – To Hate What You Love

Opening the door, I waved at Vim in the distance. He turned to look at me and stood up off the stump with... strange quickness, for him. Yet by the time he started walking towards the house, he had returned to his naturally calm pace.

Holding the door open for him, I smiled and nodded once he reached the house. He nodded back, and as he stepped into the house he reached over to pat me on the shoulder before heading to the stairs.

His hand left my shoulder warm, and the other cold as I closed the door behind him.

Watching him head for the stairwell, as to go speak to Nebl who was finally alone... I wondered just how long he would have waited. Glancing to a nearby window, I saw the half hidden moon... and not a cloud in the sky.

It was the middle of the night, probably midnight.

They had a clock here, but it was in the front room. Where right now Lellip and her father were talking. Although they didn't seem bothered by my presence... I really didn't want to disturb them. Some of the conversations they had been having the last few days had been rather heavy. Too heavy for me to feel comfortable listening into.

They were father and daughter, after all.

Vim made barely any noise as he walked up the stairs to Nebl's room. Once he was out of sight I turned and headed back to the kitchen. Pram had gone to bed a few hours ago, and I was occupying myself by cleaning up from our dinner... or rather mostly Nebl's.

The man had eaten nearly a whole pantry.

Not a surprise, but it had been worrying. I'd have warned them otherwise, since usually eating so much so quickly after going so long without was dangerous... but not even Vim seemed to worry over it. Maybe our kind didn't suffer like humans did during such events.

He did seem a lot better. He had even asked to get up and walk around the property. He had done so, using Drandle's shoulder as a crutch... but had only walked around for a few minutes. He hadn't even circled the whole property, nor had gone near the smithy... which had surprised Lellip a little.

She had thought he'd be in there swinging hammers before doing anything else.

The large kitchen had three big tables in the center of it. The walls were covered in shelves, or ovens, and in one corner was a large metal tub looking sink. It was perfect for washing and cleaning large amounts of plates and pans at once, which was another hint that at one time... there had been many people here. Or maybe it was simply that Nebl might eat in such volumes often.

It had seemed that he was more like me than his children, which was a little surprising. I wasn't as old as him, by the sounds of it, yet...

Yet...

Returning to washing some plates, I wondered why I was so different than most our members. And not just because of my ears and tail.

I'd ask Vim later if it was just happenstance or if there was a meaning behind it.

"Still cleaning Renn?"

Turning around, I found Drandle giving me a soft smile. He was taller than me, about Vim's height... but he was a little scrawny. His shoulders weren't very wide, but he had long arms. "There's only a little left," I said.

He nodded and glanced behind him, to what sounded like Lellip. Sure enough she appeared from behind him, smiling at me. "She's like me, can't sit still!" she said proudly.

I smiled back and nodded, even if it wasn't entirely true.

After all I had spent years just... sitting and watching Nory as she cooked and cleaned. If I had done it all the time she would have gotten upset with me. It had made her feel useless to have nothing to do. There had been times where I'd go months without cooking, although it was usually I that caught and cleaned what I hunted.

"Well I am going to sleep while I still can. Goodnight dear, goodnight Renn," Drandle said as he turned and headed back into the hallway. His and Pram's room was on the first floor, near the front entrance for some reason.

"Night dad," Lellip entered the kitchen and hurried up to me as I put a clean plate into the section of the sink that was for soaking.

"I really am almost done," I said to her. She peered into the section of the tub that was left and nodded. It was true, there was only three plates and a couple pots left.

"Thanks Renn," she said kindly.

"Mhm..."

"Think Grandpa is sleeping?" she asked.

"Vim went to tell him to sleep, so probably," I said, careful with my words.

"Oh...? Oh... I'll let him be then," she sounded odd as she nodded.

For a long... strangely quiet moment, Lellip watched as I cleaned the last few plates. Her staring was a little uncomfortable... since not only did she usually try to help, no matter how minuscule the task... she also usually spoke a lot and rarely was as quiet as she was now for long.

The only time she went so long without talking was when she was focused on a task, working. Usually when she was designing things into metal.

About to say something, something silly and light to make her smile, I froze as she stepped forward and wrapped me in a hug.

Her arms slithered around my waist, and I felt my tail go still as she hugged me close. I still held a plate, so I had to carefully put it back into the sink. I couldn't return the hug yet since my hands were wet and...

"Thank you, Renn. Thank you so much!" she squeezed me, oddly tightly, and sobbed once.

I quickly returned her hug, uncaring over my wet hands, and nodded. "Any day," I said as we squeezed one another.

The two of us remained connected for a long moment as Lellip slowly stopped crying, and then she nodded and stepped back. I sniffed as I nodded back at her, and then noticed the slobber and snot on her face.

"Do I look as bad?" I asked her as I reached over for a towel.

"Probably not, whenever I cry I get snot all over and..." Lellip laughed as I wiped her face off with the towel.

Once she was done I went ahead and used it to wipe my own face off and nodded. "Nothing wrong with that," I said.

"Dad thinks I shouldn't cry as much," she said softly.

"I think you should cry whenever you need to," I said. I did after all, so I better believe such a thing.

She smiled and nodded, but didn't seem to agree with me. Which was okay. Not everyone needed to be like me.

"Thank you Renn. Really. I... I don't know what to say," she suddenly seemed embarrassed as she glanced at the sink. She seemed to fidget, as if she wanted to get to work cleaning them if only to distract us from the awkward air.

"It's okay. Plus Vim is the one who dug him out, you know?" I said.

She nodded but shrugged. "Yeah... but he's Vim," she said.

He's Vim... did she mean that she wasn't sure how to thank him, or that him saving a member of the Society was just... normal? Taken for granted?

"He is Vim," I agreed, since I wasn't sure which it was for her. I really hoped it wasn't what I thought it was.

"Hm... he is..." she chuckled, implying she thought I had not only understood her but agreed with her.

Which was sad, since I probably didn't.

A little bit of an odd silence followed for a moment, and then Lellip sighed and nodded as she wiped her eyes clean once more. "I'm going to bed too... just, let these be. Get some sleep too, okay? Knowing Vim he might make you leave at any moment, so make sure you're ready for it," Lellip said kindly.

"I will. Goodnight Lellip," I said.

"Goodnight," she nodded and turned away.

The young woman left the kitchen... and I wondered if...

If...

Stepping forward to say something, I realized there was no point. There was nothing I could say to her.

I knew that, since I had gone through the same thing that she was going through now. And not just when I had buried Nory. Nor when I had buried Ginny. I had felt that way when I had buried that old witch. Though maybe not the exact same feeling, since I had been the one to end her life. I had killed her and buried her myself.

I hadn't been able to bury Lujic, because it had been too painful, but the emotions had been the same.

Even after you bury them, and realize they're gone... you still expect to turn around and see them. To hear them in the distance. To smell them. You hear their laughs in the distance, and in your dreams.

And although everyone knew of the graves and little trinkets she had left for her grandfather... no one knew that she had made another. A smaller grave with a tiny little cross upon it. For the man she had loved.

Humans died before we did. Always. And although telling her that it would be okay... that although it'd hurt, she'd survive it... I knew there was nothing I could actually say. Not right now. Not after her grandfather returned alive, proving once again the difference between us and them.

After all that had been what some of her and her father's conversations had been about. Indirectly at least.

Her grandfather had returned, but not the man he had gone into the mine to save.

How could he? He had been human.

The sad thing is it was probably... the first time Lellip had ever endured such a feeling.

The first time she had buried a human whom she loved.

Though maybe she hadn't buried him, just yet...

I gulped and hurried to finish cleaning the rest of the dishes. Just to have something to distract myself with.

At least she had a family with her. One that was normal, and loved her dearly.

She'd survive it. She'd overcome it.

Hopefully she wouldn't have to endure it too long. Hopefully it wouldn't... ruin her.

At the very least she won't have to live with the knowledge that she had sent her grandfather to his doom.

Finishing with the dishes, I sighed and realized I had nothing left to do. The kitchen was clean. The front living room was spotless... I couldn't do anything in the smithy, not because it was night but because it'd cause too much noise. This family couldn't hear anywhere near as well as myself or Vim, but anyone could hear loud banging of metalwork.

Though...

My eyes wandered to a nearby shelf. Where Pram had dozens of small cylinders. Each of them full of tea leaves of various types.

"Maybe it'd help his scratchy throat," I told myself as I went to making some. I even snuck a few spoonfuls of honey into the cups, for good measure.

Lighting a small fire, I smiled at myself as I warmed up some water. I liked the smell of tea leaves simmering.

Putting three cups onto a small platter, I put the tea kettle they used onto it as well. It wasn't the shape of one I was used to, but it was made out of cast iron. It was... a little too wide for my taste, but it worked all the same.

Once done, I realized I was going to actually intrude. Vim had basically said he wanted to talk to his friend alone. They were still up there, talking. I could just barely make out Vim and Nebl's voices. I couldn't hear what they were saying, since they were talking lowly... but...

"Just drop it off," I told myself as I picked it up and headed for the stairs.

Carrying the small platter, I wondered if I'd get yelled at for intruding... but...

Tea was great! Especially when exhausted... or hurt... plus I had put some honey into it and...

Slowly approaching Nebl's door, I found it open and a lamp was lit within. A familiar shadow shifted as I peered my head around the door's frame, and found Vim staring at me.

Woops. That wasn't a happy stare.

"Sorry," I quickly apologized and turned to go, but a cough stopped me.

"Please enter, young feline. Let me properly thank you as well," Nebl said. Although I could still hear weakness in his voice... it was firm and unyielding. It hadn't sounded like a request, even though I knew it was.

Slowly entering the room, I felt a little sluggish as I raised the platter to show why I had dared Vim's anger.

"Ah, springleaf. My favorite. Please," Nebl held out a now far more steady hand than I had seen him do earlier this morning.

His favorite? Really? I had picked it at random...

Walking up to the bed, I lowered the platter so he could pick up one of the cups. He did so with grace and surety, which seemed a little... unnatural, since he still had sunken cheeks and a gloomy expression.

"I uh... Hm..." I turned a little, to offer Vim a cup as well. He was sitting on a chair in front of his friend's bed, and was no longer really glaring at me, but wasn't too happy either.

He sighed as he nodded and reached out, but instead of taking a cup he took the platter itself.

Putting the platter down onto a small bedside table, Vim nodded... though probably not really in thanks.

He wanted me to leave.

"Sit. I hear your name is Renn," Nebl said after he took a sip from the cup.

"Oh. Uh... yes. It's a pleasure to meet you, Master Nebl," I said with a small bow of the head.

The man tilted his head at me, and I noticed the deep green eyes hidden behind his loose locks of hair. They reminded me of Trixalla's a little.

He was old.

Glancing at Vim for permission, I found him nodding softly. He seemed to have accepted it in stride, since he looked normal again.

I sat in the only other chair next to the bed, which was a little closer to Nebl than Vim was, and sat up straighter.

"Give her a cup, Vim. She did well, and deserves to relish in its flavor," Nebl said with a lift of his own cup.

Vim glanced at his friend, and then without looking reached over and grabbed one of the cups. He handed it to me gently.

"Thanks," I said and took a small drink. Sure enough it was tasty. Still a little too warm for my own taste, but it didn't bother me at all. I particularly liked the hint of honey in it.

"I remember you in the mine. You held the lantern. Thank you, Renn for helping me," Nebl lowered his head, and a lot of his scraggly hair danced in the process. He needed a haircut.

"Oh! It's... it was nothing. Vim did all the hard work," I said.

"Ah, but Vim won't smile when I say thank you. You did," Nebl said with a wink.

I had smiled?

"I... I'm just happy to have witnessed a miracle," I said honestly.

Vim sighed, but said nothing. Nebl though smiled softly at me, reminding me he was old. Only those much older than I could smile at me like that. At least, only the ones who seemed genuine when doing so.

"Miracle. Hear that Vim?" Nebl said.

"Miracle," Vim nodded, saying the word a little oddly.

It was my turn to smile softly as I nodded as well. "A miracle."

"Vim has a penchant for performing miracles," Nebl said.

Yes... it was starting to seem that way.

"I suppose to a point I do agree, young Renn. Though now that I see you closer, I probably shouldn't call you young. You're older than my granddaughter... maybe even as old as my daughter, based off your eyes," Nebl said as he studied me.

I shrugged, since I didn't know if I was or not. Honestly I didn't care much if I was or not.

"You can call her young, Nebl. As long as I can call you the same," Vim said.

Nebl grumbled as he took a sip of his tea.

Did that mean Vim was as much older than him as Nebl was me?

"Miracles don't have to be religious, by the way," I told Vim.

"Funny," Vim said.

"That was a beautiful statement, not a funny one. But I suppose Vim does find humor in the weirdest of places," Nebl said with a nod.

I felt a little odd being told that my words had been beautiful, since I hadn't meant them that way. I had been trying to tease Vim a little.

"All the same, you did well to hold on Nebl. I suggest you mind your body for awhile... degradation like that is hard to return from, even for us," Vim said to his friend.

"Degradation. Such a word to say in front of my guest. Tell me Renn, since no one else seems to be willing to tell me... how long had I been stuck in that mine?" he asked me.

I perked up a little, and tried not to glance at Vim. He was glaring at me again.

"About Three and a half months, I'm told. We arrived almost a month ago, five days from now will be a full month, and the cave-in had happened two months before we arrived," I said.

"Three and a half months..." Nebl went quiet as he stared into his cup. Was his tea empty already? I glanced at the platter across from me, past Vim. It was out of my reach.

"Just a moment, Nebl," Vim said softly.

"A moment. Yet it had felt like an eternity," Nebl said strongly.

I gulped a dry mouth, yet felt no desire to take a drink.

"Eternity passes," Vim said.

"You said that to me once before. I hadn't believed you then either," Nebl said.

"Well as they say shame on you once and twice and so forth," Vim said.

Nebi chuckled and then sighed. "What say you Renn?" he asked.

"Huh...?" I sat up straighter; a little bothered at being addressed. Their conversation had seemed... very familiar to them. It was one full of innuendos and jokes I knew nothing about, lacking their long relationship.

I didn't belong in the center of it.

"I do suppose asking me about eternity is... counterproductive... but asking her?" Vim asked his friend as he glanced at me.

"Why not?" Nebi asked the protector.

Vim opened his mouth to say something, but stopped as he stared at me.

"Hm. Silenced by a single look. Yes. I do think I will ask her. So, Renn, tell me. What would you say to a man who just spent what felt like an eternity alone in pure darkness, with nothing but his failures in his mind to keep him company?" Nebi asked me.

Oh jeez.

I shifted, and not because of Vim's look. He didn't seem angry or upset... but as interested in my answer as Nebi seemed to be.

Feeling out of place... I decided to just let it be and answer honestly.

"Use it to appreciate the moments afterwards, I think," I said to him.

Nebi held my gaze for a moment, and then smiled.

Vim nodded next to me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw him smile as well. "A flawless answer," Vim said.

"Indeed. You're not young at all, forgive me. A pleasure to meet you, Renn," Nebl then extended a hand, the same one that had left that imprint upon Vim's arm. It hadn't just been because of the soot and dirt either. He had grabbed Vim so strongly it had left a bruise.

Taking his hand, I was a little thankful he didn't squeeze anywhere near as roughly as that time as I nodded. "A pleasure," I greeted him again.

"Hm... It is too bad none of my sons still live, or I'd beg you marry one of them. Such a waste," Nebl said with a sigh as we shook hands.

"Huh...?" my tail knocked into the chair's leg as I processed what he had just said.

Before our hands separated, I noticed that his hand was much larger than anyone's I'd seen... maybe even bigger than Link's, which was saying something.

His forearm was huge too, even though it was obvious he was very malnourished from his trial.

"Funny you say that. She seems to like the forge, and has a knack for it too," Vim said.

I glanced at him as Nebl sat up straighter. "You jest?" he asked while staring at me.

"Oh uh... It is fun, though I'm told I'm too strong for my own good..." I said, repeating what Lellip said.

"Too strong!" Nebl laughed, a little loudly. The kind of loud that made me wonder if it had woke anyone else in the house.

Though... I doubted anyone would dare complain to be woken by his laugh. Especially when it sounded so happy, and genuine. Even if a little strained.

"Well... then it wouldn't have worked out anyway. Too bad," Nebl said after a few chuckles extra.

"Hm?" I wondered what that meant.

"His sons hated the forge. Despised it," Vim told me.

"Ah..." that was sad.

"Nothing like a daughter to do what sons won't, eh?" Nebl said with a smirk.

Daughter...? Ah... he must mean Pram and Lellip. I hadn't really seen Pram in the forge, but she was pregnant.

"Congratulations by the way. Another descendant," Vim noted.

"Yes. Will you stay for the birth?" Nebl asked.

"It'll be a miracle if we stay a month more," Vim said, smirking as he spoke. He was still caught up on that miracle thing wasn't he? Would he poke at it for months?

"No matter. You'll be back soon enough, you always return. Even when I don't want you to!" Nebl said with a chuckle. He coughed a few times after the fourth laugh, and quickly went to drown the rest of his tea.

"Ah..." I stood, and quickly rounded Vim's chair as to grab the tea kettle.

"Look at that, a gentle soul this one. I'd tell you not to stain her, but if she's been with you this long and still like this she'll probably be fine," Nebl said as I went to refilling his cup.

Smiling, I sat back down while holding the kettle. Both to refill it as needed, but also since it was warm. It felt good in the hands.

"Renn, would you please give me a few moments with this fool alone?" Vim asked suddenly.

"Oh...? Sure," I nodded, and stood but Nebl waved me down.

"You stay," he said plainly.

"Nebl..." Vim sighed but Nebl shook his head, and pointed at Vim with one of his strangely long fingers.

"She stays. I know what you want to ask anyway, and I will only answer it if you let her stay," he said firmly.

Looking from him, to Vim, I felt very uncomfortable.

Was Nebl trying to tease Vim, insult him, or make him uncomfortable? By the look on Vim's face it was all three. And although it was amusing to see, I really didn't want to be caught up in it.

"Are you sure?" Vim asked his friend.

"As a stone," Nebl answered.

"Stone gives way easily," Vim countered.

"Only for you, my friend."

A moment of silence followed Nebl's comment, and I glanced around. "I uh..." I was about to say I didn't mind, but Vim looked at me and nodded.

With a reluctant sigh I sat back down.

While sitting, I drummed my fingertips against the sides of the kettle. It was more oval than the ones I was used to, which made it take up most my lap.

"It's not their fault, Vim," Nebl then said.

I went still as I both heard Nebl's tone... and saw the way Vim's eye's focused and hardened.

"You cannot blame them for their lack of effort. You can't fault them for not trying," Nebl said to him.

My tail twitched around the leg of my chair, tightening around it tightly as I inwardly cringed. I really shouldn't be here for this conversation.

"If I hadn't come Nebl," Vim started to speak but Nebl shook his head.

"They're not like you Vim. By the hammer they're not even like me. You can't compare them to us. To them I was dead. To them by all reason and by all count I was gone, and there was nothing they could do," he said.

"Even humans try, Nebl. That is not an argument," Vim said lowly.

"They do. Yet they are not humans. We are not humans. Our age dilutes our reasoning, our hope. We become too... literal. Too serious. Humans live such short lives they not only are willing to believe in miracles, they give birth to them simply out of sheer will. Blaming my children for their lack of trying is like blaming the ore for not being what it could be on its own. You have to shape it, you have to teach it and show it or it'll do nothing and stay a simple ore forever," Nebl reasoned with Vim.

Vim took a deep breath, and I knew it was not because he was holding in words or shouts... but because he knew Nebl was right.

Was this what had been bothering him all this time?

Was this why he had been acting so oddly since we got here?

"You blame them?" I asked Vim.

His eyes narrowed, and I realized he had forgotten I was here. He glanced at me, and although did so with that strong gaze... it wasn't a glare. He wasn't upset with me.

"He was just beyond the dirt, Renn," he said softly.

"A mountain, Vim," I said back.

Nebl nodded, agreeing with me.

Vim shook his head, not agreeing at all.

"Vim... you are what this girl sees as a miracle. You are not the standard. Hell, even I'm not the standard anymore! Little Lellip... as wonderful as she is, as much of a joy she is for my life and as far as she has come... she'll never have my strength. Never be like me. Let alone like you. And her children will be even less. Even weaker. Even smaller," Nebl said softly, as if afraid Lellip would hear him speak.

His words would probably be interpreted as hurtful... but he wasn't wrong.

"It's not a question of standards, Nebl...! It's the lack of effort and..." Vim shook his head, and I knew what really bothered him.

It wasn't a matter of how strong anyone was. It was the simple fact that anyone could have done it, given the time and effort.

Even the humans could have. He wasn't just angry at the smithy family... he was angry at everyone. At everything.

"He... he thinks they should have saved you. Before we even got here," I said as I understood.

"Of course he does."

"She heard you, same as I did. Not a moment later," Vim said softly.

"Look at her ears, Vim," Nebl whispered, barely audible.

Vim blinked and did. Upon being focused on they twitched, as if his glance alone could be felt by the many hairs upon them.

"You say it's not a matter of standards, but is she more like them, or more like me?" Nebl asked him.

I didn't like how I had thought something similar earlier. It made me more aware of how different I really was.

Vim took a deep breath but finally nodded, yet didn't say anything.

While staring at him I realized something very... very serious.

Vim loved the Society. He protected them fiercely.

Yet hated them all the same.

Shivering at the realization, I suddenly understood a lot of things. Many things, a lot of comments... suddenly they all made sense.

He loved and cherished all of us, yet at the same time expected more than we were capable of giving.

Glancing at Nebl, I found his hard eyes on me.

He had me stay, not for Vim's sake...

But my own.

Nebl reached out his arm, open palmed to Vim. The gesture was obvious.

"Forgive them Vim... please. For everyone's sake. Before you leave, forgive them. If not for me, or yourself, do it for her," Nebl said to him.

For me?

Glancing at Nebl, I wondered why he'd phrase it that way.

Vim didn't nod but he reached out, clasping Nebl's arm. He didn't grab him by the hand, but instead by the forearm. As they had done in the mine. I saw the way they gripped each other tightly, firmly. This was something they had done for years and years.

I was jealous over the level of their friendship. Over the way Nebl had been willing to talk so... purely and deeply with Vim like that, and even argue with him.

The two were looking at each other in a way that actually made me jealous.

"Okay," Vim finally said.

"Okay," Nebl said.

Reaching out, I placed my hand on their wrists. The only place that I could grab onto both of them with the size of my own hands, thanks to how big theirs were.

"Okay," I said.

Chapter 107: Request of Those Left Behind

I dodged one of Renn's blows and sidestepped another. The next I blocked, and then the one after I parried and tapped her lightly with the side of my blade along her right arm.

"Ugh..." Renn groaned as she stepped back. Although I had only tapped her and did so with the side I knew it had probably still hurt a little. Hopefully not too badly.

"You are getting better," I told her.

"Doesn't feel like it. I feel like you're dodging and blocking me easier than before," she said.

"That's because I'm not intentionally taking your attacks anymore," I told her.

Her ears perked up as she studied me for a moment, as if to judge my face and see if I was lying or not.

Which was rude. Rude enough that next time she attacked I planned to thump her a little harder.

"Can I ask something?" she asked.

I gestured with my sword for her to go ahead.

"You made spears and stuff, yet we're still just using these. Why?" she asked with a nod of her chin to the pile of weapons nearby.

"You're not ready for those yet," I said.

"Then why bring them?" she asked.

"Because I don't know when you will be. This time only swing at me when you're breathing out," I told her and gestured for her to start again.

She huffed but obeyed. She stepped forward quickly, starting her attack with her favored swipe at my left arm.

I wasn't sure if she noticed that she was starting to... have her own pattern and style, but I'd never mention it. Not aloud. Not yet anyway.

I'd stop her from picking up any kind of unwanted traits, but stuff like that was simple nature. It was impossible to not have some kind of style or pattern that one instinctually favored.

Plus it seemed what was being instilled into her was...

Well...

Blocking her first few attacks, I ducked a large swipe and she yelped as she jumped backwards before I could poke her in the stomach. My fault for not moving quick enough, but at the same time a testament to her instincts.

"I was going to use my finger," I told her as I stood back up.

"I know! That's worse somehow!" she shouted at me as she shivered, from many feet away from me.

I smiled at her. She was amusing, sometimes.

"Again," I commanded.

She grumbled but charged forward all the same. This time she started with a swipe to my mid-section, as if to get revenge.

I solidly blocked it, and to mix things up sent my foot out.

Renn went wide-eyed and her tail shot upward, looking like a startled cat, as my foot solidly touched her stomach... and then stopped.

She let loose a pent up breath, relieved, as she leaned into my foot. I had stopped right before actually connecting, resulting in our rather awkward situation. Me standing on one leg, and her leaning into my foot.

"How do you even block something like this Vim?" She asked me while she tapped my shin.

"You should have rolled along it," I said.

"Rolled...?" she frowned as she looked down at my foot and leg, and after a moment she actually started to do so. She spun on a heel, slowly rolling along my leg. As she did she raised her sword upward, making it point up to the sky.

"Then what? Just bring the sword down onto you or something?" she asked as she paused, right where my knee was. I kept my leg extended and played along.

"Personally I'd bring the sword down onto the leg itself, but that's just because I like to punish people who overextend themselves," I said.

"Hm..."

She wouldn't try.

She did.

She brought the sword down as fast as she could, a full blown strike directed entirely at my kneecap. The kind that would have split a log, even with a dull blade.

Smiling at her, I simply curled my leg at the knee and leaned back. As her sword whooshed by, missing my leg and knee entirely, I sent my leg back out to her. This time I stopped it right before her extended elbows.

"How many people can actually do that?" she asked me accusingly.

"Well you've tried it on one person, and one person was able to. So with that in mind, everyone?" I said back.

She scoffed and then swung her blade upward, as to cut at the underside of my calf.

I dodged it, and went to block and parry the series of blows that quickly followed.

Although an hour had already passed, I indulged Renn as she continued to swing her sword at me. Lately it had seemed she had made it her personal goal to land at least one solid blow upon me.

Honestly she was learning quickly, and doing well... but I had no idea how many years it'd take before she'd actually be able to fulfill that dream.

After another hour, I parried one last attempt from her. Sending her sword out of her hands and into the air, I carefully grabbed it before she could.

"Really...!" she complained as I stepped back away from her, holding both swords.

"Hm... I think we're done for today. Plus we have a visitor," I said.

Renn realized what I meant and turned to see the young Lellip as she stepped out from the trees. The young girl saw us, and flinched as she sheepishly smiled and waved.

She had been searching for us, and hadn't realized she'd find us so quickly. Which wasn't really her fault. Ever since we had returned with Nebl, I hadn't taken Renn too far into the woods. Just a few minutes away was the smithy.

"Go see what she wants," I told Renn as I hefted the two swords.

"Huh? Okay..." Renn nodded, even though I could tell she was unsure of what to say or do.

After all there was no reason for Lellip to search her out. Which meant she was here to ask me something, most likely.

Watching Renn walk to the girl, I stared at the way her tail twitched as she walked. It was stiff, a little too stiff...

She hadn't wanted to stop just yet.

Maybe she was enjoying this too much. Yet for as eager as she was... she still had yet to ever actually attack me in the real sense.

Not one of her attacks so far had been filled with blood lust. Not a single swing had been meant to actually hurt me. She wouldn't hesitate to swing, no matter how precarious my situation probably seemed from an outsider's point of view... yet at the same time not once did Renn seem to think she'd actually hurt me.

Either she saw me as some kind of omnipotent warrior, or...

Or what she actually enjoyed was the physical exercise, and doing so with me. It could have been any kind of training. Any kind. She was having fun because we were doing something together.

Sighing softly, I watched as Renn said hello to Lellip. They made small talk for a moment until Lellip shyly smiled and pointed at me.

She had something to ask of me.

Typical.

Glancing down to the two swords in my hand, I studied the differences.

One was a tad bit shorter. About half a hand shorter. Her hilt was also small enough that if I used both hands I'd be gripping the pommel not just the handle.

If my blade was a full length broadsword, hers was a hand and a half.

I hefted the two and for a tiny, fraction of the moment... I was back on the battlefield.

My eyes hazed over, and I slowly moved the swords into position. To not just fight, to not just do battle...

But to wage war.

Then as fast as the moment came, it went.

Lowering the swords, I walked over to the small log I had left the bundle of other weapons at. I put the swords back into the leather holster, and then tied the leather strap that held it all together. Hefting it up, I turned and walked over to Lellip and Renn who were patiently waiting for me.

As I approached, I noticed Renn's strange smile. It was a happy one... but also kind of sad. As if she had just heard something painful, yet it had made her smile all the same.

She had that expression often. I wasn't sure yet if I liked it or not.

"What is it?" I asked Lellip.

"Ah... Well..." she glanced at Renn, whom quickly nodded and held out her hands.

"I'll take the weapons back, Vim," Renn said calmly.

Renn was happily dismissing herself. Wonderful. Maybe I should have actually listened to their conversation instead of remembering the past.

Handing her the bundle, I noted the way she blinked at the weight of it. This was the first time I had ever handed her the whole satchel, and it showed. She put it over her shoulder, holding the leather strap tightly with both hands as she then nodded at me and Lellip. "I'll head back first," she said.

Watching her go, Lellip waited a few minutes before speaking up. It wasn't until Renn was mostly hidden by the trees and foliage before she turned around to look up at me.

"Everything okay Lellip?" I asked her, inviting her to tell me.

"Yes... or well... I think so. I actually came to ask you something, since... since I know everyone else will say no," she said.

I frowned, especially since that told me what she was about to ask was probably...

"I like saying no too, you know," I told her.

Lellip smiled and nodded. "I know. And! And it's okay, if you do, of course," she said quickly.

"Then give me the chance to," I said with a gesture for her to tell me.

"Ah... right... yea... Well," she glanced behind her, to make sure Renn was gone. She was. "I'd like to go to the mines. To uh... to where you found Grandpa," she said finally.

Thus Renn's sad smile.

Had she told Renn? But then why did Renn leave?

No. She had told Renn. Maybe even before she had come here. Maybe that was why Renn's tail had twitched oddly as she walked over to her. She had known what Lellip wanted and planned, since before.

"What'd Renn say I'd do?" I asked her.

"Huh! Oh..." Lellip went a little red in the face, and then coughed. "She said you'd say yes... since you believe in free-will," she said.

"I see. Go get two helmets then, and a lantern," I said.

Lellip looked up at me with suddenly wide eyes, as if in disbelief. "Really?" she squeaked.

I nodded. Had she really thought I'd have said no? "Let's go now, before the humans start mining again," I said.

"Oh thank you!" Lellip hurried forward, wrapping me in a small hug. I had no time to return it, or pat her on the back, since she then spun around and darted back to the smithy. "I'll get ready right away!" she shouted.

Smiling softly at her I followed her, but not as quickly. I walked slowly out of the forest as she ran straight through, even going so far as to run through bushes and tall grass.

After a few minutes I exited the forest, and found Renn patiently waiting at the edge. She still carried the satchel of weapons, and it looked... a little silly on her. Thanks to the spears within, the leather satchel dragged on the ground a bit and yet loomed over the top of her, even her ears.

"I knew you'd say yes," she said as I walked up to her.

"Did you," I said.

She nodded happily. "Thank you. She wasn't going to ask you, originally," she said.

Which meant she had been the one to convince her... though...

Though I suppose that was what I wanted her for, wasn't it?

"You do know what she actually wants, yes?" I asked her.

"To see if she can find his body, right? So she can bury Kline?" Renn tilted her head at me, and her ears shifted as well. As if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Kline," I said. Right. She had said that name before...

"It's a gentle kindness, Vim. It's a good thing," Renn said.

"That gentleness is what kills our people, Renn," I told her.

Renn hesitated, but she wasn't able to argue. After all, it was true.

"Are you coming? Go put those away first," I said.

"Oh no... She asked if I'd come, but... I really think she needs to do it alone. She'll..." Renn glanced at the buildings, and hesitated even though no one was nearby. Lellip was still out of sight, likely rummaging in the workshop.

"She will weep," I agreed.

Renn nodded. "I'm sorry. I... I'll hold her when she gets back, but..." Renn looked away, as if ashamed.

Before I could voice my disagreement... I realized why.

Had I not thought that Renn and Lellip were similar? In a way? How could I think such a thing, and then in the same vein blame her for it? I couldn't. And not just because my friend had asked me not to.

Renn saw herself in Lellip, and didn't want to relive such a fresh memory.

She might not have loved Amber as Lellip had this Kline... but the emotions were similar. The self-loathing and blame was the same.

It had been months ago... but for us...

Yes. Fresh indeed.

I sighed and nodded. "Put those away all the same," I told her.

"Right," she nodded as I stepped away from her.

"If anyone asks just tell them I took her to check on something near the village," I said.

"Right," she said again.

"And next time I go to flick you in the stomach, don't yelp like that. Makes me only want to do something worse," I warned.

"R...Right."

Chapter 108: To Hammer Again...

Although Nebl still looked weak, ill even, he didn't move or act it.

The man swung the hammer down, replicating the pure tone Vim had created.

"Ore is ore. No matter what you deal with, or what you're making, it's all the same. You heat it. You hit it. You heat it. You hit it," Nebl said as he struck the burning orange metal again.

I nodded, even though I knew there was far more to it than that. He simplified stuff, it seemed.

"In time you'll be able to tell where and when you need to hit it. Based off the color alone. Then you'll learn the sound. Until you can do it all with your eyes closed," Nebl said as he turned the billet around and began to hit it at a different rhythm.

"Do you intentionally make it sound like a song?" I asked him as I listened to the notes reverberate for a moment. Unlike the hard sounds of Lellip or my own hammer strikes... Nebl's and Vim's seemed to only echo once, even though just as loud and pure.

Not only were they pure... but there was a certain tempo to them. The loud note with each strike should hurt my ears, yet it didn't... all because of the rhythm they hit along.

"No music. If you try to make music you'll fail," he said with a gruff voice.

Yet he was definitely making music.

Maybe that meant the music was simply a byproduct, not intentional at all.

How did that happen?

I sat a few feet from the anvil that Nebl was working at, and we were alone in the forge. Vim and Lellip had yet to return from the mine, and Pram and Drandle were out working in the farm nearby. I could hear Drandle every so often yell at Pram to sit down and rest.

"See that hotter line? In the center?" Nebl didn't move the billet to show me so I had to stand up a little to see.

I nodded once I could.

"That will be the core. It's too close to the edge, so I will need to move it a little," he said, and then flipped it to begin hammering a different direction.

"Why doesn't it melt? Like it does in the furnaces?" I asked.

"Different temperatures. This furnace is not as hot as the blast furnace, and that one over there isn't as hot as this one," Nebl said.

"Yes, but why? Why would how hot it is matter?" I asked.

Lellip hadn't known the actual answer, and something told me Vim wouldn't give it to me.

"Different melting points because of the metal's density. There's a science to it. I'll teach you it if Vim allows," Nebl said as he stepped away from the anvil to put the metal back into the furnace.

Science...

"Vim doesn't like teaching stuff like that," I said.

"Vim doesn't like anything. He's tired of losing what he likes. But he will teach you if you ask the right way," Nebl said as he stared into the fire. His face was sunken, and although he had tied up his wild hair into a pony-tail... he still looked like he should be lying down not hammering away at a piece of metal.

For a few moments I said nothing as the furnace growled angrily, heating up the metal. Every so often Nebl would reach over to grab the little metal bar that opened and closed the air intake flaps. They were outside, and a lot bigger than one expected.

"Vim has learned that teaching certain things brings only disaster. He teaches someone something, and it gets them killed. Or others killed. Over the many years that has made him... hesitant. If a man like him can be such a thing, it is there that he is," Nebl said softly.

I sat up straighter; I was a little excited to hear someone talk about Vim. Especially so, since it was from someone who so obviously knew him well and had known him for a long time.

"Smithing is the same. It's something that can lead to other techniques. This forge especially. If you knew what I had to pay for this place..." Nebl went quiet for a moment, and then glanced at me. His hard eyes held my own and I waited for him to continue. "Do you even know who Vim is?" Nebl then asked me.

"The protector," I said softly.

His hard eyes seemed to soften a little, and I realized that answer had been... maybe not wrong, but incorrect all the same.

"He's teaching you how to protect yourself," he said with a glance behind me. I knew he was looking at the leather pouch that held the weapons. I had leaned it up against the wall near the door, after he had invited me in to join him.

I nodded. "He said since I'll be traveling with him, conflict is inevitable... so I needed to know," I said.

"A regrettable truth. Yet he also asked for you to learn how to forge," Nebl said as he glanced back at his metal. It must not be ready yet, for he looked away after a moment. Sometimes they left it in there a lot longer than I thought they would.

"I honestly don't think I can learn this before I leave... there's so much," I said.

"The basics. And by the time I'm done with you, you'll be competent enough before you leave," Nebl said with a huff.

My ears twitched as I nodded. That sounded promising. Lellip wasn't a bad teacher she was just... a little odd. She spoke quickly, and focused on her work. To the point that sometimes she neglected what she was actually doing. Though it was most likely my fault. I wanted answers to questions that no one really seemed to know how to answer. Or know if they should answer them to me.

Maybe I just needed to accept that some things weren't supposed to be known, even though I couldn't help myself.

My curiosity was dangerous. Not just to myself, but the Society.

"Do you know if he has a route in mind yet?" Nebl asked.

"Route? You mean throughout the Society? No... I do know we're to eventually head to Lumen though," I said.

"Lumen...? I see..." Nebl glanced at me for a moment before he reached in to grab the metal. He pulled it out, and with a single fluid motion took it to the anvil and hefted his hammer.

I blinked as some sparks flew upon his first strike, and then blinked on the second because of how solid of a blow it had been.

Even while weak, he was strong. Maybe even stronger than me.

"How can you hit it so strongly? When I do that it ends up breaking," I asked.

"Because I know how and where to hit. Grab that hammer," Nebl gestured with a chin to the nearby table. The one that had hammers and chisels and...

Standing quickly I obeyed. Grabbing the one that looked nearly identical to the one in his hand, I nodded.

"Strike it in the center. With me," he said, and then right after hitting the billet... he hit the anvil.

The hammer made a strange ringing tone upon being struck, and he then hit the steel. Then he hit the anvil again.

"With me," he ordered again.

Oh. I'm supposed to hit when he hits the anvil.

Stepping forward I nodded and got into position. It didn't take long at all for him to hit the steel, and then tap his hammer on the anvil half a moment afterward.

I struck the steel, and noticed the way the hot flakes upon it curled a little. The steel itself seemed to bend just a bit, but not enough to ruin it.

Without a word Nebl struck the steel, and it was sent back into the former shape. The proper one.

I see.

Striking the steel right as he tapped the anvil, I nodded as I slowly understood what he was trying to have me do.

He wasn't having me forge or shape it; he was simply having me hit it until I did so at the right strength. Each time I hit it, and deformed it because I hit too strongly... he reshaped it back, for me to repeat the process. Then he'd tap the anvil... either harder or lighter, telling me to do the same.

"Harder," he told me after I hit it again. This time I had hit too softly.

About a dozen strikes later, Nebl huffed and spun the metal around. This side was much brighter than the other.

"Make it rounder," he said.

Rounder...

It only took four times for him to correct my own hitting, before he seemed to have to stop fixing my mistakes.

Then another four hits later and he stopped hitting it completely. He simply turned the billet, tapped the anvil and nodded when I hit it.

He flipped the billet again. "Give it a corner," he said.

Frowning at him, I wondered how I'd do that. I just made it circular... almost like a rod and...

But no, maybe it would be easy.

"Why do we hit it many times and not just... force it into shape? All at once?" I asked as I struck the billet.

"That is done. But you need the cast, and strength like yours and mine. Humans can't do it yet," Nebl said.

Oh...?

"And that only works for certain purities. Humans struggle with that too," Nebl said.

"Oh..." I forged a second corner, and Nebl spun it again. To allow me to make the other corners.

"Your mind works at least. More I can say for most," Nebl said with a huff as I finished up the corners.

Nebl hit the anvil three times in quick succession, and I hesitated. Did he want me to strike it three times quickly? But no, he stepped back and pulled the billet away as to put it back into the furnace.

"Why is this... steel so special?" I asked him.

"It leads to a new age. One that will come eventually," Nebl said.

I hesitated, and thought of that painting at the Cathedral. The one with Vim.

The armor and spear he had in that painting had been the same color.

"Did Vim teach you how to make it?" I asked softly.

Nebl was quiet for a moment, which was strange for him. He seemed to answer so quickly, and so surely...

He then turned to look at me, and I shifted a little. I held the little hammer tightly in my hands, and wondered if maybe I should have kept that question to myself.

"You're a dangerous one, aren't you?" he said.

Blinking, I looked down at the hammer and wondered if he thought I had been trying to intimidate him or...

"I mean your questions, Renn. They sound so innocent, until you realize what they are," Nebl said with a chuckle.

"Oh. I'm sorry," I said, and meant it. I hadn't meant to ask something I shouldn't.

"Vim did teach me how to forge. At least, more than I knew at the time. No, I don't know where he learned it or how he did. But it's safe to assume he simply acquired it somewhere. Maybe another member taught him or it's some forgotten technique from a destroyed nation he once knew," Nebl said.

He sounded serious in his answer, yet at the same time his answer had sounded... a little too ambiguous. It made me wonder if he was just giving me an answer to satiate my curiosity or if he was telling me the whole truth, and honestly didn't know.

For now it was probably the best answer I could get on that matter. He had said earlier that he knew the science behind the steel, but wouldn't tell me until he got Vim's permission. Or rather, until I got it.

Maybe that was something similar.

"Lellip says you refuse to make weapons," I said, changing topics.

Nebl shifted a little, but nodded. "That is the family rule, yes."

"Can I ask why?" I asked.

"You just did. But yes you may. If I make weapons... if we make them," he corrected himself, "Then the resulting chaos will be on my hands. If I forge a sword and it stabs a young child thru, it would be the same as if I had done the deed myself," Nebl said.

I nodded, since I understood that viewpoint completely. I didn't entirely agree with it, but from a moral standpoint it made perfect sense. One could argue anything you did could be seen in that way, like the hammers he used to forge other things, but I knew the truth in the matter.

Weapons were weapons. They were tools, yes, but how often were they used as tools for good?

"Plus in all truth... no one has asked for weapons in many years. Lilly and Yangli had been the last to request them, I believe," Nebl said.

Lilly had? "Lilly did?" I asked. I didn't know who this Yangli was but if they were anything like Lilly then...

Nebi pulled out the hot billet, but paused before going to the anvil. He stared at me for a moment before finally bringing the metal back to the anvil.

"I do hope your obvious knowing of Lilly is pure happenstance and not because you're one of her flock," Nebi said coldly.

"Hm? No. I met Lilly while searching for Vim. I only spent a couple days with her," I said as I prepared to hit the steel again.

"Good. Stay away from her. She flew too close to the sun. Stay away from Yangli too," Nebi ordered as he nodded and informed me to go ahead with hitting.

Striking the hot steel, I spent a few minutes being focused on the metal. I wasn't sure what he was making, but he seemed to want it to form an elongated square of some kind.

"Did you make weapons for them?" I asked as he turned the billet over.

"I made them one. Yes," Nebi said.

One. I wonder if this was before or after she had lost her wings.

"Did Vim make them any?" I asked as I hit alongside his taps on the anvil.

"No. He did not."

After a few more strikes the billet started looking... well, exactly what he had seemed to want. A rectangle of some kind.

"What are you making?" I asked as he turned the billet around to study it.

"We are making a post insert. To go into the ground," Nebl said calmly.

A... a post insert? For... for something like a fence? "For a fence?" I asked.

"For a sign. To warn others," Nebl said gently.

Oh.

"For the mines," I said as I understood.

He nodded. "For the mines."

Vim had mentioned that they were mining into something dangerous. Some kind of clay.

"Will they heed the warning?" I asked as I stepped back as he went to hammering the billet himself. He was now hammering it on the top, as if to make it wider.

"Likely not," he said.

Yet still he'd do it.

"It is funny. We could try and warn them. We could try and teach them... yet they'll still fail. They'll still make mistakes, and commit atrocities... yet we are the exact same. Vim could stop many of us from making horrible mistakes, saving our lives, yet we do not allow him to. He could have stopped Lilly and Yangli. He could have forced them to not do what they did, yet he knew it didn't matter. He knew the end result would happen, whether he stopped them or not," Nebl said as he hammered the metal.

Staying silent, I wondered exactly what had happened. Something to have made her lose her wings, yes... maybe even her children. Or at least one of them.

"Hadn't Vim helped them?" I asked softly.

"He stood with them when the moment came, since that is his duty. But he did not help them get to that point. Some see that as a failure on his part. Others see it as his proper duty. To let us decide our own fate, and he only needs to aid us when we ask for it," Nebl said.

"He helps, even when we don't ask for it though," I said, as I thought of Trek.

"Then you've not been with him as long as I had thought. But that's to be expected. You'll learn the truth soon enough," he said.

I shifted and squeezed the handle of the hammer I held. Was he saying that Vim really wouldn't help someone, if they hadn't asked for it? Would he stand back and let them die, if they hadn't previously accepted his aid?

Surely not. Right...?

"He'd save us if we were in danger, Renn. But... sometimes that very danger is our own doing. Our own mistakes. One must pay their dues, not even Vim can stop the law of the world," Nebl said as he stared at me for a moment. The square orange metal piece was starting to lose its luster. It needed to go back into the furnace soon. Although cooling off, it was also now far bigger than it had been. What had earlier been about the size of my forearm was now nearly as wide as the anvil it sat upon. And about the size of my closed fist in height.

"He saved you," I whispered.

"And got angry over it," Nebl said.

"At them, for not helping you," I shook my head as I spoke.

"He did. But don't think he hadn't gotten angry at me too. For letting myself get in such a situation in the first place."

Nebel examined his handiwork for a moment, and then grunted. He lowered the metal clamps he used to hold the steel he was working with and sighed. "A poor result. Vim would use this moment to tell me it was proof I still need rest," Nebel said.

I of course could not see anything wrong with it. It looked... perfectly symmetrical, and laid flat on the surface. Nothing about it told me he had failed in any way.

Though odds were whatever was wrong with it, was my fault. I didn't do very much of the hammering, and he had hit it alongside me as to correct my mistakes but that didn't change the fact I had a hand in it its failure.

"Maybe you should rest?" I asked him, deciding not to voice the obvious.

"I will. But I also need to move. To breathe in the flames and heat. Metal needs to be heated to be fixed," Nebel said as he nodded, as if sure his words were the whole truth and the only truth.

I knew he didn't really think he was made of metal... but he sure did look it to a degree. Even with his sunken body, he looked muscular. Firm. Powerful. It made me wonder what he had originally looked like. He was about my height, however... and he slouched a little which only made him seem even shorter.

"Come. Let's work the bellows for a moment," Nebel said as he stepped away from the anvil.

Leaving behind the metal he had been working on, I wondered if it was okay to do so. It wasn't anywhere near as bright orange as it had been but it was still hot.

Yet there was no reason to doubt the man knew what he was doing.

I joined Nebel to the section of the wall that large ropes hung from massive wooden poles. There were also circular pipes on the ground that one could step on, to work the bellows that way. When Lellip had done it the other day she had done both at the same time, and had also struggled until I had gone to help her.

She just didn't have the weight behind her, I think.

Grabbing one of the hanging ropes, I nodded to Nebl who grabbed his own. Half a moment later the bellow blew a massive amount of air into the main furnace. The blast furnace roared as I pulled on the rope as well, sending another wave of air into it.

"The air is everything for a fire. Take it from the fire and it dies without a whimper," Nebl said as we waited for the bellow to reset. It slowly rose back upward, making an odd noise as it did.

"Lellip said that fire could last for weeks without fuel," I said.

"It can. But it'll grow weak," Nebl said as the ropes we held went tight again. It was ready to be pulled once more.

I pulled my own rope as Nebl pulled his. The blast furnace roared even louder this time, being fueled by two bellows at the same time.

The room quickly became hotter, even though the blast furnace wasn't open. Nothing was in it being melted. Yet still I could tell that only a few pulls of the rope had increased the temperature severely.

"How are these made? Why can they refill themselves of air so easily?" I asked as I stared at my bellow. Only a small portion of it was here, the rest was outside. In here all I could really see was the mechanisms used to pull and lift it. It looked made of leather.

"I'll teach you how to make one. It involves pressure. These are massive, but the hole in which the air flows outward is small. About the size of your tail," Nebl said as he went to pull his rope again. Mine wasn't ready just yet.

My tail...?

I glanced at it right as my rope went taught again.

So about the size of my wrist.

Glancing at the blast furnace, I wondered where the air actually went into it from. It was huge, nearly reaching the top of the ceiling, and took up half the building all on its own.

Pulling my rope, I heard the hiss of air until I heard the roar of fire instead.

Was there really a fire in there? It also almost sounded as if there was... liquid. I sometimes heard swishing and sloshing when the bellows were used, too.

Though I guess of course there was liquid in there. When they poured in the ores up top, it came out as molten metal which I supposed was a liquid?

"That is enough," Nebl said as he stepped away from his corner.

"What happens if it goes out?" I asked.

"It's exceedingly difficult to light it once it's cold. And then it takes weeks to get it hot enough to melt steel. It's just a pain to let it happen, but it does sometimes," Nebl said.

Looking at the rope I had pulled, I noticed the wear and tear. It's been used for years and years.

There were four bellows. Or at least, four hanging ropes. Four places to pull. I wasn't entirely sure if there were four bellows or not. From outside there were just two large additions to the building, so it was hard to tell how many were where.

It really seemed like this place had been made with far more workers in mind than just Nebl and Lellip. Pram was also a possible worker, though unable to help since she was pregnant... but from what I could tell Drandle didn't help much. At least not in the smithy.

Nebl and Vim had mentioned something along the lines of Nebl having lost children. Sons especially.

"Come. Let us go over lighting a furnace," Nebl gestured for me to join him as he walked to the third furnace. The one that wasn't lit, and the one he had said wasn't as hot as the one he had just been using.

I nodded, excited to learn. It all felt... a little haphazard, as if there was no set method to it... but I knew that didn't matter.

We weren't humans after all. We had time, a lot more than then.

Nebl wasn't in a rush, simply for that reason.

"What about your post?" I asked.

"I'll need to redo it. It's not wide enough," he said.

Really...? It honestly didn't seem that wrong. Lellid had mentioned that he and Vim were something of perfectionist however.

"I apologize," I said.

"Was not your hammering that failed it, but the temperature. I had let it get too cold," Nebl said.

Too cold? Yet it had formed into the shape needed all the same hadn't it?

Maybe he was just being kind. Yet I knew he was the kind to also tell me the truth, all the same... so maybe it really had been the temperature.

"You'll find people and metal are the same, Renn," Nebl said as he noticed my disappointment.

"The same?" I asked as he pulled open the furnaces latch. To where we'd in a moment be shoveling coals into.

"Mendable. But only if you break them first," he said.

I blinked at his sudden statement, and realized he was still on the topic from earlier. Or rather, we had never left it.

"Are you saying that Vim wishes he could break us? Or rather the Society? As to fix what he thinks needs fixing?" I asked.

"I'm saying Vim waits until we break before he fixes anything. But that's not his fault. We as a whole forced him into that corner. We fought back and disagreed when he had wanted to do it another way. Now it's the only way he's allowed to do it," Nebl said.

Nebl handed me a shovel, and I went straight to shoveling a few loads of coal into the furnace. Lellip had already explained to me that it only took three or four at most.

As I shoveled, I thought about it. Maybe Nebl was right, even if I didn't want to agree with him.

Vim protected us, yes... but most of the time it seemed he came in to help only after there was a problem. He saved Lomi, but had not done anything to stop her village from burning in the first place. He had dealt with the Sleepy Artist, or rather the paintings, but had not done anything to ensure Lughes and the rest hadn't made such a mistake in the first place.

After all if the lack of paying taxes was really the cause of such a tragedy... why hadn't Vim made absolutely sure they were doing it? He understood the fine workings of the human society well, after all.

"Is that why we're dying? Is that why we're losing?" I asked as I loaded the last bit of coal needed.

"We're losing because none of us are willing to do what we need to. Or rather... none of us are willing to let Vim do what he needs to," Nebl said.

Although I wanted to ask what that was... I wasn't able to bring myself to actually ask the words. Since I somehow knew already. I stabbed the shovel into the pile of coal that lay against the furnace, and then stepped back.

"Close the door, and light this," Nebl offered me a white rope of twine... it was dry, but smelled oddly.

"What is this?" I asked. I didn't like the smell at all, it made me wince.

"It's soaked in kerosene. A very flammable liquid. We make it with clay and stills. Another thing I will teach you if Vim allows," Nebl said.

Another. Wonderful.

Taking the small strand of rope from him, I noticed it was hard. Very hard... the kind of hard that made me question if it was really rope and not something else.

"And a match," Nebl then offered a match. A long one, with a black tip.

"And how are these made?" I asked.

"A similar tool, but one with ignition. The ones you're probably familiar with use sulfur. They don't burn long, and not very hot. This one will, so be careful with your ears and tail," Nebl warned.

Another tool. Another warning.

For a tiny moment I thought of all the things here. The many things that probably didn't exist anywhere else, or if they did... did so only where Vim allowed.

How did he come to have such knowledge? How did he decide who got to use it, and who didn't? What did he know that no one else did, simply because he wouldn't tell anyone?

"Has Vim ever told you no? When you asked to learn something?" I asked him as I put the white rope into the little chamber right below where we'd stick the metal we'd want to heat. Near the end of the small chamber, were coals. Some of them looked half burnt already, from a previous ignition.

"Only three times. But I know better than to ask for what I don't deserve, or can't handle," Nebl said as I then slid the match along the brick stone real quickly.

It came alight with a spark, and I quickly stuck the lit end of the match up against the white rope.

The white rope didn't spark alight as the match had... but it did ignite quickly. As if made of paper. And the whole thing went aflame smoothly as well.

"Just leave the match in there, it'll burn away with the wick," Nebl said.

Wick. That had been a wick! Of course!

Feeling a little stupid for not realizing the obvious, I did as he said and slowly closed the little iron door.

"Leave it open just a hair. To let it breathe," Nebl said.

"Ah," I nodded. Right. Airflow. He had just explained that earlier. I made sure to keep it open just enough.

"Forging is just like us," Nebl then said.

As the furnace slowly lit, I glanced at the old monkey as he stared at the open door—at the flame within.

"Like us?" I asked softly. What'd he mean?

"We don't learn until we get hurt. We don't understand until the world forces us to. We don't care until we must," he said softly.

Shifting a little, I wondered if all of our older members were so... odd sometimes. Though I knew this conversation had been fueled by my own questions and queries. So I shared in the blame.

"If something isn't what you want, hit it. Then hit it again. And again," Nebl said.

Recognizing the phrase, since it was what Lellip had put on his gravestone, I nodded slowly. He wasn't looking at me, but instead the furnace, but I didn't want to be rude.

He was probably right after all...

Even if I didn't want to agree with it.

Especially when Vim was the one he was talking about.

Chapter 109: Spring

Renn groaned as she ran past me again, glaring while she did so.

"Only five more," I told her as she ran past.

"Keh!" she made an odd sound at me as she picked up her pace.

Smiling at her, I couldn't help but ponder what could have been.

She would have been enjoyable to have been with in the army. Even as a simple subordinate.

Though... She would not have been like she is now, if she had been there. Neither her personality nor her temperament... And that would have probably made the result much worse... Those last few years would have probably been much different. For me especially.

My smile died off as Renn circled the outer perimeter, leaving my sight for a moment.

"Why does she make me think of those days so much?" I asked myself.

It made no sense honestly. Although I was training her, and thus helping her solidify her own capabilities... it wasn't to send her to war. It wasn't to have her fight alongside me in such a way. In fact it was all for the opposite.

I was training her so that she could protect herself, for as long as possible. So that she could then be useful to the Society... Nothing more.

Right...?

As I pondered such a thing Nebl stepped out from the house. I smiled at my friend, who now finally looked somewhat back to his old self. He was still scrawny looking, but that'd take years to fix... if it ever did. He might never return to his massive frame.

He smiled at me and nodded, and then began to walk towards me.

I stayed seated on the stump, awaiting his arrival.

My friend looked good. He stood up straight now. His daughter and granddaughter had finally gotten his hair under control. It was still a little too long for him, but I knew that was on purpose. They hoped his longer hair would hide some of his weight loss. It was especially obvious around his neck and shoulders.

By the time Nebl had reached me, so had Renn again. Her footsteps were light and barely noticeable even though she was sprinting as fast as she could on gravel and dirt.

"Master!" she greeted Nebl as she passed.

"Renn," Nebl nodded to her.

"Four more," I told her.

"Khmph!" she made an odd noise at me, and hurried forward.

Nebi chuckled as he watched her go.

"She's just upset I'm not running with her," I told my friend.

"And why aren't you?" he asked.

"My foot feels a little odd," I said as I lifted my right foot.

"A... little odd..." Nebi studied my foot, and I realized he was taking me far too seriously.

"It tingled this morning you know? For like a whole second," I said.

He took a deep breath, seemingly un-amused to learn that I had just been messing around.

Smirking at him, I watched as Renn disappeared behind the buildings.

She did run well. Must be innate. She ran like a sprinter, yet had our strength. Our endurance. A deadly combination.

"Notice her ears and tail don't move at all as she runs?" Nebi asked.

"I have," I said.

"Try not to let her lose them, I bet it'd ruin her," Nebi warned softly.

"She's not as foolish as Lilly, I think," I said. I figured it was she he was thinking of.

"Hm... Indeed. A curious one, full of questions and desires... but not anger. She hates no one," Nebl said.

This wasn't the first time we had conversed about Renn. But this was the first time he had said something like that.

"I disagree," I told him.

"Do you?" he asked, a little surprised.

I nodded, but didn't specify why. Although he was my friend, that didn't mean I'd tell him everyone's secrets so willingly.

They weren't my secrets to give after all.

"I see. Is that why she's doing this then? She hides it well. I genuinely did not feel that from her," Nebl said, now sounding a little worried.

"Ah, no. Not at all. You need not worry about that," I said quickly. Now I felt almost as if I should tell him. Since after all, he was now worried he had just spent two months teaching someone how to forge steel. And I had spent those same two months on how she could use that steel to kill.

He now worried he had made a monster, or at least aided in its creation.

"You know... I actually believe you," Nebl said softly as Renn came back into view.

The smithy was not a small parcel. Her able to round it as fast as she did was actually very impressive. Especially when you took into account I had her running around most of the farm fields as well.

"Would you tell me if I asked how she ranks?" Nebl asked gently.

"Ranks?" I asked.

"Compared to others," he said with a gesture of his thick fist.

"Ah... well..." I wondered about that.

She had been very surprising. She learned quickly. Understood things instinctively... but so had many others over the years. Nebl and so many others only knew of Lilly and Yangli, and those like them. They didn't remember, and had never met, the hundreds of others like them throughout the years. Especially those who had stood to fight in the beginning, before the Society became what it is today.

They'd not know that Renn, although unique and special, wasn't if one took into account the many who had come and gone before her.

Plus she lacked something very precious.

"As long as she's keen and stays collected, she'll never die to a human at least," I said after a moment of consideration.

"I see..." Nebl sounded disappointed to learn the truth. Although no warrior himself, Nebl understood my meaning.

She would fall in front of a dedicated enemy. One with actual hatred and furor.

Renn passed us, this time without making a sound. She only glared at me with her eyes as she passed.

Three more laps left.

"Does she always act so upset with you when you train her?" Nebl asked as we watched her go.

"Sometimes," I said.

"She's a sweetheart with me," he said with a smirk, as if it was some kind of competition.

"She's a sweetheart even while angry, so that's not a surprise," I said with a wave.

Nebl chuckled at me, and then pointed upward. "It's spring, Vim," he said.

"It is. And the passes are clear," I said.

Well they weren't. But they were clear enough. Renn and I passing them now would not be seen as weird, just foolish. I didn't mind being seen as a fool. Fools were sometimes liked, even.

"As much as I enjoy your company... and more so Renn's, how much longer will you stay? Maybe you will get to see my next grandchild?" Nebl asked.

"I actually intended to leave in a few days. I planned to tell you today," I told him.

Nebl nodded, and seemed genuinely disheartened. Which was odd. He was never happy or sad for me to leave, but it was simply because he was like me. He knew in a blink of an eye he'd turn around and I'd be standing there again, back from my journey.

Maybe he had enjoyed teaching Renn. Or maybe he had simply grown a little softer, like his body had. His recent near death experience hadn't been his first one... but it might have been the one to affect him the most. This time he had no one to hate, after all. Only his failure had laid with him in that mine. His and his own.

"Will she be returning with you?" Nebl asked.

Ah. So he had enjoyed teaching her. Good. That only meant Renn was not only diligent, but really was as good-natured as I thought.

"We'll see," I said simply.

"That's probably the best answer I'll get out of you concerning that, so I'll simply plan on continuing her tutelage then," Nebl said.

Renn appeared again. She was still running at a good pace, but I noticed she had taken a little longer to round the path this time.

So. Two hours straight of nearly her fastest pace was what it took to wear her down.

Nebl watched as Renn approached. Once she was close enough Nebl nodded to her. "Just two more times, Renn," he told her.

"Hmhm," she grumbled as she ran past, this time not even looking at me.

"I do believe she is getting tired," Nebl noticed.

"She's been tired for some time. It's just now really starting to get to her," I said.

"Endurance. Have you been training her for awhile?" He asked.

"No. Started here," I said.

"Really...?" Nebl went quiet as we watched Renn round the building, disappearing from sight.

I studied my friend as his eyes went dull, as he pondered deeply.

Yes Nebl. She was far more inhuman than she looked.

She had the strength, endurance, and reflexes of someone far more detached from humanity. Renn looked human outwardly, except her tails and ears... and a few small things like her teeth and nails, but that was it. Other than those she looked like any normal young woman you'd find in any town. Maybe a little more beautiful than average, but every town had its beauties.

I was mentally comparing her to those from hundreds of years ago. Those who had fought in the actual wars against the humans. She was like them, at least her strength and endurance were.

Yet at the same time she wasn't like them at all.

She lacked far too many inhuman features to have been in their ranks. She would have stood out as much as I had.

It made no sense. She was too human, at least physically, to be so... not.

Usually those like her were like Nebl's children. People who were stronger than humans, and lived longer, but not by leaps and bounds. Lellip was strong, but she'd struggle with a full grown man. At least physically, she was likely as strong as a common male laborer. One of the miners in the village was probably a good reference.

"Is she the child of a Monarch?" Nebl asked quietly.

"No." I had known that from the moment I had first laid eyes on her.

I'd have killed her if she had been.

Though that didn't mean she wasn't too far detached from one. A few generations were certain, though, otherwise I'd have smelled it.

"Then is it just happenstance or...?" he glanced at me, searching for an answer.

"Not sure. Yangli is strong like her too," I said.

"Yangli has scales," Nebl said sternly.

So? What did a layer of scales change? But I didn't voice such an opinion, since I knew it was more than just the scales. It was the person beneath them. "Most of us used to be like her, Nebl," I told him.

"A bygone age. She doesn't add up. She's too young," Nebl shifted a little, as his mind whirled.

"Ages come and go, and leave remnants behind all the time. You of all people should understand that well," I said, hoping to steer his mind's thoughts a little. At least away from Renn for a moment.

"Indeed..." he said quietly as he kept himself mostly to his thoughts.

Great. Good thing we were leaving soon.

Renn appeared, and I noticed she was breathing heavily. Maybe the knowledge she was almost done was making her exhaustion take over.

Good to know. It meant she allowed a goal or destination to influence her. Positively and negatively, depending on how it was used.

She really did remind me of days long past. But not the days Nebl was probably thinking of.

Days far older than them...

"Once more," I told her. As she passed us. She nodded without even a grunt.

"I shall have Lellip prepare the bath for her. Or do you plan to torture her more?" Nebl asked.

"Well I had planned a lot of detestable stuff. Painful stuff. But I suppose a bath is okay too," I said.

Nebi smiled softly at me, and I was glad he no longer looked... worried. Whatever he had been pondering was now set away, at least for now. "I want you to know I have enjoyed watching you, Vim. With her," Nebi then said.

"Hm?" I wondered what he meant. Did he mean when I was sparring with her? We had been doing it near the smithy, ever since his return. I had noticed he, and the others, had watched every so often but they had usually only done so for a few minutes at a time.

They were interested, but at the same time scared of it.

"You had been happy when you taught me too," Nebi said, and then turned away. To head back into the house.

Renn arrived around the time he closed the door, and I watched as she heaved as she slowed upon approach. She groaned as she breathed heavily, bending over and holding her knees as if about to throw up.

"Well done," I told her.

"Grah," she made another odd noise, and then slowly knelt down. She sat into the grass near the stump I sat on, and focused on breathing.

She was covered in a layer of thick sweat, and...

Oh, even her ears were drooping. Seems she really was exhausted.

I let her calm down for a few minutes, and I noticed the smithy bath's chimney started to have smoke expel from it. Nebi or Lellip were already warming the water.

They were kind to her. Noticeably so.

After a few more minutes Renn slowly laid back, lying onto her back and staring up at the sky full of white clouds.

"It's getting warmer," she said with a raspy voice.

"Spring is here. It'll get warm, then rain, and then warm again," I said.

"I like the rain," she said.

More like she'd like it to rain right now, likely.

Staring at her as she stared up at the sky, I wondered if she looked any different since arriving here. Was she leaner? More muscular? It was hard to tell.

Our kind did change, as humans did, but it was slower... and usually not as prominent. She could train harshly for years and never actually gain much muscle mass, thanks to her bloodline. It was part of the reason I knew Nebl might not ever return to his former state. He might be too old now to ever get that body back. Odds are he might slowly start aging, even though he really shouldn't just yet.

Most of our kind were the way we were, and nothing we did do could change it. You got the body you were born with, and it didn't matter how much you ate or exercised.

Link was a perfect example. That man had never done anything yet was a walking mountain of muscle.

A waste.

"I got tired near the end. I honestly had thought I could have run the whole time without even breaking a sweat," Renn said.

"Now you know your limit. Congratulations," I said. It wasn't her true limit, but for now it'd do. If life was kind to her she'd never realize the limit she knew now was simply the starting line.

Renn lifted a hand, to stare at it. She narrowed her eyes at the shaky fist she made, as if upset at her own body. Which she shouldn't be. Her body was unique, and in a good way.

"How long could you have gone Vim?" she asked.

"Want a real answer or one to annoy you?" I asked her.

"The real one."

"I can run from the Cathedral to anywhere in the Society without stopping for rest," I told her.

Her balled fist stopped shaking, and she lowered it. She rested it on her chest and turned to stare at me. Her hair and ears looked a little odd, thanks to how she had laid down. They were a mess.

"Do you get tired? Ever?" she asked.

"Of course I do. I'm still a man," I said.

With a huff she sat up, and I noticed the way her tail stayed lingering on the grass. It hadn't moved or twitched since she had lain down. She must really be tired. "A man," she said.

"Parts of me at least," I said with a smirk.

Renn's face contorted into a weird mix of annoyance and amusement, then she finally smiled and giggled at me.

Smiling at her strangely tired sounding giggle... I wondered what I was going to do with her.

A part of me had hoped she'd deny learning how to fight. Yet she hadn't.

Then I had hoped she'd not be good at it.

She was.

And now she had proven that she had the physical body to back it up.

Which meant the only real thing left that could give me a valid reason to deny her attempt at joining me...

Other than to keep training her for what was probably going to be years... was well...

For a tiny moment I thought of putting her through a crucible.

The mere thought of it pissed me off.

"Lellip is good at making shoes," Renn said as she moved her feet, to showcase her new footwear.

"She did learn from the best," I noted. Nebl had always been very good at leather-work, even though he preferred metal.

Renn reached out to touch some of the straps that held her shoe on, and I studied the way her fingers played with them. She now kept her nails short, short enough that humans would probably start seeing her as the daughter or wife of a wealthy merchant. Maybe even a lower noble.

Only the wealthy could have such clean looking nails. Even the women who didn't participate in hard labor didn't have such nails, at least in today's era.

Yet how could I tell her not to keep them short and clean? I had been that one to give her that gift, after all.

"They prepared a bath for you, if you'd like," I told her.

Renn's ears perked up, no longer drooping, and she turned to look at the buildings. She must have seen the white smoke coming from the bath's smokestack, since she smiled deeply at the sight. "That's kind of them."

It was.

"Are we done then? Can I enjoy a soak or...?" she asked me, hoping for the positive answer.

"You can go bathe. You stink," I said.

Renn's brow furrowed as I stood from the stump. As I reached out for her hand, she took it and I helped her up.

Pulling her to her feet, I noticed how light she felt. And she had even pulled back on my hand, as if to try and get me to trip.

She was far too light to be as strong as she was.

"I probably do, look at this," Renn groaned as she looked down at herself. Most of her clothes were hugging her body tightly, thanks to the sweat.

The spring air was clean, and rather still. I had been able to smell her since she sat down.

She didn't stink. At least not the kind of stink that would ever bother me. Or well, probably any man. But that was precisely the reason that I had to tell her she stunk. She couldn't be walking around smelling like she did, who knows what kind of weird men would notice. She already drew eyes enough as it was.

"After you... soak... Meet me in the workshop," I told her.

"Hm?" she tilted her head, and suddenly I felt a tug.

Looking down, I found that our hands were still connected. She hadn't...

No...

Looking back up, she gave me a worried smile. She was waiting for me to let her go.

Letting her hand go, I smiled and nodded. "Enjoy your bath," I told her.

"Oh I will! Enough for the both of us," she said as she stepped away.

Renn took a few steps, then paused and looked back at me. She seemed to hesitate, and I hoped she didn't say anything more. Luckily she didn't, as she nodded with a soft smile and returned to walking.

She hadn't tried to invite me as to join her.

But the reason was obvious.

As Renn headed into the house, as to bathe, I looked down at my palm.

It was the same palm I had known for years. Countless years. The same old scars. The same discolorations from burns and other wounds. The same wrinkles and cracks and...

Yet it now had sweat upon it. A small layer which was mostly around my palm.

It wasn't mine, of course. Yet...

Closing my fist, I sighed.

I hadn't let her go.

And she had noticed.

"Spring came too quickly."

Chapter 110: For The Society

Vim tightened the leather strap on my belt, and after a final tug he stepped back to appreciate his handiwork.

Feeling very... awkward, I stood still as he studied my new clothing, and the things accessorizing it.

"Is it supposed to feel... silly?" I asked as I hit my thumb on the sword's hilt while lowering my hand. It was in the way!

"Does it feel silly?" he asked with a smirk.

"Of course it does. Does everyone feel so... stupid? Wearing them like this?" I asked. All the years I had seen people with swords on their waists. Knights and normal people alike. Never had I thought it actually felt... as if it was wrong.

"You'd stand out too much with it on your back," Vim said as he reached out to slip his fingertips under my shoulder straps. I squirmed as he tried to dislodge them, they didn't budge.

Lellip and Nebl had made me... suitable attire, as they had called it. I now had leather clothes, which had little hooks and loops all over to attach stuff to. The ones being used right now, was on my right hip was the sword Vim had made for me, and on my back was my backpack. Now instead of wrapping around my chest and arms, it was latched to my shoulders.

It felt... loose, as if it was going to fall off. But it wasn't. The thing was firmly latched and laid rested up against the small of my back. I knew while traveling, and especially if we had to run or climb it'd be far more comfortable than it would have been carrying it normally.

There was also a quiver, which held arrows... but that was near my feet. He hadn't put it on me yet.

"I'll look like a hunter," I said as I tried to envision what I looked like.

"You are one. You're quite literally one of the most perfected hunters to exist," Vim said.

"Jaguar," I whispered.

"The forest's solitary hunter," Vim said.

Solitary. He used that word a lot, especially when describing me. I wonder if that was how he actually saw me in his mind.

It wasn't wrong, of course... I had no one. Nowhere. Nothing.

Nothing other than him. And the Society.

After he checked my backpack he knelt down to check my shoes and the leather bracers that rested above them. Those felt uncomfortable too, but I also kind of liked them. They hid beneath my pants, and no one could really tell I had them on.

With Vim knelt before me, I stared at the top of his head. I made sure to not hit him with the sword on my waist, since it hovered just near it.

Before he stood back up he checked my waist. There was a leather wrap, which covered my rear end. Something similar to a skirt which was made of thin leather. It hid my tail perfectly, allowing me to wrap it around my waist or upper thigh. Even if somehow someone was able to catch a glimpse of it, they'd just think it were a fur piece connected to my belt. Something a woman would wear.

It also let me release my tail easily, without having to undo my pants entirely. It was probably the best thing given to me out of everything, so far.

"I feel like a brigand, Vim," I said honestly.

"Yes. You're very terrifying. You look like such a hoodlum, ready to pick all the pockets and steal all the girl's hearts every which way," Vim teased me.

"Women find brigands attractive?" I asked, wondering how accurate his teasing was.

"Some do, I guess," he said, sounding a little annoyed his teasing had been ineffective.

"Is it the danger, maybe?" I asked myself. That would explain Vim, to a degree.

Vim raised an eyebrow as he glanced at me. I ignored his look as he checked the sword once more.

"Jump around a little," he said.

"Huh?"

Vim moved his finger around. "Jump a few times," he ordered.

I sighed and obeyed. I stepped back a few steps and jumped. Not too highly, nor roughly, but enough to make my hand instinctively grab the sword's hilt. To keep it from swinging around wildly.

"Let the sword go and jump again," he said.

Great. He wanted to see how badly it banged against my knee and ass, didn't he?

Jumping again, I flinched as it smacked my right knee. It didn't really hurt too badly, but it did sting.

"Come here," Vim noticed of course, and he quickly went to untying the sword's sheath.

Watching him undo the little metal hooks that held it in place, I watched as he quickly took the sheath and the bundle of leather strips over to the nearby workbench.

As Vim went straight to adjusting whatever he thought needed adjusting, I glanced behind me to the door. The sun was setting, I could see the setting sun's rays.

Lellip and Nebl had both been in here earlier, for about an hour. They had carried in all of the new clothes for me, and Vim, but hadn't stayed around for any of the adjustments. Vim had told me it was because they saw the fine tuning to be a little personal, and especially so for the stuff concerning the weapons.

Glancing at the nearby quiver full of arrows, I wondered where they drew the line at. Lellip had made the quiver itself, and Nebl had made the arrows for me.

Weren't those weapons? To a point?

"You're a little longer in the leg than I had thought. And your hips a little wider too," Vim said as he worked.

Frowning at his statement, I wondered if I should take offense or not.

Vim turned around, and nodded as he stepped back over to me. I went still, and felt a little weird as he bent down a little as to reattach the sword to my waist.

It felt weird to have him fumble around so close to me, especially since he was basically touching me. Whenever I felt him grab my belt, or even me myself as he moved stuff, I wanted to shiver.

We've touched countless times since I had joined him on this journey... even slept in the same bed, yet little moments like this were what made my heart miss a beat. They felt... personal somehow. Maybe it was because of what Vim had mentioned earlier.

"Alright, quick jump and twirl please. Without holding onto it," Vim asked for as he stepped back. He was completely oblivious to my discomfort.

I nodded and obeyed. I jumped up and once I landed gave him a good twirl. As I spun, I realized the sword wasn't moving much at all anymore. It still wobbled, but not nearly as bad as it had the other time. My knee and butt and thighs were safe from bruising.

Vim nodded, pleased with himself as I came to a stop. "Good," he said.

"Yea, that was much better," I said as I hopped around a bit, trying to make it move violently as it had done before. It wouldn't, it stayed firmly positioned. I didn't even need to hold onto it.

"Does it still feel silly?" he asked.

"Of course it does. I'm not a swordsman, Vim," I said.

"Swordswoman," he corrected.

"You know what I mean. This... this isn't me," I said with a tap onto the pommel.

"It is if you wish to join me... which speaking of that, here," Vim stepped away and grabbed two stools. Ones that were used to sit in front of workbenches.

He dropped one before himself, and dropped the other next to it.

"Sit," Vim said as he kicked the stool towards me.

I sat, and wondered what he was going to add to me now. Although this was... interesting, and I was thankful that everyone was going out of their way to make me as comfortable as possible... I honestly didn't like some of this.

Did Vim really expect me to walk around covered in weapons? Why did I have to when he hadn't been? Until now he had carried nothing more than a small knife, and had only used it for starting fires and cleaning small animals as to cook them.

Why now did we suddenly need swords and bows and spears?

Vim sat down across from me, and put his right leg up onto his left. Resting his ankle on his knee, he went to messing with the small leather strap in his hands. He worked on it without even looking at it, and instead stared at me.

"They also left because I told them to, by the way," Vim said.

"Huh? Oh... Why?" I asked. Why indeed? We were going to leave tomorrow... I wanted to enjoy as much time with Lellip as I could.

"So you and I can have a moment," he said.

A moment.

Slowly nodding, I tried not to let my eyes get distracted by his fingers. He was tying something now.

"Would you like to stay here, Renn? Not forever. Just for a few years. While I make the rounds. You can spend that time to study, to learn. They're more than willing to accept you. Pram especially, since she'll have the baby to worry about. And Nebl will take time to recoup himself, too," Vim said calmly.

His voice and expression didn't match the severity of what he was saying... but that was probably because he didn't cherish the offer as much as I did.

How could he?

"They'd let me, wouldn't they," I whispered.

He nodded. "They would. Lellip likes you. Pram likes how courteous you are and even grumpy Nebl seems to be okay with you. That's quite a feat by the way, don't discount it," he said.

"And Drandle?" I asked.

"Funny you think Drandle has any say in the matter. But for your information he likes that you're such good friends with his daughter. Though he'd honestly like you to leave once the child is born. He's a wimp," Vim said.

It hurt a little to hear that he didn't trust me around his newborn, but I understood it. I was a predator. And although a member of the Society... one being taught to kill. At least that was what I was learning, in their eyes.

"I see..." I said softly.

"Forget about that. Focus on my question," Vim said as his fingers finally came to a stop. Either he was done doing whatever he wanted, or had stopped so I'd stop staring at them.

"I am, Vim," I said.

"Are you? Usually by now you tear up at least," he said.

Blinking, I allowed my eyes to get a little watery.

Vim frowned upon noticing it. "Really?" he asked.

"You gave me permission!" I said as I sniffed.

"I did not!"

I didn't really start crying, but I did have to blink several times to clear my eyes of tears. After a moment Vim sighed and leaned back, staring at me as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"They're wonderful people," I said.

"They are. In their own ways," he said.

"Which is why I can't stay. If I did I'd fall in love with this place. I need to leave," I said.

Vim shifted a little, studying me closely. His fingers nudged the little leather strap in his hands, as if he had forgotten all about it.

"Are you going to do this every place we go to Renn? You can't love everyone and everything," Vim said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it's ridiculous. Stop making friends, it's unnatural," he said with a sigh.

Smiling at him, I nodded... though didn't agree to anything.

"I'd love to stay... but no. I'll leave with you," I said with a solid nod.

Vim's eyes held my own, and I wondered if he genuinely hoped I'd say yes for once.

He always asked. Always gave me the chance to. At least, everywhere that I was allowed to stay at. Kaley's and Tor's farms had not been willing to let me stay after all.

"You sure?" he asked one last time.

I nodded. "Very."

"Alright then. I hope you know that if you keep saying no, you'll end up with nowhere to call home right?" he asked me.

"I'm sure I'll figure it out," I said.

Vim shrugged and sighed. "Remember the book of promise? The one Celine wrote?" he asked me.

I nodded. Of course I did. I thought of it often.

"There's a promise in there. One that requires me to always make sure every member of Society has a home. Or at least, a form of it," he started to say.

"I remember it. To house and defend them, even if they refuse to live there," I said, quoting the end of the promise.

Vim stopped for a moment and renewed his studying gaze of me.

He did that sometimes. Staring at me as if I was something strange. Something different. Someone he hadn't known.

It was almost as if he thought I was unable to remember the most basic information. Or would forget important details easily.

He had mentioned that most of our kind did. That most of us did... forget easily... especially the mundane information. But surely that wasn't mundane? That had been a book written by the woman who had made Vim the protector. Essentially the beginning of everything.

"Do you remember the whole promise?" he asked me.

"As one without a home, you should value the necessity of one. Build, secure, steal, procure, and give to any who requests or needs it. And while you," I began to speak of the promise of housing, which had been on the fourth page of that little book. Before I could finish Vim raised his hand and closed his eyes.

Going silent, I watched as he sighed and rubbed his eyes... as if suddenly exhausted.

"You asked if I could," I said.

"You could recite the whole book, couldn't you?" he asked with a groan.

"Well..." I could. But maybe he didn't want me to say I could.

"Of course you can. You... Why hadn't I noticed? Of course you can..." Vim sighed as he stretched his back, as if suddenly stiff and in pain.

"You... you told me to read it and remember," I said. Was he actually upset I remembered it? He had told me to study it!

"Yes! Remember the theme. The point. That there are rules and the point of a protector is to serve the protected, never anything else. Who gave you permission to have eidetic memory?" he asked me.

"Ediotic?" I repeated that word. Had he just insulted me?

"You have a wonderful gift. Though it might not be that but rather hyperthymesia. Maybe I should put you under Brandy. You're wasting yourself," he said.

I nearly stood up, but kept myself seated and in control of my emotions. "Brandy?" I asked.

"The bookkeeper. You'd be a great service to the Society if you'd put your mind to use alongside her," he said.

Calming myself, I realized what he had meant.

Vim wasn't insulting me at all.

He was instead doing the opposite.

"How so?" I asked, since he seemed unsettled enough to actually answer such a question.

"Although the bookkeeper she is basically the main cog in the Society. The one that connects every other. It is through her that all the different members coexist and interact. From this smithy, to the Cathedral, to the merchants and everything in-between. It all runs through her one way or another. You and her would probably make a very deadly combination," he said.

"I don't want to be deadly."

He waved me off. "You know what I meant. You'd be useful. Truly useful. It'd help, even more than what I do. You should consider it," he said.

Staring at the man who had just so readily dismissed everything his existence stood for... I wondered what to say or do about it.

"Why don't you help her then if she's so integral to the Society?" I asked carefully.

"I do all the time. But money and information cannot stop a sword, or put out a fire. And that is what I'm best at," Vim said calmly as he continued to stare at me. He was now very obviously thinking on how to get me to agree to work alongside this bookkeeper of his.

"Money and information," I repeated him.

He nodded. "Powerful tools. The pen is mightier than the sword, as they say," he said with a gesture to my hip.

Glancing at it, I was forced to remember the stupid thing still clung to me. I hated how easily I had forgotten that it had been tied to me.

"Money and information would not have saved Nebl," I whispered.

"Honestly I disagree. The right information, and in a certain sense money, would have preemptively stopped such an event from happening in the first place. Thus saving him without him ever needing to be saved," Vim countered.

"That's what-ifs. Not reality," I said.

"No more than anything else. What if you and I had spent more time at the Cathedral? What if instead of coming here first, we had instead gone along my normal route? Spending months heading southward, checking in on the camels and then the armadillos?" he asked me.

I knew neither of those people, nor what animals they were... but I knew that his argument was flawed. And I knew he already knew that too.

"Then your friend would have lasted until you got here, Vim. If it was destined to be," I said gently.

Vim's eyes narrowed at me. "Destined. That argument fails, Renn. The moment you include me in it. Anyone could have saved him, had they been watching. Had they been listening. Had they been better," he said sternly.

"I'd not have been able to save him Vim. Even if I had heard him without you... I'd not have known how to dig him out without also endangering myself. I would have probably gotten stuck too," I said.

"You'd have employed methods. Or would have gone to get help. A call for me, even, in this theoretical possibility," he said.

He didn't actually think that anyone else could have done what he had done, did he?

Yes he had simply dug Nebl free... but did he not realize what he had done while doing so? He had mined for nearly a whole day straight. He had mined very carefully, neglecting certain routes and had been mindful of his methods. He had even used many of the fallen and broken support timbers as he had dug something that had taken obvious skill and knowledge of how mines worked in general. Something told me even if all the human miners had gotten together, none of them would have been able to do what he had done as easily. Let alone at all, possibly. The danger of the venture alone might have deterred the humans entirely. Odds were that was exactly what happened too. The humans had seen the collapse. They had examined it, probably for hours. And then deemed it too dangerous. Too deadly. Too risky.

"Let's agree to disagree," I said sternly. His eyes focused for a moment, but he didn't seem to grow angry at me.

"Sure," Vim happily accepted my offer and then leaned forward as to point the little leather strap at me. "Back to the promises. My main task, other than simply keeping our members alive, is to house them. If they have no home, it's my job to help them get one. To find one. To provide one, if able. Not everyone agrees to take one, of course, but I'm supposed to do everything I can to offer one. At any cost," he said.

I nodded. "I know Vim."

"So please accept one?" he asked gently.

"If I find one that I truly wish to call home Vim, I highly doubt it will take until you ask me for me to tell you. I'd probably claim it without hesitation, and rather proudly," I told him.

Vim slowly nodded as he sat back up, dropping his foot to the floor as if in defeat.

Foolish man.

To think he'd actually be upset that I wanted to stay with him, instead of anywhere else.

How could he not realize how wonderful this was? How amazing it felt to know that soon I'd get to meet new people? Hear new stories? See new sights? Let alone the fact that I have now watched Vim do several great things, even if he didn't see them as such. I had watched him take Lomi to a new home. I

had seen him help complete strangers, without asking for a thing in return. I had not only watched but helped in the saving of one of our own members! Saved his life! Then of course the journey itself so far. It had been... has been, everything I wanted and more.

How could such things not be wonderful in their own right? How could such a life not be desirable?

How could he not comprehend how happy I was? Did I really seem that sad or forlorn to him? Did he not see me smile? Hear my laughs?

"Maybe Link was right. Maybe you are looking for a mate. Which is great, since I have no idea who'd want you. Most the men of any value are taken already," he said with a sigh.

My sword suddenly felt as if it did indeed belong on my waist, but I kept that thought down as I stared at the man who was genuinely worrying over my future. I wanted to scream at him. How could he not realize what was so obvious?

But no... It wasn't his fault. He was doing his job. And he really did seem to want me to be happy. He wanted everyone to be happy. Even the ones he didn't like.

Didn't like...

"How many of us do you hate, Vim?" I asked him.

Vim for a tiny, nearly unnoticeable moment... went completely still. I blinked, since I had almost not believed what I had seen. He had actually... gone still. As if frozen in time completely. For the tiniest of moments, Vim's whole body hadn't done a thing. He hadn't breathed. He hadn't moved. Not even the hairs on his arm or head had adjusted, from movement or wind. Even his heartbeat had disappeared.

I gulped as he slowly looked at me, and then smiled softly. "Too many," he whispered. Then the man looked down, at the thing in his hands.

It had torn in two.

He sighed as he stared at the two pieces, and I wondered when he had snapped it. Definitely thanks to my question... but I hadn't heard or seen it snap. It was made of hard leather, too, so it wasn't just a simple tear...

"Have you met any you hate yet?" he asked me softly.

I opened my mouth to tell him that I hadn't... but then I thought for a moment longer.

"Rather than hate... I do have a few I dislike," I said honestly.

"Oh?" he looked up at me as he rubbed the two leather strips between his fingers.

"I don't like how a few of our members are... weak-willed. Link for example. Or Lughes and Crane. I understand their... situations. And I don't actually hate them as people. I'd never hate them just because they're timid... but I do dislike that they seem so..." I stopped talking as I shrugged. I wanted to be honest with Vim, since he was being so honest with me... but it hurt to say it aloud.

"That's not hate, Renn," Vim said softly.

"No. It's not. It's disappointment," I said with a nod.

"Disappointment. Indeed," he nodded back.

Vim sighed as he tossed the leather strips away. He lobbed them over near one of the workbenches. One that had leather all around it. The two strips disappeared into the mess, and I knew eventually Lellip or Nebl would find them and wonder just where they had come from.

It was honestly an odd action from the man in front of me. He was usually never so careless. Never so thoughtless.

"Don't disappointment me, Renn. But if you do, don't feel bad about it either," Vim then said as he stood up.

I stood too, as if on instinct, but Vim ignored me. He stepped around me and headed for the door... seemingly done with our conversation. It was a little worrisome to see him act so, but I could recognize that he was no longer in the mood to talk with me.

He was no longer in the mood to talk to anyone.

"Goodnight, Vim," I told him as he left.

He waved at me lightly, opening the door the rest of the way and stepping out.

Being left alone in the workshop, I glanced around. At the two stools. At the workbench nearby that still had a little lantern lit up, the one that Vim had been working at.

The quiver of arrows on the ground. My hat, which sat upon it. The bow without its string attached up against a large crate a few feet away.

With watery eyes I slowly sat back down. This time on the stool he had been sitting on.

It wasn't warm. Like usual Vim never left behind any traces. No smell. No warmth. Nothing to prove he had just been sitting here. He never did. He never left messes. Never left a single hair. The only time he ever left anything to prove of his existence, seemed to be the bodies of those he killed.

Although impossible, I even had the thought to go find the two little straps of leather that he had just tossed. To see if they'd be gone too. I knew they wouldn't be, but...

"Sometimes he acts as if he's not really a part of our world," I said softly. As if he was... not a member. Not one of us.

Maybe he was too close. And had been for too long.

A man who didn't realize he was becoming detached, precisely because he had been so involved and invested for so long.

I had thought we had accomplished something wonderful here in these few months.

I had learned a lot. Not just from Nebl and Lellip... but Vim too. We had saved Nebl. His friend. The mentor and elder of this family. We had brought back the smiles and happiness that had been lost.

Yet now we'd leave, and Vim would act as if nothing had happened. As if nothing worth remembering had occurred. As if it was just another day. Another stop on an endless journey.

That wasn't fair. And not just to him.

No wonder the Society always seemed to see Vim as more of a tool than a man.

Tapping my sword's pommel, I listened to the sound my fingernail made as the pure note filled the workshop.

He wanted me to find a home. To find a place to belong. Because that was what was expected. He couldn't move on until I did. He couldn't forget about me until I smiled and thanked him, sending him on his way.

I was a burden he did not want to carry forever. Not because he did not enjoy my presence, but because my continued presence meant he was failing. The Society had embedded into that man a guide and rule book that shouldn't exist.

It was cruel. And not just to the man instilled upon.

Which was the entire reason things needed to change.

Vim saw them all as a burden... and not as the great gifts that they were. But that wasn't his fault. It wasn't his fault. Since they all saw him the same way.

He was the protector, nothing more. No one truly valued what he did for them, since it was expected of him.

Before leaving the Cathedral Vim had joked about tossing that little white book into the fire. He had only partially meant it seriously.

I had stopped him. I had been the one to make sure he hadn't done so.

Maybe it was time it was thrown into the fire.

Gripping my sword's handle, I nodded.

"For the Society," I whispered.