

Non Human 111

Chapter 111: The Frozen Pass

Spring was here. But that didn't mean winter couldn't still be a problem.

"Vim it's frozen," Renn said over the wind.

I sighed as I glanced up and down the ravine. The bridge connecting the two was indeed frozen over, which was honestly a surprise. There was still snow on the ground, but it was old. Fresh snow hadn't fallen in days.

But it had possibly rained since.

And during the cold night...

"Will it break?" Renn asked as she stepped a little closer to study the bridge. I kept a keen eye on her. There was a lot of snow, and running water, beneath the bridge in the ravine but that didn't mean she'd survive the fall. There were a lot of very sharp rocks all along the way down.

"Careful Renn," I warned.

She nodded as she stepped back, having seen enough.

With a sigh I debated it. If I was alone I'd have been halfway across the bridge by now... but with her...

This ravine separated two large mountains. At one time they had been connected, of course, but either an earthquake or some kind of underground shift of aqueducts had formed the crack. It was too big to just jump over or circumvent, and was miles long.

It was the reason I had been able to validate spending months at the smithy. Crossing this mountain during the winter was literal suicide. No one accomplished. Well, humans didn't.

Thanks to some foolish moments in the past, members of the Society had given birth to stories. Legends. The kind that made it difficult for me to travel with anyone over this mountain with company. I didn't blame anyone, especially since we had traversed in a rush out of necessity... but it did make it hard for me today.

Why did humans forget things so quickly, yet their stupid stories and legends lasted generations?

"Is there another way?" Renn asked as she glanced down the ravine. Towards the northern point.

"There isn't. This crack runs along backward, sending us days out of our way," I said. By the time we went that far this bridge would be thawed.

"So...?" Renn stared at me, obviously wondering what the problem was.

Why not go that way then? She seemed to want to ask.

Because I wasn't in the mood to stay on this mountain any longer. That was why.

"Let me check it," I said simply.

"Check it? Vim it's frozen so solid it isn't even swaying," she said as I stepped towards the bridge.

"It's not swaying because it's heavy because of the ice, not because it's frozen," I said.

"That's no better!"

It wasn't. But oh well.

Stepping out onto the bridge, I immediately noticed how slick it was.

Yep. It had definitely rained. Probably not last night, but the night before. There was a good inch and a half or so of ice covering this whole thing.

Glancing across the bridge, to the other side... I tried to guesstimate how much weight was on it.

Far more than it had been built to withstand.

The bridge wasn't that old, actually. A nearby local lord had commissioned its structure about twenty odd years ago. Nebl and I had actually been a part of the crew that built it. Not just for the money, but to make sure it had gotten done properly.

I trusted our own handiwork. Especially since half the connections and support beams weren't pig iron, but hardened steel.

Stepping a few feet out onto the bridge, I heard it creak loudly as it complained at my extra weight.

Hm...

"Vim, come on," Renn complained from behind me. I knew she wasn't worried over the height, but rather me.

She didn't know I could survive this fall without issue. Although it would piss me off.

Grabbing the thick ice that covered the rope handle, I intentionally caused the whole bridge to sway a little. It rocked just a tad, and I heard countless cracks erupt from all over the bridge. Parts of the bridge weren't as solidly frozen as the others.

"Gah you're crazy!" Renn whined.

I nodded as I turned back around and went back to her. The moment I stepped off the bridge and back onto the snow covered ground Renn grabbed me by the arm. "We can just go around can't we?" she asked.

"We could. But I think it'll be fine. I want you to cross first, you're much lighter than me," I said.

"First! Vim!" She shouted at me, and then looked around me as to stare at the bridge. "No way!"

"Yes way. You weigh nothing. It won't even notice you. The bridge is solid. Just quickly hop on over there and I'll follow afterward," I said.

Renn's face contorted into very visible frustration and concern, but I ignored it as I pulled her around and patted her on the back, directing her to the bridge.

"Vim this is crazy, that thing looks like it could shatter with a sneeze!" she complained.

"That's rude to Nebl," I told her.

"Huh? Nebl?" she glanced at me at the mention of his name.

"Well yeah, he's the one who built it you know," I said.

Renn blinked wildly and then looked back at the bridge. Suddenly she seemed not as worried as before. "Really?" she asked.

"Really."

"Are you sure it won't break?" she asked.

"Sure enough. I put my whole weight on it and shook it too, you saw me do it. It didn't break, it's solid enough," I said.

"You only stepped out a few feet though," she countered.

"Far enough. Plus the shaking is what really tested it. The thing barely moved, you saw that. If it was going to break it would have done it then," I said. Which was true. I had shaken it hard enough that if it really was structurally unsound it would have snapped.

Renn groaned for a moment and I noticed that she had grabbed onto her sword. She held the handle tightly with her right hand, as if it could give her confidence.

Did she even realize she grabbed like that?

"If... if it does break while I'm on it, will you save me?" she asked.

Save her? While she falls from a bridge? A frozen one in the middle of a ravine, with certain death below?

"I would try," I said comfortably.

She glanced at me, and for a tiny moment I wished I could lie. I could lie, of course, but not about something like this. Not to someone like her.

I nodded again. "I would, Renn. I promise. And I'm serious, I'd not be telling you to do this if I thought it was actually unsafe," I said.

With one last groan she nodded, and then took a deep breath.

"Go slowly. Just walk naturally," I told her as she stepped forward.

"Gaeh..." she made a weird noise as she reached out to grab onto the frozen rope guide rail. Her pale fingers flinched upon grabbing it, and I wished I had gotten her gloves.

It wasn't my fault though; I had not expected her to have to actually touch anything cold. A little snow for a few hours, sure, but I had thought by now we'd be halfway down the other side of the mountain.

"Okay. Here I go. To fall to my death..." she whispered as she stepped out onto the bridge.

"Death by falling is boring, you're too amusing to die that way," I told her.

She glanced at me with scornful eyes but said nothing. Then she took another step out onto the bridge.

Renn was now on the bridge itself, and she looked as stiff as the bridge did. Her back was straight, and she was being as careful as possible to not let her tail touch any of the bridge's parts. Neither the ropes nor handrails.

"Okay... okay..." she seemed to gain some confidence as she walked forward, realizing that the bridge really didn't notice her at all.

And why would it?

She weighed nothing compared to me. A fifth at most. And she was walking daintily, carefully, with slow precision.

Smiling softly I watched as Renn slowly walked across the bridge. Once she was far enough, she picked up her pace and hurried to the other side.

She ran off the bridge once across, and even ran several feet away from the other side's cliff face. Closer to the trees.

"I made it!" she shouted at me over the ravine. Her voice carried on the winds, and sounded far too thrilled.

"You did," I said softly and stepped forward to join her.

Walking across the frozen bridge, I noticed the spots where she had stepped. Although nowhere near my weight... she had still left imprints. Footprints, in the ice.

Melting ice.

Once I reached the middle of the bridge, I understood what was happening. Or rather had happened. The middle was thawing first, most likely thanks to the excess wind that passed along it compared to the parts near the cliffs. Although the wind was cold, freezing in its own way, it was still warmer out here than it was near the cliffs. Warm enough to start thawing.

"Come on already," Renn said, right as I felt myself step into mush.

Looking down, I stared at the ice I had just disrupted.

Renn's footfall had left a small indent.

Mine had stepped through the melting ice, to the wood beneath.

Half a second later, a giant crack shot out around my foot. It danced and arced to the right, then headed backward. It shot out quickly, like a lightning bolt, and my eyes followed it the entire way. I had to turn back around to watch it, since it headed the way I came from.

The massive crack followed my footprints. Going from one to another, like guidepost of their own. It kept going until it cracked right into another crack. One from earlier. From my forceful swinging of the bridge.

"Vim...?" Renn's voice echoed alongside the loud sound of the crack. Then something popped. A huge chunk of ice flew upward, breaking off the bridge as if done so by an outside force.

"Well then," I said as I realized what was about to happen.

I spun around and shot forward, which allowed me to rush forward to Renn and the other side... but also furthered the process of the bridge's last moments.

"Vim!" Renn shouted upon seeing what was happening behind me, but I didn't turn to see what was happening.

I knew what was happening. I had seen it before. I had experienced it before.

Though definitely not recently.

For a few footsteps my feet met solid support. My heavy, and quick, feet ushered me along easily. I was only a few dozen leaps to Renn... until my foot met nothing but air.

The bridge went taut for one second, and then snapped. A loud rumble of cracks followed, as the whole bridge snapped in two. Nearly right beneath me.

"Wait!" Renn screamed in shock, but I ignored her for a moment. She was fine. She was on solid ground. On the right side of the mountain.

I was stuck fifty paces beyond. Falling alongside a bridge.

Reaching out I grabbed one of the solidly frozen handrails. Although the main bridge had snapped in two, and the entire thing was now crumbling, it was still connected to the rest of the bridge. It was still something I could use.

Pulling myself forward, I shot upward. I reached out and grabbed onto the wooden boards that made up the bottom of the bridge, as it and myself flew forward toward the cliff.

Renn went out of sight as I fell, and the wild wind became even crazier as for a few moments I flew through the air, until the bridge I hung on to smacked into the cliff's wall.

The impact didn't hurt much, but it caused the whole bridge to break again. Ice shot out in all directions, some of it in massive chunks as big as me. Snow exploded into the air, blocking sight, and for a tiny moment I was weightless again as the bridge bounced along the cliff.

I didn't wait for the bridge to settle. Since I had no idea if it would stay connected to the cliff or not, especially with the wild thrashing. I began climbing even as the bridge flapped in the wind and in the turmoil.

Ignoring the blinding snow, and the ice falling upon me, I clambered upward. Sometimes using the ropes. Sometimes using the floorboards. My newly acquired items, my sword and spear, both clanged and got hit by the falling ice. I didn't care if they got lost, but I wasn't in the mood to fall just because some metal decided to get stuck on a falling bridge piece or rocks. Before I could even finish my thoughts about complaining about the spear and sword, as I climbed I noticed the sensation of slipping. And not because my grip was failing me.

The remnants of the bridge I clung to were falling apart. I had moments left.

Looking upward didn't help much, since the flailing bridge kept dislodging snow and ice and sending more into the air. But even though I couldn't see, I could hear. And I could hear Renn.

"Vim!" she shouted. She sounded far closer than I wanted her to. Hopefully she wasn't foolish enough to be hanging off the ledge or something.

Climbing up a few more feet, I had to quickly reach out and grab onto the cliff's stone. The wound up rope I had been using to climb had snapped, and it with all the wood it was connected to flew off.

"I told you!"

Looking up, the snow finally thinned enough for me to see a pair of ears. They and Renn's hair flapped wildly as she glared at me. She was holding onto the main support beam for the bridge, staring at me with a look of utter blame.

"Yeah, yeah," I said as I hurriedly hefted myself up to her.

A few pieces of rope and broken boards were all that was left of this side's bridge. I used them to clamber back up onto the cliff. The moment I reached up and grabbed onto the last bit of ledge, Renn's hands coiled themselves onto my forearm.

She pulled me up onto solid ground before I could get my own self up over it.

"Solid! Solid and safe!" she shouted at me.

"It had been for you," I said as I allowed her to pull me away from the ledge. As if she thought I was foolish enough to fall back into it after narrowly surviving it.

Glancing back at the open ravine... I sighed at the sight. The other side had a little more bridge left than this one. It had scraped a huge portion of the cliff's snow and ice off, and...

Looked to be hanging by a few threads. Odds were it'd snap and fall soon enough.

Sorry Nebl. He'll be furious to hear I had been the cause.

"And sorry to myself too," I said with a nod.

"You should be sorry!" Renn yelled at me.

"I am!"

Renn squeezed my arm which she held, and started shaking it. She grimaced and looked... rather upset. Was she trying to shake the stupid out of me?

"Gah!" she finally released my arm after a moment, seemingly giving up. A good thing too, since it'd probably take her years to shake enough stupid out of me for it to be even noticeable.

"Are you okay, Renn?" I asked her.

Renn stomped away for a few feet and then turned to look at me. She glared for a moment, and then released a huge sigh. "I'm fine," she said.

"You sure?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. Other than my heart. Jeez, Vim... do you realize what just happened?" she asked.

"Yeah I need to file a complaint and sue," I said as I checked my stuff. My bag was still on my back, and so was the spear and sword. Funny. I had actually hoped I'd lose both during the event.

"You said Nebl made it!" she shouted.

"When you shout in anger you scrunch up your nose in a very adorable way," I said.

Her face contorted, scrunching up as if she wanted to prove it wasn't just while she was shouting. Then she looked away with a huff.

While she mumbled complaints at me I stepped forward to study the damage. It seemed the support beams were still fine, not just on this side but that side too. Yet everything else was indeed shot. Even if the large portion hanging on the other side remained by the time someone came to fix it, it'd not be worth risking to use it. It would be safer to just cut it and let it go.

"Sucks for the caravans. They really liked this bridge," I said.

"I liked it too, from a distance!" Renn shouted at me from behind. Did she not want to come near the ledge anymore?

Staring down into the ravine, I saw the great plums of snow and ice. I couldn't see any of the bridge, but it had definitely fallen and caused a great commotion... maybe even a small avalanche, based off the way the giant cloud of snow was rolling down the mountain.

I wasn't worried over anyone or anything getting hurt by the resulting avalanche. The only snow on this mountain was here. And there was enough forestry along the mountainside to stop most of the snow, and keep the snow from picking up too much steam. Plus the forest would keep the large boulders and rocks from joining the fray, thanks to their thick roots and foliage.

"Uh... Vim?" Renn finally wasn't shouting anymore, but now she sounded...

Wait...? Concern?

Why? Wasn't the danger over?

Turning around, I expected something dangerous. A large bear maybe. Annoyed at us intruding and causing a ruckus. A group of men, maybe as well. Maybe even the lord of this ravine, demanding payment for breaking his bridge.

Instead Renn was standing a few feet away, near the trees. Staring at something in front of her. Something covered in snow and...

Stepping up next to her, I sighed at the sight of frozen corpses.

They had wrapped themselves in a set of blankets, and the blankets had frozen to them. There seemed to be an older man, based off the black beard, and he was holding a woman. It was hard to tell thanks to the layers of snow and ice, and the blanket wrapped around them, but it looked as if there was a third smaller individual between them.

Renn had gone as still as they, so I stepped closer. Bending down I brushed some of the snow and ice away to see.

Yes. It was a child. A young boy.

"H...how does this happen?" Renn asked.

"Quicker than you think. They dared the pass, and couldn't cross. Since they set up here and froze to death I'm going to assume it was either a blizzard up here at the time, too windy to use the bridge, or someone had gotten hurt. Too hurt to continue and the others weren't willing to abandon them," I said as I stepped away.

They looked dressed for such a venture. Thick pelts. Thicker jackets. The man was missing his right glove, and it showed. He was missing a few fingers already, but that was probably thanks to a scavenger and not the cold. It was a shock to see they still had their eyes and tongues too.

"Probably a week or two old," I guessed.

Renn took a deep breath, and released it slowly. A thick plume of white exhaled from her, covering her distraught face.

"Recognize them?" I asked her. She looked like she was about to break down and cry.

She quickly shook her head, and then looked at me with horror. "Do we know them?" she asked worryingly.

"Ah... no... I don't," I said as I realized what was wrong.

She didn't know them at all.

She just felt sorry for them.

I sighed, and glanced at the ravine once again.

A broken bridge. A dead family.

Not a great start to our venture east.

"Come on, Renn. I'm sorry but it's too late for them," I said.

"Should... should we bury them?" she asked.

"It'd be exceedingly difficult up here. Plus they'd just get unburied by bears or other predators. Come on," I said gently as I reached out to take her hand. Her pale hands had red fingertips now. I wanted to warm them.

Renn let me take her hand, but kept her eyes on the frozen family even until they were out of sight.

Chapter 112: A Boulder to Toss

Sometimes it was best to just... play the part.

I sat on the large wagon's front bench, with one leg crossed under the other. I was alone on the wagon, with only the two large stocky horses for company. But they weren't much company. They were busy nibbling on the weeds and grass at their feet.

"Ho! Another!" the older man hollered in joy as Vim pushed another large rock over the ledge, clearing way to allow the two younger men to go at the pile of debris with their shovels.

Vim stepped back and sighed, staring at the two young men as they shoveled with gusto, shouting in unison as they worked.

Smiling softly at them, and Vim who was glaring at them, I glanced over to the mountainside that had collapsed over the path.

It was all dirt. Dirt mixed with large boulders. In fact the black soil looked... rather healthy. The type that I'd not be surprised to see getting used to grow crops in. Yet in this mountainous forest, it was probably not viable.

"Another!" one of the boy's shouted. He huffed loudly as he stepped away, allowing Vim to step forward. I watched as Vim disappeared for a moment, hidden by the final layer of dirt and rocks separating this wagon and them on the other side. Vim re-appeared, with a smaller boulder in his arms. He stepped a few feet away and with a small throw sent the rock over the large drop. I heard it crash into trees and other rocks below, loudly breaking tree limbs as it fell down the mountainside.

A part of me thought it was... silly, to toss the rocks so flippantly over the ledge. But I knew Vim wouldn't be doing it if it was too dangerous.

"What a marvel..." the older man, the employer of the two younger men with shovels, said as he watched Vim wipe his hands and step back. To let the boys go back to work shoveling the dirt.

"I was a boulder in my previous life," Vim jokingly said. The two boys glanced at each other as the old man bellowed a happy laugh.

And happy he was... They weren't too far from being done now. The large pile of dirt and rocks that been blocking the path was now almost gone. I knew in not much more time, only piles of dirt would be blocking the wagon. There were only a few more visible rocks of any real size amongst the dirt.

Which meant the merchant and his crew would be able to continue on their way, delivering their cargo.

Glancing behind me, into the canopy covered wagon... I wondered what was in the boxes.

I knew what was in them, technically. I could tell by the smell. There were things made of copper. Refined copper too, not the pure stuff.

The entire wagon was full of the boxes. Enough to make the two horses actually struggle when they were forced to pull the wagon. All the boxes were enclosed, so I couldn't see their contents... but honestly I couldn't think of very many things that could be in them. The boxes were too thin for certain tools. Too small in height for others. Yet I could tell by the sounds they made when moved or jostled, that whatever was in them wasn't a singular piece of copper but many pieces. Dozens maybe.

Whatever was in them was probably something mundane. These men seemed poor, and more laborers than merchants. The two employees shoveling in fact were uneducated. Neither could read... which I had found out thanks to neither being able to read the painted names on the horse's saddles.

Looking back at the shoveling men, my eyes narrowed when both of them went to working harder. They had noticed my eyes had returned to them.

I smiled softly as Vim noticed too, and he glared at them even harder.

"Still this was greatly fortuitous. Your young companion can help herself to the bottles of drink if she'd like! They're right behind where you're sitting! First box on the right!" the older man shouted at me, to get my attention.

Blinking at his offer of payment, I frowned and glanced at Vim. He shrugged at me, telling me it was my choice. He didn't care if I did or not.

Well...

Turning around a little, I found the box he spoke of. It was the same as all the rest, but unlike the others this one wasn't nailed down. The lid lifted easily, revealing wrapped food... water skins and...

Pushing one of the glass bottles aside, I noticed the swirling dark liquid within. It was wrapped carefully in a cloth, like the three other bottles.

Some kind of wine.

I lowered the lid, and sighed. I wasn't in the mood to drink wine out here. Stuck on a smelly wagon of copper, while two young men stared at me with obvious gazes.

The older merchant didn't notice I had rebuffed his offer, for he was now talking in depth with Vim about the guild he had purchased from a few days ago. Something to do with a new levy of taxes on his goods that just wasn't fair at all... at least in his opinion.

He wasn't necessarily... off-putting, but there was something about the man I didn't like. Maybe it was the lack of aid he was giving the two men shoveling, or Vim. He hadn't done a single thing since Vim and the two men had gone to clearing the blocked road.

Granted he was old... and did have a limp while he walked... maybe he was just incapable, and knew better than to strain himself. So maybe I shouldn't hate him so readily just because of that. Or because

he seemed way too happy over Vim and I's sudden arrival, and Vim's willingness to help him clear the road so his wagon could get through.

"To be fair, my friend, I doubt highly you're a mere guard! I know my metals, you see, and the metal upon you and your companion is far from paltry, I say!" the old man happily boasted of himself, and his new friend Vim, and I couldn't help but find myself hating him again.

Maybe I could hate him, and it was okay. I mean... he hadn't done anything yet. He also wasn't rude... he had already paid Vim in coins for his help... he had offered me food and drink too, which probably weren't cheap... and he let me sit on his wagon while Vim worked...

I groaned softly and looked away from him as Vim and him talked. I was tired of listening into their conversation, even though I still heard it clearly. He kept asking which company or band Vim worked under, or ruled. I wasn't entirely sure what he meant, but I assumed he thought Vim and I were mercenaries of some kind.

Glancing at the weapons resting against the side of the wagon's bench, I knew exactly why he thought so.

I had told Vim we'd look like brigands.

Though... maybe that wasn't so bad.

Maybe it'd keep suspicious people away from us as we traveled.

Looking back towards Vim, I watched as he lifted one more rock. This one was barely big enough to justify him having to lift it, but I knew the two younger men were exhausted. Both were panting and working much slower than they had earlier.

They had tried to show off to me far too much in the beginning, and were now paying the price.

At least, so Vim had said a few minutes ago.

Smiling softly at the two men, I watched as the younger one with longer hair blushed. He stepped forward with his friend, to continue shoveling, but skidded a little on the dirt. He didn't fall or hurt himself, but his blush became much deeper as he tried to hide his face beneath the dirt... which didn't work. The dirt was no longer high enough to hide them. It was only up to their knees now.

"Don't go falling down now, lads. Look! Nearly done!" the older man shouted at them.

The boy's blushing immediately ended, and I knew it wasn't because he got excited over the older man's shout. He had simply gotten angry.

While they finished up clearing the path, Vim reached out and shook the old man's hand. I focused on their light conversation, and heard that Vim was saying goodbye. His job was over. The boulders were cleared, and all that remained were small rocks and dirt. Both things the young men could handle.

I smiled at the prospect of finally getting to leave and continue on our journey. I hurriedly hopped off the wagon's bench.

Landing onto the dirty ground, one of the horses neighed at me as if offended. I ignored it as I went to pick up my sword and spear, and to grab Vim's too.

"Come on Renn," Vim called for me, which honestly he hadn't needed to do... but...

Glancing at him, I noticed the smirk he had on his face as both of the men paused in their shoveling. To stare at me.

They looked like young boys. Their faces were frozen in shock, as if they had just been told their mother was leaving them.

Shaking my head at Vim, and his weird teasing of the boys, I picked up his sword and spear and headed for him.

I stepped up over the dirt, stepping in-between the two men as I did so. They both went completely still, and one even gulped. "Good bye, ma'am!" the one who had blushed earlier said.

"Goodbye! Keep it up, you're almost done!" I gave them a small bit of encouragement as I hurried over to Vim.

Handing Vim his sword first, while he went to securing it onto his back I accepted the hearty and happy handshake from the older man. "Thank you so much! Please, if you ever stop by my farm in Trivati, please visit me. I'll repay this many times over, I swear it!" he beamed a joyous smile as we shook hands.

"Sure thing," I told him as I let go of his hand and went to hand Vim his spear.

He gripped it solidly as he took it. Tightly enough that the sound of his skin and knuckles loudly protested, causing the old man and even the younger men to stop for a moment and stare at him. Then Vim easily slid the spear onto his back, hooking it to the same leather scabbard that held his sword.

Vim then nodded one last time. "Farewell. Safe travels, and may your wine taste strong all through the night," Vim said to the old man.

Stepping away alongside Vim, the old man laughed as he waved goodbye.

Leaving them alone, the sound of shoveling and small talk filled the air for some time as Vim and I continued down the path.

"How much did he pay you?" I asked once we were far enough that I could hear their voices, but knew they couldn't hear mine.

"Hm?" Vim reached into one of his pockets and pulled out the small satchel. He handed it to me without hesitation.

Peering into the small coin purse, I frowned at the sight of dozens of silver coins. "Silver?" I pulled one out. I didn't recognize the design, but I could read the language. "Twenty Prim," I read.

"Similar to Penk. He actually paid a hefty sum, surprisingly," Vim said.

Tying the little pouch up, I reached around to pull aside my backpack. Thanks to the new leather hooks and latches, I was able to simply undo one hook on one shoulder and was able to bring the backpack around to my front. It rested against my chest as I flipped the backpack open to put the bag into it.

"He seemed very happy," I said as I finished putting the coins away.

"Well... he should. The wagon was carrying coins. Probably all the wages he'd be paying his farmhands and guards throughout the year. There were dozens of those pouches he had just given me in that wagon alone," Vim said.

"Oh? Wait..." I paused and glanced back at the wagon. It looked like the men were still digging, and now the man was sitting on the wagon's bench where I had been.

"Exactly. He had paid me not just for help, Renn... but to not rob him," Vim said.

Stopping myself from tying my backpack back into position on my back, I groaned and grimaced. "You're kidding me..."

"Not really?"

"So we just robbed them!" I shouted.

"No we didn't? In fact we got paid to not do so," Vim frowned at me, as if I was making no sense at all.

"Aww Vim... Now I feel horrible," I groaned.

He smirked and reached out and grabbed my backpack. He shifted it, and went to tying it back into place for me. "Don't feel bad. What I had said hadn't been entirely a joke, but it was one. If you must know Prim currency has four levels. Bronze, copper, silver, and gold. There's ten silver coins in that pouch, which is honestly just a month's wage for a common worker in this nation," Vim explained.

"That doesn't make me feel better Vim. You just said he gave it to us because he worried we'd take more if he didn't," I said.

"Part in parcel, Renn. This is the wilderness. It's honestly his fault for only having two guards... and having them be so..." Vim paused a moment as he finished with my backpack. His hand lingered on my shoulder, making me a little conscious of his touch.

Did he even realize what he was saying? What he was feeling? What he had done and acted?

"So young and handsome?" I finished for him.

Vim blinked and then focused on me. His hand twitched on my shoulder, and I smirked at him.

He didn't even realize it. Vim honestly didn't realize he had gotten upset over their ogling of me.

"Which one was handsome?" he asked.

Stepping away from him, I smiled as I shrugged. "Boulders look good from the right angles sometimes, you know," I said.

"Boulders...?" Vim didn't follow right away, but the man stepped forward after a moment. After the third step, he realized what I meant and sighed. At himself.

Giggling, I glanced back at him, and had to quickly look away... since he had a weird smile on his face that made me suddenly very conscious of what I had just said aloud.

"You being slobbered over I understand... but how do you think I feel when I'm being sleazed over too, but by an old man? At least yours were understandable," Vim complained.

Heading around a bend, I burst out laughing as I finally realized exactly why the old man had been so happy.

"He had been infatuated!" I agreed and admitted, realizing it clearly now. That made perfect sense! Same with the coins!

"He had been. I bet it was the rock throwing," Vim said with a smirk.

Laughing at him, I came to a sudden stop upon realizing it.

Vim tilted his head at me, wondering what was wrong.

"So... those boys..." I whispered.

Vim's smirk slowly died, and he sighed softly with a nod. "Well, you had said young and handsome," he said.

I groaned, no longer amused at all.

Chapter 113: Crossroads, Sandwiches, Drinks

The map would need to be updated... again.

I sat alone at a table, staring at the rather busy marketplace. Hundreds of people were coming and going, and most weren't locals at all. Large portions of the people in town carried the obvious rugged bags of travelers, or pulled along their carts and wagons that were loaded with goods.

A part of me could remember this place. A small few family's large settlement. A place I usually never bothered with, because I always expected it to disappear. People tried making new towns all the time. Very few if any ever actually succeeded.

Well this one seemed to have done so.

What had been a few scattered buildings was now an actual town. There were two brick roads, meeting in the middle and forming a large circular marketplace. The square was full of inns, taverns, restaurants, markets... a church, with a large bell tower... and even a barber.

Add the hustle and bustle to the expanding houses and buildings being built along the dirt roads that verged off the stone ones, I wondered how long ago this place had become an actual town. Years surely, based off the stonework... but hadn't I just been through here less than ten years ago? It hadn't been anything like this then.

Humans were fast when the money was flowing.

"Sir! You really need to try this, it's got just a hint of honey in it!" a cup appeared out of nowhere, being placed onto my table.

Staring at the golden swirl inside, I forced a small smile to the young woman who was beaming me a huge smile, and doing her best to seem as unimposing as possible. Which was hard, since her breasts were about to spill out from her tight shirt.

"Sure. Thanks," I accepted her forceful offer, and she nodded quickly with a giggle.

"Here!" a man at another table drew her attention, and she actually glared at him for a tiny moment.

"I'll be back!" she said happily and hurried away to serve the other table.

I shouldn't have sat here.

But it wasn't my fault. No one had even been here when I had. The girl hadn't even been working then either. She had just arrived a few minutes ago, and started taking orders.

How was I supposed to know these bunches of tables and chairs were for the restaurant across the square? Ridiculous. At least put up a sign.

The young girl took the man's order, and the woman's who was with him too, and I heard the obvious distaste and annoyance in the waitress's voice. She was actually upset at them. For making her work... or well, for making her work away from me.

What was with the people lately?

I understood it when men, and even sometimes women, stared at Renn. Or tried to impress her or draw her eyes... although most of the time none of them tried too hard since I stood next to her at all times... but...

But me?

Usually I was ignored through and through.

Though she seemed far more forceful than I liked, at least she wasn't a strange old man with bad breath.

Glancing at the church, I sighed and hoped Renn would emerge soon. I wasn't ready to start worrying about her, she'd only been in there for about half an hour... but her presence would save me from the soon to come onslaught of the waitress.

My eyes wandered to the silver gleaming weapons resting against the table.

That was the reason, wasn't it?

A boring, average looking man suddenly becomes much more interesting the moment he's seen carrying the tools of war.

Sighing softly, I picked up the slop she had left on my table and took a small sip.

Immediately regretting it, I lowered it slowly and wondered how anyone paid and actually ordered this junk. She had said there was honey in it? Sure... maybe a single spoonful. A spoon of honey tossed into old ale that had been sitting in a rotted rain barrel for months, likely.

That was the problem with the east. No one here knew how to make good food or drink.

Funny, that I'd say the religious west was more knowledgeable about booze than the pagans in the east.

Or not, depending on how you looked at it...

"Well? How about food? They're cooking a huge slab of meat right now and I bet it'd be tasty with some bread, a nice midday sandwich!" the waitress began speaking before even reaching my table. She smiled at me, speaking quickly... and even bit her tongue half way through her spiel.

She blushed a little, and I realized she wasn't playing at all. This wasn't her trying to get me to order more food. She was genuinely attracted to me.

Had to be the weapons.

"What kind of meat is it?" I asked. Renn didn't seem to like the leaner meats.

"Just a cow, we usually serve pigs and chickens so I'm not sure why we have it," she shrugged.

Probably a dairy cow if it was not a common food source. Someone probably sold it to them, since it wasn't milking anymore. "Sure. How about half a dozen sandwiches to start?" I ordered. Dairy meat was soft and tender, usually. Renn would like it, even with bland bread.

"Half a dozen? I don't get off until later..." she stepped away for a moment, and then stopped as she went into thought.

"For me and my companion. She'll be here in a moment, I'm sure," I told her.

The waitress stared at me, and then went beat-red in the face. Without a single word she hurried away, nearly running across the open square in-between people and wagons to get to her restaurant.

Watching her go, I sighed and shook my head at her.

"I'm a companion am I?"

Turning, I watched as Renn slowly stepped out from behind me. She slowly sat down across from me, pulling her chair closer to the table as to glare at me.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

Although annoyed by that waitress, it seemed she had done something right. I had not noticed Renn leaving the church at all.

Renn glared at me for a long moment, and I wondered if maybe something had happened. She didn't look hurt or... as if she had been found out. I also didn't smell blood or her tears either.

"Well, you were right. This is becoming, or already is, a crossroads city," Renn finally said.

"Figured. Glad to hear it from the higher ups of society, at least," I said and waved a paltry thank you to the church across the street.

Renn's glare narrowed at me, and then she sighed. She reached across the table and grabbed the cup of nasty ale from me.

"That's nasty," I warned her.

"You drank it earlier," she said as she sniffed it.

"Which is how I found out it's nasty," I warned again.

Renn ignored my warnings and took a very tiny sip. The kind that told me she probably couldn't taste anything anyway. Yet still she flinched and squirmed for a moment, and then slowly put the cup back in front of me.

"You know... you're the only one who doubts me sometimes," I said.

"I wanted to see for myself. It is nasty. Tastes like fish water," she complained.

"That's rude to fish," I said and went to take another drink.

Renn watched with an odd look as I took a deep drink.

"Well... while you were flirting with large breasted women, I found out that this city is under the domain of a count. A count from Lumen. He made an agreement with the church. Half of the taxes in the town go to the church, the other half to him. He pays for the city stuff, and the church helped build this square and the stone buildings," Renn explained a very common method the church used to expand its influence.

"Typical," I said.

"Seems... fair? The church spends a bunch of money which helps the town solidify and grow. This count gets paid, but uses that money to also expand and take care of the city. It allows both the church and the nation's nobles to have vested interest. Allowing them to work together instead of fighting over it," Renn said.

"If neither weren't greedy abusers, it'd work, sure," I said.

Renn frowned but didn't seem willing to argue with me any further.

"I guess there's a lot of trade here in this region. They tax the merchants who enter. Based off the number of carts who pass by. They'll eventually charge per head and the weight of the cargo, I guess," Renn added.

"Foolish methods. But everyone always has plans and goals and schemes," I said.

"You're the one who wanted me to find out," she said.

"And you did it. Thank you," I said with a tilt of my now half empty cup.

She didn't seem to appreciate my thanks, and then looked past me. Over my shoulder.

"I'm going to go buy something I can actually swallow before our food gets here. I'll be right back," she said as she stood from her seat.

Renn hurried away, and I turned in my seat to watch as she crossed the square and entered a tavern.

While she was in there I swallowed the rest of my dirty tasting ale.

It did taste like it had at one time had fish in it. Renn had a way to describe stuff.

"Still, a count?" I wondered as I glanced around. There were plenty of large stone buildings... but none seemed like a noble's residence. Maybe this count wasn't as wealthy, or maybe they didn't have a residence here at all. Maybe they sent one of their underlings to oversee the town.

Though honestly it didn't matter much. Another town. Nothing new. Humans ever expanded. Always multiplying.

"To think they used to struggle just to breed," I said softly.

The waitress from earlier emerged from her business, carrying a small crate. She smiled as she made her way to the tables, stepping around people and carts as she hurried.

She stopped before my table first, and went to putting plates upon it. Each plate had two large sandwiches, packed with meat, cheese and even lettuce.

"So uh... I'm taking it you're not interested?" she asked softly as she put another plate in front of me. She had even leaned down a little, to get closer.

"He's not."

The waitress stood up straight as Renn put several mugs down onto the table.

"I see! Sorry! Let me know if you want anything else!" the waitress took the news in stride, without a flinch as she put one last plate onto the table and then stepped away to deliver the other table's food.

Without a word Renn sat back down.

"What'd you get?" I asked as I reached out for one of the mugs she brought back.

Renn shifted a bit, and for the tiniest moment I thought she'd smack my hand away... yet she remained seated and didn't stop me. Taking one of the mugs, I noticed the familiar red juice within.

The berry drink she liked. Without any alcohol within it.

"Surprised they had this," I said as I took a drink.

"It wasn't cheap. Five of those coins, that your friendly old man paid you," she said with a small smirk.

"So as you drink, thank my good looks for the delight," I said as I raised the mug to her.

Renn's brows furrowed in annoyance... and then she reached out for her own mug as a smile formed on her face.

She raised the mug in toast alongside me, but had to stifle a few laughs before she was able to take a drink.

Chapter 114: A Bridge's Forgotten Smile

If not for the other people walking upon the bridge, I'd think Vim and I had stumbled into a dream.

Gulping, I glanced behind us. We had been walking on the bridge for some time now... and although the end of the bridge was far away, it looked... too close. Impossibly close.

Looking to my right, and then left, I did my best to try and comprehend how much stone was around me.

This bridge was beyond massive. Vim and I weren't really walking in the center of it, but it felt like we were. The edges of the bridge, adorned by massive walls of white stone pillars, were far enough away that I knew I'd have to throw a stone with nearly all my strength to reach them.

The pillars raised high into the sky, and were connected to each other with white stone rails. The detail I could see carved into some of the rails and pillars made me sweaty. Someone had spent years... genuine years and years, making this thing.

"Vim..." I said his name and looked ahead of us. To the people in the distance. I could see wagons, carts... groups of people, and sometimes even a singular individuals walking upon the bridge. Both coming towards us, and heading across the bridge like we were.

"Hm? Everything alright?" Vim glanced at me as he spoke.

"I... I need a moment..." I said as I slowed to a stop.

Vim frowned but paused to wait for me. "Want to sit for a moment?" he asked, worried.

"Oh... no... I'm not... I'm not bothered by the height, but the size of this thing. Vim what is this?" I asked as I spun around, to take the whole area in again.

The mountains we had just left were behind us. They had felt massive. Most of them were still covered in white snow. The trees were thick upon them... and I had honestly felt that they had been difficult. We had encountered that bridge, which collapsed... and then we ran into that broken road that Vim had helped clear way.

Yet opposing those mountains, across the massive bridge we were walking upon... were mountains that made me feel as if I'd never seen mountains before.

They loomed over us. Dwarfing not just us, but the whole world.

"They're considered mountain chains. There's hundreds of peaks and thrice as many summits. There's even a huge plateau beyond this mountain here, overlooking the inward sea," Vim said as he noticed where my eyes lingered.

"Plateau?" I asked.

"A large flat mountain. It's... interesting. You'll get to see it if we get to head north from Lumen," Vim said.

I nodded, and looked down again. To my feet.

I was walking on something that had to be far older than me. The stones beneath my feet looked... nothing like any I knew. They were white, even after all this time, and not because they were stained by snow or ice. Each brick beneath my feet were perfectly aligned, and all the same size and shape.

"Did Nebl make this too...?" I asked, completely astounded. How had he done it? How could anyone? The bricks weren't even that big... most weren't much bigger than my foot! And...

"Nebl...?" Vim chuckled as he stepped closer to me a little, to let us talk comfortably. The wind wasn't that strong on the bridge, especially for us, but there was still a constant whistle from it.

"Vim this is impossibly huge. How long is it? It feels longer than entire towns we've been to!" I said with a point to the other end. It looked so far away that it was actually blurry, even for my eyes.

"It's four miles long, give or take," Vim nodded.

Four miles! A thousand of his paces... four more times...

"Will you be okay if we went to the ledge?" he asked.

"Ledge...?" I glanced over to the rows of giant pillars. Yes. He was right. There was a ledge there. A real one. There looked to be no guard rail or anything to stop someone from just... falling off.

"Here, you should be able to see it even from here," Vim reached out and gently put his hand on my back. To guide me to the edge.

I wasn't scared of heights. Yet I still felt an odd flutter in my stomach as we stepped closer and closer. I slowed our pace a little, and noticed Vim gently allow it. He waited for me to feel comfortable enough before we got any closer.

After a few minutes we finally reached the pillars. I glanced upward, and realized they were far bigger than I had thought. Nearly three stories high, based off the buildings I'd been in lately.

I grabbed Vim's elbow, since his hand lingered on my back, and dared to step between two of the pillars.

There actually was something to stop someone from falling off, but not in a good way. Off the ledge was simply another section. What looked to be another small bridge, running along the edge of this one. Yet that one also had no rails or safety features. Maybe they had made it simply so if someone did fall off, they'd land there instead of falling far into the...

Groaning, I stared down at the bottom of the world.

There were giant trees, and even lakes and rivers in view beneath the bridge. Far beneath us. To the point that everything looked tiny, as if painted. As if not even real.

"See? Lumen," Vim pointed to a far off corner of the world. I followed his finger and sure enough saw a massive city. It looked like it was sitting right on the ocean, but it also looked like it rolled up the mountainside it was situated against.

From the distance it looked massive beyond measure. "Is it bigger than Telmik?" I asked.

"About that size, give or take. If you look you'll see dozens of smaller towns and villages all around. There's one there, and there," Vim pointed, but I only saw one of them. My eyes hazed over for a moment and I stepped back, away from the pillars.

Vim let me, and stepped back with me.

"Why's there no safety rail?" I asked.

"Look how massive this bridge is, Renn. If you fell off it's kind of your fault," he said with a chuckle.

"Then let's get back to the center. So it's not our fault when it happens," I said sternly.

"Sure..."

Heading back to the center of the bridge, I was thankful that Vim neither teased me... or pulled his arm free of my grip as we did so.

Vim was the protector, so he was used to being... protective... It wasn't just something he promised to be, and the rules demanded he be... It was also something he did instinctively. Innately. It was a part of him, and always would be. So to him it was nothing but second nature... but that didn't mean I didn't appreciate it when he acted so.

"The pillars are for the wind by the way. Without them breaking the wind, this would be almost impossible to traverse safely. But even still, during storms it becomes too dangerous to cross," Vim explained.

Glancing at the pillars... I realized that was what those rails were on the top of them. They were oddly shaped and coiled around themselves for that reason. They were meant to divert wind.

"Why doesn't the wind just pass through the middle?" I asked.

"It tries. But wind follows the pressure and temperature. The stones are radiant. They absorb the sunlight. Touch one," he stopped walking for a moment to let me bend down.

Gently laying my hand on the ground, I smiled at the warmth. "What the heck?" I released Vim's elbow as I went to touch the stones with both hands. To warm them up.

It was cold up here.

"The stones are layered. The top layer is brick that warms, the middle cools and then the bottom heats again, so ice cannot form underneath to weigh it down," Vim said as I ran my hands along the bricks.

"I'm surprised no one's tried to take all these bricks, these are amazing," I said.

"Oh people have tried. Trust me," Vim said.

Looking up at him, I wondered what it'd be like to know as much as he did of the world. How much had he seen? How much had he forgotten?

Standing back up, my fingers suddenly felt cold... even though they hadn't before. I hurriedly buried them into my pockets, but it didn't help much. The leather I wore was warm on the inside, thanks to a layer of fur, but on the outside and in the pockets it was somehow colder than the general air.

"They should make all bridges with this stuff. Your bridge you broke wouldn't have done so with these," I said.

Vim frowned, and shifted a little. "It wasn't my bridge..." he said.

"You said you and Nebl helped build it?" I asked.

"Well, yes. I had helped. But Nebl was the chief of that crew, and the lord of that region paid for it... I was just there to make sure no one bothered Nebl," Vim said.

I smiled at him, amused he'd take more offense to it being his bridge than the being told he had been the one to break it.

His pride was odd.

He tapped his foot on the bridge we were on now. "Still standing," he said proudly.

For the smallest moment the world, in all its amazing beauty, disappeared. And for that moment, only Vim stood in front of me.

He was smirking while staring at the bridge beneath his feet. Staring at it in a very obviously proud way. The kind of proud that only a man who was defending his pride, and doing so majestically, stared.

The moment passed as I took a deep breath and a cold wind blew past. It wasn't a harsh wind, just cold. It made me shiver.

"Come on. Let's get across this bridge before nightfall, so you don't freeze to death," he said, noticing my shiver.

"I could just lay on the bricks," I suggested.

"Like them?" Vim asked.

Raising an eyebrow I tried to find what he was talking about... and sure enough, to our left near the pillars... were what looked to be people lying down against the base of the pillars.

There were two of them, and they had lain down near one another. Most likely laying against the pillars to have warmth from multiple angles.

"Although it's hard to imagine this thing collapsing... I'd still not sleep on it. Ever," I said as I stared at the two sleeping men. They were curled up near each other, wrapped in odd looking furs. Was it spiky? It looked it.

"Me either. But you can't blame them for it, Renn. To them it's been around forever and always will be. Their great-grandfathers traversed it. So did theirs. And along the way their great-grandfathers ancestors forgot to tell them that there used to be dozens of such wonders all over the world, yet are gone now. Collapsed, buried, forgotten," Vim said softly.

Glancing at Vim, I realized he was once again speaking of a history no one knew about. Or at least, no one but him.

"How did a civilization that could build such things disappear Vim?" I asked him.

"Easily. Overnight. With a whimper," he said.

I didn't like how seriously he had said that.

If something could do that to such a powerful peoples...

Then what hope did we have?

Vim and I walked in silence for a good few minutes. And that silence lingered as a large wagon passed us by on the other side of the bridge. It was huge, with wheels bigger than Vim, and stacked with massive barrels. The four barrels within the wagon were so huge, I knew if one laid down on its side it could have been used as a small house.

"What's in them you think?" I asked Vim.

"Probably fish," he said.

Fish! Live ones, maybe...

The wagon was guarded by four horsemen. They, and the wagon riders, all stared at us as they passed.

Their looks were odd, but I had been growing used to strange stares lately. Ever since Vim and I had started carrying around our weapons, the whole world had started treating us a little different.

"You think they'd all stare so much if they knew the swords were dull?" I asked Vim after the wagon was far enough away.

Vim chuckled happily, telling me he had thought the same thing. "They'd stare still, for sure! Just in a different way," he said.

Smiling at his happy smirk, I enjoyed the sound of his amused voice. Usually he spoke so plainly, and calmly. His normal tone was so bland that such emotion from him was rare and valuable.

Looking up to my right, I stared at the tip of the spear on my back. Unlike the sword on my waist, that wasn't dull at all. The arrow head looking blade at the end of the spear gleamed, and looked menacing.

What most people probably didn't know was that spear tip could be unfastened. It could be un-tightened off fine threads, and removed.

Vim and I still sometimes sparred. We'd only done it a few times since leaving the smithy, but that had mostly been because of how cold it's been. He didn't seem bothered by the cold, but he was kind enough to not force me to endure it.

He still hadn't allowed me to wield anything other than the sword, yet, however. Even though he let me carry it.

"The church at the crossroads thought I was a mercenary by the way," I told Vim.

"Well, that is what we look like right now," he said.

"They asked what band I belonged to," I said.

"What'd you tell them?" he glanced at me as he asked.

"The Silken Band. The one Lilly's son is in," I said.

Vim paused for a moment, causing me to come to a stop too. Uh oh... had I made a mistake?

"That's actually smart of you. I apologize for not bringing it up before," Vim said as he thought about it.

"Oh?" I smiled at his uncommon praise. He did give it out sometimes, but it was rare. Rare and precious, since he only gave it out when one really deserved it.

"Hm... from here on out just say you're in the employ of the Animalia Company," Vim said.

"Animalia?" I asked.

"Means what it sounds like. Animal. It's the main company the Society owns. The one we're headed to in Lumen," he said.

"Sounds... a little dumb," I said honestly.

Vim smiled and nodded. "It is! I gave them a bunch of better names, but who am I to judge?"

"Something tells me that was the better option then," I said with a nod.

Vim's smile died a little, but not entirely. "Rude."

Passing an older man, I noticed the staff in his hands. It had a little bell at the top, similar to the one that had hung over the door at the Sleepy Artist. Yet his, even while walking and the wind, didn't make a sound.

"When shepherds retire here they take out the little thing that makes the bell sound. It's to imply they no longer will call their herds, or dogs," Vim said gently.

Glancing at the man who had very obviously noticed what I had focused on... I wondered how he did that. "Do I speak my thoughts aloud sometimes?" I asked.

"Only when you sleep," he said.

"That's worse!" I groaned.

Vim actually nodded, as if in complete agreement.

"Really...?" I asked. What had I been saying in my sleep? And why was Vim actually acting as if it had been... bad enough to make him act so?

"Between that and your snoring I sometimes can't sleep," he said with a nod.

I sighed and looked away from him. So he was mostly teasing me then.

Though... he'd not tease without a sliver of truth behind it. That was how he teased. It was the way he found humor in his world. He teased and joked, but did so by building it off what either was happening or had happened.

He teased off the truth, not a lie.

"Do I really snore that badly Vim?" I asked.

"Only when you're tired. Or very happy, for some reason," he said with a frown.

Great, so I really did!

Yet... "Happy?" I wondered what that meant.

Snoring while tired was obvious. Yet why would I snore loudly when I was happy?

"For your information I only snore when I'm in great and terrible pain," Vim said.

"Pain?" I stopped thinking about my own snoring and tried to remember if I had ever heard him snore.

"Agonizing pain," he nodded firmly, sounding and looking completely serious.

"That's horrible. Why would you even know that?" I asked. I couldn't think of any time I had heard him snore.

In fact I honestly couldn't think of any time he had actually been completely asleep near me. A few times he had seemed asleep, yet if I moved or said anything he'd just sit up and start talking. It was as if he never slept at all, or didn't need to.

Which was odd. By now we've been traveling together for...

Well... Winter had come and gone, and although it was still cold up here in the mountains it was definitely spring. We've been together for at least three or four months.

Nearly half a year... maybe more, since winter had come earlier for the north where we had met.

Glancing behind us, I realized how far we had come across the bridge. The side we had entered on now looked as distant and small as the one we were headed to.

"Vim you mentioned there had been other things like this? Really?" I asked.

"Many. Not just bridges, but... well, a lot of things," he said. I noticed he had stopped himself from actually listing them. Was he unwilling to tell me about them, or was he just not in the mood to talk about it?

"Did you break any of them? Like that bridge?" I asked him.

"Huh...? Well... Maybe a couple," Vim looked away from me, turning his head to look out into the distance.

Staring at him, I realized he had done so on purpose... not because he was examining the world or something that had caught his eye.

Was he embarrassed?

"Did you really?" I asked, smiling wildly as I watched him wave me off with a light gesture.

"Not intentionally," he said stiffly.

"Will you tell me about them?" I asked, excited.

"No."

"Then at least tell me if you broke them on purpose or not," I said, letting his simple and straight answer pass without bothering me.

"Uh... Well..." he finally looked back my way, but only to look in front of us. There was a set of carts and wagons nearing us, so he did have a reason to do that at least.

Vim started walking towards the rightmost section of the bridge, out of the center. To let the carts and wagons eventually pass without bothering us. I stayed next to him, but decided to round him... so he'd be nearest the pillars and ledges and not me.

Walking on his left was... different. I usually didn't walk on this side. It was even weirder now that I wore a sword at my hip. It was tightly snug on my right hip, which kind of... made me feel a little farther from him. As if it kept him from ever getting close to me, since it was dangerous.

Which was ridiculous. I knew even if the sword had been sharpened to the extreme, Vim wouldn't have paid it a moment's thought.

"Three. Maybe four of them were on purpose," Vim finally said after running through his memories.

I was about to tease him about the very obvious multiple numbers which he was implying he had broken without purpose... but stopped when I noticed my friend's very sad expression.

Vim and I walked in silence for a good moment, and I suddenly felt a little bad.

I had made him remember something painful, it seemed.

"Four, for sure. Personally I'd say only three, but the reality is I destroyed four. One had been a bridge like this one, actually. To the far south-east. There used to be mountains there, but they're gone now. It's a desert now," Vim spoke lowly, but not angrily. He sounded lost in his thoughts.

For a small moment I tried to think on how Vim would even accomplish destroying a bridge this size. I had joked earlier about it being... easy to break, being so big, but the reality was far from it.

I could only imagine how big the support beams were. And if this bridge was anything like the stuff that Vim and Nebl crafted, it probably had steel beams hidden beneath the white stone too.

It'd take an unexplainable amount of force to bring this bridge down. Something no singular individual should be able to summon.

"I'm sure you had good reason, Vim," I said to him as the first horseman in the caravan arrived near us.

Surprisingly it was a woman. She carried a flag on her spear, and both her eyes and her horse glanced at us as we passed one another.

A few dozen men and women, some on horses and some not, walked along the row of carts and wagons. Some were small, pulled by a single pony... while the biggest wagon was as big if not bigger than the first one Vim and I had passed earlier. I couldn't tell any of their cargo contents, though, since they were all wrapped firmly with leather tarps.

While they passed, a few of the guards raised their spears or fists to us. I made sure to return the gesture, since Vim seemed lost in thought still. He was ignoring them completely.

When the very last wagon, and three horsemen accompanying it, passed us by... I studied their little flags once more. They were blue, with what looked to be a weird looking crest embroidered onto them. Maybe a shield or something? It was hard to tell, since they were small flags and were flapping in the wind.

"You're right though, Renn," Vim spoke for the first time in a while, once the caravan was gone.

"Hm?" I turned to look at him, and hoped he'd return to the center of the bridge. We had a ways to go still, and I didn't like that I could hear the roar of the wind from beyond the pillars. It sounded angry, and I wanted nothing to do with that drop.

"There's very little left anymore. This is one of the last standing wonders, I think," he said softly.

Wonders. He called it that again.

Wonder. A word to describe something momentous.

This was the size to be called such. Definitely. Yet...

Studying the man walking next to me, I realized he was remembering a world that chances were only he remembered.

What was in his mind right now? These giant structures? The history of them? The moments when he had last seen them, or worse yet destroyed them? Was he thinking of them as they crumbled... by his own hand?

Or was it something far more precious. Maybe it was people. Places.

A home even.

"Could you rebuild them, Vim?" I asked him carefully.

Vim blinked and looked at me. He quickly regained his composure, and I wished for a tiny moment I hadn't asked a question. I had wanted him to stop looking so... dejected and defeated... yet at the same time, I personally didn't find anything wrong with a man relishing in his past.

Those moments were precious. Valuable. Lovely. I hoped one day to have as many as him. I could only hope and pray that I'd be able to look back at these moments, like right now, and smile fondly.

Though Vim hadn't been smiling...

"Not alone. Especially not while the Society needs me, either," he said.

"I could help?" I offered.

Vim smiled softly at me and shook his head. "Nah... Let someone else build wonders for once," he said.

"I haven't built one yet, though?" I said as I smiled at his smile.

"Well... I suppose that's true. I look forward to what you eventually build then, Renn. If it's a statue of me, make sure to get my good side," Vim said as he nodded confidently.

I laughed at his foolish thought. "Which side's that?" I asked happily.

"Why this side of course? I know you never get to see it, always walking on my right, but it's lovely when the moonlight hits it just right," he said as he held his head high, sticking his chin out a little. As if posing for a painting.

"The moonlight," I snickered. He noticed I usually walked on his right side? Really?

"Only a new moon's light, by the way," he added.

Laughing at him, I shook my head. "I'm sure it makes you look lovely!"

"It does! You look best at dusk, and I look best during a new moon. Everyone has their own special moment, you know," he said with a nod.

I was about to tease him over the very obvious fact that his time resulted in no moonlight at all... but couldn't do so. Especially since he had said something very interesting. "Dusk?" I asked excitedly.

Vim nodded. "Dusk."

The many hundreds, if not thousands, of sunsets that I'd watched in my lifetime quickly ran through my mind. I saw all the colors, the glares... those few moments of twilight, where it was dark and light at the same time.

"Dusk..." I tried to imagine what he meant, and failed miserably.

How come dusk? Was he teasing me? Making fun of something? Or was he being genuine? Sometimes he did this. Sometimes he said something without blinking that once I thought over it, I realized he had just said something completely absurd.

Had he just given me a generous compliment?

"Originally I thought the morning light was best, but," he shrugged. He didn't seem to even realize how bothered his words were making me.

"Why wasn't it?" I asked quickly. Maybe his answer would tell me how to actually interpret his words.

"You ignore the sunrises, mostly. Yet usually stare at the setting sun, sometimes happily... sometimes as if you're upset. Those emotions on your face while the setting sky and night mix makes you stunningly beautiful," Vim said smoothly.

Not even the cold air up here on this bridge could cool off my face as I stared at him.

"Especially when the rays of setting sun hit your ears and hair just right. It helps too if you're smiling a little and..." Vim slowly stopped talking, and also came to an abrupt stop as he finally looked at me.

I realized my mouth was wide open, so I promptly shut it and looked away from him. I felt the burning in my ears, my human ones, and for a few very solid loud heartbeats heard the ears on my head ruffle and brush against my hat as they twitched and moved around.

We both stood still, and I was glaring at a certain brick. One that had a very noticeably crack in it... yet for some reason I couldn't focus on it. I couldn't tell which way the crack came, or went or if it spread to other bricks... or if it was even a crack at all, and not just a bunch of dirt and...

"Well, you just went and proved me wrong... That's not fair Renn, I only get one singular moment a month to be good looking and look at you, doing it whenever you want to," he complained.

Raising my hands, I started to laugh as my eyes watered and a huge smile planted itself on my face. "Okay! Okay! Stop! Please!" I shouted.

"Stop what?" he asked innocently.

Taking a very, very, deep breath... I slowly looked back at him.

Vim was smiling softly at me, staring at me as if I was someone far more precious to him than I really was. His look made my heart thump harder, and suddenly I was far more conscious of how hot my face was.

I nearly jumped back, but instead only went still, when Vim reached out. A gentle, but firm, hand put itself against my cheek.

"You're as warm as the stones," he teased as he pulled his hand away.

Reaching up to cup my face, both to hide my embarrassed blush and to see if he was telling the truth... I groaned as I realized I really did feel hot.

"Come on Renn. Even if you no longer need to worry over the cold tonight, I still don't want to sleep on this bridge. Knowing my luck I'll break it on accident," Vim patted my back, ushering me to start walking again.

I joined him as we returned to walking, and with each step I did my best to get myself under control.

Why did his silly little comments affect me so deeply? He's teased me before. He's said I was beautiful before. Yet...

Gulping, I stifled a groan.

"If the bridge won't break even while hearing your honeyed words, I doubt anything can break it," I said.

Vim chuckled, but didn't argue. Did he even realize what he had just said? Aloud?

Wait...

Glancing at him between my fingers, I realized his smirk was...

Lowering my hands, I stared at the man who for probably the first time since I knew him... Was smiling normally.

Vim was smiling naturally. Without a care in the world. It looked good on his face. It was more a smirk than a real smile, but it was obvious it was his genuine smile. It fit his face perfectly, as if it had been molded for it.

His face existed for that smile to live upon. The fact it had taken this long for me to see it for the first time...

And it had been because of me.

Which made me smile too.

Chapter 115: A Safehouse For Those Without

The Clothed Woman was kneeling in front of Renn to offer her a small prayer.

Renn was obviously uncomfortable but kept herself still as the Clothed Woman mumbled softly, thanking the gods she believed in for this meeting and in hopes that they keep blessing her.

Other than Renn, who was currently dressed like a mercenary, the scene was very pious. It was in a small wooden church. The woman kneeling before Renn was covered head to toe in white and gray garbs of religious tones... and of course there was a giant cross of faith looming over the two.

Though, that cross was not a normal one. If any other church in this land saw such a cross they'd burn it down.

But the cross and the gods the Clothed Woman were praying to, that Renn didn't recognize, weren't the reason for her prickly expression.

"Amen," The Clothed Woman said as she slowly got up from her kneeling.

Renn breathed a small sigh of relief and nodded. "Amen," she said, always seemingly copacetic with others. Did she even realize that the woman in front of her was a believer in what her faiths deemed the enemy?

A part of me wanted to tell her, to see what she'd do and say... but another part of me hoped it'd stay hidden.

The Clothed Woman didn't have many friends, because of her faith. Even amongst the Society it was seen as something wrong.

"As always Vim brings another when I least expect it. You'd think by now I'd be used to it..." the Clothed Woman sighed, and her white face coverings danced a little as she shook her head.

I noticed Renn's eyes fixate on her face. She was trying to sneak a peek beyond the cloths... but I knew she'd be unable to. Even with her keen senses it wasn't possible. Beneath those white coverings were actually more cloth. Cloth that was wrapped around her entire body.

"Vim does rudely just show up without notice," Renn agreed.

The Clothed Woman chuckled and glanced at me. I didn't need to be able to see her facial expressions to know what she was chuckling over.

"I plan to have Renn meet Brandy. I've been told she's in Lumen," I told her our reason for being here.

"Ah... she had been. And will be again. She left about a month ago to the Bell Village, to deliver something. She'll return to Lumen likely within a week or two," the Clothed Woman said calmly. I noticed she called it a village and not a church, as it should have been. Did Renn notice it however?

"Typical of her. She's one of the few I ever have to wait on. Do you mind if we stick around here for a couple days before heading to Lumen?" I asked.

The Clothed Woman giggled and looked to Renn. "I'd be delighted to have you, welcome," she said to Renn.

"And your gods? They're okay with it?" I asked before Renn could say anything.

"My, so studious of you. Would you oblige them if they did take offense?" the Clothed Woman asked me.

"She would, probably," I said with a shrug.

Renn nodded quickly.

The Clothed Woman stared at her for a moment, and I heard a soft shift under her bandages. Renn's ears twitched, implying she heard the odd sound too. That hadn't just been the sound of skin, and Renn knew it. Though did she recognize the sound of something that no longer existed anywhere else?

"How could the gods not favor such a thing? Come, let's get you some tea. I noticed your voice sounded a little dry," the Clothed Woman calmly gestured for Renn to follow her out of the church and to the nearby house.

"Oh? Okay..." Renn glanced at me and I waved for her to go along with her. She actually gave me a happy smile as she nodded.

The two left the church, talking amongst themselves as they got to know one another. Renn sounding happy was... normal, to me. She always enjoyed meeting more people. Yet the Clothed Woman sounding actually happy was something to be noted.

She was never happy.

"For good reason," I said lightly as I stared around at the empty church.

It was a small one. With only a few pews and a tiny podium in front of them... The windows were plain, without color or designs. There were no statues, or motifs. Only the large strangely shaped cross that hung from the wall and ceiling, tied by iron chains.

The place was empty and always would be. Renn and I, other than maybe Brandy or another Society member, would be the only visitors here for some time. And not just because it was hidden away in a valley that most humans couldn't get to.

Yet it was clean and clear of all dust. The Clothed Woman was as devout as always.

Staring at the cross, I wondered if it was the last of its kind. I had thought earlier that if any other religious individual had seen it, they'd burn it... but did anyone really remember that symbol anymore?

There were some in the Society who would, of course... but did any human? Maybe in certain tomes or archives, hidden away from the general public... Odds were only certain bishops or cardinals knew that cross by sight alone. And even amongst them it would only be recognize by the ones who studied their history and archives. The odds of any of those books and scrolls even existing till now...

"A forgotten evil," I whispered.

Wait.

I had seen it recently.

I stopped listening to their conversation and delved into my memories. It had been recently too. Not long ago at all. But where?

Reaching out, I grabbed one of the nearby pew's backrests. Not for support, but out of instinct. I had seen it. How come I had forgotten it? What had happened?

Was it before or after I met Renn? Something told me she was the cause. Her, and everything around her, made me forget such an important detail.

Had it been upon a person? A motif? Surely not an actual cross on a building... I'd have definitely remembered that.

Or maybe it wasn't very important at all?

Maybe it had simply looked like it, and hadn't been.

"But then I'd not have noticed it," I said as I realized I had seen it.

I sighed and decided to let it come back to me when it would. Forcing it to would just force it deeper into my memories.

"Wish I had Renn's memory," I whispered as I went to leave the church.

Yet right as I left, I paused a moment as I realized something.

That was it. Renn had a memory unlike any other. If she had been around when I saw it then...

Focusing a little, I heard the two women outside. The Clothed Woman was showing Renn something. Maybe where she cut firewood, by the sounds of their conversation. They were about to head inside.

I'd ask her later. Away from the Clothed Woman.

Last thing I needed was for the poor girl to get her hopes up that there were others out there like her. Especially after it all this time, when she's finally accepted the harsh reality.

Exiting the church, I decided to walk around the property. I'd already seen most of it, this place was rather small. Just a small one story house and the church I had just been in. There was a little shack between the two, where wood was stored.

Behind the house was a small garden. Most of it looked freshly planted. And near the garden was a newer canopy, a small wooden structure that she was probably used to stay out of the rain as she did something outside.

I studied it for a moment, admiring the handiwork. The Clothed Woman had gotten help it seemed, but I couldn't tell who. Yet it wasn't hard to guess who it had been. The number of members who'd come here willingly were few and far in-between.

It was considered a safe-house for our Society... and did indeed act as one. The Clothed Woman would never turn aside anyone asking for help, for as long as they were a member of our Society.

Yet so few ever came here. Even when they needed to. Even when they had no where else to go.

Most of the area was surrounded by dense woods. A large mountain, the one Renn and I had just crossed, was visible above the tree tops to the west. It was close, and huge, but not so near that it starved this area of sunlight.

The forest this little sanctuary was located in was dense enough, and rocky enough, that humans found it nearly impossible to get here. There were too many large caverns and ravines, similar to the one beneath the bridge that Renn and I had accidentally broken. Between the dense forests, lack of paths, and the looming mountains nearby it was simply too out of the way for any human to reach.

And even if any humans did happen upon it...

Pausing in front of the only path-looking thing here, a dirt one which led towards the nearby small underground lake that fed this property's well, I wondered if she had buried any other humans out there recently.

Turning away from the dirt path, I wondered what Renn would think about it once she learned of it.

She didn't love the humans as much as I had thought, but it's become very clear that Renn did not hate them. Not as a whole at least.

Renn's entire purpose of joining the Society in the beginning had been because she was tired of burying the humans she had fallen in love with, after all. One couldn't do such a thing if they hated them as a whole.

Yet did Renn really hate anyone? She seemed happy to meet anyone. To speak with anyone.

Maybe the Clothed Woman would be the first non-human she'd come to despise.

Hopefully not. Especially since I wasn't sure yet if Renn could do what I did.

Could she protect and suffer for those she hated? Could she set aside disgust?

We'd find out.

"Vim!"

Turning, I found Renn waving me to the house. She had a small smile on her face as she did so, which told me everything was well. Odds are she and the Clothed Woman had made drinks or food and wanted to offer me some.

Glancing around the small property, I knew there was no point in really examining it further. It was the same as it had been for the last hundred years. That little canopy was new, but stuff like that came and went all the time. It wasn't worth noting.

Heading into the house, I noticed the smell of incense being burnt. It was a little strong, and I wondered how Renn was faring with it. She seemed to have the senses I did.

Thanks to how small the house was it was easy to find Renn and the Clothed Woman. They were in the open room near the kitchen, the two of them were sitting at a familiar table. One I made a few visits ago. There were a few cups on the table, and a pot of something in the center.

"Don't break this one," the Clothed Woman teased as I went to sit down next to her.

Renn stopped mid-drink of her small glass cup to flick an ear at me in interest.

"I accidentally broke her last table. What... three visits ago?" I asked.

"Four. It had been a beautiful table Renn. Polished stone, heavier than this whole house," the Clothed Woman said calmly.

"It had been heavy," I agreed. Took several trips to take it out of the house, if I remembered correctly.

"Why'd you break it?" Renn asked.

"Why ask that? Why not ask about the table I made her as an apology? Isn't it nice? I really like the edges," I said as I ran my hand along one of them.

It wasn't bumpy, and was smooth... but honestly it did feel a little thin.

Renn sighed as the Clothed Woman tapped her cup. One she had not drank from yet, nor would. "He threw someone into the table. I suppose I shouldn't give him too much grief over it... at least he hadn't thrown the table instead," the Clothed Woman said.

I nodded, glad she understood. Renn though stared at me with a rather... disappointed look. "You threw someone into it?"

"They deserved it," I said.

"They had. The poor table didn't, however," the Clothed Woman added.

I shrugged and reached for the Clothed Woman's cup. She slid it away from my reach and raised her chin at me.

"Fine," I said and reached for the pot and an empty cup.

"Did... did he just try to take your cup?" Renn asked as she glared at me. Her eyes dug into me as I poured myself what smelled like tea.

"He's just trying to be kind, in his own way," the Clothed Woman said gently as I took a drink.

Yep. Tea. Old stuff too, by the taste. It wasn't bad, actually.

"I'm always kind," I said.

The Clothed Woman chuckled in a way that told me exactly what her opinion on my statement was.

"How long have you two known one another?" the Clothed Woman then asked.

Renn paused mid-drink again. Failing the second time in a row to take a drink.

"A few months shy of a year, I guess," I said.

"How wondrous. She's been with you the whole time?" she continued her questions.

A pair of large ears flickered as Renn finally gathered herself enough to take a drink. She had an odd look on her face, one that seemed a little bothered.

Did this unholy woman's questions bother her? Interesting.

"Somewhat. There was about... well a month I guess, in the beginning when she wasn't officially traveling with me," I said as I thought about it. Did the few weeks Lomi and I had spent at the Sleepy Artist count? I felt they didn't. At that time she had been a resident of The Sleepy Artist. At least to me.

"Still can't find a place to stay? Have you taken her to the Cathedral yet?" the Clothed Woman asked worriedly.

Why... she actually sounded concerned. Over Renn.

Now, that, was interesting.

"We left there a few months ago. It was... a bit too much for me, I think. There were a lot of people," Renn said.

"Ah, a lot of humans. Yes. Too many, I think," the Clothed Woman said.

Renn's right ear twitched, in a way that told me she had probably figured it out. Maybe during their conversation earlier she had said something already.

"You think one is too many," I said, both to tease her back from the earlier table comment and also to make sure Renn really did understand.

"One would be fine. They can't re-populate if there's only one," the Clothed Woman said with a small nod.

"Technically they could, with one of us," I said.

The Clothed Woman shivered, causing an odd sound to fill the room. "Blasphemy," she whispered firmly.

I nodded and smiled softly as I took a small drink of my tea. As I did I made sure to study Renn.

She had a very sad expression on her face.

Yet that sadness was not hatred. Just disappointment.

"I do have news you'd probably enjoy, however," I said.

"Hm?" The woman I sat next to glanced at me, as if she could actually see.

"The Sleepy Artist is gone. I'm not entirely sure of the fates of the residents, but they're scattered for now at least. Missing," I said.

The Clothed Woman said nothing, nor moved... for a long moment. Renn stared at her with wide eyes, expectantly, and flinched when the Clothed Woman shivered and let loose a tiny sigh of relief.

"Sheldon's dead then? Thank the Gods," she said, releasing her cup as to cup her hands instead. She offered a quick prayer of thanks to her dead gods.

Renn's scared eyes turned to me. They held my gaze for a long moment as they slowly morphed into a genuine glare of discomfort.

"She and Sheldon had some history," I told Renn.

"And it's finally history indeed! How wondrous," the Clothed Woman said as she finished her prayer.

"He was a coward..." Renn whispered.

"A traitorous coward," the Clothed Woman nodded, agreeing.

Renn made a very tiny noise. A small groan, which luckily thanks to the Clothed Woman's jubilant happiness over the news hadn't noticed.

"Crane may be gone too, though," I said, deciding to change Renn's opinion of her quickly.

"Ah... that is true. A sacrifice I'd not have willingly made... I pray she had not suffered, and is now flying with her sisters and masters," the Clothed Woman said.

I nodded gently at Renn, who was now looking at me with a very worried and rather highly raised eyebrow.

She wasn't sure what to think.

"What a trove of destiny... and Lughes? Is he gone as well?" the Clothed Woman asked.

"Missing. They're not classified dead just yet," I said.

"All the same. I shall go pray for them. Shelldon I hope is being played with by my Lords, but they... they I shall beg the gods for mercy," the Clothed Woman slowly stood from the table, nodding at herself and us as she stepped away.

"Huh...?" Renn started to stand, but quickly realized what she meant. The Clothed Woman left the house, heading for the church.

"She's gone to pray," I told her.

"I see that..." Renn slowly sat back down, and while she did... her ears drooped lowly.

I reached for the pot of tea as to refill my cup. Yet right when I grabbed the little thing's handle, Renn grabbed it too... rather she grabbed my hand which held it. She squeezed my hand, to get my attention.

"What is it?" I asked her.

Renn glanced at the nearby door. The one that led to the hallway, and thus the exit of the house.

"The Clothed Woman is like us, Renn, but not like you and me. Her body is a fragment of its former self. She'll not hear us here," I told her.

Her hand twitched, and then so did her ears. They fluttered a little oddly as she released my hand and sat back into her own chair. "I... I don't know what to say," she whispered.

"Then don't say anything?" I said as I poured myself more tea.

"I can't. I need to, yet I'm scared of the answers," she said.

"Sounds like life," I said as I took a small drink.

Renn groaned quietly, and shifted in her seat. She looked bothered.

I lifted my cup to her. "Just ask Renn. Better to know than to dread the unknown," I said.

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"She hates humans," she said.

"Obviously."

"And most of our kind too. She hates the Chronicler. And Lilly," Renn said quietly.

Chronicler and Lilly?

"Let me guess... you heard she hated the Chronicler, so you brought up Lilly. Thinking if she hated one of them, she'd not hate the other?" I asked, trying to find out how she got there.

Renn nodded dejectedly.

"See? You assumed. The Clothed Woman hates most of our kind, Renn. She hates humans more than them, though. By the way, Sheldon really did betray her in the past. A very painful betrayal. One that would make even me upset," I said. Honestly it had.

The jaguar across from me shifted in her seat. A woman who for the last few days while we traveled, had seemed resolute and strong willed, now looked her apparent age. She looked young. Unsure of herself. Troubled.

"She... seems so kind, otherwise," Renn whispered.

"She is. To some," I said.

We sat in silence for a moment until Renn sighed again. She slumped forward, hanging her head over her cup of tea that she held tightly. Her hair dangled loosely, and I noticed a few strands had even fallen into her tea. She didn't care.

Reaching across the table I pulled her hair out of her cup. Renn's ears twitched as I did so, but she didn't lift her head or say anything.

"Part of being in our Society, Renn. You must learn to accept that not everyone is the same. Not everyone likes each other," I said.

"I know," she whispered.

"Get to know her better before you judge her," I added.

"I know," she nodded. Her hair almost went back into her cup.

Studying her, I remembered the question I wanted to ask her. About the cross... yet decided to let it be for now.

She had her own worries right now. Her own concerns to dwell upon.

I'd let her worry about something else later.

Drinking my tea slowly, I studied the woman sitting across from me. She looked defeated, sitting there with her head hung low. Yet...

Smiling softly at her as she sat back up and nodded. She quickly drowned the tea remaining in her cup and stood from her seat.

"I'm going to see if she'll let me pray alongside her," Renn said.

"To her gods?" I asked.

"To whoever is listening," she said as she left the room.

Watching her go, I lifted my cup in support.

Good luck.

Chapter 116: The Clothed Woman

The Clothed Woman was... different.

And not just in appearance.

There was a strange smell around her. I wasn't able to place it, but regrettably a part of me... was disgusted by it. It made me feel horrible to think such a thing, to be repulsed by her scent... but it was the truth.

Her stink wasn't because of an odor, however. It was something else. Something I couldn't understand. She didn't smell as if she was dirty, or unwashed. Nor did she stink because of... whatever she wore, or was wearing beneath her white robes.

Something told me it was more innate. Something that most others probably didn't even smell, or couldn't smell. It was so subtle sometimes, that I even wondered if Vim smelled it.

Was it because of what she was? Or was it something else? Something she did, or ate?

"Sometimes I sew clothing... I give it to Brandy when she visits," the Clothed Woman said as she quickly moved her needle.

I nodded as I watched her patch white cloth. The same color as the robes she wore. It almost seemed like it was another set, but it wasn't big enough. Maybe it was a part of her dress? The robes she wore all looked sewn together, but that didn't mean they really were or always were.

Sitting across from her, we sat in the open living room together. We had pulled the chairs away from the table and were sitting near the corner of the room. She was sewing, and I was just sitting and talking to her.

"I enjoy crafting as well," I said. I wasn't sure if I should tell her I had spent time at the smithy. Not because I wanted to hide it... but I worried she'd stop treating me kindly if she learned.

There was a good chance she didn't like Nebl, or his family. Based off the odd woman's penchant for hating our own kind.

"Most of our kind do. We get too old to not become restless," she said.

I nodded and agreed with that.

"Do you plan to make a home in Lumen?" she asked.

"No. Vim wants me to meet Brandy, as to learn from her," I said.

"Learn...?" Her sewing didn't stop but she did look at me. Or at least, it seemed like she did. Her head turned, and by all accounts one would think she was staring... yet somehow, for some reason... I felt as if she wasn't.

I shrugged, and felt bad when I did. If my instincts were right and she really wasn't looking at me, it was rude not to speak my thoughts aloud. "I'm not sure. He just wants me to spend some time with her, I think," I said.

"Ah... maybe there's something you must learn from her. Vim is odd in his ways, but as strange as his methods are they're still productive," she said.

Her words seemed rude, but I could hear her genuine tone when she spoke of Vim.

She liked him. Maybe not the way a woman liked a man... but rather a person. She relaxed when he was nearby, and it was noticeable enough that even I could see it without being able to see her finer features.

But her feeling safe and comfortable around the protector was something most did.

"Is Lumen as big as it looks? I saw it from that massive bridge in the mountains. It looked... as big as Telmik," I said.

"Bigger, actually. It runs along the coastline, for the boats, and then runs up the mountain. It also goes into the mountain too, although I've been told they no longer are digging into it anymore," the Clothed Woman said.

"Bigger?" I asked.

She nodded, her sewing pausing just a moment as she rearranged some of the cloth. She wanted to sew another side tighter.

How did she see? I know I felt as if she didn't, yet it was obvious she could.

From what I could tell there was another, even thicker, layered of cloth below the face cloths that hung from her head covering hat. They were white, so probably to a degree see-through... yet they weren't. I couldn't see past the first layer, let alone any beneath it.

"Lumen is an eventual city-state, Brandy says. It's becoming rather powerful," she said.

"City state..."

"It will eventually declare independence. I'm not sure if Brandy has anything to do with it or not, but she's confident it will happen," the Clothed Woman said.

She spoke kindly of Brandy, as well. How strange.

She seemed so... gentle. So pious. So well mannered.

Yet there was deep hatred in her heart. For a lot of things.

"Human politics," I said. It was interesting to learn of them, but I honestly didn't care much for them either.

The Clothed Woman nodded. "Worthless thing, it is," she said.

Smiling softly at her matter of fact hatred, I wondered how many were like her. There were more than I thought based off Vim's comments... but how many truly? What percentage of our kind was like her?

"How long have you been here?" I asked her. I didn't like how she didn't have a name... Vim called her the clothed woman, but it felt so wrong to address her as such. That was her appearance, not her name.

"One hundred and thirty eight years," she answered.

I had a feeling she could tell me the days and moments too, if I asked.

"And yes, I stay here alone. There used to be more of us, but they're gone now," she added before I could ask another question.

"Ah... I'm sorry," I said softly. I had wondered, but I had not planned to ask about that.

The Clothed Woman shifted her shoulders in a way that told me she was smiling. "It is fine. I used to weep over it, but I've come to accept it. Eventually all things end, so it is only natural," she said. She spoke with a very calm and even natured tone that I was almost tricked.

She wasn't over it at all.

"The longest I ever stayed at one place was about half that time. I had lived with a witch, in the north," I told her.

Her sewing slowed a moment, and she tilted her head. "A witch?" she asked.

I nodded. "An old human. She had wanted to kill me, yet didn't know how. She taught me a lot," I told her.

Her sewing stopped. "And?" she asked.

"I ended up killing her," I told her.

The Clothed Woman's hands tightened a little, and I worried she'd prick herself with the needle. Yet she didn't. "I see. I'm glad you survived such an encounter. Had she imprisoned you?" she asked.

Imprisoned...? Oh...

My mind whirled as I realized I had told her a tad too much. I had felt comfortable revealing it, since she seemed to hate humans. I figured she would have heard me slaying the witch and just accept it. Taking it for granted, even.

"No... she was just odd. I stayed with her as to learn what I could, for as long as I could," I said.

"Wisdom. I wish more were like you. Yet most of our kind would not have had the strength, internally and not, to do such a thing safely," she seemed to accept my statement easily with a nod.

"So I've learned. I... honestly only recently learned of the Society," I said. I made sure to omit that it had been those at the Sleepy Artist who had introduced me to it.

Though... maybe she wouldn't get upset over it. She had hated Sheldon enough to actually get happy over learning of the Sleepy Artist's destruction.

No.

She would.

Especially since the entire reason I had been banished was because I had chosen Amber over them.

A human over our own kind.

"Then know most of us are as weak as the humans we flee from. I can see and hear your strength, Renn. You walk like Vim," the Clothed woman said.

"Huh? I do?" I asked as I looked down at my feet. I walked heavily like he did?

"Steadily. Confidently. It is a rare trait, especially today. Even in the past, when more like you walked this realm... such a confident woman was rare. I can see why he favors you," she said.

For a few moments my mind whirled as I processed all the information. She was old, then. If she remembered a time when there were lots of us. And I walked confidently? Steadily? I knew better than to take those words at face value. She, being the kind of person she was... spoke solidly but also with a lot of thought. She was comparing me to Vim, after all.

She must mean I walked boldly. As if unafraid of anything I'd find along my path.

Which was funny, since I always felt the exact opposite.

Yet as interesting all that was...

"He favors me?" I asked, deciding to further pursue that topic.

The Clothed Woman giggled as she finished sewing. She lifted it a little, and tugged at the sides. The seam she had just sewn didn't flinch.

"Vim favors us all. Yet some more than others. It's been a long time since I've heard him readily tease and joke with another so blatantly," she said.

Tease and joke...

"He does like his silly jokes," I said. They were rarely funny, but they usually came from him when he was smiling and amused.

"The day those silly gags end are the day we all perish, I think," she said lightly.

I wasn't sure what to say to that as I watched her stand. She stepped aside and to a nearby desk, where several small boxes laid. One of them was the source of her needle, which she returned it to. It was one of hundreds it seemed. The little box looked rather scary with the hundred of needle heads poking upward.

About to say something, I realized I was about to call her the Clothed Woman. And...

"Can I ask something personal?" I asked her cautiously.

"Sure... though I may not answer," she said as she turned to look at me.

"What's your name?" I asked.

The Clothed Woman slowly shut the needle box, and then chuckled. "I see. I was wondering what was bothering you. You are far gentler than I had thought," she said.

I shifted on my seat as she tapped the top of her needle box with a gloved finger. Why did so many people call me gentle?

"The Clothed Woman just seems... insulting. But..." I felt a little silly as I told her the truth.

"How interesting. Did you know there's actually quite a few of us who don't even understand the concept of names?" she asked as she turned to face me.

"The concept?" I asked.

She nodded and crossed her arms. Suddenly she looked more human than ever, as she leaned back against the desk for support. "A lot of our older siblings don't even understand it. They can't comprehend what a name is, what it means. Then there are those like you, who feel uncomfortable when we don't have a name," she said.

The way she spoke... and what she was speaking of, made me feel unnecessarily small. As if I was a young child.

She knew what names were. She used them. Yet she spoke as if she was just like the ones she spoke of, incapable of understanding them.

"You don't have a name?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "I do not."

"Why not just pick one?" I asked.

"Ah, so you aren't entirely without our mindset, then. Glad to hear it," she chuckled at me.

Without their mindset? She meant the mindset of our ancestors, didn't she?

I tried to think of my own ancestors. The ones my grandparents had told me about.

Most had names still. Even the ones who had been nothing but giant animals, without human reason or morality.

Did that mean she was even older than them? Was she not hundreds of years old but thousands?

And why would picking a name make her say such a thing about me? Was there something weird about just... choosing a name, if one didn't possess one already?

"But honestly, it's not that I don't understand it. I simply... don't have anyone left who I wish to give a name to anymore. Other than Vim, no one from that era is alive anymore. So there's no point," she said calmly.

I shivered, to such a degree the tremble actually reached my tail and ran down it. It felt weird, and made me suddenly rather aware of the cold. "Then what about Vim? Or does he know it, yet doesn't share it?" I asked.

"Vim doesn't know it. I like him, but not so much that I'd let him give me a name," she said.

Give a name.

She didn't choose a name herself... she had those she cherished and loved pick a name for her. Maybe that was normal back in that era.

"The protector is... unique. He hates my enemies, and even hates most of who he protects... but he also hates my gods. So I can like him, and can live amongst him, but I cannot love him. I cannot cherish him," she told me.

Hates her gods... "Doesn't he hate all gods though?" I asked.

The Clothed Woman tilted her head, and then giggled lowly. "Oh yes. He does," she said.

"Then..."

"You must not have devoted yourself to any supreme being just yet. When, or if you ever do, you'll come to understand," she said.

I nodded slowly, since I wasn't sure if I ever could.

How could you judge someone in such a way? Judging them for their actions, or morals even, was at least understandable... but their faiths? As far as I was aware there were many versions, and they all were rather similar in the end. Why would you let such minor variances change one's opinion?

"I suppose I'll have to see, if that day comes," I decided to say.

"And it will. We live too long for such things to not inevitably come sooner or later. Look at Vim, that man had resisted the Society for years yet now he's the only reason it still exists," the Clothed Woman said.

Wait what?

"Resisted?" I asked.

The Clothed Woman nodded. "Rather fiercely too. I miss that Vim. My Lords liked him back then," she said.

I gulped at the new information, but before I could process it someone knocked on the door.

Turning quickly, I felt my ears stiffen for only a moment... until I realized it was just Vim. "Renn, come give me a hand," Vim called for me out of the house.

The Clothed Woman gestured for me to oblige, so I nodded and stood from my chair. I allowed my mind to compartmentalize the new information she had just shocked me with, and quickly tried to think of all the questions I was going to want to ask later.

Stepping out of the house I found Vim walking around the edge of the building, headed behind it towards the farms.

Following him quickly, I found he had set up a small station beneath the large awning that covered a few tables and chairs. A place to work, even when it rained.

Vim had caught something. The pile of meat on the table looked a deep red color, telling me it was some kind of deer.

There was a large copper bowl on another table nearby. I could smell the salt in it.

As I walked up next to him and the table of meat, Vim tapped the table with a fingertip as he pondered something. "I'll cut them, you hook them into that little lean-to next to the house, I already prepared the hooks," Vim said with a gesture to the house. There was a little section on the back of the house that extruded, yet wasn't accessible from the inside. I had thought it had been just a storage room, but it seemed it was for drying meat.

Studying the pile of meat, I realized he had already trimmed the meat of fats. They just needed to be sliced into appropriate chunks and salted.

"Making jerky?" I asked.

"Something like that," Vim said.

"Will we be here long enough? You said only a couple nights right?" I asked as I went to stand next to him as he hefted his knife, as to begin cutting the meat slices into smaller pieces.

"They're not for us," he said simply.

Oh. Then it was for her.

Smiling softly as I went to work alongside Vim, I wondered why I was surprised.

After all he always did this. He always did something, no matter how small, for those we visited. Whether it be fixing something, or helping them out around the house. Or like Nebl, whose life he had literally saved.

Though...

Glancing at Vim as he cut the meat, I wondered why he had asked for my assistance. He usually didn't.

Something like this Vim would normally do alone, without a word. Without most of us even realizing he was doing it half the time.

Taking a piece of freshly cleaned meat from Vim, I took it over to the salt bowl and laid it on top. I repeated this process until there wasn't enough room for any others, and flipped them so the salt could cover their entire area. After a few moments I took the bowl to the little extrusion on the building. Sure enough there were three rows of metal bars hanging inside. There were dozens of hooks of varying sizes. A few even had meat already hanging on them, but not something fresh. Vim hadn't put them there; they had been hanging for days if not weeks already.

Putting the cuts of meats onto the hooks, I hurried back to repeat the process.

"How's she treating you?" Vim asked as I laid meat into the salt.

"Huh? Oh... very well. She's... odd, but no odder than most us. I feel like I could learn a lot from her," I said honestly.

"Don't learn too much," he said softly.

As he handed me another slice of meat, I hesitated as I stared at him. Had that been a genuine warning? It hadn't sounded like his typical teasing at all.

"She's old, isn't she?" I asked.

"One of the oldest left, yes," Vim said with a nod.

"I've noticed you aren't telling anyone what I'm doing," I said.

"And what are you doing?" he asked.

"Well..." I glanced at the house, and wondered if she could hear me. Vim had said she couldn't hear like we could... but the house was so close. It wasn't that big either, and she was so quiet when alone. She barely made a sound.

"You do as you will, Renn. It's my job to both allow it and to support it. Don't be ashamed of what you are," he said.

"I... I wasn't saying I was ashamed, I just worry she'll not like me if I told her certain things," I said.

"That's her problem," Vim said with a shrug.

"I don't want people to dislike me, Vim," I said. I wasn't like him, who didn't care if people hated him or not.

"Then don't let them? Go hang those up," Vim nodded to my bowl. It was full.

I grumbled as I hurried, I had a lot I wanted to say to him.

As I hung the meat, I noticed the meat that had been hanging in here originally.

It was... a little oddly colored. Was it rancid? It didn't smell or look it, but it did look weird. That wasn't lean meat. Something heavier. Maybe it was some kind of bear or large animal I'd never seen before.

Going back to the table, I put the bowl down with a small thunk. Vim glanced at me as I huffed and held my hand out for the next slice. He handed it to me gently.

"She doesn't have a name," I said.

"She used to. She abandoned it. Her gods demand the sacrifice of that, and other things, upon becoming their follower. It's a primitive religion, that luckily the humans abandoned," Vim said.

Sacrifice? I thought of the stories the witch had told me. Of pagan rituals and gods. Ones that the church hadn't even known about.

It had been why she had wanted me, after all. To use me in one of those rituals.

"Feels wrong to call her what we do," I said gently.

"Only to you. Crane was crane, because she cared not for a name. There was a member near where we met, a man named Elk. He's an elk. He too doesn't care for a name. There's a lot more like that then you think," Vim said.

"Then why not at least give her a more normal sounding name? The Clothed Woman seems so..." I shrugged as I filled the bowl once more. I needed to go hang them again.

"Other than that, I do have a question," Vim though stopped me before I could step away.

I gulped as I nodded. Usually he'd wait till I got back. "Yes?"

"Do your recognize the cross in her church?" he asked.

Blinking I glanced at the brown church. It was a little rickety and old, but well built... and the cross inside...

Yes. It had been different. It had two sections, unlike the normal one I was used to seeing. Plus the cross had a weird bend to it, as if it was trying to wrap around its self...

Vim patiently waited for my answer, and I remembered he had wanted to know if I recognized it.

Had I? Why was he asking this?

Wait no. Answer his question first before thinking of anything else... Especially since he was staring at me so seriously. His eyes were actually very focused on me, as if my answer was going to be important to him. Why'd he look so desperate sometimes? I didn't like it when he looked like that and...

"Oh." I remembered. Thanks to the look on his face. He had that same expression when he had been staring at that painting. The same worry.

"You do," he said, and I didn't like how unhappy he sounded over my doing so.

I nodded carefully. "I do. I've seen it in a painting. One that had been hanging up at the Sleepy Artist. In the lobby," I said. How come I hadn't remembered right away? I had stared at that painting, alongside all the rest, for months.

"A painting...?" Vim frowned at me.

"Definitely. You even stared at it once. I remember thinking it was odd. You had looked at it very... seriously, yet it had been normal. A normal village scene. It hadn't even been one of our paintings, of our people. It was on the second shelf, near the window," I reminded him.

Vim lowered the knife he held to the table, and I noticed he was squeezing the handle a little hard. It was protesting, and trembling in his grip. If it broke... would it cut him? Or cut me? "A painting..." he whispered.

"I could repaint it if you wanted," I said.

The knife broke.

I startled, and had to quickly grab hold of the bowl of salt and meat I had knocked over in my shock. It rolled a bit, and I nearly dropped it... but another hand grabbed hold of the bowl's upper lip as I did.

Vim held it firm, and sighed as I quickly put the bowl back into the center of the table. Once it was safe from further danger, I glanced at the man who had just startled me.

"What was that for?" I asked him.

"Sorry. I uh... Are you okay? It flung near you..." Vim looked me up and down, but there was no need to worry. The knife blade was sticking out of the grass nearby, a few feet to our right. I pointed at it for him.

He sighed as he bent down to grab it. "How's your hand?" I asked.

"Well, there goes one of my knives," Vim said with a sigh.

"That wasn't one of yours," I said. It wasn't the same silver color as the ones he had made for our journey.

"No. This was hers. But now I need to leave her mine, since I broke this one," he said, lifting the broken blade and its handle to show me.

"Oh." I nodded. That was true. In a way.

Vim gestured with his head. "Go hang those meats real quick. Let's finish," he said with a defeated tone.

"Sure..." I picked the bowl up and went to hang the meat, feeling a little weird.

As I hung the meat, I glanced around the lean-to's doorframe to stare at Vim. He was standing in front of the meat, staring at what little was left with a strange expression.

He was upset.

But more than that... he was worried. Bothered.

My comment had disturbed him... but why?

Was it that I had remembered the cross? That the cross had been in a painting?

That I offered to paint it for him again? Surely not...

As I finished hanging the meat, I groaned as I realized too much was happening too fast. The Clothed Woman had said stuff that made me far too inquisitive... and now this.

Being so curious wasn't good for me. It always got me in trouble.

Finishing up, I noticed how uncharacteristically quiet Vim was as we finished. He didn't say a word as we finished preparing the meat for drying... and cleaned up the mess we had made.

And that silence lingered even as the night drew closer, and made my curiosity turn to worry.

Worry not just for myself... but whoever or whatever had made Vim act so oddly.

It took a lot for that man to become so unsettled. So whatever it had been...

Surely it hadn't been good.

Hopefully it hadn't been me.

I wanted to make that man smile, not upset.

Or at least... I didn't want him to hate me as he did so many others.

Others were willing and able to live like that. Willing to live with those they hated, or disliked... but not me.

I didn't want to hate Vim, and I didn't want him hating me.

Honestly I didn't want Vim hating anyone. Yet...

After finishing I headed back into the house, to return to The Clothed Woman. Especially since Vim silently left me behind, returning to the forest. Maybe to go catch another deer, or maybe to pick up meat he had left behind.

As Vim left the area, disappearing into the forest... I glanced at the nearby church. I couldn't see within it since it didn't have the typical huge windows that most usually had... but I knew within was that big cross. The oddly shaped one, hanging from the ceiling and wall.

He hated that. I could tell that clearly.

I wasn't sure why... but I'd need to find out.

Both to see if I should hate it too, but also so I never became whatever it represented. So that his hate would never be directed towards me.

Hopefully the Clothed Woman would understand... but if she didn't...

Well...

That was just a price I was willing to pay, for his affection.

Chapter 117: To Bet On Her Promise

Hammering the nail, I made sure it was centered before readying the next board. Lining it up, I slid the board into place and readied another nail upon it. I hammered the last board into place easily enough, and leaned back to make sure it was all well.

Stepping back, I nodded at the new fence. The dark red wood looked a little too colorful for just a common fence, but it was what Brandy had left for The Clothed Woman to use.

Running my hand along the top of the nearest wood post, I wondered where this wood came from. It was something found far east, not near here... yet had been cut here. The eastern regions cut their wooden panels much thinner than they did here. Thanks to their climate, and the way they built their buildings.

Cupping the top board of the fence, the one I had just nailed into place, I studied the thickness of it.

Yes. Cut here. That meant they had either been cut to order, or the raw lumber had been shipped here and processed here.

What had Brandy gotten herself into? I had thought she had agreed to not expand beyond the near borders yet.

"No matter," I said as I stepped away from the fence. I spun the hammer in my hand around as I walked along the fence and looked for any gaps or mistakes.

There wasn't, of course. Yet it kept me busy to look and check. I walked along the fence, circling the large patch of melons that I had fenced in.

The fence wouldn't stop animals of course. It was only a basic fence with three levels of boards... but The Clothed Woman didn't need to worry about animals. No base creatures would intrude in this area. Not even birds.

Yet sometimes one needed to make their home presentable, even if no one but the person who lived here ever saw it.

Plus it let me feel good for visiting. It let me pretend I actually did something productive.

Wasn't much I could do for the one who lived here, after all. Especially since the stuff she actually wanted from me was... not feasible. Or well, not something I could or would willingly do.

A laugh filtered out of the house. Probably from one of the open windows. The weather was nice, and the world warm. And I knew that Renn had likely opened the windows because of the odd smell within the house.

Not that a little wind or draft could clear out that smell.

Renn's laugh died down, as I tapped the hammer against my thigh.

"She's another issue," I said to myself as I finally reached the same spot in the fence where I had started. I had rounded the whole enclosure, and found no issues with it. I'd have made a small gate for her too, but I knew she'd only break it down. The Clothed Woman didn't like doors or gates. It was a miracle she allowed one for her house's front door... although I doubted it was ever really closed when she were alone.

No matter.

We could leave tomorrow now and I won't feel too bad about it.

Some food. A new fence and I had cleaned up around the property a little. A tree had fallen to the north, and had begun rotting. I moved it far enough away that it'd not bother the other trees or give access to any kind of weird bugs. This region had a termite problem during the summer.

For the Clothed Woman that was enough. Or... well honestly, it was enough for me.

She didn't care if I did these things, after all.

She didn't care for anything anymore.

I sighed and hoped that Renn wouldn't end up like her. So many did for one reason or another...

Maybe that was why I had been so upset that she had remembered the painting. A part of me was angry at myself, for not remembering it... but honestly that didn't matter.

Renn remembered it. Which meant she'd notice such things. Which meant she'd get involved, more and more.

Her staying with me was risky... she was too smart for her own good.

"She'd break or get corrupted," I whispered at myself. I needed to find a way to convince her to leave me. To pick someone, or somewhere else.

My biggest hope right now was Brandy.

She traveled. She went from town to town, somewhat like myself. She made deals and negotiated not just with our own people, but the humans. She was involved in politics, markets... She even dealt with the church on occasion.

Renn seemed to need something to focus on. She needed activity. And purpose.

Brandy could give her that. And Renn would be good at it. She'd make a wonderful merchant, and an even better Society member. Renn would not hesitate to travel between locations, picking up goods or dropping them off.

"Are you going to attack the fence?"

I blinked, and turned to see Renn. She was giving me a really odd smile, and her ears were straight up... as if alert and ready.

Glancing down, at what she had spoken about... I realized I had laid the hammer onto the fence in the way I would right before swinging it. I looked as if I was lining up a strike.

"Hm," I lifted the hammer off the fence and looked around. The Clothed Woman wasn't nearby.

"She's praying," Renn said gently.

Ah... yes. It was that time. About noon.

"Four times a day," I said with a nod.

Renn nodded softly. "She stops anything she's doing to go pray. It's a little odd, but I guess that's how she is," she said.

Ah... they must have been doing something. Odds were they had been laughing together over something, and the Clothed Woman had actually stopped laughing entirely and turned to walk out, causing Renn to feel awkward.

"You feeling up for leaving tomorrow?" I asked her.

"Do I get to choose if we do or not?" she asked back.

"Well... I'd consider your opinion, at least," I said honestly.

Renn smiled, and stepped closer. I noticed the odd way her tail twitched as she stepped up to the fence I had just made. She ran her hand along the middle fence board. Seemed that was the one most comfortable for her to touch, thanks to her height. I glanced at the spot I had rested the hammer on. The top board. It had been the most comfortable for me to touch... was I really that much taller than her? It didn't seem like it.

Her ears really made her seem taller than she actually were.

"So uh... I want to apologize," Renn then said.

"What'd you do this time?" I asked.

Renn's fingers clenched onto the wooden board, and her ears flickered... yet she didn't look at me. She found a nearby melon, a watermelon, more interesting all of a sudden. "Well, for yesterday," she said.

What'd she do yesterday? I had caught a couple deer... she had helped me prepare their meat for drying... I asked about the painting, and then afterward I went to check on the small lake nearby. By the time I had gotten back Renn and the Clothed Woman had been in bed. Though that was undoubtedly because of the Clothed Woman. Renn never stayed up too late, but that had been early even for her.

"The painting, Vim," Renn reminded me, speaking with a hushed tone.

"Ah? What'd you do wrong with that?" I asked.

"You had seemed upset..." she said.

"Oh..." I realized what happened. I had been bothered, yes... but not really because of her. It was upsetting that she remembered it, but I didn't fault her for doing so. It just meant I needed to be careful with what I said and did around her. She wasn't the first to have such superb memory. Rather I had been upset not because of her... but the circumstances themselves.

"Did I misunderstand?" she asked, most likely noticing the truth on my face.

I nodded. "It seems so. I had... indeed been bothered, Renn. But not because of you. In all honesty I was surprised once again at your impeccable memory, but what had disturbed me wasn't that you had remembered it but that I had. Or well, that I had not taken more notice of it," I explained.

"Was that painting important?" she asked.

"Yes. Or well, not the painting itself but the purpose behind it. You said you could paint it from memory?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Maybe not as well, of course, but I could."

"Would you do so for me? I'll get the materials for you in Lumen," I said.

"Sure!" she nodded quickly, and her eyes seemed to light up a little at the request. Maybe she liked to paint?

"Thanks," I said, and meant it.

Renn giggled as she gave me a huge smile, and actually started to sway on her feet. She held onto the fence as she rocked back and forth... and seemed far too happy. Her tail was even swaying wildly.

The sight of her being so... happy, made me feel a little uncomfortable. I was glad she was happy, of course... but...

She wasn't just happy she was getting to paint, was she?

Was it because she had thought I had been upset with her, and now was happy to know I hadn't been? Or was it something else? Was she just happy that I had asked her a favor?

"You're an odd one, Renn," I said.

Her happy swaying slowed, but didn't stop. "Says you?" she said with a happy tone.

"Hm... that's true," I nodded and stepped forward, to lean on the fence I had just made. It supported my weight easily.

Renn leaned forward too, to join me up against the fence... though once again our difference in height became a little more apparent. While I could rest on the top of the fence comfortably, she had to raise her arms a little to do so. It made her look uncomfortable.

"We haven't been training lately, you know," Renn then said.

"Hm... can't do that here," I said.

"Oh?" Renn's happy smile died a little more. She glanced at the church, but of course nothing had changed. The Clothed Woman was still in there, praying. And would be for some time.

"She'd probably try to convert you if we did," I said with a nod.

Renn looked back at me, blinked a few times, and then scoffed a laugh. "You said that so drearily!" she laughed at me.

"Drearily?" I asked.

She contained her laughter with happy little giggles and nodded. She leaned closer to me, bumping into my arm. "I wouldn't be able to wear such clothing, so you don't need to worry. Hiding my tail and ears are a pain enough as it is!" she whispered, a little loudly.

It was my turn to smile, and I found myself taking a somewhat deep breath... as if in relief. "I see," was all I was able to say.

Renn happily nodded. "Plus I don't mind praying, but four times a day? What if we were doing something interesting? I'd have to put a hold to it and go pray! That'd probably get annoying very fast," she said.

"That's true. Wouldn't want you to miss out on the interesting stuff," I said.

She nodded seriously, as if she could imagine all those supposed important things she could potentially miss out on.

"Plus then I'd not be able to stay with you, and that would be horrible," Renn said.

Rubbing my thumb against the wooden fence, I stared at the woman who sighed and rested her head onto her folded arms. She suddenly looked tired... as if all that laughing and giggling had worn her out.

Studying her expression, I realized how serious she was being. She had been laughing earlier, making lighthearted jokes... but that comment just now had been genuine. From the heart. From her soul.

It made her seem beautiful.

And it made me want to trust her. Even though I knew I shouldn't.

Looking away from her, I picked a random half grown melon to focus on. The oddly shaped white colored thing was barely able to hold my attention. In fact it couldn't... but I kept it in my sight all the same.

"The cross, Renn, is a symbol of an old evil. One that no longer exists," I said.

Renn's tail thumped me in the back of my thigh, but the way she shifted told me she had not done it on purpose. "Evil?" she asked quietly.

I nodded, staying focused on the melon and not her. I didn't want to see her expression right now. I couldn't afford to.

"A very... real evil. Most of the Society despises that cross. Half of our kind killed during the era where that cross ruled, had died by that cross. Most chained to it, in fact," I said. I remembered those fires well.

Renn didn't say anything, but she did stand up. She gripped the fence as she stood up straight... and I felt her gaze as she stared at me.

"The Clothed Woman is one of the few left who still worships them. She's not evil, Renn... in her own way... but religion... her gods, they are. So the painting is important. I need to find out who painted it. And why they had. And who had seen it, if possible," I told her.

"Amber painted it, Vim," Renn whispered.

The white melon lost all value as I quickly looked at the worried woman next to me.

"What?" I asked.

"Amber did. I asked who painted it after seeing you stare at it, since I wondered why it was special. Since it hadn't looked special at all. Amber said she painted it a few years ago. She saw it in a dream I guess," Renn said with a shrug.

A dream.

A prophecy.

I groaned as I leaned back against the fence. I closed my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose... suddenly exhausted. "Her mother had been a saint," I said.

Renn didn't say anything as I processed this information. Of course she had painted it. In a way... that was good. It meant no one from that cult had painted it. It meant no one from the cult had commissioned it.

Yet at the same time it meant Amber had seen something.

"Vim...?" Renn asked worriedly, and I knew I needed to explain it to her. At least enough to make sure she'd not worry and fret.

"It's okay. I'm actually... a little relieved it had been Amber. I had worried someone from that religious order had painted it, or commissioned it. But learning that Amber had done it from a dream, although worrying, isn't as pressing as the other possibilities," I told her.

"How's it worrying, Vim? If she had drawn it from a dream? What harm could that bring?" she asked.

"Her mother had been a Saint, Renn," I told her.

She nodded. "I remember that."

"That means Amber shared the blood of a saint. Someone blessed by their god. Although no real saints exist anymore, and haven't for a long time... there's still a tiny sliver of power within them. Her painting

it from a dream means she either saw what has happened or what will, in the future. Meaning what she had painted had either been a village in the past, or one to be built in the future. It's worrisome because if it was the future, it means that cross will emerge again, corrupting those who kneel before it. I had hoped that cult would have been forgotten like so many other things," I said.

Renn gulped, staring at me oddly. Had I frightened her? I hadn't meant to. In fact the entire reason I had told her so much was to do the opposite...

"You scare me sometimes, Vim," she then whispered.

I was glad I was staring at the fence, for I was able to stop myself from squeezing the wood board too tightly. I released it before it cracked in my grip. "I don't mean to," I told her.

She nodded. "I can tell. Did you almost break the fence?" she asked, looking at my hand.

"Almost," I said honestly.

She smiled softly... and looked a little too gentle. What was she, my mother? Why was she looking at me like that?

"Is that religion that bad?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Is she?" she asked.

"No. Not anymore," I said honestly.

She gulped and blinked. She hadn't wanted that answer.

"That's why you scare me Vim. You so easily make me question myself and the world," she said.

"The world I get, but no need to question yourself Renn," I said. Especially since I liked the way she was. I didn't want her to change.

"Should I still paint it?" she asked.

"Yes. Especially now. Maybe if I look at it again, knowing what I do, I can validate the truth. Maybe I can even figure out where or when that village existed, to also make sure it had just been a dream of the past," I said.

"Okay. I'll do my best, I promise," she said gently.

I nodded, thanking her.

She nodded back, seemingly happy again. Her eyes still held worry. Her tail was still hung low... but she seemed relieved. A little calmer. A little more sure of herself.

Yes... I'd hold her to that promise.

Amongst others.

"Careful Renn," I warned her.

"Hm?"

"Don't let me rely on you too much. That usually turns out bad," I said.

Renn held my gaze for a moment, and then smiled. "Well, can't be that bad. Even if you seem to hate doing so," she said.

"It does make me feel sick," I admitted.

Renn laughed at me. "I bet it does!"

Smiling at her, I found myself unable to tell her the truth. After all... it didn't feel bad to trust her at all.

Which was why it was so dangerous.

Which was why I shouldn't do it.

Yet... I was still going to bet on her all the same.

"She's done praying... go spend time with her, since we're leaving in the morning," I told her.

Renn's ears danced as she turned around, and saw the Clothed Woman leaving the church. Renn's ears actually drooped a little... and she then glanced at me. She looked hesitant, but decided on something with a nod of her head. "You're right," she finally said, and then turned away.

Watching her go, hurrying to the Clothed Woman... I hoped I hadn't made a mistake.

Trusting her with that painting wasn't too bad... but it wasn't just the beginning, it was also the end.

Once one made an enemy out of certain beings...

Looking at the church, and the two small women before it... I dared the old gods that used to live there to try it. To try and hurt them. To try and kill those I loved and cared for. To try and burn alive those I protected.

To try and demand sacrifices again, of both others and their own skin.

"Try it. I'll just kill you again."

Chapter 118: Lumen's Gates

This was new.

Standing next to Vim, I stared ahead at the line of people before us. Most were men, and most looked far more tired than I felt... which was saying something, since I really was tired of standing in line. Yet as tired as they looked, most were in deep idle chatter with one another. Either about the world, the city, or some kind of business talk.

"Why are we not just going in like those people?" I asked Vim as I pointed at a pair of people riding a horse. The man looked rather well-dressed, and the woman holding onto him from behind was covered in a dull looking cloak. She looked as if she was trying to hide her face.

"We don't have permits. Nor are we residents. We're almost thru Renn, just a little more," Vim said calmly. He was growing a little too used to me. If I had complained and whined in such a way during the beginning of our journey, he'd have glared at me... Now he just glanced at me with a soft smile when I voiced such annoyances.

"Just be lucky you aint' a merchant girl. Twice the tax it is," a man in front of me said with a sigh.

Smiling at him, I wondered what kind of merchant he was. "They tax you even without goods?" I asked.

"They'd tax thrice if they could!" another man behind us said. His yell got some laughs from the line, and I realized that most of the people in line were in fact merchants.

Merchants yet without goods...

"Their goods are likely waiting at the port of entry, Renn. Remember that road full of carts and wagons?" Vim said.

Ah. He was right. When Vim and I had left the forest, I had indeed seen a road full of large wagons. The massive style ones, which I had seen on that bridge before.

"Aye. Lumen does not allow us to ride our own carts into town. Tis' a lawless place," the man in front of me complained, confirming Vim's words. The man turned around to look at me as he spoke, and actually froze in place for a moment.

I stared at the oddly shocked expression on the man's face, and then he coughed and returned to looking forward... this time doing so while standing up much straighter.

Vim scoffed quietly, so lowly that I doubted anyone else had heard him. But it had been loud in my ears, since he stood so close to me.

What had he seen, or recognized, to act like that? Had he recognized Vim? Did Vim recognize him?

I glanced at Vim, and then behind us. Sure enough there didn't seem to be anything of note... other than the dozens of people behind us who were also waiting in line. At least behind us looked to be some women and children.

"Lumen imposes a more... strict warehouse system. All goods need to go through their customs gate before being allowed entry. They'll be able to pick up their goods and carts once inside," Vim explained.

"Lawless," a man a few spots away said, agreeing with the former man's comment.

"Seems a waste of time," I said.

"She gets it!" someone said loudly. Another voiced his agreement, and we all suddenly got to move.

The line moved forward, and Vim and I finally stepped onto the large wooden bridge for the first time. I groaned as I realized at this rate it'd take another hour or two before we got in.

Across the bridge, was a gate. A massive stone structure, which had what looked like three iron gates within it. It was daunting up close, but also exciting... it made me wonder what kind of sights I'd see inside. Especially since I really couldn't see much of the town, even when we had been approaching it from the forest up on the mountainside.

Giant walls surrounded the city of Lumen. And within those walls were more walls. The few buildings I had been able to see over the walls were rather standard... other than the very massive castle that lay in the center of the town. That had been a sight. It made me wonder how many people lived in it. The castle alone looked as big as Ruvindale.

There were two lines into the city. The one that those horse riders had used... which let you just walk right into town, and then the one Vim and I stood in.

This one was long, and seemed to move slowly.

How long did it take to pay an entrance fee? What were they doing to take so long? Did people have to mine and chisel the coin themselves on the spot or something?

Vim sighed and crossed his arms. His elbow bumped into my arm a little, but not harshly. We were standing rather close to one another. I smiled at his annoyed face, and wondered if sometimes Vim wished he didn't have to act so... normal.

That was probably the only reason we were standing in line. To appear as normal as possible.

I had no doubt if Vim really wanted into the city, there'd be no reason for him to wait in line. If he didn't have a method to get in without notice, he could just climb the walls or something. Or just pay his way in. Yet here we were... patiently waiting... as if we were normal people.

"Mercenary though aren't you? Don't see a mark or flag," the man behind us then spoke up to Vim.

Glancing at Vim, I watched the way his annoyed expression disappeared. Hidden now beneath the calm and placid face he usually wore. "Who were we last with Renn?" he asked me.

"The Silken Band," I answered.

The line of waiting merchants grew quiet all of a sudden, and the man in front of us actually stepped forward... as if to get away from us.

Woops?

"Ha! Wish Frank was here. He'd piss his pants if he heard that!" the man behind us laughed though, breaking the weird silence that had formed.

Another man laughed, and then the idle chatter returned... and I noticed that a few of the people who had been silent this whole time had joined into those conversations. As if to distract themselves, or look busy.

I glanced at Vim again and found him slightly smirking. He had known my answer would have caused such a unique response.

Wonder why? Was it famous? If it was, it must not have been in a good way. The only reason the man behind us had laughed, was because he had been amused over imagining his friend's reaction to the news.

Vim noticed my staring, and then smiled at me. I felt an awkward smile form on my face in return, and had to look away from him.

Come on Renn, don't act so weird in front of him!

"Still, mercenaries... If you don't have contracts already let me know. I could use a few more hands on my trip south," a man a few ahead of us said. He turned to give us a warm smile.

"Sorry, already paid for," Vim said calmly.

"Ah, typical. Your kind don't come here without, after all," he said with a sigh.

"Aint that the truth. Wish I could get paid before even showing up," another man said.

"You could if you sold something that didn't flipping spoil," the man next to him said.

"I like the smell of bananas!" the man laughed in response.

The line laughed a bit, and I wondered if everyone here knew each other... were they all together? None seemed to be. They weren't dressed similarly. Some looked like poor peddlers... some looked wealthy. One of the men in front of us was even wearing robes, and had rings on his fingers. They didn't look gold, but such a sight was still an odd one.

Our line moved again. I got to step a few more steps out onto the drawbridge, and was able to study one of the massive chains that connected the bridge to the wall.

Reaching out, I touched the hard metal. It was cold, and a single part of the chain was bigger than my arm.

"The links aren't that bad," I noted. Whoever had made them had some skill. They were huge, which would have made it hard for a normal human to work them. Odds are many blacksmiths had forged each link, at the same time.

"My guild made those chains, mercenary. You're damn right they're not bad!" a man a few behind us said.

"You're part of the Yapls? No wonder you stink," another man said. This time, people didn't laugh.

"Lotta nerve saying that in front of me!" the man two in front of us turned around and actually stepped out of line as to address whoever had spoken.

"And'ahl say it again!" the man behind us raised his voice, and I turned to watch as a rather lanky man stepped out of the line to shout at the one who had been in front of us.

The two men began yelling at each other, and I was a little surprised to see most of the people only shake their heads while watching them. No one seemed overly concerned.

"Get back in line George, before you get tossed into the river!" a man with a familiar voice shouted at the two arguing men. He had been someone who had spoken to me and Vim earlier.

River...

While the line watched the two men, as their arguing fizzled out, I stepped up to the railing as to look down past it.

Yes. There wasn't a moat beneath this drawbridge... but a genuine river. It was a rather far drop, and looked deep and wide.

"Feh, spineless spice merchant," the man who had left the line from in front of us returned to his spot, huffing and red in the face.

Glancing behind us, I saw the lanky man who had confronted him. He was also red in the face, and was muttering with the men who stood around him. Most of the people he was talking to looked displeased with him, or annoyed.

"Is that common?" I asked Vim.

"Merchants don't deal in blood, Renn. They deal in coin," Vim said calmly.

The line burst out in laughter, even the man in front of us who had been involved in that confrontation laughed.

"True words!"

"The truest!"

"A wise mercenary, who'd think it!" another laughed.

Smiling at them all, I suddenly didn't feel so bad about being stuck in this line. This was entertaining.

Vim seemed completely unbothered by the commotion around him, which he had been the cause of, and our line moved again.

Stepping ever closer to the large gates, I once again realized how big they were... and how massive the actual gates were themselves.

The first iron gate of the gateway was the full length of the open bridge. And even from this angle, I could see that the metal the gate was made of was thick. Nearly thicker than the chain I had just looked at.

How did they lift it? Surely using some kind of pulley system... but the weight of that gate alone...

And there were three of them.

Could I lift them?

Could Vim?

The line's laughter died down and their conversations quickly returned. Most sounded much more lively than they had before, as well.

While the line became noisy I stepped around Vim. I held onto his arm so I could bend a little, arching to the left as to try and see the end of the line. I wasn't able to see over most of the men. Especially since most wore hats of some kind.

We weren't that far it seemed. I could see the inside of the gate finally... and what looked to be knights. There were men with swords and spears, and most looked bored.

I leaned back, and returned to my spot. Releasing Vim's arm, I sighed and tried to hear the sounds of the city just out of reach.

Between the hat muffling the sounds, the loud line I stood in... and the massive walls, I couldn't hear the city of Lumen at all.

Which was weird. It was so massive, it should be loud. Yet wasn't.

"Almost Renn," Vim said gently.

I nodded, and sighed all the same.

A few minutes later and our line moved again. I stepped forward, and finally stood on solid brick again. The wood of the bridge was left behind, and I smiled in triumph.

Vim smiled at me, watching me as I nodded to him... wondering if he even understood as to why I was smiling.

"Next in line!" a young voice called out, and our line moved again.

I finally was able to see our destination without having to stand on my toes, or by peeking around Vim. There was a window lodged into the stone gateway, off to the right corner. Guards stood around it, and the people in line were both talking to whoever was within the window and handing them stuff as well.

I watched as another person was called to the counter, and I saw the pair of men put not just coins onto the counter but papers as well. Whoever was hidden behind the window grabbed the papers and spent a long time reading them.

"Read faster," I complained.

The man behind me snickered.

"Next in line!"

We were finally next. The man who had stood in front of us all this time spoke loudly to the one behind the window. He seemed animated, waving his hands around.

"Excuses?" I asked.

"Sounds like it," Vim agreed.

He sounded like he was trying to get the entry tax lowered.

I glanced to the right, and saw the bowmen up above. There were two I could see up there, and they were leaning up against the rampart. They were staring at Vim and I and whispering to each other.

"Don't scare the knights," Vim said lightly.

A nearby knight shifted in his armor, and glared at us.

I coughed and smiled at him, which made the armored knight suddenly look very troubled... and then look away. He suddenly found the end of his spear very interesting.

Vim chuckled but said nothing.

"Fine!" the man at the window shouted and slapped something onto the counter. I heard the sound of metal scrape stone, so I assumed it was some kind of coin.

The man huffed and turned away, heading into town... and as he left he quickly became calmer. After only a few steps, his upset face contorted in frustration became calm and normal, as if he hadn't even been actually angry.

"Next in line!" a man in leather armor shouted from next to the window.

Excited, I skipped ahead of Vim and hurried forward.

Stepping up to the window, I stared at the young boy behind the counter. He looked... a little silly in his metal armor. It clanked loudly as he moved the coins he had just gathered behind the counter, implying that he was as scrawny as he seemed. He barely fit the armor, let alone filled it out.

"Welcome, welcome. Occupation and purpose of visit?" the young boy asked as he went to writing something before him. I couldn't see it thanks to the counter being too tall.

"Mercenaries. Here to answer a call of employment," Vim said.

The young boy hurriedly looked up, and his eyes went a little wide upon seeing me... and then became less shocked upon seeing Vim. "Ah... yes. Sorry, sir. Mercenaries... that's five Lumen Marks each, since you have weapons," the boy said quickly.

As he spoke I noticed the two guards on the left stood up a little straighter, all the while glaring at Vim.

Vim said nothing as he reached out and dropped the two coins onto the counter. The boy smiled happily at the sight of them, as if relieved that Vim had so willingly obliged.

"Thanks! Have a wonderful stay in Lumen!" the boy repeated the same phrase I had heard him say to the others before us.

Vim turned away, and I quickly went to follow him. As we left the giant gate, I noticed the stares of the guardsmen around us. Especially the stares directed at me.

"That was it?" I asked.

"What else were you expecting?" Vim asked as we headed into the city, walking along a giant archway to another gate. This one was smaller, and had only one metal gate. It was also not housed upward in the sky, in the archway itself, but instead opened up on hinges along the sides.

"Well... it had taken so long I had expected actual inspections? Or questions?" I wondered.

"I'm sure one of those men would happily inspect you if you'd like them to," Vim said.

"Oh shush, you know what I mean," I said. Why'd he say that like that?

"Hm." He seemed to have noticed my distaste for his comment and nodded. "We are obviously what we appear to be, Renn. They only inspect those who look out of place. Plus the merchants have to tell them their goods and guild information. They have more questions than mercenaries do," Vim explained.

"Ah... is that why you chose mercenaries? Because of how easy it was?" I asked.

"To a degree. I had thought of using you as a traveling nun, but you get this wickedly sinful smile when you see something interesting, so that idea was kicked rather quickly," he said with a sigh.

I giggled at him. "That's a joke I approve," I said with a nudge of my elbow.

"Hm. Would you also approve something nice to eat and drink? I'm actually in the mood for something cold," Vim offered.

"Oh my yes." Yes indeed.

Walking alongside Vim, I smiled happily as we entered Lumen.

Chapter 119: Lumen

Renn hummed a happy tune as she chewed on the somewhat burnt breaded snack.

The bread she ate had some sugar icing on it. Something that was expensive. Expensive enough that if she had been any normal human woman, she would have thrown a fuss over the burnt bread it was slathered on.

"I uh... like this. A lot," Renn said as she nodded and took another bite.

"I can tell," I said. Wonder if the burnt bread was what she liked the most. Maybe it gave it that extra bit of flavor to make her happy.

Renn licked her lips, which had gotten smeared by the sugar. "This place seems lively. But I like how it's not as busy as Telmik, too," Renn said.

Ah. So that was why she was as happy as she was. It wasn't just the tasty food and drink we had just enjoyed, that she was still enjoying, but also the lack of traffic.

"It gets busy in certain areas. We're avoiding them," I said.

"Oh? Thanks!" Renn smiled at me, telling me she had understood very quickly that I had been doing so on purpose.

I sighed at her, and decided to let it be.

While we walked I studied the familiar city. Lumen like always was very clean. Too clean. It made me feel uncomfortable somehow, even though it shouldn't.

The city was also busy... although not busy enough to bother Renn and make her queasy, there were still quite a few people walking around. Like usual most of the city was full of commoners. Most stared at us as we walked by, but I knew it wasn't just because we both carried weapons but also Renn's appearance.

She was a beautiful young woman, and it was very obvious she was enjoying life. She was dressed well, seemed very healthy, and was genuinely happy. To most people that was a rarity. Especially here in Lumen. With her huge happy smile as she chewed down on the snack, people's first impressions of her only became that more set in stone.

Seeing such a woman with a man like me, while dressed like a mercenary and carrying weapons on her back...

Yes. She was a unique sight.

Those merchants in that line had found her just as fascinating. It had been humorous to see them glance at her, only to look away quickly. As if they had never even seen a woman before.

"Where we going now?" Renn asked as she swallowed the last bit of her snack.

Watching her lick her fingers, I sighed at the sight.

I reached over to wipe a line of sugar icing off her cheek. She let me do so, and I licked the stuff off my thumb. "The Society has a guild here. We'll be going there first," I said.

"Oh...?" Renn sounded odd, but I ignored her as we crossed an intersection. The roads here were larger than normal, to accommodate the large wagons and carts. None of those carts or wagons were here now, but I was making sure no one was following us. Some of those guards and merchants had been a little too intent on staring at Renn...

But what did I do? It's not like I could make her less attractive. The only thing I could do was dress her in rags, and make her unhappy. But neither of those things would let me sleep comfortably.

It was my job to make those I protected as safe and happy as I could... and here I was sniveling that I was actually doing a good job for once.

"This place is neat, though. Where do they get all the stone from?" Renn asked as we passed a strangely shaped building. It was oval instead of square. Reminiscent of the architecture found farther south.

"The mountains nearby. There's a giant quarry near here," I said.

"Huh... how does the stone buildings last compared to a wooden one?" she asked.

"Depends on how it's made. Stone will usually outlast wood, but only if constructed properly," I said.

"Anything that would last our lifetimes?" Renn asked.

"Certain methods, yes. A combination of steel and special stone mixtures. They'll need to be maintained over the centuries, but it's possible. That bridge we crossed on the way here was older than you Renn, by several factors," I told her.

"Ah... you had mentioned that. Does that mean no one's been maintaining that bridge since then?" she asked.

"Not in the way that it needs to," I said. For a tiny moment I thought of all the things that bridge had probably needed. The chutes, the warming blocks, the circulation pipes... I shivered at the idea of having to retrofit and repair that thing. Since I'd not be able to enlist any help from anyone, and would thus have to do it all alone... it'd take me years. Maybe even decades.

Renn and I crossed into another street, heading towards one that would lead us to the center of the Lumen's merchant district.

"Like most cities this place is built in districts. Unlike most though those districts are owned by guilds. Powerful merchant ones, too. You'll start to see knights and guards wearing not the colors of Lumen but the guilds who employ them," I explained to Renn. So far I hadn't seen any of them, but once I did I'd point them out.

"Guilds who own knights?" she asked.

I nodded. "They're become very powerful here. The monarchy here was purchased a few generations ago... making a very... money focused community," I said, choosing my words carefully. Not because I worried who was listening, but precisely because of who was for a fact listening.

I'd let Brandy teach Renn about this land and its markets. The capitalistic mindset here was something she had to figure out herself. It'd not be hard for her; really... although most of the lands today were ruled by monarchies, influenced by the church, they were still relatively profit and loss orientated. Half the nations that collapsed did so not from war or plague but because their economies collapsed underneath them.

"You said the society has a guild here?" she asked.

"That's where we're headed," I said with a nod.

"Do we have knights too then?" she asked, excited to hear if we did.

"Well... I'm sure they employ guards. Not sure if they've gone that far just yet," I said.

"Ah... true... I guess if they really needed someone they'd just summon you I suppose," she said with a nod.

Glancing at her and her confident smile, I wondered why she seemed to enjoy such a thought so much.

"This way," I guided Renn down a smaller road. One that rested in-between large houses. Not noble homes, just wealthier merchants.

Renn studied the homes we passed, seemingly interested. "Is there a house here for us too? Like at the Cathedral?" she asked.

"The guild here has homes, yes, but we will be staying at the guild itself while we're here," I said.

"Oh...? That's too bad," she whispered.

Too bad? Did she want us to stay in a house or something?

"If you wander around on your own, make sure you carry coins with you. There's a fee to enter certain districts, and it can add up if you're not careful," I warned her.

"A fee? Just to walk around?" she asked.

I nodded.

"That's ridiculous," she grumbled and shook her head. Her happy smile died a little, she was now a little upset.

"We pay taxes and tolls when entering different lands," I told her.

"Lands, yes. Not within the same city!" she said loudly.

I shrugged.

"Don't shrug! How do they even tell whose entering and leaving? What if people do what we're doing now, walking down smaller back roads?" she asked.

"They fence it off with walls, Renn. Similar to the gate we went through when we entered the city," I told her.

"Oh... that's dumb," she complained.

"Not to these people," I said. Most had voted in favor of it.

Though... people had been given one month's salary in exchange for a positive vote. That might have had something to do with it.

Exiting the road of houses, we returned to a business road. We took a left, heading deeper into Lumen, and the shops started becoming more frequent.

"See that symbol?" I pointed at one of the building's front awning. It had a blue and white emblem sewn into it.

She nodded.

"That's the company guild that the Society owns. The Animalia Company," I said.

"Huh? Really?" Renn stood up straight, and I realized it was probably a little hard for her to see clearly. Thanks to the angle...

Looking up and down the street, I found another shop with the symbol. Some kind of bakers shop. It had the symbol painted onto the large window displaying breads and other items.

Walking over to it with Renn, I let her examine the symbol for a moment.

"Just... just the letter A? really?" she asked.

I nodded. That it was. "Well, the letter... in a circle. With colors," I offered to defend it, even though I didn't care for it either.

"It's not neat at all," she complained.

"Hm..." I turned to go, but Renn stopped me before I could. She gave me a happy smile, and I sighed and nodded.

A few minutes later she emerged from the bread shop with two loaves, both warmly baked.

Renn happily returned to my side as we went back to walking to our destination. She hummed as she slowly munched on the bread.

"How much were they?" I asked her.

"Three of the copper pieces each," she said

"Oh?" That wasn't bad at all. Either the crop yields this year had been great, or the shop owner had taken a liking to her.

Something told me it was the latter.

"Want a piece?" she asked, offering me a bite.

I took it, even though I didn't want it. How was she able to eat so much? Better yet how did she seem to always enjoy it, too?

"So... do we own those stores then? They had all been human in there," Renn asked.

While we rounded a corner, I realized that maybe that had been what she really wanted. Not just the bread, but to check if any of our kind had been in that store.

"We own it. Or well, at least fund or supply it. Brandy and the guild leader handle all that stuff," I said.

Thank goodness too. The thought of having to deal with all of that stuff again made me pissed off.

"Hmm..." she hummed as she chewed off a big bite of the bread.

As I ate the piece she had offered me, I recognized the taste of sourdough bread. It was bland, and didn't deserve the happy smile she wore as she ate it.

"They said this was made with ale," she said.

"Ale yeast, yes. A process fairly new to this region."

"It's tasty," she said.

"Usually this bread accompanies something else, Renn. It's an addition, not a snack on its own," I told her.

"Oh?" she mumbled the word as she took another big bite.

No matter.

Rounding another corner, the Societies Company came into sight. Down the road, at the end, was a massive building.

"There she is," I told Renn.

She paused, and looked around. Then her eyes fell on the huge building at the end of the road.

"That big castle?" she asked with food in her mouth.

"Not really a castle. There's a large trading firm behind it, and then there's a bank and commercial residence too. Other than the Cathedral Renn, this is one of the largest buildings the Society claims," I told her.

"Huh... from a church to a trading post," she said as we started walking to it.

I scanned the street leading to the company, and didn't recognize any of our members. There were a few people who were busy working and walking around, that were probably employees or something... but they were all humans.

"The bank is at the end of a large commercial road. A road that has businesses running down it all the way through the city until it reaches the port. There's another large road opposing it, that's used by carts and wagons. You can walk down it just be careful, sometimes the merchants aren't very attentive," I explained.

Renn giggled. "Ran over by a wagon."

"It happens," I said.

"Ah... probably does," she sounded more solemn as she nodded... then took another bite of her bread.

"Never seen anyone hurt by a horse or cart?" I asked her.

"Hm... I have. But it hadn't been moving," she said.

"Hadn't been moving?" I asked.

"The cart broke, and fell on the man. Honestly I hadn't seen it first hand, and I had only seen the... results. I'm not sure how it happened, or why he had been under it in the first place," she said.

"Humans always find ways to get themselves hurt in the oddest ways possible," I said.

"They do," she agreed, and munched down on the last bit of one of her loafs.

Walking past a large warehouse, I noticed the three carts within being loaded. The crates had our companies insignia painted on them.

"We own these too?" Renn asked.

"So it seems. We hadn't last time I was here," I said.

"Isn't that a good thing?" she asked.

"Was Lughes's hoarding of wealth good for him?" I asked.

Renn stopped walking, and I flinched. I shouldn't have phrased it like that.

"I uh... really don't want that to happen again, Vim. Please," Renn spoke seriously, and had even squeezed the loaf of bread in hands as she did so. I sighed at the sight of her squishing her snack, and looking so distraught.

"Sorry Renn, I hadn't meant it that way. Brandy is far... more astute than Lughes. You'll see upon meeting her, that such a thing like that won't happen here," I said.

"Yet you had said that for a reason. Why?"

"Because great wealth is more trouble than it is worth," I said.

"Are you... against this then? What the Society is doing here?" she asked as she looked around.

"We can talk about that later. I want you to have your own opinion first, before you hear my own," I said. I had been doing so well too, with not revealing anything to her. I had wanted... I needed her, to form her own thoughts on this place. On Brandy.

I needed Renn to form her own thoughts on the Society as a whole.

Renn studied me for a moment, and then looked down. Her happy face was long gone, and was now going to stay away based off the sad frown that took its place as she studied her now half squished loaf of bread.

"Remember the favor I asked of you?" I asked her, hoping to salvage this moment.

She should be happy. Overjoyed. She was about to meet one of the largest communities of importance in the Society... she deserved to experience this moment with absolute joy, not worry.

Renn nodded. "The painting," she said.

I nodded. "Can I ask one more favor of you?"

She tilted her head at me, and I knew her ears had flickered under her hat. "Sure?"

"Do for me what no one else will," I said.

Renn's eyes hardened and she nodded stiffly, waiting for the rest of my request.

"Judge them," I asked of her.

"Judge...?" she didn't seem to like the idea of it.

"Judge their methods. Their community. The company, the guild, and the people they employ," I said.

Renn stepped forward and shook her head. The loaf of bread in her hand shook as she did. "Wait... wait, Vim!" she started to speak but I didn't let her interrupt me.

"I need you to study them. To learn everything you can, about everyone you can. Especially of Brandy and Gerald, the guild leader," I asked her for help.

Unlike the last time I had asked her for help... she now looked upset. Hurt. Offended, even.

Stepping closer to her, I reached out to break off a piece of her now mostly squished bread. It tasted the same, even squished.

Renn took in a deep breath, and closed her eyes. She ignored me as I took another piece of bread.

"Why wait till now to ask me this? Why now? Why when we're right in front of them?" she asked quietly, with her eyes still closed.

"You wanted me to test you. Here it is. A real one. One that can change everything," I said.

A tiny whine came from her as she lowered her head, and I could tell by the way her hat shifted that her ears had drooped.

Two men, both talking lightly to themselves passed us by. They glanced at us oddly, but didn't draw too close or seem too interested. Their conversation never even switched to us, even when they drew farther away.

"You can say no, Renn," I told her after a few moments passed.

"No," she said.

I frowned, a little surprised that she actually had done so. I couldn't help but blink a few times, and hesitated.

She had said no.

"Okay..." I said lightly, and my mind whirled at the rejection. I honestly had not expected it at all and...

"I can't say no. I'll do it. What am I supposed to be looking for?" she asked, looking up at me. She blinked at me and tilted her head, as if seeing something odd. "Vim?" she asked, and I realized I probably looked absolutely ridiculous.

Calm yourself.

"There's nothing you need to look for. I just want you to evaluate them. I want you to learn everything that you can, and afterwards tell me about them. Your thoughts, the good and the bad," I said.

"Oh... So I'm not going to get anyone in trouble?" she asked.

So that was what she had been worrying about.

"Likely not, Renn. Even if someone was doing something I disapproved of, do you really think I'd do anything about it? If they're not endangering the society I don't stop anyone from doing anything they want," I said.

She nodded, understanding that.

"Then..." she glanced past me, to the building in the distance.

"Just study them. Judge them. I wasn't going to bring it up at all, honestly... but maybe it's for the best. As I said, you wanted to be tested. Well... this is a good way for me to do it. I want you to basically report to me, after some time, and I want you to tell me everything on your mind. The good and the bad. About everyone. Everything."

She slowly nodded, understanding. "Okay. I can do that. I can do that Vim," she said.

"Please and thank you," I said.

Her eyes held my own, and I noticed the way her pupils were thin and narrowed. She was focusing very intently on the thing before her. Usually I'd not be bothered by such a gaze... yet...

"Next time give me more warning, please," she said softly.

"If there's a next time. Sure," I said.

Renn giggled and then took a huge bite out of her bread. Right where I had been pulling pieces off. "Please Vim! Of course there will be," she said and stepped past me. Hurrying forward... now excited.

Following her, I kept pace with her as I studied the look on her face. Her smile had returned... but I could see the worry behind it. Especially in her stride, and the way she chewed on the bread. She wasn't

eating for enjoyment now, but instead to simply eat it as fast as possible. It was no longer something to relish, but now something to finish so she could move on to something else.

I sighed at myself, and realized I had done that rather foolishly.

Oh well. It was done.

Next time... next time I'd do it better.

"What's a guild leader, by the way?" Renn then slowed to ask.

Frowning at her, I put my hand onto her back as to keep her from stopping completely. She picked her pace back up, but it was obvious she was upset over it. "The one who leads the company. They call the organizations guilds here, he's one of us. A dove," I said.

"A dove?" she perked up at that.

"Brandy is an otter. She's the bookkeeper," I said.

"Otter," she perked up at that even more.

"Though she may not be back yet," I said.

Renn nodded. "The Clothed Woman had said that."

"There're a few other members too. They'll introduce themselves," I said.

Walking up to the Animalia Company Guild, I glanced down the large roads that circled the massive complex. There were carts and wagons down one side, some lined up and waiting to get in. Down the other side were people coming and going. There was even a carriage waiting at the bank's entrance, possibly a noble or wealthy merchant was making a deposit or asking for a loan.

"It is a castle, Vim," Renn whispered as she stared upward.

Glancing up at the many floors, and balconies that littered them... I guess I could see how she'd think such a thing. It did have towers and spires, but I knew most of them were just for decoration.

"Well... as I said. Wealth becomes too noticeable too quickly," I said.

"Obviously so," she agreed as we headed for the entrance in the center. The one between the bank's entrance and the large depot for goods. The one most people wouldn't usually need to enter, since it was more for the workers than customers of any kind.

Patting Renn on the back as we crossed the wide street and entered the company, we passed through the massive wooden doors that were propped open wide. They looked pushed to the limit of their hinges, as if to invite any and all into the building without hesitation.

Upon entering we found hustle and bustle. The large entry room was created in a way to mimic the building itself. Massive, for the sake of being so. There were large stairwells to the back, which led to the upper floors. The cardinal directions also had large hallways. One to lead to each section of the building. Then there were of course doors and hallways scattered around them, all having their own purposes. There seemed to be twenty or so people here, but some were heading elsewhere. One was walking up a stairwell, to head deeper into the building and another pair of women were heading down the right hallway. Based off the uniforms they wore, they were heading to the bank as to go to work.

Amidst all the paths one could take, were desks and tables. Offices ran along the left side of the large room, and tables for people to sit and work on whatever task they were entrusted with littered the right wall. In-between them, was a large circular counter. Where three women were currently sitting at. Each woman was directed towards one of the hallways, or the front door.

The one who sat facing the door noticed us as we entered, and quickly stood from her seat.

She went wide-eyed, and then screamed. "Oh my gosh!"

Renn went perfectly still, as did most of the dozens of people in the room. Every conversation, all the shuffling of papers, and the echoes of feet upon ceramic tile all ceded in their noise making as the receptionist leapt over her counter and ran at me.

I stepped aside from Renn a bit, to give the woman enough room.

With a happy shriek, Reatti charged into me, wrapping her arms around my waist as she happily giggled and greeted me.

Smiling down at her, I glanced around and noticed the gentle smiles of other members... and the odd looks of those who were obviously not.

Yet none of those looks bothered me as much as Renn's did.

Chapter 120: The Animalia Company

The woman swung in the air for a moment, thanks to how fiercely she had tackled Vim.

Vim held his arms out for her, not so much as to hug her... but to make sure she didn't fall and hurt herself. Vim turned a little, to let her fling around in the air for a moment. The sight made me jealous.

Why was she allowed to act like that and not me?

"Nice to see you too Reatti," Vim calmly greeted the woman, as unabashed and as unbothered as usual.

"Welcome back! It's been awhile!" Reatti said happily as her feet finally found the ground. She stood up straight, yet still held Vim in a hug. The woman was a little shorter than me, even without my ears into account... and looked very human.

"A few years," Vim nodded, and then someone else hurried up. I went still as another woman giggled happily as she approached.

This one looked a little older. And was definitely not human. Her ears were pointed a little at their tips, and her hair was a little too thick. "Welcome back Vim. Come, come inside, come on Reatti. Let. Him. Go," the new woman spoke kindly to Vim, and then her tone took a drastic change upon addressing the one clinging to him.

"Aww, don't be selfish Herra. The only time he'll let me hug him is when we meet and..." Reatti complained.

"Selfish!" Herra's pointed ears became a redder hue, and she stepped forward and grabbed Reatti by the back of her shirt. With a couple tugs the woman was able to separate Vim and Reatti, who whined quietly.

"Nice to see you're well too, Herra," Vim said.

The stern woman suddenly let Reatti go, and went red in the face this time. "Mhm," she nodded.

Reatti saw she had been let go and immediately stepped forward to hug Vim again. Before she could however, a new person arrived. This time a young man.

"Vim! How've you been!" he stepped forward, right before Reatti could get a hold of Vim, and went to shaking Vim's hand.

"Brom. I've been well, how's the ear?" Vim asked.

Brom laughed and scratched at his head, where his left ear... should have been. He had a very obvious scar there, which ran upward into his hair and even down his neck. Something had harmed him dreadfully.

Looking around for any more people approaching, I found there were none. Everyone else in the large room were staring at us, but not approaching... though...

Very quickly I tried to tell who was human and who wasn't.

A tall woman near the massive hallway to the right wasn't. She wore a loose dress robe, and I could tell by the way she stood that she was one of us. Something was hidden beneath her dress, like how I hid my tail. Other than her none of the rest had any obvious traits I could notice just from a glance.

"Gerald is here, Vim. Just got back a few hours ago, in fact," Herra said as Vim's hand was finally released by Brom. The young man was still smirking wildly, as if shaking Vim's hand was an honor.

Wait... he probably wasn't a young man. He wasn't human either. I could tell not just thanks to the scar from an injury that probably would have killed any normal human, but also because his nails were black. Solid black. Not something paint alone could have accomplished.

"Oh come on, at least let us visit for a moment and," Reatti stepped between Brom and Herra, to get her opinion in.

"Yeah, it's slow right now Vim, we could chat and," Brom agreed, interrupting Reatti.

"Slow? We have thirty nine appointments left today, Brom!" Herra interrupted Brom.

"You two do! I don't!" Reatti raised her hand, smiling in triumph. She looked the youngest of the three, and also seemed to act it... but something about her made me think it was the opposite.

These three were all definitely members...

"Come with me instead Vim! I got cookies!" The tall woman I had noticed earlier was waving at us, beckoning Vim over.

"Your cookies are stale!" Brom yelled at her.

The tall woman glowered at Brom, but said nothing.

Glancing at Vim as the rest of the building started talking, some laughing and some returning to their jobs, I went still at the sight of Vim's soft smile.

He was staring at them all with gentle eyes, and it made me...

Feeling forgotten, I shifted a little and realized I was still holding the last piece of bread. Just one bite was left.

Since no one seemed to be focused on me, I went ahead and stuffed it into my mouth. It at least gave me something to do.

"Just stay off it, Brom. Go load a cart or something," Reatti complained as she tried to push him aside.

"I wish mother would have drowned you too," Brom said as he refused to get pushed aside.

My ears perked up at his words, but no one else seemed to even blink at them as Reatti actually growled at him. A deep guttural growl that solidified the fact she wasn't human at all.

Herra was about to say something, to join in the commotion, but someone suddenly coughed.

The whole room went quiet, and I noticed the three fools had gone completely still. Reatti lowered her head, Brom looked up to the ceiling and Herra slowly turned to smile apologetically at the one who had coughed.

A tall man stood at the second stairwell balcony. In-between the two large stairwells, the balcony extruded enough to let him overlook us all. He was staring down at us, and didn't look too please.

"Uh... see you later Vim. Let's get drinks later," Brom said quickly as he turned to go.

"I'll see you then too!" Reatti said as she hurried back to her desk. She didn't hop over it as she had done upon seeing us, but instead entered it from the appropriate little door.

Herra sighed and stood up straight, and then gestured towards the stairs. "The Guild Leader awaits," she said calmly.

"Thanks Herra," Vim said as he stepped forward.

She smiled and nodded as Vim stepped past her.

Quickly swallowing the last bite of bread, I hurried to follow Vim. As I did though the woman startled a tiny bit. So momentarily that I had barely noticed. Her eyes narrowed at me, and I smiled and nodded softly to her.

Had they actually not realized I had been here?

She didn't smile back, and I felt her gaze on me as I followed Vim to the stairwell.

In fact...

As we ascended, I noticed how oddly quiet it got as I followed Vim.

Reaching the top of the stairs, before Vim and I turned to greet the man, I glanced back behind me.

Everyone was staring at me. Everyone.

I gulped and looked away, suddenly very conscious.

"Gerald," Vim greeted the man, and I intentionally stepped to the side a little... to put Vim in-between me and the many onlookers.

"Vim. A pleasure to see you again," the tall man took Vim's hand, and as they shook hands I realized something rather interesting.

This man was beautiful.

He wasn't just tall, he was perfectly shaped. Not too skinny. Not too large. He had big hands, wide shoulders, a nicely shaped face... He was clean shaven too, which was a rarity amongst the men of today.

As their hands separated, I realized I was staring at him. I shifted a little as he turned to smile at me. "This is Renn," Vim introduced me.

He held his hand out, and gave me a very large smile. One that told me that he knew full well what I was and was genuinely happy to know so. "Renn? I am Gerald. I'm the appointed guild leader of the Animalia Company Corporation. It is my honor to welcome you into my business," he greeted me.

Shaking his hand, I flinched a little. His hand was soft. Too soft. Had he never done any labor before?

"It's a pleasure to meet you Gerald," I said.

"Come. Shall we go to my office, Vim?" Gerald asked Vim for permission as my hand left his.

Rubbing my finger and thumb together, I felt odd. I had gloves on, but had noticed how soft his hands had been all the same. It made me wish I could take my glove off and shake his hand again.

This was the dove Vim had mentioned... did that have something to do with how soft he had felt?

Vim nodded and Gerald gestured for Vim to walk ahead of him. Vim did so, and then I had to go and follow after Vim since Gerald didn't move. He waited for me to go ahead first.

He was the leader here and he was treating Vim as the superior.

"Is Brandy back yet?" Vim asked as we headed for a hallway. It wasn't as large as the two down on the first floor, but this one had a huge red rug with golden designs on the edges.

"No. She likely won't be for a week or two more," Gerald said from behind me.

His voice came from even higher than Vim's... and was a little sing-song like too. Now that I wasn't looking at him, his voice was something I could focus on a little more. It wasn't as high pitched as I would have thought from a bird, however.

"Where'd she go?" Vim asked.

"The Bell Church," Gerald said.

Vim nodded.

He had already known that. From the Clothed Woman.

Had he doubted her, or was he just confirming it?

I gulped as I remembered his previous oddness. And not just the odd moments before we had entered this building.

He had acted weird at the Clothed Woman's church too. As if he hadn't trusted her.

The hallway turned a little, but it wasn't a corner. The hallway rounded, and suddenly there were large windows. All as tall as Vim, and very clear. I was walking in the center of the hallway, but once I saw the flowers and other greenery I had to step closer to the windows. As I did I realized that the flowers and grass outside weren't a real garden. This was still the second floor. The flowers, trees, and grass were all growing from giant planters and pots. There were tables and chairs out there, too. It looked pretty.

Once the windows were left behind I returned to walking directly behind Vim. He had noticed my actions, but hadn't paid much attention to me. A single glance was all I had gotten.

This entire place was ours? It was humongous. The hallway was now returning to a single straight one. A familiar normal hallway... but now with smaller windows, and paintings in-between them.

These windows showed the city. We were now walking along the edge of the building, it seemed. Off in the distance I could see the tall stone buildings, and the huge walls that loomed over them in the distance. It was a pretty scene. One that I wanted to examine, but honestly the paintings and the hallway were more important.

Passing a large painting, I studied the underwater scene that had been painted. There were pretty fish swimming around colorful coral. Nothing about it really seemed related to our Society, but...

The next painting was a desert. Giant rolling hills of sand with ragged mountains off in the distance.

As we walked the hallway the paintings started to show a theme.

One was a dense forest. Another was a rocky mountainside.

The paintings and windows ended, and finally doors came into view. Vim took us to one of the biggest doors. I noticed there were no windows opposing the door, and it seemed intentional.

Vim opened the door and strode on in as if he owned the place. I hesitated a moment, but followed him in anyway.

The office of the man who was called a guild leader was... a little plain. It was big, and had a very large window behind a fancy desk... but that was really it. There was a couch, some chairs across from it and a low glass table between them. In front of the desk were two large chairs, and there were a few shelves on the walls without doors or windows. Most of the shelves were full of books and nothing decorative. In fact other than the rug on the ground the room was bland.

Walking into the room, I studied the rug that covered the floor. It had the same red and gold design as the one in the hallway, yet was thicker. I actually felt bad walking onto it with my dirty shoes.

Gerald closed the door behind us, and Vim went to take a seat onto the couch. Before he did, he pulled around his sword and spear and rested them against one of the bookshelves. He also put the leather slack pouch that held the quiver and bow down too.

While Gerald sat behind his desk, into a large black chair, I went over to place my own weapons next to Vim's. Putting the spear and sword against the shelf felt a little rude, but I did so anyway.

"I see the company has expanded again," Vim said as I made sure the spear and sword weren't going to cause any damage. I had to move Vim's spear a little, since he had laid the spear point right into the spine of one of the books on the shelf. It had left a tiny little dent of a hole, and I flinched at it.

"You mean the warehouses? Yes. We purchased them last year. We rent out half of them to the previous occupants," Gerald said.

"Kind of you," Vim said.

"Brandy's idea. We spent nearly two years turning away cargo storage, thanks to the lack of space. So we now use those warehouses to store the long-term goods," Gerald said.

Once I was done messing with the weapons, I stepped around and wondered where to sit. Vim had relaxed back on the couch, laying his arm up against the top of the couch's backrest. Sitting there would probably seem weird, even though the couch looked the most comfortable.

Sitting across from Vim in one of the larger single chairs, I shifted a little and was surprised to find it was actually very comfortable. Whatever material the cushions were made out of was soft. It didn't even bother my tail that was hidden under the leather skirt. Usually sitting down bothered my tail no matter what or how I sat.

After getting comfortable I realized Gerald was staring at me. So was Vim. They both had an odd smile on their faces.

"Hm?" I wondered if maybe I had sat funny, or they hadn't wanted me to sit here.

"How's the market doing, in general?" Vim then asked, while still staring at me.

"Strong. New trade routes have been solidified along the eastern coast, which has helped immensely. I've even been considering selling one of our boats, thanks to the offers being given," Gerald said.

"What kind of offers?" Vim asked.

"Thirty thousand, with ten percent for five years," Gerald said.

Vim frowned, which made me squirm since he was still staring at me. "Not bad at all," he said.

"Indeed."

"Why haven't you accepted?" Vim asked.

"Brandy's against it," he said.

Vim sighed. "And let me guess, that's why she's gone to the Bell Church," he said.

Gerald glanced at Vim, and then back at me. He sat up a little straighter, and seemed as if he wanted to say something... yet didn't speak. Seemed he didn't want to say something while I was here.

"Other than that, and our steadily growing company... the biggest issue right now is actually the politics in town," Gerald said, very obviously changing topics on purpose.

Vim shifted and rested his head on his fist, relaxing even more. He still stared at me, however. "Politics," Vim nearly scoffed the word out.

"The Lumen monarchy and its supporters want to declare independence. They're in the process of forging a declaration as we speak. They expect it to be done before summer," Gerald said.

"What do the fools at the merchant table think about that?" Vim asked.

"As one of the fools, I'm willing to support it since everyone else wants to as well. If I voiced against it now I'd be seen as odd, Vim. A few meetings ago Old Crouch voiced his disapproval and at the next meeting instead of him in his seat it was his nephew," Gerald said.

"Was he killed?" Vim asked.

"I believe he was," Gerald said.

Vim sighed, and I was a little surprised to hear of such a thing. Someone had been killed simply because they had a different opinion amongst many? And it wasn't even a religious thing but something to do with money?

"All in all it has a great chance at not only passing both sectors of government, but will also succeed in the long run. Lumen's become too powerful and well connected with the nations across the inlet sea. Though I do suspect a visit from the royals of Dreed soon, to offer a very appealing counter offer. I expect a flat tax rate, with an offer of eventual sovereignty down the road," Gerald said.

"Have fun with that," Vim said.

"I always do," Gerald nodded with a smile.

Vim glared at me, and I realized he was actually glaring at Gerald. I accepted his glare and smiled back at him, which made Vim frown instead.

"Anyone new here?" Vim then asked.

"Other than our very unique guest in this room, no one is new. There are currently fourteen members in Lumen, if you include Brandy who plans to stick around for a few years," Gerald said.

Fourteen!

What a wonderful number!

"Anything special I should know about, before we talk about her?" Vim asked with a wave at me.

"I do have a request for you, but I can beg of it to you later. She's far more important," Gerald said with a smile at me.

I shifted at that smile, since it looked... too good on his face. It was almost unnatural how beautiful he was. Maybe he wasn't a man at all?

"Well?" Vim gestured at me to introduce myself.

"Ah... I'm Renn. I've been tagging along with Vim for a little over a year now. We met in Ruvindale," I introduced myself.

"A year?" Gerald quickly glanced at Vim, who waved him off.

"For now I'm just traveling with him. Haven't really decided yet where to call home," I said.

"Well, well... Forgive me for asking, since it's very personal and usually not something we openly discuss without permission... but I have over a dozen lives that I am responsible for, so I am forced to ask it," Gerald spoke evenly, yet with a serious tone. He sat closer to his desk, and crossed his arms on the desk. He stared calmly at me, waiting for permission.

"Uh... sure," I nodded, unsure what he wanted.

"You're a predator, aren't you?" he asked.

Oh. "Yes. I'm a large cat. The Chronicler said I was a jaguar," I told him.

Vim sighed, and I wondered if maybe I shouldn't have told him that.

Gerald though went wide eyed and sat back a little. "Huh... So..." he pointed lightly at his head, and I obliged him and took my hat off.

The man smiled warmly in thanks as he took in the sight of my ears. "I also have a tail," I said, and reached down to lift the leather skirt a little. I let the tip of my tail slid out from its hiding spot to show him.

"Fascinating... Well, the reason I asked so rudely, Renn, is that although we do have a few predators here... they're not true ones. At least not anymore. All of those here however will not shy away or hide from you, or feel threatened, but I only wish to ask permission to let everyone know about you. To get their approval in letting you into our home," Gerald said.

I glanced at Vim who nodded at me. "He's asking for permission to summon everyone and have them all give the okay to letting you stay. It's how it works here," he said.

"Oh. Sure. Of course." I nodded quickly.

That was perfectly reasonable. This was their home after all.

"Wonderful. I'm sure it'll be fine. As I said we're all a little more... adept at living amongst those unfamiliar. But the rule is the rule. If you don't mind I will go have Herra summon everyone for us. Is that alright with you as well Vim?" Gerald asked.

"She's probably already gathered most of them," Vim said with a nod.

"I've no doubt. I shall leave the two of you alone as I do so. For what it's worth Renn, you have my blessing. I look forward to hearing your story and sharing with you my own," Gerald stood from his desk and spoke warmly as he hurried to go.

"Yeah..." I nodded as he quickly left, closing the door behind him.

Vim sighed as he lifted his feet and put them upon the small glass table that sat between us.

"It's just how some places are Renn," Vim said.

"I'm okay with it. I'd never want to force myself onto someone," I said.

"Some like that, though," Vim said.

I frowned at him and wondered just what he meant. Were there really people who enjoyed it when strangers intruded forcefully into their home? Or into their territory?

Wait...

"Is that what you like?" I asked, a little excited.

Vim simply stared at me, and I sighed at him.

He chuckled.

"Is... are all of them going to come in here? To say yes or no?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh... not likely. Most will say yes or no without even looking at you. The few who might want to meet you will do so, but they'll probably meet you in the housing area, not here. Odds are most already heard all about you. Half the community was in the lobby, so they've already seen you," he said.

"I see... wait half? Really?" I asked. There had been that many? The three fools... that tall woman... Gerald... I had missed a few then.

Vim nodded. "The only one who might actually say no is Pierre. He's a mouse," Vim said.

"A mouse?"

"They hate cats," he said with a shrug.

Oh.

"What do I do if they actually say I can't stay?" I asked, now worried.

"You'll be fine. But if you did get told no... well, I guess I'd have to escort you out of Lumen. That'd be a pain," Vim said as he thought about it.

"How often do people get told no?" I asked.

"Honestly it happens... but usually it's their reputation that causes it. Or their actions. For reference Lilly is not allowed into Lumen," he said.

Somehow I understood why. She'd not harm any of our members, but the humans here...

"You'll find there are probably a few dozen humans here too. That know about us, and are a part of the Society," Vim then said.

"Oh? Oh..." that was what he meant then. Lilly wouldn't have liked that at all. "Does Gerald have to ask them too?" I wondered.

"No."

That seemed unfair... but I guess that was just how it was.

Amber hadn't been considered a true member either, once I thought about it. That had been most the reason I had such a difference of opinion with the rest at the Sleepy Artist.

"Notice he said fourteen?" Vim then said softly.

"Hm? Yeah?" Why did he suddenly look so sad?

"He didn't include her," he whispered.

I was about to ask who he meant... but I knew already.

They hadn't included the Clothed Woman in their numbers.

Vim took a deep breath and sighed. He sat back and looked away from me, to the floor.

Gulping softly, I couldn't help but feel cold all of a sudden.

And here I had thought he had hated her.

How foolish of me. How cruel of me.

About to say something, I went quiet as someone knocked on the door. Gerald opened it and stepped in, smiling happily. "Renn, would you be willing to meet a few of our members here? It'll only take a moment," he said.

"Sure," I said and stood.

I stepped to the door, but hesitated when I noticed Vim wasn't getting up too. He noticed my look and waved at me. "I'll be here when you're done," he said.

Oh. Great.

"Remember Herra? She'll guide you there," Gerald gestured out the door, to where Herra stood. She smiled and waved at me, seemingly excited.

I nodded, and decided to put away the mixture of feelings I was enduring right now.

I didn't want to hate them all, so for now I needed to... ignore it. Not forget it. Just ignore for a moment.

"Renn is it? I'm Herra," the woman greeted me as I stepped out of the room, and as I shook her hand Gerald closed the door behind me.

"Renn. I'm beyond pleased to meet you, thank you for taking the time to talk to me," I greeted her back, and felt a little bad as I became a little excited.

"Oh please, time off work and I get to meet someone new? Threaten me with a good time, really," Herra happily spoke as she gestured down the hall, the other direction than whence I had come from earlier.

Following her down the hall to meet the rest... I looked forward to meeting new people. New members of the Society... yet at the same time...

I was also looking forward to doing what Vim had asked of me.