

## **Non Human 121**

### Chapter 121: A Request

Gerald closed the door and nodded to himself, as if very proud of what had just happened.

"Why'd Herra volunteer?" I asked.

"She's interested in her. Wants to know about her," Gerald said.

Really...? Something told me she had a weirder reason.

"Merit and Sofia wanted to see her before saying yes. They'll allow her entry, Vim. Merit just likes to act rude and Sofia does whatever Merit does," Gerald said as he went to sit across from me, in the other chair. The one Renn hadn't sat in.

"You heard from everyone else already?" I asked.

Gerald nodded. "Herra hurried around to ask everyone," he said.

"How'd Pierre take it?"

"I heard he said she was pretty? He saw her as you two walked up the hallway. He had heard the commotion and came to see what was going on," he said with a shrug.

I sighed. That was too bad. So far only a few members have actually dismissed or hated Renn, but none had done so too vocally.

She needed to experience outright disgust and hatred, to really learn that not everyone would like her.

"So uh... Well..." Gerald fidgeted, and I noticed the way his eyes danced to my left.

Glancing at whatever was bothering him, I realized what it was real quick. After all they gleamed, and were pointy.

"What?" I asked him.

Gerald coughed and sat straight up, and I watched the pretty man's face go pale.

A part of me wanted to tease him, but I knew I shouldn't do that. He, like most of our kind... weren't like Renn. I couldn't tease and joke about things like that with them. They were too sensitive. Too weak. Too scared.

"Should I uh... be worried Vim? Is something happening? I hadn't heard any news of anything, or..." Gerald shifted and I noticed the sweat forming on his brow.

Oh. True.

Raising my hand, I gently smiled at the very worried bird. "Please Gerald, if something dangerous was happening by now I would tell you... you know that," I said.

"Well, yes... but you've only been here for under an hour, so I was just thinking maybe you were waiting till she left or..." Gerald did seem to relax, but he was still worried. He looked at the weapons again, as if his eyes were drawn to them.

"They're blunt. Or well, the swords are at least," I told him.

"Oh, well that's good. The swords are blunted. So it's a good thing you're not strong enough to not even need a sword... or that there's a bunch of spears and other weapons there too, which are obviously sharpened," Gerald said quickly.

I couldn't help it; I had to let a smile reach my face. Although I had expected it to bother him, it instead made him relax a little. "I have a favor to ask you, Gerald. It's a big one, too," I said.

Gerald blinked and sat up, nodding quickly as he waited for me to ask it.

"I'm looking for a place for her. Renn. She's a predator, a real one, but she's gentle and very intelligent. You'll realize this quick enough. I'd like you and the rest to see if she'd be able to work amongst you. Live amongst you, too," I said.

Gerald was quiet for a moment, and I watched as his mind quickly began calculating. He was not just thinking of what to say, but everything. How much danger she'd bring. How much profit she'd allow. He was undoubtedly taking those weapons into account too.

"Gentle you say?" he asked softly.

I nodded. "She's still a predator, Gerald... but you need not worry over her harming or eating anyone. Trust me; I've been watching her for a year. She'd die before hurting any of you," I said. It was rather surprising how easily it was to promise such a thing.

He gulped and sat back against his chair, as if suddenly tired. "A genuine predator... at the very least it'd make us feel a little safer, in a way," he considered.

"I plan to stay here until Brandy returns. By then we'll all be able to figure out if she'd work out or not," I said.

"Oh... speaking of that I do have a request. I'll also go around and ask everyone else if they have any for you too, here over the next day or two," he said as he remembered.

I gestured for him to continue.

"We have a commission. A buccaneer, the family you've dealt with before, is requesting your help. They submitted it a few weeks ago, twenty three days? I think? But if I remember correctly they don't set sail until the end of this week so you could still accept it..." Gerald stood quickly and hurried to his desk. I watched as he opened a drawer and went to rummaging amongst his papers.

"The Yin family?" I asked.

Gerald nodded as he continued to look for their request. "Yes. The leader of their little mercenary crew is still that girl. The one who is always smoking. Even in my office!" Gerald complained. He made a happy "Aha!" upon finding her letter. He stepped around the desk to hand it to me.

Taking the little brown letter, I smiled at the scrawl on it. It was written in pirate speak. A silly joke amongst her family and me.

"I'll accept it, unless you don't want me to," I said. I couldn't believe she was still alive, but it would be pleasant to see her. I had made a promise with her great-grandfather to help them in return for them always being willing to serve our Society if we called upon them.

As far as I was aware we had only done so three times. And only for charter, never for anything too unreasonable.

"I'd like you to. They offered a rather tidy sum. A port entry permit for one of the Isles. Its value over the years will increase many fold," Gerald said.

I sighed as I nodded and read the letter. It was a simple request. She just wanted help recapturing a ship they had lost to pirates. Real ones.

"Would you send someone to verify it all for me? To make sure I don't miss their boat," I said as I held out the letter to him. He'd put it into the archives eventually, once the job was done.

"Of course. I'll send someone shortly," he nodded.

"Thank you. And thank you Gerald, for remembering her and her family," I said.

"How could I not? There aren't many humans who we can call friends, Vim, I remember those not only who we do so, but have earned it," he said proudly.

I nodded... but...

"They don't really know who or what we are, Gerald," I reminded him.

"Ah. True. I could tell by the conversation with her that she thinks you're the only oddity here. That we're just a front for you. Your soldiers, as she called us," Gerald nodded as he put the letter back as he remembered his conversation.

"That means I'll be leaving for a short time... will you and everyone be comfortable without me here?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't we?" Gerald asked as he slowly slid his desk's drawer closed. He had an odd frown, as he wondered what I meant.

"Renn, the predator. The new possible member?" I reminded him.

He realized it immediately and flinched. He slowly sat down and sighed. "Well... you had said she was trustworthy, yes? Then I suppose we shall just have to endure," he said after a moment of pondering it.

"Thanks."

Gerald smiled a little abashedly as he slowly sat down into his chair. He drummed his fingers along the top of his desk and then coughed. "She uh... Is she a new member? Truly?" he asked.

"Yes. She had not known of the Society until a year ago," I said.

"Fascinating. Where did you find her?"

I shook my head. "She found us. She found the Sleepy Artist by chance," I said.

"Ah... I had heard of what happened. I hear there's hope for them though?" Gerald asked.

I nodded. "Always."

He nodded as well, growing solemn. "I'd never met them. Though we've received many of their paintings..." Gerald said.

"Then at least something of them will always remain," I said.

Gerald shifted at my words, but neither agreed nor argued with me. He instead looked to his right, to something on his desk. He reached out to touch, and I noticed the way his fingers lingered on whatever it was. Paper it seemed, since I couldn't see it from this angle. Maybe a letter or drawing.

"How have you been Gerald?" I asked him.

The man frowned but nodded. "Well. Busy, as always. I am glad Brandy will be staying here for a short time to help out, but she always brings... changes. Yet the world changes on its own anyway, so I suppose that's just part of the life we live," he said.

"In my experience most things don't change at all," I said.

"In your eyes nothing we do is new, so that's not a fair judgment," Gerald said with a small laugh.

Tapping the couch's backrest I was resting against, I wondered if that was true. Was that why I felt like nothing was changing really? Was it just because I already...

Gerald then coughed, not just once but thrice. I raised an eyebrow at him as he shuffled the paper on his desk that he had been touching earlier. "I uh... don't know how to say this Vim, but..."

"What?" I asked. What was wrong now?

"She's new here, and I'm sure no one will say or mention it, and I surely won't either! But uh..." Gerald hesitated.

Oh. Renn? What about her?

Gerald groaned and then went to rubbing the bridge of his nose, as if in pain.

"Out with it," I said.

"You must have stopped at the sanctuary... with her... right?" he asked with a start.

"We had spent a few days there yes, and..." I started to speak, but then realized what it was.

Gerald still hadn't look at me. He had gone a little red in the face, which didn't suit his pretty appearance at all. "Renn... she uhh... Kind of brought the scent with her and..." Gerald stumbled over his words.

"Ah. I get it. Yes. I'll make sure she bathes and washes her clothes," I said with a wave.

Gerald breathed a sigh of relief, and nodded quickly. "Thank you. I didn't know how to handle it and..." Gerald spoke fast as he sat back, looking as if he had just accomplished some kind of staggering task.

If he knew that she'd probably have gotten just as embarrassed as he was now upon being told she stunk, he might have gotten even redder in the face. I enjoyed the idea of it, but didn't share it.

"It's not her fault... and pretty much everyone knows what the scent is from, so will not judge her for it... but..." Gerald coughed as he nodded, and I waved his concerns away.

"I know. I'll let her know," I said.

"Thank you. Really. Truly."

"How about me do I stink too?" I asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said with a sigh.

I hadn't been...

Standing up from the couch, I glanced at the weapons lying against the wall. Renn had moved them, so they weren't resting on the shelves themselves.

She was gentle. Even if no one else noticed it.

Too gentle, even.

"I'll go grab her and toss her into the baths, then. Before the stink starts to linger," I said.

"Ah... sure... I uh... is there anything you'd like tonight? For dinner? Or drinks?" Gerald stood from his desk, excited at the prospect of being able to get me something unique.

"How about something for her? She likes tender meats. I got her a honeyed pig once, she enjoyed that," I said.

"Oh? Oh! Yes. Of course. I'll have Magda prepare something. Just for her or...?" Gerald watched as I walked around the couch to grab the bundle of weapons. No point leaving them here, Gerald would just panic all day if I did.

"Sure, I'll eat with her. Maybe if I do everyone will leave me be," I said.

Gerald sighed. "That depends on how well their little meeting went," he figured.

"Then might need to make enough for everyone. Oh... which room do you want to give her? It might become permanent, after all," I asked.

Gerald paused a moment and went into thought. "Does she have a preference, maybe?" he asked me.

"Probably something with big windows," I said. She liked to stare out of them, and liked to read. So something that got a lot of natural light.

"On the third floor near the end is a suite. It's been empty for a few years. We let that one noble stay in it years ago and she seemed to like it," Gerald offered.

I pulled the memories from the back of my mind to the front. "Years ago? Gerald that had been when Lumen was still a small port village," I said.

He shrugged.

"That'll do though. I'll let her have that one. I'll take the room across from her for now, then," I said.

Gerald nodded as I hefted the weapons and turned to leave.

"Welcome back, by the way. I'm glad you're here," Gerald said as I opened the door.

"Thanks. I look forward to leaving again," I said.

Gerald laughed as I left him in his office and went out into the hallway.

Closing the door behind me, I glanced up and down the hallway. It was empty... but warm. The sun was starting to set, and was now angled into this hallway. The many windows helped keep it warm.

Tapping the wall as I walked along it with a knuckle, I sighed and headed for the middle of the building. I knew Herra had probably taken Renn to the center community area. Where there were large rooms of tables, chairs and places to visit with one another.

Slowly walking, I studied the clean hallway once more. It was... mostly the same as I remembered it. The rug was new. It had been blue last time I had been here, like the color of the company's logo. Were they planning to change it, or was it just a change to be different?

Rounding a corner, I reached an intersection. I stepped off the red rug and onto the decorated tiles, as to head down the hallway which led to where our members lived.

I was careful not to break the tiles beneath my feet. They were sturdy enough to support my weight, but if I didn't step carefully... with a heel first, and not an even footing, then they'd crack.

As I walked down the hallway, it became more and more plain. Paintings became scarce, then non-existent. Windows went from big and fancy, to plain and eventually there weren't any at all.

Reaching another crossroad, this time one of the hallways led to a door. A door that was metal.

Walking up to it, I opened it gently. It was supposed to be hard to open, so humans would struggle with it, but for me it was still a little too easy... and the spring mechanism they utilized for the handles on these doors was... fickle. If I moved the handle too quickly or with too much strength it'd break.

It was made for them, not me. I'd need to warn Renn to be careful when opening and closing these doors. She wasn't as strong as me, but was closer to me in strength than she was them.

Closing the door behind me as I entered the section our Society called home here in Lumen, I noted the smell lingering in the hallway I entered.

Yes. Gerald had been correct.

I had simply not noticed, likely because I had been right next to her the whole time. I, like always, had adapted to the unnatural. Sometimes my bodies abilities were... too potent.

Sighing as I walked down the now decorated hallway, I noticed the colorful lamps lighting the windowless hallway. The lamps weren't the kinds that burnt with oil, and were using colored glass to give the hallway a colorful theme. Someone had too much time on their hands.

Although this giant building was huge, which was why Renn had confused it for a castle... the area which our members lived within was actually a little small. It was four levels, with the fourth level being an

open rooftop for members to relax in the open air without having to hide their features. The first level was the community area, with a few kitchens and places to visit and linger without being in anyone's way. Second and third floors were mostly rooms and storage areas.

I first went up a floor, to find the rooms we'd be using. I had to stand at one of the intersections for a moment to remember, but eventually found the corner Gerald had spoken of. It was the one in the southeast. Renn's room would be a little... isolated. But I knew he had not done such a thing maliciously.

He kept her close to the community, but far enough away that no one would be worried. Hopefully Renn understood.

I opened the door to her room, and peeked inside. It was clean, like everything here. People spent a lot of time, since we had a lot of time, to do such tasks such as tidying up. It had a huge bed, one that was actually a little too big for a single person. There was a bathroom, with running water... which I was going to have to explain to Renn on how to utilize. Even the Cathedral didn't have such features, thanks to the church being so against such progress.

Originally I had intended to start the bath for her before finding her, so she'd not stink up her room... but if I was going to teach her how to use them, then it'd be best to wait till she was here.

The room didn't have a balcony, but it did have two large windows that she could open. One even had flower pots hanging on its railing, though most of the plants within them looked a little decrepit. One might be salvageable but the others didn't look it.

Once I was sure the room was decent enough I left it and went right across the hall to mine. It, like most rooms that pointed inward and without windows, was small and bland. It didn't have its own bathroom, and the bed was small. It was a room for visitors, not residents.

I tossed the bundle of weapons onto the bed and left the room as to go find Renn.

Maybe I would be lucky and I'd find her alone, since she had scared everyone else off... but the moment I stepped down to the first floor, I heard the truth.

There were many voices, and they all sounded very happy.

"Of course they're happy," I complained as I headed for the noise.

## Chapter 122: Merit and Sofia

Merit was a very small girl... or well, woman.

She sat across the oddly shaped table from me, and was just barely able to put her arms onto the table. The chair was too small for her, and even though there was a taller one a few feet away... she hadn't seemed willing to go get it.

"I'm telling you, she'd be perfect for the bank, look at her! She'd make all those perverted old merchants salivate, especially if she wore this stuff!" Sofia said. She reached over to lift one of the little hooks on my left shoulder, where my backpack could attach to if I wanted it to rest on my left shoulder and not my right.

"And that's why you want to stay out of the bank, Renn. You'll become a product to be sold," Merit said. My ears twitched because of her voice. It was so... childlike. I heard a young girl speaking, yet she spoke with the monotone of a tired old woman. It made my senses go haywire.

"Please. She's just saying no because she's not tall enough to see over the counters," Sofia said. Sofia looked like a middle-aged woman, but had a beautiful smile. The kind that drew eyes. She also seemed able to look in different directions with her eyes without issue, which was really odd and off putting... but I didn't want to say that out loud.

Merit glared at Sofia, but only for a moment. "You're a predator Renn, be a guard. You get to stab people," Merit said.

I laughed a little, but was starting to realize that Merit was being completely serious.

She was supposedly a guard after all... even though she looked just like a little girl.

"Just don't work the depot, Renn... really. The people there are boring," Sofia said with a sigh.

"She'd distract the human workers. She's too pretty," Merit said with her emotionless tone.

"Where does Brandy work?" I asked.

The two went quiet and looked at one another. Sofia leaned closer to me, to rest her shoulder onto my own. "Brandy's a boss, Renn. She's the bookkeeper. She works wherever she wants to," she told me.

"I see."

"Is that who you're here to see?" Merit asked.

"Vim wants me to meet her," I admitted.

"Hm..." The two hummed as they thought about it.

Sofia turned to look at me, and I had to focus on the eye that stared at me. The other was looking at Merit. "Maybe she's not going to stay here?" Sofia asked.

"Who knows? Vim's always scheming stuff," Merit said.

I glanced at the white haired Merit, and wondered why she'd say that. Vim? Scheming? Honestly he hadn't seemed like such a man, from my experience. He had plans, sure... but it seemed he never really tried to put them into motion. Or if he did, he did so very slowly over the course of years and years.

"Speaking of schemes, did you see the way Herra glared at her?" Sofia leaned forward onto the table to whisper to her friend.

Merit nodded, and tried to lean forward too... but wasn't able to get very far. She was just too short. "I did," she said.

"What was that about you think?" Sofia asked.

"I'd like to know too," I said as I leaned forward to whisper with them.

Merit scooted upward, and I watched as she pulled her legs up under her as to kneel on the chair instead of sit. She was now able to lean across the table, to get close like Sofia and I. She glanced around for a moment before speaking.

As she looked around, I noticed her white hair flopped around in flocks... as if some parts of her hair were thicker and heavier than others. Yet they didn't look braided or bound by anything, like pins or ribbons... though maybe it had something to do with her bloodline. After all, her hair was a silver-white color. It was honestly pretty, even though strange. I'd never seen such a color of hair before on anyone, even the oldest didn't have such a pure white.

"Herra likes Vim," Merit whispered.

Sofia nodded, and I became far more focused on our conversation.

"Has for years. She's even tried sneaking into his bed," Sofia said.

"What?" I asked loudly, but flinched when they both shushed me. I nodded an apology.

Herra had been here but had left after the introductions. She had work to do, it had seemed. I had honestly expected more people here, but only Merit and Sofia had been waiting for me. Supposedly I'd meet the rest later, as their shifts ended and the day came to a close.

Yet even though alone, the two women seemed very worried as they lowered their voices even more. "Did you two enter the lobby holding hands or something?" Merit asked. Her voice sounded... very strange with her whispering. Either her lower volume made her sound more childish, or she was now actually interested in our conversation... because she no longer sounded monotonous. She now sounded excited. Childishly excited.

"No? I had been carrying bread, even," I said.

"Huh..." Merit frowned as she tried to think what could have happened.

"And they just got here, so it's not like she could have heard about anything, either," Sofia suggested.

"Whispering and scheming already?"

The three of us startled, to the point that Merit actually flew back so quickly in her chair she lost her balance.

Luckily Vim was already next to our table. With a steady arm he reached out and steadied both Merit's chair, and her herself. She blinked wildly in shock as she quickly regained her balance and sat back down, no longer sitting on knees. "Thanks," she said kindly.

"Jeez Vim! You know I don't like it when you do that!" Sofia complained. She sounded out of breath, as if she had screamed.

"I was being quiet, since you all seemed to be doing the same," Vim defended himself.

"Geh... I think I peed myself a little," Sofia groaned.

"That's disgusting," Merit coldly said.

It was, but it was understandable. I hadn't even noticed him entering the room either... and this room was big. There were half a dozen large tables, and thrice as many chairs. There were also two fireplaces, and neither was lit right now so...

I should have noticed his appearance and his approach. How was he so sneaky sometimes? I glanced over to the nearby entrance to the room, and figured he had entered from there... but... How had no one noticed? Both Sofia and I had that door in our line of sight. I should have noticed him walking over to us, even if just out of the corner of my eye.

"How've you two been? Other than your pants, Sofia... I apologize," Vim spoke softly, and gently, as he asked his question.

"Uh... rather well. It's nice to see you too, Vim... but I uh need to go now. We'll talk later, okay? I have a request for you, actually, if you'd listen," Sofia said as she slowly got off her chair. I tried not to look at her bottom, since it was rude.

"Well... I guess I owe you now, so sure," Vim nodded.

Sofia smiled warmly and nodded. "Thanks! See you later Renn, we'll talk again! Remember, pick the bank!" she seemed far too happy for someone who had just tinkled from shock. I waved at her as she hurried away to one of the nearby stairwells.

"Such an old woman, pissing herself from something like that," Merit said with a huff.

"You'd know," Vim said with a poke. She made an odd noise as he poked her in the forehead, causing her thick hair to dance as she shook her head.

Right before Vim's finger left her forehead, something sparked between it and her hair. It looked like static, and even came and went with a strange sounding popping sound.

"Jeez, you're such a tyrant," Merit groaned as she rubbed her head, but had a smile hidden beneath her arm.

"I do my best. And I apologize, but I need to borrow Renn from you," Vim said.

"Oh? So maybe Herra should be worried..." Merit said with a smirk.

Vim tilted his head and glanced at me, as if to find out what she meant... but I wasn't sure if I wanted to give him the answer. Even if it would make him smirk.

"Mind coming with me for a bit Renn? We have something we need to do before dinner," he said, ignoring Merit's smirk.

"Sure," I nodded as I stood from my chair. I pushed it back under the oddly shaped table, and was about to push the other chair that Sofia had left... but realized it was a little wet.

"I'll clean that up Renn. You just met her. Let her spoil her integrity with you later, if you'd kindly allow it," Merit said with a kind smile.

"Ah..." I awkwardly glanced at Vim who nodded at me, as if he agreed with her.

Merit slowly got off her chair. Once she was off it, I realized once again how small she was. She looked like a genuine child. "She's a gentle one, Vim. Look at her, she had actually been willing to clean up after Sofia," Merit said as she rounded the table.

"Sofia is... an odd one Renn, don't feel bad about it," Vim said.

"She won't be embarrassed either, Renn. Trust me," Merit added.

"Are... are you sure?" I asked as I looked between the two. They both nodded, seemingly in agreement.

With a sigh I nodded. "Alright. Thank you for meeting with me Merit, I enjoyed our conversation," I told her.

"Same. Now get going, before Vim just picks you up and carries you off," Merit said with a wave.

"I only do that to small people," Vim said.

Merit's waving came to an immediate stop, and then she glowered at Vim. "I'm going to steal your shoes when you're not looking," she threatened.

"Please do. They'll remind you how tiny you actually are," Vim said as he turned and stepped away.

The child-looking woman groaned and her shoulders rose up. She then made a gesture at Vim with both her hands, which I didn't recognize but it was obvious that it was ill-meaning.

"See you later Merit," I said as I went to follow Vim.

Her angry demeanor immediately transitioned into a happy one and she waved me away. "Later."

Following Vim down a hallway, to another stairwell, I wondered why he acted certain ways with certain members and not with others.

"Will she be okay? Honestly?" I asked.

"Merit? She can reach the chair if she tries, yes," Vim said.

I scoffed, and felt horrible. I had almost laughed. "I meant Sofia," I said with clenched teeth.

"Oh. Yes. Sofia is... well, she's older and timid. Sometimes things like that happen. She'll not avoid you or anything because of what happened, in fact she'll just forget all about it soon enough," he said.

"Hm... is she older than me?" I asked.

We reached the second floor, and Vim paused for a moment. "Yes. But not by much," he said as he thought about it.

"Great... does that mean I'll start doing that too?" I asked.

"Have you had dozens of children yet?" Vim asked as he headed for another stairwell.

"Huh...? No..." I was a little upset he'd even ask that. He knew I hadn't given birth yet... but then I realized what he meant.

For a few moments I followed Vim in silence.

Dozens of children. Yet she was here alone, it seemed.

"Are any of them still alive?" I asked Vim softly as we ascended another flight of stairs.

"No. Sadly no," Vim said gently.

I see. "Most of our members are like that, aren't they?" I asked.

"More than you'd think, yes," he admitted.

That was sad. Very sad.

Reaching the third floor, I paused at the end of the stairs to look down the hallway. Vim kept walking, but I waited a moment to take the place in. I hadn't been up here yet.

"It's one color here," I said. The second floor had different colored lamps... here it was all orange.

"Hm," Vim was already half way down the hallway.

Hurrying to follow after him, I studied the doors I passed. Some weren't just wooden or metal doors... some had designs on them. Some were painted, and others had plaques on them.

Pausing in front of a double-door, I stared at a mural. The doors were painted in full, and every few inches of the door had different designs. There were hundreds of smaller paintings, somehow painted in a way that the whole door looked like one singular painting.

The name Liina was painted amidst the many different scenes, seamlessly a part of the whole design.

"Liina?" I asked Vim as I hurried to catch up with him.

Vim paused to look around, as if to find whoever it was. Once he realized I was talking about the door with that name on it, he nodded at me. "A woman. She's actually... well... I'll let her introduce herself. She's about your height, but a little scrawny," he said.

Oh? Hopefully I could meet her soon. I liked her artwork. I especially liked the fact she was someone who would draw and paint on her bedroom door. She was probably someone I'd get along with well.

We rounded a corner and then another. After entering a rather... bland hallway, since all the doors suddenly became normal and without character, Vim pointed to a large door at the end of the hall. "That's your room. And for the foreseeable future, your home," he said.

I wanted to complain at his wording, since I knew he was internally hoping I'd actually let it indeed become my home... but I kept my mouth shut as I walked up to the door.

It was a wooden one, but it had metal plates securing the wooden panels. Either for support or decoration, I couldn't tell.

Opening the door, I hesitated right before I was able to look into it. I glanced back at Vim who was waiting patiently for me to open the door.

"Where's your room?" I asked him.

"Hm? Why?"

"To make sure no one sneaks into it for you, of course," I teased.

Vim frowned for just a moment, and then smiled softly. "Ah. Yes... Herra and Magda do both try occasionally. But don't worry, I have a wonderful repellent this time," he said as he crossed his arms and nodded.

Wait... Magda? Another woman! Really?!

"Repellent?" I asked. That word was one I hadn't heard often.

"Hm... I'm thinking maybe your clothes, might be good enough if I leave'em in front of my door," he said as he stared at me.

My... "My clothes...?" I glanced down at myself and wondered how to interpret that.

Did he mean to say if he left my clothes visible, people would think I was in his bed? Or was it some play of words that I wasn't understanding?

A long, weird, awkward moment passed... and then Vim sighed. "That went better in my head," he said.

"Oh... it was a joke?" I asked.

"Well, kind of... You see... uh..." Vim sighed as he glanced me up and down.

"What?" I asked. Why was he being so weird all of a sudden?

"Did you notice an odd stink at the sanctuary?" Vim then gently asked.

I gulped as I stood up straight. "Wait..."

Vim nodded without a word.

Lifting my shirt, and the leather that held it in place, I did my best to try and smell myself.

Per usual I smelled my own scent. The smell of my body. There was a smell of hair that was nearly fur, thanks my tail and ears. I could smell a little dirt too... but...

Looking at Vim, he nodded again. "The Clothed Woman has a unique scent... it is uh... well, it's lingering on you Renn. You need a bath," he said honestly.

I groaned as I let my shirt fall. "Really...! Why didn't you say anything?"

"I hadn't noticed!" Vim said.

"How could you not!"

"How didn't you? Your nose is as good as mine," Vim defended himself.

"I..." that was right... why hadn't I noticed? It was a horrible smell. Now that I was thinking about it, I really could smell it. Though I wasn't sure if I really stunk of it, or if I was just smelling it because he had brought it up.

"Yeah... So uh, take a bath. Toss your leather and clothes out for me, I'll get you something fresh to wear and will get these cleaned," Vim said.

"You're going to wash my clothes for me?" I asked him.

He nodded with a look that told me he wasn't sure why I'd even ask him that.

"Vim..." I groaned.

"What? Don't be prudish, do you know how old I am?" he asked.

"It's not that! I mean... I appreciate it but..." I wasn't sure what to say to him. I didn't want Herra or the others to get the wrong idea, thus ruining our potential friendship... yet at the same time...

Honestly I kind of liked the idea.

"You're making an odd face right now," Vim warned.

"I'm sure. Tell me, is it bad? Why didn't anyone say anything? What if they think I'm weird?" I asked him.

"You're fine. Everyone knows what that scent is, Renn," Vim said.

"Oh... so they know," I said as I realized it.

He nodded. "They'd not tell you that you stink, both because they'd worry they would offend you... but also because it would be rude to her as well," Vim said gently.

"Right..." I nodded. That was true. I'd hate to be that rude to her too.

"Now come on, I need to show you how to work the bath," Vim pushed me into the room, uncaring for my emotions. I resisted a little, so he actually lifted me... but did so by lifting me with his hands under my armpits. As if I was a child. Likely because of what Merit had said earlier.

"I wanted you to carry me into the bedroom, Vim, but not like this!" I said as we entered the room. As I said it I felt silly, and went a little red in the face... but...

Vim actually laughed.

Chapter 123: A Bonnet Upon Her Head

Renn now looked like a Lumen local.

She was dressed in browns and blues. A mix of the local trendy colors and the companies. She wore a blue bonnet hat now as well, and looked... far too at home amidst the workers of the company.

I was staring down at her. I stood on the second floor balcony, and was overlooking the main lobby. Renn was near the shelves on the western wall, where the ledgers and large chalkboards were located. She was with Reatti and another woman. A human woman, who I had heard actually knew about our society... though I had not ever talked to her myself. She was young, probably only twenty or so years old by the looks of it.

She was also pregnant, which surprised me. Not that she was pregnant at her age, of course... but that they were letting her work. Our company, although built for the society and not the humans, still respected their rights and treated them well. Usually by the time a woman was that far along in her pregnancy they'd be letting her stay home. Maybe there was more to her story than met the eye.

Reatti laughed, and her loud voice carried into the lobby and echoed for a moment. She and Renn seemed to be getting along wonderfully, which was a good thing. Reatti and her brother Brom were some of the few here I actually didn't need to worry about.

I had earned their loyalty with blood... and in turn they had earned my trust with theirs.

Renn was currently learning how the company divided up the jobs and compartmentalized everything. She had a clipboard in her arms and was continuously writing stuff down as she was taught one thing or another. Thanks to Reatti's boisterous voice, I could hear most of their conversation rather easily.

Right now Reatti and the human woman were telling Renn about a recent scam the nobles were falling for. Forged credit ledgers from the mining organizations and guilds up north. The way they spoke about it, and what I'd heard so far, told me that one of those mining companies was involved. Someone somewhere had access to stamps that were legitimate. Odds are one of the mining companies had been on the verge of bankruptcy and resorted to such methods to salvage themselves.

If they were able to acquire enough money that way and not get caught, they might just succeed.

If caught... well... This era was rather cruel in its punishments.

"And here's my idiot brother," Reatti introduced Renn to Brom, who just walked into the lobby from the trade depot.

"If I'm an idiot then I'd hate to think what you are. Can you even read?" Brom defended himself, and the two quickly went into their typical sibling spat.

Watching Renn as she happily watched the two argue with one another... I found myself smiling at her smile. She looked so genuinely happy, that anyone who saw her knew instantly that she was no threat.

That was probably why nearly everyone had already come up to me as to let me know they were more than happy to accept her into Lumen's Society. Even the ones who hadn't actually spent any time with her yet.

The only ones who hadn't yet were Liina, Lawrence, and Tosh. But Tosh was understandable... that man wouldn't even notice if a new member showed up or not. He was too lost in his own mind to care anymore.

Liina and Lawrence however weren't. Especially Liina... I had thought those two would have met by now and become fast friends.

Why hadn't she yet? Was something amiss?

Granted they weren't... the exact same thing... But they were so close in bloodlines...

Though, also granted, just because one was the same lineage as another didn't mean they'd just automatically get along. Look at all the humans. They hated each other for every which reason to exist.

"Lord Vim."

A man's voice drew me from my thoughts and I turned to look at the older human. He smiled eagerly as he slowly walked over. He had a large white wooden cane, and was leaning on it far more than he should. The thing looked stressed, as crooked as he did.

"Hey there Monroe," I greeted the elderly human man. I recognized the little ribbon tied to his belt. It had been Sally's.

He chuckled as he stepped up the railing, to rest on it next to me. "I'm glad I get to see you one last time... was starting to think I wouldn't," he said once he could.

"Hm... a poor reward for such a long and studious life, but if that's what you want," I waved at myself.

Monroe's chuckling turned into actual laughter, but it didn't last. He started to cough... a bad kind of cough. The kind that made people look up at the balcony at us.

I didn't say or do anything as Monroe did his best to get his coughing fit under control. I heard the lungs within him spasm and fail, and then after a few moments his coughing ended. "Ah... forgive me," he said weakly.

"It is fine, Monroe," I said gently.

He smiled and gulped. He looked up at me, and I realized he was now shorter than me. He was... slouching rather badly now. He used to be eye-level with me. And nearly as wide.

Monroe had used to look handsome. Strong. Stout. He had also been a very funny man, able to make the whole room burst into laughter with but a few words.

It had been that humor that had won him the heart of poor Sally.

She had perished years ago, yet Monroe had remained loyal to her. A true man.

"Anything I can do for you, my friend?" I asked him. For you Sally.

He frowned and shook his head. "I've made my peace, Lord Vim. I'll welcome the end when it arrives," he said.

I believed him.

"Just name it, if you wish for anything. If it's within my, or the Societies power, we'll give it," I said all the same.

Monroe looked away from me, to the lobby below. "I'm just glad to see that you're finding more of you. Sally would have liked her. She's vibrant," Monroe said.

My hand gripped the handrail a little too tightly, but not so tight it broke. Yet all the same it creaked as I studied the old man.

If Renn could only have known how beautiful a compliment she had just received was. If only she had heard it, and had known this man his whole life... and the woman he had loved and who had loved him.

Even in his final moments... he had cherished the Society beyond his own self. Even though Sally had told him it would have been more than okay to not do so. That it would have been okay for him to leave, and live as a human instead.

Glancing at Renn, I noticed the way she blankly nodded and listened to Reatti. Brom was now gone, as was the pregnant woman. Reatti and Renn were now near one of the corner offices, going over some kind of ledger book.

Had she heard...?

"Monroe... I want you to know you earned it," I told the old man, as I stared at Renn. Her hat twitched, and she actually glanced at me.

Looking back at him, I found the man had gone still. He turned to look at me, and his graying eyes had grown large. His wrinkled face, suddenly not. For the smallest moment... I saw Monroe. The man who Sally had died for. The human who had proved to many, most here, that humans could be trusted.

I nodded. "You earned her sacrifice. Well done."

Monroe's eyes blurred, and then tears begun to seep from his eyes. He lowered his head, and I reached out to pat the man on his shoulder. His thin bones, and thinner skin, somehow felt sturdy as I gently gave him a squeeze.

"Well done," I said again.

With one last pat on his shoulder, I turned to go. To let the man weep alone.

Heading into the hallway I headed for Gerald's office. I wasn't sure if he was there... but it was about time his messenger returned to let me know of the contract's status. The one with the mercenary captain, the buccaneer who wished to hire me.

I had worried originally about leaving Renn alone here already, but it had been a useless worry. Other than the three who hadn't approved of her yet, everyone else had not only approved her but had done so with joy. They liked her, more than should be possible.

But that really shouldn't have been too surprising.

This was Lumen. A place that was so intertwined with humans, their politics, and the markets... that the only way a member of our society could survive here was if they were human enough themselves to do so.

Plus, even though Renn was a genuine predator... she was also very human herself. Very understanding. Very gentle, and kind.

It would not surprise me at all if by the time this little venture was over... Renn would come to me and ask to stay here. To abandon the idea of joining me, and becoming a protector of the Society.

"If only," I whispered as I reached Gerald's office.

Opening the door, I frowned at the empty room. The lamps had been shuttered, too, implying he had no intention of returning anytime soon.

Great. Honestly it was time I walked around Lumen to check the city... but...

Heading down the hallway, towards the crossroads that would let me head to the depot section, I wondered if maybe I was in a hurry to fulfill that contract because of Renn.

Maybe I wanted to get away from her, if even for a little while.

I did... but was it for the right reasons?

Were my reasons ever the right ones?

Rounding a corner, I slowed to a stop at the figure walking ahead of me. Also heading to the depot.

"Wynn," I called out to the man.

He stood up straight at the sound of my voice, and turned around slowly. He smiled at the sight of me and happily approached me as I walked towards him.

"Vim! How's it going?" he asked.

"Nothing's changed since this morning," I told him. He had been one of the first to come to me in the morning, to let me know that Renn was welcome in his opinion. Though he hadn't talked to her himself yet, he had seen her from a distance this morning talking to Herra and Merit.

"Well that just means today's uneventful. Where ya headed?" he asked.

I gestured forward, and he and I returned to walking to the depot. "Anything new since my last visit?" I asked him.

"Hm... just getting busier. We had to hire more people, as always when we expand the company... But honestly nothing drastic. Everyone's all been fine, the guild's been fine, and the town's been in a good mood lately too. Lot of new trade routes have given people more work, thus more money," Wynn said.

"More monies is always good," I agreed.

Wynn shrugged, and I knew like most of our kind he didn't see the value in wealth at all.

"And as of now Vim, I don't have any requests for you either. I know Sofia does, but not sure about the rest," Wynn said.

"I know Sofia has one, thanks for looking out for her," I said.

Wynn shuffled a little as we rounded a corner and headed for the large stairwell that led downstairs. "Well... yea," he said with a smile.

As we descended, we left the well lit up hallway and into the darker stairs. As we did I noticed the obvious discoloration of his hair. Especially the spots where his horns had been at one time.

"Is Magdalena still bossy?" I asked him.

Wynn huffed. "Always. But that's just how she is. Better a stern boss than a human one!" Wynn said happily.

"That so?" Reaching the bottom of the stairs, the building became a little noisy. We entered a new hallway, one made of pure stone and lit only by a few small windows. The kind of small that was useless, almost. Too high and too small to see in or out of. The hallway led only one way; towards the main depot area.

"So uh... I hear she's a large cat?" Wynn asked.

I nodded. "Renn's a jaguar," I said. If she was so willing to let everyone know, then there was no need to hide it.

"Not sure what that is. Would it be bigger than me?" he asked.

"It'd hunt you," I said.

Wynn paused for a moment, and then laughed. "I see!" he found that hilarious.

"More and more visitors from the east are coming here, right?" I asked him as we neared the large door that led to the main depot.

Wynn nodded. "Sure are. More trade routes have made it easy for them to come. Not just the traders either, some are even moving here," he said.

"Wonder if I should go visit their lands," I said. If they were able to reciprocate in trade with Lumen... maybe they had advanced farther than I had thought already.

"Oh? Are any of our members over there?" Wynn asked, interested.

"There's actually a couple, but they're a little eccentric," I said.

"Aren't we all," he sighed as I opened the main door.

Once I did the world became noisy. People were shouting. Horses neighing. Wood and metal clanking against each other, as people moved and hauled stuff into place.

The giant warehouse had two sections. One to drop off and another to pick up. The roads of Lumen actually passed through the depot, so there were two lines. Each heading different directions.

"Well, I'll get to work. I hear we're going to have a feast tonight, see you there!" Wynn patted me on the shoulder and headed away.

I nodded as I scanned the depot. It was full, like always. Most the people here wore the blue and grays of the company, but other than Wynn who was now joining their ranks they all seemed to be human. I knew Magdalena was likely in one of the offices nearby, hidden by the stacks of boxes and barrels.

Walking along the edge of the depot, I stayed out of everyone's way as I studied the building everyone was working in. The crates were stacked high, seven high, and one section of the depot's walls was covered in barrels. I wasn't sure if they were empty or not, but they looked full. Maybe wine?

"You said four!" a man yelled at another, but I ignored their yelling match. Someone was upset over the prices.

There was always a few.

Above the paths that ran through the whole building, from the roads, were cranes. Large loops of ropes and pulleys. It was one of the reasons the company had been able to secure such a large portion of the storage market in Lumen. Most humans couldn't make such things, even though they continuously tried. They could make pulleys of course... but they didn't have the steel to make them able to handle the weight, nor the building supports to keep the roof stable as well.

I hadn't heard of it happening lately, but when we had first built this depot others had tried to replicate us. To share in the success.

Many had died when those buildings had collapsed upon themselves.

"Oh? Vim?" Magdalena's voice drew my eyes. She was standing at the arrival entrance gate, and waved at me. She held a clipboard in her hand and was standing in front of a large wagon. It was empty, so probably here to load up on something.

Walking over to her as she hurriedly gave orders to the men and women around her, she finished up by the time I reached her.

"How's work?" I asked.

"Great! We've had..." she checked her little ledger, "Twenty seven drops offs today, and it's not even noon!" Magdalena seemed to find our windfall in business to be a wonderful thing.

"That's good," I said. Who was I to burst her bubble?

Magdalena smiled and nodded, pleased with herself.

I gestured for her to follow me. I planned to walk outside of the depot for a moment. She hurriedly accompanied me as we stepped out of the gate, and out into the street.

Like the streets everywhere in Lumen, they were wide and made of stone... but the streets here weren't made for foot traffic. The stones weren't decorated, and also cut larger as to support the weight of the heavy wagons and horses hooves.

Magdalena and I walked along the sidewalk next to the depot, towards the other gate. The road that came from the other side of the building, which led to the port. It had been made that way so the stuff that flowed into the city from the south gate, and the ports which were the most heavily trafficked, would be easily able to reach the depot and deposit the goods as quickly as possible.

Which also allowed the goods needing picked up to be taken there as well, using the other road and path.

"I hear you're going to take the pirate's commission?" Magdalena asked as we walked along the depots stone walls. There weren't any other doors along the depot other than the four gates that let stuff in and out, so it was kind of a bland walk... but I wanted to make sure the structure was doing fine.

"I am. I'm supposed to hear a response from them any moment," I said.

"Interesting. They're giving us a port certificate in the east. Signed by the king of that country himself, I guess," Magdalena nodded, happy at the prospect.

"So I hear," I said.

Studying the stone walls as we walked along them, I wondered how they still looked so... new. Not only were they clean as could be, not a one was out of place. None had shifted, or cracked.

Granted this was just the outer layer. There were steel rebar bars within the stone walls, and another two layers around them, but...

The outer layer usually showed failure first, when building a place like this.

Magdalena happily watched me as we rounded the depot corner, rounding to the north.

A few coaches passed us by on the street, and I noticed the people walking on the other side of the street. People going and coming from work.

"How's the city been, Magda?" I asked her.

"Well enough? I heard from Brandy that there's a plague of some kind down south, but nothing like that's appeared here yet," she said.

"If it's a real plague, it will. It'll come with the goods," I warned her.

"Hm... But it just infects the humans' right?" Magdalena said callously.

"Right," I said softly. Did she forget we had hundreds of human employees here? Many of them good people, like Monroe?

Plus...

Pausing at the next corner of the building, I studied the massive structure that continued on for many city blocks. Beyond the depot was the storage warehouse, and then the societies households. Then the bank and its massive vault.

Walls circled the building with the bank vault, but not this section.

Only once had anyone tried to break into the bank, as far as I was aware. It ended very abruptly and no one has tried since.

They had been unlucky that I had been here at the time.

Rounding the depot, we headed for the entrance on the other side. The northern gates had lines in front of them, longer even than the ones in the south. I studied the wagons waiting to get into the depot, and the crates loaded on them.

"Most are from the fleet that docked yesterday night. Most of the goods are perishables, foodstuff and types of spices," Magdalena said.

"Whose our current port authority representative?" I asked.

"Liina's turn. She doesn't like it. She hates the sailors," she said.

"Ah..." maybe that was why she and Renn hadn't met yet. Too busy.

Watching the wagons enter the depot, and the rest of the lines following suit, I had no choice but to accept that this business was not just flourishing... it was probably the most prominent in Lumen. At least for this sector of the market.

Add this to the bank...

I gestured for Magdalena to follow me back into the depot. It was time she got back to work, and I stopped bothering her.

Entering the northern gates, I noticed Wynn as he directed a group of workers who were unloading a large wagon of crates. They were using one of the ceiling pulley cranes to do so.

Wynn could lift those boxes without such help of course, but the entire point of this place was to blend in as much as possible.

"Any odd goods or people lately?" I asked Magdalena.

"Just the eastern folk," she said.

"They're not true eastern people, Magda," I said with a sigh.

"To me they are. I've never been beyond this mountain range, Vim," she said.

I nodded. She was right. To her they'd be people from the east in that case.

I couldn't imagine seeing the world as massive, when only knowing such a tiny piece of it.

Didn't they ever get the urge to go see beyond the next hill? To see the mountains just beyond their sight? Even today I sometimes felt that tug, that calling, from sights just beyond reach.

A man whistled, signaling another wagon to be allowed into the depot. Wynn and the rest quickly went to work unloading the next wagon.

They were swift, and experienced. Odds were most the workers here had been with the company for a long time.

"Do you still close before dark?" I asked her.

"Of course. One hour before dusk, as you want us to," Magdalena nodded.

Good. At least Brandy hadn't circumvented my rules that much yet.

"Alright, I'll see you later Magda," I said to her.

She immediately lost her smile, but nodded understandingly. "Okay. See you at dinner."

Leaving the depot, I re-entered the company's main building. This time I used a different door, and followed a familiar unlit stone hallway until it merged with an even bigger and brighter hallway.

Stepping into the larger main hallway, I returned to the main lobby area. Instead of heading to the lobby itself however, I took a left into a smaller hallway. One that had a few young women walking together, they were dressed in the company attire and carrying folders. They stared at me as I passed, and I heard them wondering who I was as I went to check a certain office.

The office of Lawrence was open. It was a large room with multiple people, mostly women, and in the back I saw the familiar man. He was at his desk, writing diligently.

"Can I help you sir?" a younger woman asked, but another stood from her desk and coughed.

"He's here to see Lawrence, Trip," an older woman said quickly. I didn't recognize her, but she obviously recognized me.

The young woman raised an eyebrow as I smiled gently at her and stepped past her. Walking in-between desks and cabinets, I ignored the stares of those watching me.

Lawrence was focused in his writing. He was staring intently at the papers he wrote on, looking almost out of it.

The man had long hair as usual. It was thick and a deep glossy black, reflecting the lamplight and sunlight from the windows in the ceiling. He had at least tied it behind him today. The little strap he used to make his pony tail looked like a piece of common rope that had been smoothed.

Walking up to Lawrence's desk, I reached out and tapped the edge of it. The man's desk, like always, was cluttered. Papers, books, folders and even a rock? A hand sized rock was sitting not far from where he was writing. It wasn't ornamental, or being used as a paper weight so I wasn't sure what it was for.

"One moment," Lawrence said as he continued writing.

Smiling at him, I waited.

Then waited some more.

A few of the women started to whisper amongst themselves, but I ignored them. Especially since I didn't want to laugh.

Tapping the desk again, Lawrence sighed. "One moment," he said again.

One of the women nearby coughed. Loud enough to make it apparent. Lawrence paused in his writing and looked up. His long black hair smoothly fell along his shoulders as he sat up straight to see who was bothering him.

Then he smiled and shot to his feet. "Vim!"

He dropped his pen without a thought, and reached out to take my arm. We clasped arms, reminding me of the old days, and I nodded. "Lawrence," I greeted him.

"When'd you get back?" he asked as he squeezed my arm. His squeeze betrayed his appearance. He looked thin. Weak. Young.

He was far from weak.

"Yesterday. Just came to make sure you hadn't been absorbed into your desk yet or anything," I said.

"Oh please... Hm..." he looked down at his desk and huffed. He was probably quickly trying to think of who he could push his work on so we could go have a chat.

"I'll be here for awhile. Or well, not really. I expect to leave on a commission here in a few days, but I'll be back soon enough and will stay for awhile," I told him.

"Oh! Wonderful. Good. Very good... shall we meet over dinner then?" he asked.

"There's a feast tonight Lawrence, did no one tell you?" I asked.

"Uh..." he hesitated and a nearby woman stood from her seat. The one who had coughed and got his attention.

"Herra came in and informed you about it a few hours ago, Sir," she reminded him.

"Ah... yes. I suppose she must have..." Lawrence nodded, pretending he remembered.

"We'll share a drink then, at least. Don't forget," I pointed at him as to imply he better not.

Lawrence nodded and smiled. "Of course. I'm sure I can scrounge up a bottle or two," he said.

"Or two," I scoffed. A few of the women in the office giggled.

Yes. He was a drinker. And not just that... a hoarder. At least, of things he found precious. Valuable alcohol just happened to be one of those things.

"Tonight then," Lawrence nodded as I turned and left.

Waving him off I ignored the odd smiles from the women as I left. I didn't close the door behind me since it had been open originally, and I headed for the main lobby.

Before I even reached the lobby, Reatti found me.

She, like usual, ran straight at me. She rounded the corner, saw me, and in the next instant broke out into a full burst run right at me. Which was impressive considering she was wearing high heels.

I stood firm, but the moment she tackled me I stepped back to absorb her impact. So that she'd not get hurt or break anything, I spun a little. Letting her cling onto me as she was spun around. She laughed in joy, and I made sure her feet and ankles didn't smack into the nearby walls or decoration.

"Found you!" she happily said.

"You did."

"Gerald's looking for you. He's with a boy from those pirates," Reatti said as she gave me a squeeze. She buried her face into my chest as she hugged me, as if to mark me with her scent.

Meerkats were so odd.

"That's good," I said.

Patting her on the shoulder, I gave her a tiny push... to let her know enough was enough.

She complied with my wishes. She stepped back and released me... but not before giving me one last squeeze.

Glancing down the hall where she had come from, I found Renn standing there. Staring at us.

She had been walking around with Reatti, it seemed.

"Psst," Reatti whispered and gestured for me to bend down a little, so she could quietly tell me something.

I obliged and knelt a little to let her whisper into my ear.

"She's smart. Really smart. She can do any job here, easily," Reatti said seriously.

"Oh? Think so?" I asked as I stood back up.

Reatti nodded quickly.

Smiling at her, I was glad to hear it.

I mean, it had been obvious already. Renn wasn't just smart... she was able to remember everything and anything in nearly flawless detail.

She was perfect for a place like this.

"Is Gerald in his office?" I asked.

"He's on the second balcony, waiting for us to find you," she said.

"Then I better let him know I've been found," I said and stepped away.

"Are you going to become a pirate?" Reatti asked as we began walking towards Renn.

Renn had seemingly chosen to stand there, watching us. Letting us be.

"Well... for a short time. Unless they want help with something else," I said. Gerald had said they wanted help reclaiming a stolen ship. In a way that was piracy... kind of.

"Wish I could help, bet that'd be fun," Reatti said with a sigh.

"Oh? Really want to come?" I asked.

Reatti's happy smile quickly died off and she groaned... and then pretended to remember something. "Actually you know what? I have something to do here! Yea... my brother needs me to break his legs on Sunday, before the church bell rings, you know?" she said with a nod.

Renn giggled as we got close, and I studied the way she stood. It was the first time she's ever worn heels, so I had heard, yet she wore them comfortably as if she'd done so for years.

She really was comfortable in her skin, and it showed.

"Going well Renn?" I asked her as I stepped up next to her.

With a happy smile she nodded. "So far," she said.

"She's been doing great. Though she keeps looking at certain people like she's going to eat them, but I think as long as we feed her snacks throughout the day we can avoid that in the future," Reatti said with quick nods.

Glancing at Reatti, I then glanced back at the woman who had been the brunt of a joke... and was giggling happily because of it. Seemed Renn had spent enough time with Reatti to learn her personality well enough to know Reatti would never say something like that with actual spite or cruelty.

"You two go back to work then, I'll go say hi to the pirate," I said.

Renn's bonnet shifted a little, but I ignored her odd look as I stepped around her and headed for the nearby stairwell. Entering the main lobby, I walked up the stairs to the second balcony while ignoring Renn and Reatti's happy teasing. The two seemed to be becoming fast friends. That alone made me bringing her here worth it.

"Ah, there he is," Gerald noticed me as I reached the second floor. I studied the young man who sat across from him... and was a little surprised at how accurate Reatti's comment had been.

Boy indeed. He wasn't a man yet at all. Although tall and his tan and salt hardened skin gave him a very firm and healthy look, it was undoubtedly clear he was still a boy. Maybe not even fifteen years old yet, based off the slight pudginess of his cheeks and the fuzz on his upper lip.

He must be liked within his band, or hated maybe... usually mercenaries... especially the pirate variety, treated young men like him roughly. The fact they hadn't made him shave off that fuzz meant he was either hated and thus not given a hard time, or loved and thusly not given a hard time either.

"Sir Vim?" the young boy spoke, and I noticed he was trying to make his voice sound deeper than it was. All it did was make his voice crack more than it needed to.

"That's me," I said as I walked up to the two as they stood up.

"Vim, this is young Ronalldo. The current representative of the Yin Fleet," Gerald introduced me.

The young boy held out his hand, and I took it. Although young his hand wasn't soft, he had probably been raised on the boats. "It's an honor, sir," Ronalldo said firmly.

I nodded at him. "I'm told your crew have a request of me," I said.

He nodded quickly as we shook hands. "We do! Yes, please... We uh... we need help reclaiming a ship. One last seen to the north just a few days hence, off the horizon of the port near Whickler," he explained.

Whickler... not far from the Bell Church, although of course on the sea. The Bell Church was nestled in the mountains nearby a large lake, fed by the many rivers from the mountains. And that lake fed the sea.

"Then we better set sail soon, no?" I asked.

"Oh yes sir. Mother..." the boy coughed. "Marshal Grilly would like to set sail tomorrow night, with the tide, if you'd be willing," he said.

Mother...?

I was about to pester him for it, but I could tell by the boy's face that he was now panicking a little.

He wasn't supposed to have said that. Not here. Not aloud.

In front of me that shouldn't have been an issue, considering my relation with the Yin family... but we weren't alone. Even if Gerald was the leader of the Animalia guild, who was my de-facto representative... the Yin family didn't trust the Society. They trusted me.

"Then go let your marshal know I shall be on your deck by midday tomorrow. You have my blood, young Ronaldo," I said and held out my hand again.

The boy stood up straight and went wide eyed. He quickly took my hand, and I noticed it shake this time. "Sir!"

Right after our hands separated the boy gave me a navy salute, though one from a different land's navy. One from the east. Afterwards he hurried and turned, nearly running down the stairs as he left. He left in such a hurry a few of the workers in the lobby had actually startled at him.

"Mighty young boy for a pirate," Gerald mused.

"The best start young," I said.

"They call her marshal? That's not a navy title is it?" Gerald asked.

"No. But that's the point. They use that title to trick those who listen and hear... Consider it a tactical decision," I said.

"Ah... don't know how often that'd actually be needed, but sure," Gerald said with a shrug.

"In their world, it works wonders. It makes their enemies improperly discount and improperly judge them. Since other navy's and ship captains will think they're fools who are commanding their first ship or fleet, from a mainland army," I said.

"Fascinating. Wonder who taught them such a tactic...?" Gerald asked with a smile.

"Whoever it was, I bet they're a bastardy genius," I said with a frown.

Gerald chuckled as I glanced down over the nearby balcony's railing. Down below, near the stairs still, were Renn and Reatti. They were talking to one another about something Reatti had heard earlier. Some kind of newly opened restaurant or something that was supposedly tasty. They were making plans to visit it together.

While I stared at her, I noticed the top of her bonnet shift a little. Then she turned her head, and then looked upward. At me.

She smiled at me, holding my gaze for a short moment before she returned to talking to Reatti.

Tapping the railing, I sighed and turned back to Gerald. "Got anything you want in Whickler?" I asked.

Maybe I'd be seeing that boat sooner than I promised.

I needed to get away from her for a while. Even if I didn't want to admit it.

## Chapter 124: To Spar and Shop

The old woman was more than calm, willing to be very patient as I stared at the glass bottles of paint.

She had asked if I could tell the difference between the two colors, but it was obvious they were different. I didn't need help to tell the difference in their blue hues... but I did need to consider which would mix well with the other colors, to make that strange shade of dark purple I would need for the painting.

"Think you could teach me to paint, Renn?" Reatti asked from behind me. She was looking at the paintings hanging on the wall nearby.

"I could," I said, and decided to just get both of them. Better to have both than to get just one and have chosen the wrong one. Putting both into the little wicker box that the old shopkeeper wanted me to use as a basket, which was on the woman's counter, I went back to the wall to find the next color I needed.

"It'd be nice. Would paint my brother and then set it on fire," Reatti said with a happy sounding tone.

"That would be amusing," I said.

The old woman who had been watching me with a keen eye actually looked away, and seemed to calm down a little thanks to Reatti's words.

Maybe she thought only wealthy nobles could speak about such crazy things.

Picking up a dark gray color, I paused as to remember the painting in my head. Yes this color was needed too.

Putting the glass bottle of gray into the box, I went back to the wall of glass bottles.

They weren't that big. About the size of my curled up fist... but I wasn't too worried about the quantity. I didn't plan to paint it as largely as Amber had done. The canvas I had picked out, all three of them, were about half the size as the ones she had used.

Big enough to be detailed for Vim, but small enough to not have to take me weeks to paint or lots of resources.

Reatti hummed as she looked at a new painting. One that looked like it was morbid. I had only glanced at it, since it had been of what looked to be the remnants of a war. The painting had lots of dead bodies, and other nasty stuff in it.

"Is this about the Wright Massacre?" Reatti asked the old woman.

"Oh? You recognize it? You're very well read, young lady," The old shopkeeper sounded happy that Reatti had recognized it.

Glancing at Reatti, I noticed the look on her face.

Knew about it? Hardly.

She must have seen it.

"It was painted by my grandfather. He said it had taken nearly a year for the carnage to fade away," the old woman said.

"Hm," Reatti nodded, and I wondered if that meant she was as old as me... if not older.

She didn't act it all the time, but I was starting to realize that most of the older ones rarely did act their age.

That probably explained me... and Vim, in a way.

Picking up another few bottles, I decided it was enough for now. Putting them all into the box, I quickly went over the colors again... and the brushes and knives and...

"A palette, surely?" the old woman offered her insight.

"Ah. Yes. Please," I nodded.

She smiled and went to procure one.

Honestly I didn't absolutely need one. I usually painted each color at one time. But there was no harm in getting one just in case.

"Is that all then?" Reatti asked as she stepped up next to me.

I nodded. The colors... the brushes and other utensils... Some chalk and powdered charcoal... The three canvases...

Wonder how much it'd all be.

The old shopkeeper returned and placed a finely detailed palette into my box. It looked... too fancy, honestly. She must have picked the priciest one. Maybe I looked like a woman with more money than sense.

"Credit or...?" the woman asked as she pulled around the little note she had been scrawling on as I added items to my box.

"Coin," Reatti answered for me.

The old woman once again looked at us as if we didn't belong in her shop. "The total will be two hundred and ninety five silvers, young ladies," she said stiffly... as if expecting us to be shocked at the number.

It was hard for me to be surprised, since I had no idea if that was a lot or not.

"That's robbery... but if that's what you want, Renn," Reatti said with a shrug.

"Do I have enough?" I asked her.

"Oh. I'm sure," Reatti smiled softly which told me she was looking forward to proving this old woman wrong.

Digging out the gold coin I had gotten from Gerald, I held it out for the older woman.

"Oh my," she frowned at the sight of it as it fell into her open hand.

"Is that not enough?" I asked, a little worried. I knew I could pay with credit if I needed too, which was partly the reason Reatti was here... but I hadn't really wanted to.

"Oh plenty dear. I'll need to go get you change, one moment," she said as she stepped away and headed back into her office.

"Hm... not the reaction I was hoping for," Reatti mumbled.

"Too old maybe," I said just as quietly.

She nodded, agreeing with me.

A few moments later Reatti and I had been given our change, and unmarked leather bags to hold our items. The canvases weren't really small enough to fit them, so Reatti carried them for me.

"Shall I summon a carriage for you?" the old woman asked as we went to leave.

"We will be fine, thanks though! Have a great day!" Reatti said as we left.

"Come again," the older woman bid us farewell.

Leaving the shop, Reatti and I started to head back to the guild house.

"That coin was not the same one you got, was it?" Reatti asked.

"No. I kept that one as a souvenir. I asked for another from Gerald," I said.

"Ah... so you're the sentimental type. Good to know," she said.

"Am I?" I asked her and myself.

She nodded.

"How'd you notice it wasn't the same?" I asked.

"That was a newer minted one. The one he gave you as a tip was an older one. Different faces," she said.

Ah... they had been. It was surprising to hear Reatti was that observant. Although she had studied the one the King had given me, she hadn't done the same with the one I had just paid with. That coin had only been visible for a few moments.

As we rounded a corner, to head to the main road that led back to her home... I noticed the storm off in the distance. Far out at sea.

"Do you get a lot of storms here?" I asked Reatti.

"Oh yea. It's the sea, of course. That one does look... a little bad. But by the time it reaches here it'll be mostly rain," she said.

"I see." I wonder if this sea was... different than the one I had spent time on a long time ago. This was supposed a sea surrounded by land and not wide and open like the other. Maybe that changed things.

While we walked, I noticed the wagons making their way to the same destination as we were. "Does the company ever... not open? Or is it busy all the time?" I asked.

"Busy all the time. We only close for a few holidays, and only because the city and humans would throw a fuss if we didn't," she said.

"I take it you're not religious then?" I asked her.

"Not like my brother is," she said.

"Oh? Brom is?" that was interesting. Maybe I wouldn't hurt him too badly later then.

She nodded and sighed. "Ever since he got hurt, he's been... weird. But it's fine. At least it means when I kill him he'll get to see his god or whatever," she said.

Smiling at her strangeness, I nodded. "Right."

She was so different than the brother and sister I had known back then. Lujic and Ginny. The human children I had stayed with for so long.

They had been so sweet. So gentle with one another. Part of the reason I had stayed with them was because their sibling relationship had made me jealous.

My own experience with siblings was... like Brom and Reatti's, yet not.

They joked about their hatred for one another.

We hadn't.

"See that?" Reatti pointed at a building to our left. It was big, but not as big as the guild was.

I nodded.

"That's one of our competitors. They tried to make a depot there. They had to close it earlier this year. Idiots thought they could just stroll in and take over," she said with a smirk.

"Oh...?" Interesting.

"And over there is an old warehouse we used to use. There's a sinkhole beneath it. Some old well or something that broke, so now it's empty," Reatti pointed across the street to another large building.

Sinkhole...

As we walked, Reatti went to telling me about the local area. The businesses we owned, and the ones we wouldn't buy even if they begged us to do so. It was a little interesting to hear how... prideful she was, of the Society and its ventures.

While she told me of a road that had houses, where our workers lived, I noticed a pair of figures in an alley we were passing. They wore large cloaks, maybe because they feared the upcoming rain from the incoming storm.

"Ignore them. There're always beggars around here... even though Lumen's guards chase them away each night," Reatti said.

"Is that what they were?" I asked. They hadn't looked it.

"Probably," she shrugged. Seemed she didn't care much.

Reaching the depot, Reatti and I just walked right in. She ignored the people loading and unloading, and the stares we got of the merchants who watched us as we passed.

Entering the main building, we walked into a rather dark hallway. "And we're back. Well? Have fun?" Reatti asked as we headed down the hall.

I nodded. "Yes. Thank you Reatti. I appreciate it," I said.

"No big deal! Next time let's get something to eat before we come back," she said.

"Oh... I'm sorry; I should have got you lunch or something huh?" I realized I had been rude.

"Naw, we needed to bring this all back. You and I don't need to worry about being mugged or anything, but we can't let people know that," Reatti waved it off easily.

"I see... Still, I apologize. I had been absorbed in the task," I said. I had made a promise after all.

"It's all good, really. Remember that restaurant I told you about?"

I nodded. "The one with the weird tasting noodles," I said.

"Yeah. Just take me there... how about tomorrow?" she asked.

"Sure."

She giggled and stepped closer to me. Her shoulder brushed against mine, as if to give me a tiny hug. She guided me around a corner and to a stairwell, as she giggled happily.

"Should we invite your brother too?" I asked.

"Don't you dare!" she shouted as we reached the metal door of the Society.

I smiled as I nodded. I had expected that answer.

Reatti opened the door, and I noticed the way she seemed to struggle a little with the handle. She had to push down with a little bit of an oomph.

"Difficult with one hand," she commented as we entered.

Really...?

I closed the door behind her, and as she turned go head down the hall... I tried to open it again.

The handle was easy to manipulate.

Closing the door again, I made sure it was latched and went to follow her. She glanced at me with a smile, to see what I was doing. "Making sure it was closed," I said.

"Ah. Yea. It does sometimes feel like it doesn't, huh?"

I nodded.

As we headed for my room, I noticed the smell of food being cooked. It was later in the day... almost time for dinner...

"You're going to spar with my brother right?" Reatti asked as we reached my room.

"Yes. Want to watch me beat him?" I asked as I opened my bedroom door.

Reatti giggled, but shook her head. Oddly she stayed in the hallway as I went into the room to put the art supplies away.

"Sorry, but tonight's my night to help cook. Maybe another time," she said as she handed me the canvases.

"You could have come in Reatti... it's not like there's anything in here anyway," I said.

"Ah... Thank you, Renn... but this is just the way I am. Please don't be offended by it," she said gently.

Staring at her, as I held the canvases... I softly nodded. "Okay. I can respect that," I said.

"Thanks. And thank you, Renn, for letting me shop with you. I'm going to help cook... you uh... enjoy swinging swords with my brother. Gods that sounded weird. Don't ever let me say that again," Reatti made a weird face as she stepped away.

I laughed at her and waved her off. "Thanks again Reatti!"

Once I put the canvases away too, I hurried to grab my sword. I didn't attach it to my belt, and then headed for the rooftop.

I wasn't sure if he was there yet... but our promise had been to spar before dinner. He might even be tired of waiting for me, though Reatti and I had told him we'd go shopping first.

Honestly... as happy as I was, and excited, to paint that picture for Vim...

I was also excited to win the bath.

After all, it wasn't just a bath with Vim. It was more than that. It represented far... far more...

It'd mean he'd have to acknowledge me. Not just as a woman, but a possible partner. It'd mean he'd let me join him, and wouldn't tell me that I wasn't good enough again and...

Opening the door to the rooftop, I wasn't too surprised to find Brom waiting for me. He was sitting on one of the many benches, staring up at the oncoming storm clouds.

"I'm sorry Brom, were you waiting long?" I asked as I hurried over to him.

"Not at all. Did you get your painting supplies?" he asked.

"I did. Your sister helped me out," I said.

"You can be honest and tell me she's useless, you know," he said with a smirk.

"Honestly..." I shook my head at him. As I did, I remembered I had my hat on. Taking it off, I also let my tail out freely.

"So... I take it you've been sparring with Vim?" Brom asked as he slowly stood from the bench. As he did I noticed him lift his sword.

His wasn't in a sheath. And it was... a little thicker than the one Vim used, or my own. Yet it was the same silver steel as ours.

The biggest difference however, was it had dents in it. And looked... old.

And it was sharp.

"Yes. I have been. A few months now," I said.

"Good. So you know the process, at least," he said.

"I... think so?" I said.

"We stop before hurting one another. Don't actually stab me, please," he said.

"Oh right. Yes. I know," I nodded.

"Good. Also I'm told that if at any point you get what might be considered a killing blow on me, I'm to immediately castrate myself and jump off a cliff. So... well... let's not let that happen, okay?" Brom said.

I laughed at him and wondered if that had been Vim's words, or his sisters.

"Well shall we?" I asked as I drew my sword from the sheath.

He nodded. "May as well. It's going to rain soon," he said as he stepped away from the bench... and out into the open.

Following him, I took up a stance across from him. For a tiny moment... my heartbeat quickened... then it relaxed as I took a few breaths.

I can do this.

Brom stood still, holding his sword up with a single hand. His other hung a little lifelessly on his side, but I knew it wasn't because he couldn't use it. Unlike the side of his face, and neck, his arm was fine.

Maybe he didn't use both hands to swing his sword? Vim did that sometimes. Maybe he was trying to mimic him... or maybe all men did that?

"Ready?" he asked me.

I nodded. "Ready."

Time to do it. Time to get what I want.

The first real thing I've wanted in a long time. Not a home. Not a friend. Not a place...

But something special. Something for myself. For me.

Winning wouldn't actually give me Vim, of course... but it was the start. The beginning. A chance.

A chance to earn him, and his trust.

And all I needed to do... was swing this hunk of metal.

Blinking, I took one last breath... and then nodded.

Brom nodded back... and I charged.

His sister was weaker than me.

They weren't predators.

He wasn't large. He was about my height, and nearly as thin. He wasn't Vim.

I was stronger.

I reached him in the blink of an eye, and with a rush I swung my sword upward at an angle. Straight towards his face.

Brom blocked the swing, and I relished the sight of his sword flying upward.

He didn't have my strength! Just like his sister! He wasn't as strong as me!

I smiled, and stepped inward. To bring my sword back down. To strike outward, and up, to stop just right in front of his side and...

And...

And win...?

I blinked, staring at the dark cloudy sky in front of me.

"Huh?" I asked myself.

"Whew... you're strong. Seriously strong. That almost broke my sword," Brom's voice came from above me. Directly above.

Blinking, I tilted my head and found him standing above me. He was studying his sword... and I was staring at him from...

The ground...?

He had knocked me onto my back? When? How?

Rolling over, I shook my head and felt around. I was fine. My sword was still in my hand... yet I had been on the ground. Lying on my back, as if taking a nap.

"How...?" I slowly got up, wearily... not because I was hurt but just in case I was.

Looking up at the sky, I was thankful to at least see that the clouds looked the same. They were rolling along slowly, thanks to the wind, so it wasn't because they hadn't moved.

At least I hadn't passed out.

"Sorry about that. You okay? You startled me," Brom quickly apologized as I stood up and looked around.

"I think so," I said. Yes. I was fine. Nothing hurt, or even throbbed... yet...

"I flipped you. It's... a tactic we weaker folk need to rely on, when facing those as strong as you," he explained.

Flipped me...

"You used my momentum against me," I said, understanding it.

He nodded. "Fascinating. Yes. I did. You shot forward so fast, all I had to do was..." he shuffled his hands around in front of him, showing me how he had done it.

Fascinating? More like insulting.

I thought I had him. I had been that confident.

My confidence could have killed me, had this been real.

"Can we go again?" I asked, getting into stance.

"Sure."

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"You mean my sword? Yes. Now that I know how strong you are, it's fine," he said.

My eyes narrowed at his confidence... and I charged again.

This time I didn't put all my strength into the first blow, but instead went for his legs. Vim always blocked and handled it, but he didn't like it.

Maybe someone he trained had the same trait.

He didn't.

Brom easily blocked my first swing, and then an elbow thumped me in the side of the head.

I stepped back, wincing at the throbbing of my temple.

"Sorry! I uh... I'm sorry. You alright?" Brom quickly stepped forward, lowering his sword and extending his hand to me.

"Yes. I'm okay," I said. My right eye watered a little as I blinked the pain away.

"My bad Renn... you uh... you're fast. Sorry. It's been a long time since I've had to be so diligent," he apologized.

"It's okay. Again, please," I said as I got ready again.

He nodded and raised his sword.

At least... at least he kind of looked worried. Brom had an uncertain expression on his face. Which... which maybe...

This time Brom was the one who started the engagement. I accepted it, and blocked his first strike easily.

For a few, breathless moments, we exchanged blows. Our swords skidded along each other, making odd sounds in the process.

Those blows continued... and I started to feel my heart increase in speed. Not because of the physical effort, or worry over getting hurt...

But rather...

Brom dodged one of my swipes, then another. Then he ducked a stab.

And did so effortlessly.

A strange panic filled me as I increased my efforts. I swung harder. Faster. I started to take risks. I started to test my limits, in both skill and strength and...

Swinging the sword even faster, I felt my heart ache as I watched him effortlessly block and direct my attacks away from him. Parrying them away as effortlessly as Vim would have done.

Why!

Why...?

"Whoa," Brom sidestepped a hard thrust, and then I had a sword at my side. Brom held it there, point first into my ribs... and I closed my eyes and focused on breathing.

"You're actually very fast... but are you alright? You seem... unsettled," Brom said as he stepped away, pulling his sword away from what had been a killing blow.

"I'm... fine..." I lied.

Brom stepped back into position, and I glared at him. How? How was it possible that I couldn't even make him try?

Was I that bad? That weak? Surely not.

I was strong. Stronger than him. Stronger than his sister... And it wasn't as if I was completely unskilled. I had techniques. I had combinations. Taught to me by Vim himself... so... so why?

Why couldn't I win?

Brom ended up winning in even fewer moves this time. I glared at his sword that lingered a hair over my head, while mine hung pointlessly in the air nearly a foot away from him.

Why?

Getting back into position, I nodded at him... then charged in before he nodded back.

Even when I swung with all my strength. Even when I tried the techniques Vim had taught me. No matter how fast or how smoothly I swung the sword... no matter how well I blocked, dodged, or parried...

Why couldn't I win?

I lasted a few more exchanges this time... yet somehow ended up in the same position as last time. Me with my sword out, touching nothing, and his sword resting on top of my head. My ears could feel the weapon's cold metal.

"Dead," Brom said the word easily. Without a strain in his voice, even though I was heaving.

I growled as I hurriedly stepped back and nodded. I charged forward, and didn't even give him time to get into position.

The worst part wasn't that I couldn't win...

It was that Vim had obviously known.

Then yet... why had he promised a reward to Brom for not letting me win? If it had been this obvious to him?

Did he... did he despise the idea of being with me that much?

Was I going to let this opportunity just... pass me by? Forever?

He had finally said it! He had finally vocally said, and given me a chance... given me hope to...

Yet if he had known I'd have failed all along... then had he actually? Was I just... foolishly believing in the impossible?

"No!" I shouted as I swung my sword down onto Brom's. He frowned at me, blocking it as he spun his sword to deflect it.

Ducking his swipe, I saw an opening and rushed to take it.

I stepped in, sucking in air with a rush as I swung my sword with both hands. I put my all into the swing, twisting my whole body along itself, to keep the momentum and...!

Then my sword clanged as it hit the side of his, and then flung upward.

My sword left my hands as Brom hit it away. It flew into the air, and while I stared wordlessly at where my sword had been... and watched as Brom slowly placed the side of his sword onto my shoulder, I flinched when my sword landed behind me. It clattered loudly as it bounced on the stone.

"You have skill. Or rather... you will have it. You're just... unpolished? Or maybe unseasoned? Have you never been in a real fight before?" he asked me.

Brom was no longer scared of me. In fact, he was now looking at me as if he pitied me.

Lowering my hands, which had been lingering in the air where I had been holding my sword... I let them drop to my sides.

"Not like this," I said honestly.

"Hm... that's not a bad thing, really. In time you'll figure it out," Brom said with a nod. He sounded cheerful, but I could tell he was more so trying to cheer me up.

"I see," was all I said.

I had failed. And even if I picked up that sword... there was nothing I was going to be able to do to change that.

It had only been a few days since Vim had left... but it didn't matter. Even if I had months, there was no way I could beat this man. Not right now. Not the way I was.

Which meant...

Brom coughed, and I blinked. Had I started to cry? No... my eyes were still dry. Thank goodness.

"How about we stop here for now...? We can go at it again tomorrow. Is that okay?" he asked. He must obviously see my distraught emotions. It was probably all over my face.

"Sure. Thanks Brom," I said. I hated how hollow my voice sounded. Keep it together Renn... at least or a few more moments.

I turned and headed for my sword. It wasn't as far away as I had thought it was. It had only landed a few strides away.

"You really did do well, Renn. Especially for someone new at this. I can tell you've not been doing it long... yet you're good! I can see why Vim wants to train you!" Brom said as he went to put his own sword away.

"Thanks," I said... but didn't want to hear it.

Even if he sounded, and was, genuine in his compliments.

I didn't want to hear them.

Since I had just found out that I was not good enough.

Forget getting him to take a bath with me. Forget getting him to give me a chance at having a relationship.

I wasn't even good enough to stay with him. To become a protector. To help him.

I wasn't good enough.

Picking up my sword, I slowly made my way over to where I had left the sheath. I stiffly put it back in, and then glanced at Brom. He was staring at me with an odd expression... standing there quietly.

"Thanks again. Tomorrow, okay?" I asked.

He nodded.

I nodded.

Turning, I headed for the door... and was thankfully able to open it without issue.

Walking down the stairs, my vision became blurry... and I barely noticed it as I reached my bedroom.

Opening the door, I slowly shut it behind me... and fell to my knees.

Tossing my sword aside, I didn't even care that it slid out of its sheath as I barely got a breath into my lungs... and then I broke.

Covering my face with my hands... I wept.

Chapter 125: A Feast and A Promise

Walking out of the large room, I gave my final good-nights once again to the few who were left.

Merit, the woman who looked like a child, was slumped over one of the tables. She groggily waved goodbye, slurring as she drooled. She was drunk beyond measure, and didn't even notice she had a bunch of her silver colored hair in her mouth.

Sofia sat across from her and was laughing at Merit. The two other tables were exact opposites of one another. One table sat a man named Tosh, who was still staring into his full cup. He hadn't taken a single sip from it since sitting down hours ago. Nor had he said a word. Sitting with Tosh was Brom and a man named Lawrence. Those three had been sitting with Vim for most the night, talking quietly as they drank. The other table, where I had been originally sitting, was now mostly empty. Reatti, Herra, and a man named Wynn, were all that remained there. Though Herra was holding her head, groaning in pain from a headache that had been progressively getting worse since she started drinking.

Stepping out of the room, I released a small breath of relief. Honestly I had wanted to leave some time ago... but...

But...

"Ah she's throwing up!" someone shouted, and I heard someone hurl. I laughed softly as I headed down the hall, away from the noise.

Out of everywhere I had been so far... this place was probably the one I'd have chosen to stay at. At least... so far. I'd only been here two days so far, so there was a good chance I'd come to find something I didn't like about it... but so far...

Walking slowly down the colorfully lit up hallway, I tried to think of the things I didn't like about this place.

The work was simple. Even if I had to work in the large trade house, where they loaded and unloaded goods... I'd not find it unfavorable. I was strong enough to not be bothered much by such physical labor. And working in the center lobby, it was mostly paperwork. Administrative stuff. Most of the positions weren't even required to talk to anyone outside of the guild. Most of the people who worked in the back offices and rooms never left those rooms throughout the day.

I hadn't worked in the bank yet, but something told me it'd be similar. Easy going. Fun. A happy environment, which would end up not feeling like work at all.

Although in one perspective the work being simple made it a good thing, it also made me worry. Could I spend decades here? Working such monotonous tasks day in and out? Somehow it worried me... yet I honestly could not complain about the city, or its people.

Then of course... once you added in our members...

There were a few weird ones. Tosh, who I had just met during the dinner, hadn't even looked at me. He had entered the room, sat at his table, and only moved when Vim had put a cup of alcohol in front of him. Yet he hadn't drunk from it. Just held the cup.

Everyone seemed to be used to it, so I hadn't worried for him... but it was obvious the poor man was not okay. Something must have happened to him.

And then of course there was Merit. I wasn't sure if it was because she was stuck in a child's body or not, but she was a little... prickly. She wasn't rude by any means, but she sometimes said or did something that made me blink and pause for a moment. I felt as if she hated the world around her... which was too bad.

Then... there was Reatti.

She had taken me under her wing rather quickly. Within hours I had begun to feel as if she and I had known each other for our whole lives. She was simply that good of a person, and was amusing too. Although I really wasn't sure what to think of how she always seemed to run at Vim and hug him.

Rounding a corner, I realized I was walking in a large circle. The inside of the guild house was this area, where everyone lived... and it was basically one giant box. The hallways all met with each other, and circled around the building. There were four entrances, which were large metal doors. Vim had warned me last night to be careful opening and closing them. Which had been amusing, since as he opened one as to show me how to do it he had broken the handle.

Herra had not found it amusing at all, however, when I went to tell her he had broken it.

He couldn't leave the door until it had gotten fixed. No one could. There weren't a whole lot of rules here, but the main one was to always be very aware of the houses.

Protect the houses, as Reatti had said.

Keep an eye on the doors. The hallways that led to them. The people who lingered near them. Protect the houses, and those who lived within.

It was... odd... They had built a giant home for themselves, yet had done so by making that very home a hotbed of activity. The bank alone had hundreds of people come and go a day, let alone the workers. Then there was the large warehouses that exchanged cargo, which had dozens of wagons and carts a day pass through it.

Rounding another corner, I heard the sounds of everyone once again. I had rounded the whole house, and was about to walk in front of the large room we had all just had dinner in.

That would be embarrassing... so...

Finding the first new hallway, I decided to walk down it instead.

I knew where my room was. This place was large, but not that large. There were technically four floors, but the top was a roof. A roof garden, hidden thanks to the large building's rafters and pillars. A place that everyone could go outside, without having to worry about hiding their traits or having to act human.

As far as I was aware the third floor was mostly storage. My room was on the third and was in the southern hallway. Yet the window pointed eastward. It let me wake up with the sunrise, which was nice.

The new hallway I was walking down led to kitchens. They were all quiet and empty now, but had been noisy earlier. It seemed most of the members here wouldn't trust a human to cook them food. So because of that, during larger feasts, they made the food here. Yet I wasn't sure if they also brewed their own alcohol too. Or maybe that was something they didn't care who made? Why would food matter but not drinks?

"Funny," I whispered to myself as I rounded another corner. This time it was a hallway of closed doors... but simple doors. Not doors to people's rooms. Maybe these were storage rooms too?

Reaching the end of the hallway, I had to retrace my steps for a bit until I could find a new hallway. This one led me to a stairwell, so I went ahead and climbed to the third floor.

Once at it, I wondered where Vim was.

He had left rather early in the dinner. I had turned to find him, and he was gone, before I had even finished eating.

I was used to him being... sneaky, but that had been upsetting. I had a lot of things I wanted to talk to him about.

Especially this supposed pirate he was going to help soon.

"I know I'm supposed to be doing something for him but..." I whispered to myself as I walked down the hallway towards my room. I did my best to not talk too loudly, since I was sure there were probably a few people now trying to sleep.

As of now I had met everyone except someone named Jasna. Though Liina, a woman who everyone had said was my sister, had only visited the dinner for a short time. She had come, got food, and then left.

Reatti and the rest had said it was because she was exhausted from working the docks, but something told me it was more than that.

She had glared at me upon entering the room, rather openly too.

Hopefully I'd be able to break down whatever barrier she and I had between us. I wasn't sure yet why everyone was calling her my supposed sister... we hadn't look alike at all, but it would be interesting to find out why.

Though maybe not... since my only experience with sisters was...

Pausing for a moment, I thought of my family. It had been a very long time since I had spent a moment thinking of them... yet somehow this place reminded me of them.

Which made no sense. This place was warm. Happy. Full of life, and friendship.

My family had been nothing like this place.

"Renn?"

Blinking, I looked up and found Vim. He was standing down the hallway, at the turn that led to the hallway where our rooms were. He tilted his head as he stared at me.

I stepped forward, and for the tiniest moment... thought about rushing forward to tackle him. As Reatti did.

My feet hesitated, and because of it, lost all momentum that could have done the deed. So instead, with a little bit of reluctance, I slowly approached the man who was smiling at me gently.

"Did you enjoy meeting everyone?" he asked.

"I did. Greatly so," I said honestly.

"That's good."

Opening my mouth to agree with him, I hesitated.

Was it?

Looking down, I realized that... I should be happy. I should be joyous beyond belief right now.

This was a place I could call home. A genuine home.

Yet instead...

"Renn...?" Vim knelt a little, to try and see what was wrong with me.

"Hm... I think I'm... broken," I said as I touched my chest. My heartbeat felt fine, at least.

"Broken...?" he asked softly.

I nodded. "I should be happy, but I'm not."

"Ah..." Vim went quiet, and the two of us said nothing as we stared at each other.

We stayed still, until a sound echoed down a nearby hallway. Someone had opened a door, probably to a room.

Vim shifted. "Hm..." then he waved at me, telling me to follow him.

I nodded and did so. He led me down the hall, to our rooms.

Staring at the door to his room as he went to opening it... I wondered why it looked so different from my own. My room had large doors, and had metal reinforcing them and...

Then I realized why. His room was much simpler. Smaller. Colder.

There was no window. No other door, which meant no storage or bathroom. And his bed was... nearly not big enough for him, judging by the size of it. And odds were hadn't been used yet, since all of our weapons laid onto of it.

Vim went into the room and went to his bed. Usually I'd probably have made a... risky joke, about him inviting me to his bed. But this room made me very conscious of our differences once again.

He intentionally made sure to never let himself get comfortable anywhere. He made sure to never stay in a real room, if he could do so. He made sure to never fall in love with a singular place, or person. On purpose.

After all, I knew that even though he didn't need as much sleep as I did or anyone else... he still slept. He still grew tired. Still became weary.

Yet the odds of him actually sleeping here was small and...

Vim rummaged through the weapons, and hefted the two swords. Their hilts glimmered a little in this dark room.

He smiled at me, and I smiled back with a nod.

"Yes," I agreed.

He tossed the sword at me, doing so lightly. I caught it and stepped back as he left the room. He pointed upward, and I understood what he intended.

The roof.

I closed his bedroom door, but not before giving it one last look around. The room didn't even have rugs, or paintings. It was... bland... as if it had been left intentionally as uncomfortable as possible.

Hopefully this wasn't his typical room here. Though...

His door latched shut a little loudly, which made me wonder how he had just opened it without making it squeak.

Following him down the hall, I squeezed the familiar sheath around my sword. The leather was firm, but soft. Something that wouldn't give skin a rash if it brushed against many times. It somehow felt...

Feeling silly for letting the sword's presence relax me, I followed Vim up a small stairwell. One that was barely wide enough for Vim's shoulders.

At the top of the stairs was another metal door. This one though had a long middle handle, running across the middle of the door. Vim opened the door carefully, and the rush of cold air flushed into the stairwell.

I flinched as I followed Vim out onto the roof. The night was cold. Colder than I had thought it would be.

"I've always enjoyed the scent of the sea," Vim said as he stared up at the sky. Thanks to the walls and pillars around the roof area, we couldn't actually see the sea... but we could definitely smell it.

"It's an inland sea, though?" I said.

"Yes. But it's connected to the other seas via channels and under the earth. So it's still a sea, all the same," Vim said.

Brushing my hair out of my face, since it was a little windy up here... I looked around us. I hadn't been to this section yet. The one Reatti had taken me to had been one of greenery. There had been gardens, and plant life, and trees even. Here though... was mostly just flat stone. There were stairs to other sections though, and off in the distance I could see the rustling of the trees and bushes of the garden area.

"Been up here yet?" Vim asked.

"Just over there. And only for a few moments," I said as I pointed to the garden area.

"Hm. Take your heels off," Vim then drew his sword.

Startling at him, I realized I was still wearing them. The odd shoes had looked... impossible at first, but had actually been rather neat.

Walking over to a nearby corner, out of the way, I took my shoes off and also the socks that Reatti had forced me to wear alongside them. She had said my toenails would have drawn attention. I hadn't let them get pointy or sharp, ever since Vim had given me that present, but I had also not made them as short as the nails on my fingers... I would have to start doing so from now on.

Once they were off, and in a neat little pile, I took off the sword's sheath and laid it next to the shoes. Once ready I walked back to where Vim was. He had his sword up against his shoulder and was staring at the sky again.

Looking up, I wondered what he was staring at. The stars half hidden by the clouds? The odd glow of the city, which made those clouds a little brighter than they should be, or the moon that was half hidden in the distance?

Then I had to duck, as a sword brushed by my ears.

Huffing as I quickly back stepped, and dodged another swing of Vim's sword, I cursed at myself. Of course he'd be rude enough to ruin such a serene moment!

I swung the sword to parry the last of his chain of attacks; I took a deep breath and tried to control my now fast beating heart.

Of course I knew Vim would have never actually hurt me... but it had still been startling... and... and...

Smiling at his own smile, I nodded.

Okay. I'm ready.

Vim allowed me to charge him this time. He and I exchanged a rapid half dozen blows, all of which Vim effortlessly parried and blocked. After a few more attacks, I stepped back to collect my breath and self.

"Well?" I asked him.

"Well what?" he asked back.

"Did I forget everything already?" I asked him.

"Did you?" he asked.

Grumbling I lowered my sword a little. I'd aim for his ankles this time. He always effortlessly blocked the lower attacks, but it made him strain more than usual. It seemed he had to stretch his arms a little more to block that low of blows, and it annoyed him.

He smiled as he shifted; ready to receive what he already knew was coming. Only Vim could be amused that I'd intentionally try and annoy him in such a way.

We re-connected again, and in less than ten tries Vim forcefully put me on the defensive. All of a sudden I was being forced to block a series off straight stabs, all of which directed at my chest.

I grunted as I blocked, then side-stepped another, then barely parried the third. I spun a little, to give myself some distance but it didn't work. The fourth strike was waiting for me all the same.

Straining, I failed to block it entirely. Although I pushed the point of the blade away from the middle of my chest, I hadn't been able to block it entirely. It ended up stopping right as it poked my left shoulder, right under my clavicle.

I froze, as Vim did. I felt the point of the dull sword, as he held it there for a moment. "Hm... rather than forgotten, you simply became complacent. Though that's not your fault, really," Vim said as he slowly pulled his sword back and stepped away from me.

Complacent? "Complacent?" I asked.

"You don't recognize that word?" he asked, a little surprised.

I shook my head as I lowered my sword. Not completely... just enough to rest for a moment.

"It means without dissatisfaction. You became too comfortable within yourself. Not so much your skills, but your world. You're in a place that makes you happy, and you feel safe, so aren't as aware to the danger around you that you should be," he said.

"Oh... that's a lot for a single word," I said.

"I exaggerated a little. After all how can I blame you when you know I'd never actually harm you? I used to, you know, when I taught others. I always thought pain was the best teacher, back then," he said.

"Pain does help, I admit... but I'd like to think you treasure me too much to do such a thing to me," I said.

Vim opened his mouth to say something, and for the tiniest moment... I noticed his sword. It didn't move. It didn't twitch. Yet that was why I noticed it.

He had just considered proving me wrong.

I gulped, and was very... very thankful, that he decided not to.

For a small moment, I found myself doubting the entire relationship he and I had been forming.

Vim then looked down at his sword. He studied it as he lifted it, turning it so the moon and starlight would gleam off it.

"What do you think I can do with this chunk of metal?" The protector then asked me.

My ears perked up, and I wondered if this was a continuation of our previous conversation... or a new one.

"Probably anything," I said honestly.

He blinked, and then looked at me.

I nodded, since it seemed he wanted me to answer again. "I mean it. I can see how with that in your hands, Vim... You could accomplish almost anything. You could save us all, or kill us all. You could force anyone to do anything. You could enforce rules and laws, or break them with impunity," I said.

Vim slowly lowered the sword, until its point was a mere hair from the stone floor. He rarely if ever let it drop that low. Since it seemed he believed, likely correctly, that it meant it left you open to too many dangerous opportunities.

"Who says I need this to do that?" he asked me.

I shifted, and nodded. "I suppose so... But in my experience, one needs a symbol. For me it was a tooth. A fang. I didn't fear the strength of their arms but their long fang," I said. The sight of it, glistening red in the dark, flashed through my mind.

Even all these years later... it made me shiver.

He studied me for a moment, and I realized I had just revealed something... rather serious. Hopefully he'd not dwell too much on it. But... even if he did...

Suddenly I felt... odd. Was I willing to tell him? About my past? Really?

"A symbol. You're more right about that than you know..." Vim had obviously noticed, but seemed willing to let me keep it hidden for a little while longer. He looked away from me, to the stars again. "Do you like your room, by the way?" Vim then asked.

Squeezing the handle of my sword, I flinched. He had changed topics again. Why? Why now? Why when I had actually realized that I'd be okay with telling him everything...?

Why when he had so obviously wanted to tell me something too...?

"It's nice. The bed is one of the softest I've ever slept in. The bath is amazing, in more ways than one. It's big enough for both of us, by the way," I said.

Vim smiled at me. "It is, isn't it?"

His smile made me hesitate. Usually that smile, arriving after I made such an invitation, would make me excited or happy... yet now... "What's wrong, Vim?" I asked.

He blinked and then frowned. "Nothing," he lied.

He lied.

Vim Lied.

I knew it was possible, of course. For as much as it seemed he didn't, or wouldn't... it did happen. But it was usually never over something serious. He had never lied about something so important. So...

Had something happened? He had not been at the dinner for long... but he had smiled through most of it. He had seemed to enjoy his time with Lawrence, Brom and the silent Tosh. It was one of the reasons I had not sat with him. It was why I had spent my time at another table.

I hadn't wanted to intrude into his moment.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked him.

"You're already doing it. I'm sure you haven't forgotten, right?" he asked.

I nodded. Could I even forget anything about him? Was it possible?

"Are you leaving?" I asked him.

He nodded. "The Yin family has been my friend for... well, a long time. They've asked for my help," he said.

"Are they part of the Society?" I asked as I turned my sword a little.

"No. They're humans. Nor do they really know about the Society. They just know about me," he said.

Huh... so they were his friends. Vim's. Not the Societies.

That was... "Can I come?" I asked softly. As amazing as this place was... a family of humans who knew about him, and he called friend... was far more interesting to me.

Vim's sword rose up, and in a way that made me raise my own.

He rushed forward, and I panicked. By the time I got my sword where it was supposed to be... it was already too late.

His sword rested against my neck, undisturbed... and unstopped.

"Sorry Renn. But not this time," he said softly.

My jaw clenched, and I was about to attack him as to prove myself... but I knew it was pointless.

He had done that on purpose. To prove a point.

Wherever he was going, whatever he was doing... was something I wasn't ready for. And he had just shown me why.

"Could anyone have stopped you just then?" I asked as he pulled his sword away from my neck.

"There've been many, yes," he said.

"I doubt that..." I whispered.

"Yangli and Lilly could have stopped that attack. It hadn't been that impressive, Renn," Vim said plainly.

My stomach knotted, and I hated how cold I suddenly felt. I shouldn't be cold. I was starting to sweat.

Really...?

I replayed the last few moments in my mind. The way he had raised his sword up. The way he had stepped forward... yet somehow had stepped forward a great distance in a single step. In less than a blink of an eye he had gone from many leaps away to right in front of me. His sword looked like it had even phased through my own, it had moved so quickly.

"Brom," Vim drew me out of my thoughts. He was a few feet away now, walking around me. Staring at me, as he spun his sword.

"Brom?" I asked. Reatti's brother? A nice man, if a little loud like his sister. I knew their relationship was... genuine, and they loved one another, but it was odd to hear and see them fight so strongly.

"I've asked him to spar with you. While I'm gone," he said.

Wait... what? "No..." I barely whispered.

"I trained him. It'll do you good to spar with someone else, Renn. If even for just a short time," he said.

Short time...? I blinked away watery eyes and gulped. Oh. So he wasn't abandoning me.

"How long will you be gone?" I asked. Hopefully he mistook the odd tone in my voice for me simply being out of breath, or cold.

Like he would. Like he could. He could read me like I'd read a book.

"Not sure. Maybe a week or so. We're headed up north, near the Bell Church. On ship that's only two days away. I bet I'll be back around the time Brandy shows up," he said.

"I see," I said.

A week or so. Although to me that should be nothing... it felt like a lifetime all of a sudden.

Vim stopped walking around me, and I realized he was back in the same spot he had been when he started. He was even standing the same way, as if he had never moved.

He lifted his sword again, and I nodded. I readied myself, even though my sword felt heavy all of a sudden.

Blocking a few blows, I only lasted six before he rested the blade on my left side. I knew with his strength, it would have cleaved me in two.

I grumbled as he stepped back, to put us back into the starting positions.

"Do you need more pillows? I noticed you only had three," he then said.

"Huh...? No... I don't think so. They're huge. And fluffy," I said. In fact too fluffy. They made my ears hot. The ones on top of my head... though that was likely thanks to the fur and hair upon them.

"Hm." Vim charged in again.

I lasted nine this time. It ended with his blade on the back of my neck, and I stumbling away since I over extended my swing.

Sighing, he and I got back into positions. His question had been distracting. I could have lasted longer, if my mind hadn't been mulling it over the entire time. Why ask about my pillows? Of all things?

"You could have slept with me, you know," I told him.

"Hm?" he paused mid-raise of his sword.

"In my room. I'd not tell anyone," I said.

"Ah... I'm fine. Thank you for worrying about me though," he said with a smile.

"Well..." I mean...

I had somewhat meant it as a joke, a way to tease him... but for him to have seen the truth so readily was...

He charged forward, and I ducked his first swing. At first I thought I was going to connect with his stomach, but his sword parried it quickly. This time I lasted five more blows.

"Dang," I complained as we got back into positions.

Vim chuckled at me... but this time didn't charge right away.

He turned his head at me, and in turn I turned my head back at him. What?

"If you can beat Brom before I get back, I'll reward you," he then said.

"Huh?"

He nodded, and smiled at himself. As if pleased at his idea. "That bath you want so badly? Sure. Me and you. But only if you can beat Brom before I get back," he said.

My eyes went wide, and my heartbeat not only tripled... It also made me warm again.

"Really?" I asked as I stepped forward.

He nodded. "Hm. Really."

"Really really?" I asked again.

He chuckled and nodded again. "Yes. I promise."

Taking a deep breath, I couldn't help it.

"Yes!" I screamed.

Chapter 126: The Yin Bloodline

Now this was nice.

Not all of the sails were unfurled, but we were still sailing at a nice pace. The ocean breeze and the spray from the waters as the boat hit the waves felt great.

Maybe I'd get lucky and the boat would drift forever... to the edge of the world...

"Get that sail down! Now!" a loud man barked orders, and I turned to watch half a dozen sailors hurry and obey.

Leaning up against the railing, I glanced around. I was in the middle on the main deck of a large barque. A four mast ship, with square sails. And honestly, it was beautiful.

It made me jealous that I couldn't spend my time sailing the seas.

"Heave!" the men all joined together to unfold the main fore-sail. It unfolded with a pop, forcing the ship to turn a little.

"Well, master Vim? Do ya like her?"

Turning to my employer of the day, I nodded. "I do indeed. Sure you don't want to give me her instead of the permit?" I asked Marshal Grilly.

The old woman was as tall as me, but skinny. Her old age was creeping her closer to the bed, and it showed. She smirked at me as she pulled around her long pipe, and went to puffing it. She blew out a thick haze of something nasty, but luckily the brisk ocean wind made quick work of it. "Never in a million years, which f'or you that's sayin' something," she said.

I smiled back at her and gestured to her crew. "These are made for a light crew... but twelve men? Really?" I asked.

"Twelve more than I need. Plus my boy," Grilly said with a gesture to the lad. He was off at the bow, tying rope.

"Twelve more... I wonder if I could handle a ship this size on my own," I wondered.

Grilly laughed. "Don't try an' fool me now! I heard what you did with my mother in the bays of ice!" she laughed.

"That had been a much smaller ship..." I argued, but knew better than to do so too harshly. Humans enjoyed their legends. Especially when they included their loving parent.

"C'mon. They boys'll become conscious with us out here," Grilly gestured for me to follow her inside the boat. To where she had made herself at home, in the captains quarters.

Following her, I took one last glance to the ship and its crew. They were working diligently... and respectfully. They all seemed seasoned, even the young boy who honestly didn't fit in on the deck. He was still too scrawny. Too slow. But they kept him out of the way, not doing anything too strenuous.

This ship really was built to be manned lightly. Although large, with four sails which was a lot in this era, it was thin. And intentionally built in a way that one man could handle several pulleys without worry. This boat was pricey. It had stood out in the port, even in Lumen.

Yet I knew the reason we were on this boat, and not her true warship... was for a very simple fact.

She had been planning on taking another ship, after all. She had only readied this one once she had confirmation I would be joining her.

Stepping down a few steps, to enter the underbelly of the ship, we walked down a short hallway to reach her quarters. This hallway had two other doors than hers. One for a bathroom, and another that led down a small hallway to the crews section. Though it wasn't so the crew could come here, really, it was so the cook could bring food to this side of the ship.

Entering the room, she sighed as she went to sit in the large chair that looked out of place. It was a dark black, and looked uncomfortable. It didn't match the rest of the ships décor, at least in this room... especially since it looked like something a noble would like.

I tapped the golden tapestry that was nailed to one of the walls. It felt like real gold thread. "Who'd you get this ship from?" I asked.

"Two gay men," she said.

"Two gay..." I frowned at her and she laughed, in a way that told me she had been completely serious.

"And they say I have an interesting life," I complained as I went to sit in another chair. One that fit a little better. It had red felt and was gold painted, but made of wood.

"I thank ya' for joining me Vim. I was worried I'd be sinking her instead of reclaiming her, instead," Grilly said.

"Hm," I nodded. Yes. That was why she had been willing to bring this, a ship with only a few cannons and not built for war. This thing was made for speed, speed and crew. Not battle.

But me...?

"A large man-o-war. Sixty eight guns, all twice as big as any other. Stolen from me, by a fool who thinks I'm too old to rule," Grilly said.

I nodded. I had heard most of the story already, from the young lad. I had arrived earlier in the day, as I had promised, and the boy had spent time with me as Grilly and her people prepared for our voyage.

"Why'd you let that happen, anyway?" I asked.

"I'm sick," she said.

Although she had said it very... seriously, I honestly hadn't been shocked or bothered to hear it. She looked sick. She looked old enough that she honestly shouldn't even be on this boat, or smoking whatever plant she was inhaling like water.

She took another puff on her pipe, and thanks to the many closed windows I was finally able to smell what she was smoking.

"For the pain?" I asked her.

She nodded. "The pain. I hope it doesn't bother you, but even if it does I'll risk your anger," she said.

"Then inhale as much as you need," I said.

She smiled at me and nodded in thanks. The stuff she was smoking was not just addictive but a poison all in itself. The type of poison that usually made quick work of those foolish enough to get addicted to it. But... she was old enough, and if she was being honest... which she looked to be, sick enough to not

need to worry about what could happen to her in a few months time. She wasn't foolish, she was desperate.

"Something in my head. It hurts. It makes me weird," she told me.

"I see. Then will you be the last to ever call on me?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "The boy. You met him? Little Ronaldo?"

I nodded. Did she not remember that she had introduced me to him a few hours ago? Maybe she had more than just simple pain straining her body.

"He seems a good lad," I said.

"Well enough," she nodded.

"So he's your heir?" I asked.

"Yes. I've told him some of your stories. I hope during this venture you will remember him, and maybe also teach him why you're worth the price," she said with a smirk.

"Price," I scoffed. Did she forget that most of her ancestors had paid with paltry rewards? There had been one time that I had accepted a small jewel that was...

Where had I put that jewel?

"And if you would... I have another request of you, if you'd willingly hear it," Grilly stopped me from delving too deep into my memories.

"Hm?" I leaned back. Really. What had I done with that little blue stone?

"I wish for you to place him under your banner," she then said.

My mind halted for half a moment, and I sat forward. "Excuse me?" I asked.

The old woman took a deep breath, and even though hadn't puffed on her pipe she still let loose some smoke. "I'm dying," she said.

"Everyone is," I told her.

"Yet mine will be any moment. I can feel it. Not even the sea breeze can chill my bones anymore," she said.

Ah. That was bad. It was soon then.

"I see," I said gently.

"After this is done... when you reclaim what is lost, and punish those mutinous fools... I want you to take this ship, and the one we're reclaiming, and give them to my son. But under the condition he captains them under your flag," she asked me.

For a long moment, as the ship rocked and creaked, I stared at the woman who had at one time been one of the strongest pirate captains in these seas.

"You're serious," I said.

"As the pain I endure."

Taking a small breath, I ignored the sting of the poison in the air. It didn't affect me as it would others, but it was clear now why she had not really stood outside all this time. It wasn't just because she was old, and dying, but because she worried for those who breathed in the smoke around her. But it was

obvious. She knew what that stuff did. Anyone who sailed the open seas, and dealt with the eastern nations, knew what that stuff was capable of.

"You're telling me to make him less than he would be. If you perish, and he is your heir, he becomes a man. One who has a throne. You're asking me to take that throne from him," I said.

"What throne?" she scoffed.

"I know not your fleet or wealth, Grilly, but I did see your two mighty ships. A ship of war, and this one. And we're to claim a man-o-war too? That's a fleet. A powerful fleet. Fleets like that come with thrones," I said.

She waved my words, and her smoke, away from her face. "A boy his age will lose them all within a day. And he knows it. He knows it well," she said.

Did he? The number of young men that I could count, who could put down the crown after getting it...

Well...

Only one. In all my years.

And he had not done it willingly, either.

"Please Vim. I already discussed it with him. He agrees to it. If he doesn't you can just snap his neck and take the ships yourself. Better they be in your hands than he has them for a single moment, and wasted!" Grilly's voice raised as she spoke, growing upset, and then she doubled over. She began coughing wildly, and even dropped her pipe.

I remained seated, letting her wallow in her pain and lack of air.

There was nothing I could do for her, after all. Nothing anyone could do.

A few minutes passed and she finally sat back up, heaving deeply. "See? That could have been it right there," she said.

"It could have," I agreed.

"Please Vim. Do this for me. Please don't let my bloodline end. Not here. Not like this," she said.

I sighed and wondered what to say. I honestly didn't mind it. I could put the ships to use, or at least the Society could... and the boy, if half intelligent, would be fine. And even if, or rather when, the day came that he became a man too big for his shoes, and tried to rebel... I'd just simply take the ships back from him.

But...

"Grilly... he's not even your blood," I whispered.

He didn't have the blazing red hair she and all her family had.

She smiled softly and nodded. "So he aint' But Vim... Does that matter?" she asked.

No. It didn't.

"You're sure?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Please. Let me meet my mother in the open sea beyond, knowing I did the right thing. Else she'll spank me something fierce," she said.

I smiled. Yes. Her mother had been quick to discipline. Yet her father, Grilly's grandfather, had not been. He had treated her mother like an angel. Never raising his voice, let alone a fist.

Which was probably why she had grown up to such a deadly violent pirate.

"Okay. For you, Grilly. For your blood. For your family. I will do what I can," I said to her. I promised her.

She smiled, and I stood from my seat.

Bending down, I picked up her pipe... and made sure it was lit. Once so, I handed it to her gently.

Grilly placed it against her lips and took a deep breath.

"Let me know when we find that traitor," she said as her eyes became dull. The stuff was potent.

"Will do. You rest, old friend," I told her, and then left the captain's room.

#### Chapter 127: Contracts Abundant

"The Telson Guild's offer is rather enticing. I could see why you would be willing to consider it," Gerald told the man.

"I appreciate your honesty," the man named Brandon nodded with a complacent smile. The kind that was a little... too easy to read. If not for having listened to him blabber on for the last half hour I'd have thought maybe he was more than he seemed.

Especially since he was supposedly a noble. A rising one, as Gerald had mentioned. One, who would, if allowed, become rather powerful here in Lumen.

"With that being said however, I regretfully have to inform you that our offer still stands. In all truth, after hearing what Sir Telson is offering you, I'd be more inclined to either rescind our offer... or to lower it, in fact," Gerald sighed as he opened his hands and gestured regrettably.

Brandon sat up straight, his large fur robe slid off his thin shoulders a little as he stared in awe at Gerald. "Rescind?" he whispered.

Gerald nodded and sat back a little, as if to portray he no longer saw this as a business meeting. He had been sitting up straight the entire time until now. "Regrettably. I'll honor our current offer, Lord Brandon, since we had made it. The Animalia Guild never goes against their word, after all. But if Sir Telson is willing to offer such a generous contract with your family and town, I'm afraid I might need to rethink the profit and loss of the situation..." Gerald sighed as he glanced down at his desk, as if to review the many papers in front of him.

Brandon grabbed his knee, and I noticed the way it shook, as if upset. Yet he wasn't angry... he was now concerned. Visible worry encompassed his face as he raised his other hand waved it back and forth quickly. "Sir Gerald, please! I don't understand... why the sudden change of heart?" the noble asked. His voice shook as much as his hand and knee.

"Sir Telson, although has always been cordial with me... regrettably has been making many bad business decisions as of late. To the point of concern. If he's that interested in your business proposal then..." Gerald frowned and shrugged, in a way that said the rest.

The Noble groaned and then put his head into his hand. He took a deep breath, and then sat back. "I had suspected as much..." he then moaned.

A little surprised, I changed my opinion of the man a little. I had expected him to grow irate, or at least a little upset. To storm out of the office, not actually admit and agree with Gerald.

"It is a horrible thing to say aloud, of course. I hope you understand I mean no ill will to you, or even to Sir Telson. I enjoy the man's company, and have done business with him on many accounts... but sometimes people get stuck in a rut," Gerald said calmly, and sat back up a little more. His back became a little more straighter. His voice a little firmer.

He used his appearance and voice as much as his words when negotiating. It was interesting.

"Nay, you're correct. Telson had seemed very... strange our last meeting," Brandon said.

"Likely stress. Personally I hope he overcomes it, and he may well still might. Maybe the two of you can find a avenue or..." Gerald gestured for the man to continue.

"No!" Brandon shot to his feet, and then hurriedly looked over at me. I didn't have to look away, since I was already looking down at the desk I was writing at. I could hear his relief and embarrassment as he coughed and straightened his puffy fur coat. "No. That wouldn't be necessary. I am more than happy to accept your original offer, Sir Gerald. With great joy, as well," Brandon said.

Gerald stood, and I wasn't sure who wanted to take each other's hand the soonest. They shook hands, and then Gerald glanced over at me. "Miss Renn, would you please bring the contract over here to be re-signed?" he asked me.

"Yes sir," I calmly obeyed. The singular page, which was made out of oddly hard paper, had been patiently waiting right next to me.

Walking over to Gerald's desk, I carefully put the contract down in front of the noble, and then pulled over the ink and quill that he'd be using to sign it. I stepped away, but didn't return to my own smaller desk. Instead I stood a little behind Gerald, to watch as the two men signed the paper and then shook hands once more.

After shaking hands Gerald brought out a large bronze stamp. One that I knew had the company's logo upon it. Or rather, the guild's. I had noticed that here in Lumen, they called it a guild. Vim and those outside Lumen called it a company.

"For our future," the lord said as he and Gerald both pushed the stamp down onto the parchment.

"Our future," Gerald agreed.

After one final handshake, I hurried to open the office door for the noble. He bowed his head in thanks, and then greeted his servant outside.

Closing the door behind him, I wondered why he smelled like the mine back at the smithy. He smelled like ore.

Yet the business proposition he had offered to the guild wasn't a mine at all. It had been a textile offer. His family was in possession of a new sewing technique, to make fancier clothes easier... like that fur

robe he had been wearing. However they lacked the needed base materials, and were what we were offering for a portion of their profits.

Turning back to Gerald, I watched as he studied the contract he had just signed. He read the print with a knowing eye, and seemed... "Is it not what you had wanted?" I asked.

"It is. More than I had wanted, in fact," Gerald sighed.

"Then why the look of defeat?" I asked as I stepped over to his desk. I had read the contract already. Honestly it had seemed not only simple... but rather well meant. Both parties would benefit from it greatly, not just us.

"It may not have been worth the ire of the Telson Guild, and their allies," Gerald said.

"Ah... but you said they were failing?"

He shook his head as he sat back down into his chair. He pushed the contract aside to the corner of his desk, as if it no longer mattered. "They are. But their allies are powerful. A few as powerful as we are. And they're not allied by parchment and ink, but by blood. They have members married with one another, children, and such," Gerald explained.

"Oh," I understood then. Gerald had just made powerful enemies. Enemies that would now be targeting the whole of the Guild, thus the Society.

"Yet at the same time, it might go well all the same. Especially if I formally invite those individuals into the business myself," Gerald said.

"Invite them?" I asked as I sat down in front of his desk. Not in the chair that the human noble had been in, but instead another. The only other chair in front of his desk.

"I can invite them into the process of selling the finished products. So it will be outside the main production, but will let them be happy and forgiving with the portions they'd make on the front end," Gerald explained.

"You'd do that just to stay on good terms? Won't that eat up most the profits for our company?" I asked.

"Our Guild will still profit well, being able to control who gets allowed into the process. Plus we'll earn favors from them later on, as well," Gerald said. I noticed he emphasized the word Guild. He wanted me to call it a guild, not a company.

"I see," was all I said.

Gerald stared at me for a moment, and I realized he really was beautiful. It made me wonder why he and Vim, and other men of our kind, were so different.

Most of the men of our kind were... well... maybe not ugly, but just not attractive. In certain ways.

Though to be honest, I was glad Vim wasn't as beautiful as him. It would have been weird.

"Have you worked as a servant before?" Gerald then asked me.

"A servant...? No? Not really," I said. Why had he asked that?

"You seemed accustomed to what a noble would want, is all. Have you dealt with such people before?" he asked.

"Oh. No. I only have a little experience with such people. Did I act weird?" I asked.

"The opposite. You did well. It'll be interesting to see where you end up. Lumen nobles don't like letting women be in power, but you'd probably succeed all the same," he said.

I frowned at him. What was he planning on making me do?

I know that they made every new member work in every section, to let them pick where they wanted to work... but honestly. Why was I already spending a day with Gerald, the man who oversaw everything? Surely it was too early for this...?

Unless of course it wasn't really to see if I wanted to work with him, but rather so he could spend the day watching me.

He did ask odd questions sometimes.

Gerald sat back a little. He had oddly yellow eyes, which only accented his beauty even more. Right now they were staring at me as if I was a stack of coins to count.

"Most of our people don't like dealing with humans," he said.

"I've noticed," I said. There were a few even here who hated them. Merit especially hated them. But honestly I couldn't blame her... her circumstances were...

"What was your opinion on our new associate?" he asked.

"That noble? He seemed normal. Although I was surprised he actually admitted and acknowledged what you said about this Telson. I had thought he'd argue or get offended," I said.

Gerald nodded. "Most merchants would have. Since I had basically insulted their potential business partners. Yet those in the aristocracy, especially the older bloodline nobles, are actually a little more down to earth in my experience. At least in this region. Lumen especially," Gerald said.

"Do you deal with them often?" I asked. The Primdoll family had been my last real experience with supposed nobles. That had left a horrible taste in my mouth, and I hadn't even ever met any of them.

"All the time. The nobles and royals of this area are all bound to merchant guilds one way or another. Most of the ones we associate with are foreign, however. We chose to represent the powerful and wealthy of other nations here, keeping their interests in line," he said.

"Thus the depot," I said.

"Thus the depot. Vim and Brandy helped set it up," he said.

That was news to me. I had known Brandy and the Society had built this place, of course, but Vim had that major of a role?

"Vim did?" I asked.

He nodded. "Figuratively and literally. He not only helped start the transactions, contracts and the guild but also built this entire building. Or at least, the foundation of it. That depot is his handiwork," Gerald said.

"Did Nebl help?" I asked.

Gerald went still, and I felt my tail coil under my dress. Woops.

"You know Nebl?" he asked me with an odd tone.

"I do," I said.

"Yet you're new. How is that possible?" he asked.

I frowned at him. "I don't understand. How does me being new make such a thing so unbelievable?" I asked.

"Because he's the smith! Vim wouldn't have..." Gerald went quiet as he slowly stood from his chair.

The hairs on my ears went stiff, standing up, and I did my best to not stand up myself. I remained collected as I stayed seated, watching Gerald's eyes go wide as he stared down at me. He didn't seem... angry... but...

"He took you to see the smithy," he said. Not a question. A fact.

I nodded. Did I just make a mistake? There was no changing it now... but...

"What are you?" he whispered.

"Renn. A jaguar," I said smoothly.

Gerald's eyes narrowed at me, as if upset I had answered so sarcastically... but I hadn't. I had answered with the truth. The truth... the only truth I knew. We held each other's gazes for a long moment, and then he blinked. The guild leader held his breath for a moment, and then looked away from me. He suddenly looked hurt.

"What did you want me to say?" I asked him.

"Vim promised me nothing was happening. That everything was fine," he said.

"Then what's wrong?" I asked. He sounded... Did he think Vim had lied to him?

"You're not nothing. What's he been preparing you for? What's he doing with you?" he asked me.

So it wasn't Vim he was doubting, it was me. At least, in a way.

"He wants to see if I would be willing to call this place my home. I'm not sure what else you mean," I said. That was the truth, in its own form. Vim likely would be very happy if I decided to make this place my permanent residence. He'd probably kiss me if it'd get me to leave him alone.

"Yet you were carrying weapons too. The same ones as him. Where else have you been? Who else has he shown you?" Gerald asked. He leaned forward and put his hands on his desk, it made him look a little too serious. A little too upset.

Although I really wanted to answer his questions... I now felt like I shouldn't. He wasn't just asking me a question out of kindness, or just to get to know me better... he was now prying. He was now questioning me, and even Vim.

I knew this man was upset thanks to what I had said. I had told him of my knowing of Nebl. And that had bothered him. It seemed I wasn't supposed to have known him... but that wasn't my fault. How was I supposed to know that Vim letting me meet that family was something unusual?

Plus if he reacted that badly just to that knowledge... who knows how he'd act knowing anything else.

"Well? Who else have you met? Where else have you been?" he furthered.

"You can ask Vim when he returns," I said. I did my best to keep my annoyed tone out of my voice. Honestly it sounded like I had done a good job.

"Secrecy is for those who earn it," Gerald said.

"And those who can protect it, of course," I said. This time I hadn't done as well a job.

Gerald shuffled back a step. A singular, small movement... that in any other scenario I would not have noticed or cared about. He hadn't even bumped into his chair, which was right behind him.

Yet here... in this room... at this time... because of who I was, and what I was... and because of who and what he was...

I sighed and lowered my head a little. "I'm sorry. I'm... a little upset. Not at you, Gerald. Please forgive my quick mouth," I said.

Luckily even I could hear my very genuine apology. And it had been. I had scared him. And the last thing I wanted to do was that, or to ever do it again.

The last people I had scared in such a way banished me. And might have died because of it.

I'll never do that again.

Gerald slowly stepped back and slumped into his chair. The beautiful man still looked pretty even with sweat forming at his brow. He was staring at me with shrunken pupils, wide eyes... and a look of absolute shock.

"Vim and his... foolish personality is to blame for this. I'm sorry. It's his fault that you and I are having this moment," I said to him.

"You're upset at Vim, aren't you?" he asked me.

Shifting in my seat, I felt my ears furrow under my bonnet hat. "Yes," I said honestly.

"You'd voice that? You'd say it out loud?" Gerald actually leaned forward, his eyes going even wider.

Wasn't that what I had just done? "Why wouldn't I?" I asked him.

"He's the protector!" Gerald nearly shouted as he waved his hands at me, in shock. When he realized he had shouted he actually looked to the door... as if suddenly worried Vim himself would walk through it.

I couldn't help it, I laughed at him. "He is!" I said.

Gerald's panicky face contorted, as if his face didn't know if it should laugh with me or start weeping in fear. "Renn... I thought you liked him? We all thought you did," Gerald said softly.

"Well... I do?" I asked. What was he getting at? And wait, they all did? Were they all talking about me behind my back...? Well, I guess of course they were. How else would they decide if I was trustworthy or not?

"Yet you hate him?" he asked, shocked.

"Oh. No. I'm just angry with him. In a certain way," I said.

Gerald sat back against his chair, this time slumping a little. Suddenly he didn't look very... leader-like.

I knew what the problem was, however.

Like most of our people... Vim was seen as something more than just a man. He was the protector. The warrior. The man who was more a force of nature than not.

They could tease and joke with him... but not a one so far had actually stood against him. As far as I had seen, or knew, not a single one of them would dare to actually argue with him.

The only one so far had been Trek, the duck... but he hadn't actually argued or fought with Vim. Vim had simply told me that he would do so if Vim pestered him too much.

Though maybe that means he didn't either, in a way? Vim had said he'd not leave that pond, but that didn't mean he actually fought with Vim either...

"What are you thinking about right now?" Gerald asked me, with an odd tone.

"I'm trying to think of anytime any of our members have actually argued or gone against Vim before. At least, in front of me. I can't think of it happening before," I said honestly.

"Well... duh? Who in their right mind would actually argue with him? Maybe jokingly, or half-heartedly, but never for real," Gerald said.

"So it seems," I said.

Had I ever done so? It felt like I had, but at the same time not. Though I knew I would, if I ever had to.

The reason was obvious... and it wasn't because I liked the man in a way the others didn't.

I saw Vim as a man. A person.

They saw him as something else. Some might even see him as a deity almost.

All of them, even the ones who should be predators... were cowards. Cowards who put Vim on a pedestal.

A lonely pedestal that should crumble away forever.

"Who are you, Renn?" Gerald asked softly.

"Someone who hopes you're not scared of me. I really didn't mean it that way, Gerald," I said.

"I can tell. You're forgiven," Gerald said with a nod.

"Thanks," I smiled at him, and he actually smiled back.

"You didn't really answer my question, though," he pointed out.

"True... but in a way I did, I think. I'll tell you my story, if you're willing to do something for me in exchange," I said.

"Offering me a contract?" Gerald suddenly smirked, and I realized I had just let him get comfortable as we entered his territory and not my own.

"Hm... sure... I just made another, so I guess one more can't hurt," I said.

"You made one already? With whom?" he asked.

"Vim," I said.

Gerald flinched and looked away. "Poor you," he whispered.

Poor me? On the contrary.

"So? What can I do for you? To hear your story?" he asked me excitedly. He seemed more excited over this than he had been the noble.

"Well... I need a favor," I said.

He nodded, leaning and leaned even more forward... his chair actually creaked thanks to how close he was trying to get to me.

How quickly he had lost his fear and worry. How quickly he now trusted me again.

Hopefully I could keep that trust, and build off it from here on out. Though I wasn't sure what to think about his dislike of me knowing members of the Society, or the way he seemed to doubt Vim... but...

That was not something I could blame him for. Vim was rather secretive. Very opaque. He seemed to forget, or intentionally not tell things, to most.

I leaned forward as well, sitting nearly on the edge of my seat as to whisper to him.

"I need to write a letter," I told him quietly.

Gerald tilted his head and frowned. He was waiting patiently for me to continue.

"To whom?" he asked.

"Lomi, a young fox girl, at Twin Hills," I said.

## Chapter 128: Plunder

Chains rattled as I dragged the man behind me.

The ship was swaying a little wildly, but not because it was sinking or in sail. The waters were rough. A storm was beyond the horizon, and it wasn't a gentle one.

"Grihh mah," the man I pulled behind me tried to say something, but I couldn't understand it. His broken jaw and missing teeth wouldn't let him formulate a word properly.

Even if he could speak, it wasn't as if I'd let it change what was about to happen.

Slowing to a stop, I took a deep breath as to sigh... and regretted it.

The stink was unbearable in this ship. The kind of stink that made my eyes water and not because of the smell itself.

Staring at the cages, I gulped as I tried to count them. Four... five... Seven. Seven cages. There seemed to be about five a cage... but...

"Shgop!" he yelled as my grip on his skull got tighter.

I understood that one. It made me only squeeze his skull tighter.

One of the women in the cages yelled out a word. One that at first made as much sense as the man's... but after a moment my mind corrected itself.

"You all speak Glamour?" I asked them.

The caged women all went dead silent, and still.

They did. That meant they were from the far east. Wonderful...

That explained their blonde hair at least.

"He speaks our language," one of them whispered.

"Forget that, look who he holds," another pointed.

This explains the body I had seen them tossing overboard as I swam over to this ship. That hadn't been trash, or a fallen comrade... it had been a woman. A woman who had been broken.

Just great.

Some metal clanked behind me... and it wasn't the chains wrapped around the man's legs I was pulling around. I turned a little and watched a familiar face hurry down the stairs. The young boy had a huge smile on his face as he hurried to me.

"Vim! We've captured the rest of them and the ship is ours! And..." he lost his voice as he saw the scene before him. Before me.

I kept my eyes on Ronaldo as he stopped a few feet from me. He carried a small hand axe, which was still clean of blood. He hadn't used it. The axe lowered to his knee, going listless as he stared at the cages.

Studying his eyes, I noted the disgust within them. He didn't see fortune or treasure, he saw something hideous.

Good. A good man. Or one who would become a good man, as long as no one corrupted him.

Maybe I really should let him join the Society.

"What is this...?" Ronaldo asked with an empty voice.

"What indeed," I said.

The man I held squirmed and I remembered him. I released him, and as I did I noticed that my fingers had sunk a little into his skull. Not so badly that it had killed him, at least not yet, but they had broken and crushed most of what they had dug into.

I sighed at the sight of the man. It was the supposed captain of this ship, and the strongest fighter as well. He and his men had been very bold about declaring that I was no match for him. Especially with the whips of chains he had used.

Wonder if he had used those whips on the women...

Turning away from him and Ronaldo, who was now staring at the defeated captain, I walked over to the largest cage. The one that had the most women sealed within.

Kneeling down in front of the cage, close enough that the inhabitants could reach out and grab me, I studied the girls. They all hugged the other side of the cage, trying to keep themselves as far away from me as possible.

Most were naked. The few who had something to wear only wore light sheets and rags. All of them were blonde, the dirty blonde that was common in the lands to the east.

None of the girls were talking. A quick headcount told me there were thirty one, and all of them were staring at me with apprehensive eyes. Eyes without hope, I noted. They weren't hopeful at my presence, but now worried. Terrified even.

To them I was just another abuser.

"Where you from?" I asked them in their language.

No one answered me, but I did notice most of them look at one another. They did understand me, at least. So there was that.

Hadn't spoken their language in nearly a hundred years but it was working.

"Hoh jeez... By the seas Vim, I should tell mother," Ronalldo finally found himself.

I glanced back at him and watched as he stepped closer. He was staring at the nearest cage. When some of the women turned to look at him, thanks to him speaking, he actually blushed and looked away.

"You do that. Before you leave, tell the men out there that not a one is to come down here until the Marshal shows up," I told him.

Ronalldo quickly nodded, agreeing with me. "That's for sure... I'll be back," he turned to go, but not before stealing one last glance at the man on the ground. Ronalldo spat at him before heading back up the stairs.

I heard the main door to the deck close behind him as he left, and I made a mental note to put him under Lawrence's command when I placed him into the Society. Lawrence would ensure he became the good man that hid in that boyish exterior.

Looking back at the cages, I closed my eyes as one of the women spat at me.

They became noisy for a moment, as some cursed at me and as others yelled at those who did so.

Wiping my face as a few threatened to kill me, and others begged them to stop and hear me out, I wiped my hand and her spit onto one of the cage's bars.

"Before anyone spits on me again, mind telling me where you're from? Your language encompasses a very large landmass, and it'll help me have an idea of how this happened," I said to them.

"We're from the Unglo Village. Near the canyon north of Brir," one of the women said.

Ah, there we go. Someone reasonable. I stood and stepped to the cage on the right, where she was locked within. Although she had spoken, she still shied back like the rest of them upon my drawing closer.

"Yena, careful," one of the other women in another cage whispered kindly.

"Yena? My name's Vim. I have just taken this ship, as you can probably tell," I said with a nod to the dying man a few feet away.

"More prizes, we're to be? First Vikings, then merchants, and those pirates. What are you?" a woman shouted.

"Sounds like you've all had quite a journey," I said. That meant they've been exchanged several times already. That made a lot of sense.

This ship was big enough, and dangerous enough, to travel that far east and survive... but the men who had been sailing it had not been. They would have been eaten alive. The proof of it wasn't just in the festering pool of blood nearby, but the fact that Ronaldo and only a dozen men had been able to capture and detain nearly thirty other men.

They hadn't fought back too hard, after I had done to the captain what I did. All of their defiance withered and faded as they watched what I done. They had become... rather subservient, for sailors. Usually sailors, and supposed pirates, were a little more hardy and daring.

Though I had a talent for scaring such men.

"Poor prizes, if I'm to be honest," I told the girls as I looked at them. Most were skin and bones now. Shells of their former selves... or well...

Maybe. A few didn't look that dirty, honestly... yet they were still scrawny.

"How long have you been captives?" I asked them.

"How are we supposed to know?" one spat.

I nodded. True. That was a dumb question to ask them.

Tapping the cage, I wondered what to do with them. Releasing them now would probably just make them scatter. Then they'd just die. The ocean we were in right now was not the kind that women such as them could survive. None would make it to shore. Their chances would have been just as low even if they had been healthy.

And of course even if they had made it to shore... then what? They didn't seem to speak the language of this land, and were obviously foreigners. If instead of this side of the continent they had instead been set free on the west, they'd at least possibly survive thanks to the churches. But on this side, where money was god...

Half the lands here dealt with slavery. They'd just be captured again.

"He speaks funny," one of them then said.

"Do I?" I asked.

"Shut it Pram!" another yelled at the one who had made fun of me.

"Yea Pram, don't be mean," I agreed. She had the same name as Nebi's daughter. Interesting.

The women all looked at one another, and I could tell they couldn't make heads or tails of me. But that was fine.

I honestly didn't want them to make sense of me. For if they did then they'd be far too close. Too personal. Too attached...

"What am I to do with you all, I already have a woman I can't get rid of," I said in this land's language.

They frowned, not understanding it seemed. "What'd he say?" one asked.

"Hey, let us go, please?" one asked me.

"Asking that of any of the others didn't work either!" one of the women to my left shouted.

"He's a brute like the rest. Look what he did to that man," one said.

"If you won't kill him, let me. He killed my sister," one asked me.

"Oh?" I perked up at that and stepped back to find the one who had spoken.

A taller woman nodded at me. She had a scar on her face, and was naked. She was standing closest to this side of the cages, within my reach, as if to prove to me she was serious.

"How many of you have you lost?" I asked them.

"Twenty two," several said at once.

I sighed, and now regretted accepting Grilly's request.

Usually the Yin family didn't screw me over this badly.

The door to the deck opened with a loud bang, and I wondered if I'd have to punish her men, or if the captured idiots had realized they outnumbered their capturers.

But no. It was Grilly. She walked down with Ronaldo, who had an odd expression on his face. Either he hadn't explained it to Grilly, or hadn't wanted to come back down here but had been told to do so.

"By the storms... What were you thinking Pratchet!" Grilly screamed at the man on the floor as she walked up to him. She was squeezing her pipe tightly, and started coughing. Ronaldo quickly went to support his mother, but she pushed him away. Feebly.

"Blasted fool. Shameful!" Grilly coughed the words out, and stepped around the bleeding man who moaned. He had recognized her voice in his final moments.

"You didn't know about them?" I asked her.

"Obviously not! He must have... gods he must have sold the cargo and bought them in Tuckit. That's the only slave port close enough for this idiot to get to," Grilly said.

"Must have been some cargo, Grilly," I said. Although scrawny, and filthy, these women weren't cheap.

"It had been. It had been half the reason I wanted this ship back and..." Grilly coughed some more, making Ronaldo hurry over again. This time she let him support her.

I looked away from the old Yin descendant and to the women in cages. They were staring at her with strangely... concerned looks. They felt for her. Odd, but maybe it was their way of keeping hope alive. Maybe they thought a woman would rescue them, if no man would.

"Do any of you know her?" I asked them in their language.

"No. Is she sick?" the scarred woman asked.

"Very," I said.

Most of them tried to step away, but couldn't. They were already up against the other sides of the cages.

Even the scarred woman who had a backbone had stepped back a bit.

Well... if they did know her they weren't acting it. Several of them were no longer staring at her with concern, even though they had been moments before. Now they just saw her as something else that could hurt them. Something else that could kill them.

The east knew disease well. It was obvious they'd be weary of it.

Grilly finally got her coughing under control, and took a few deep breaths. "I'm sorry Vim. I had not known," she wheezed.

"I can see that. Yet now they are in your possession. Per our agreement, the one I made with your ancestor, you are free to pirate as long as you never deal in slaves. Yet now that I have officially retaken this ship for you... so too is its cargo yours. Thus..." I stopped talking, since my point was made.

Ronaldo went white in the face, and he hurriedly looked at his ailing mother. She though held my gaze.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Why ask me?" I asked back.

"I fear you'll slaughter us if I don't handle this properly," she said.

"I appreciate your honesty. For that I'll be honest in return..." I looked at the cages, and the women staring at us. Most didn't even have tears in their eyes. Their lives had become such hells that even this wasn't enough to make them cry. "I don't care what you do with them. However... the company I am contracted under, the Animalia Corporation, is headquartered in Telmik. Under the banister of the Cathedral of Songs. I'm sure you can imagine how they'd feel about it," I told her.

Grilly sighed but nodded. "Of course. Well, at least I'll get some kind of payment for returning them to their embassy," Grilly said. She stepped towards the cages, as if to study them. I noted the way she stared at the one with the biggest breasts.

"Embassy?" I asked.

"They have one in Lumen. The nations of the east made it for this very purpose. They pay a gold coin per head, on the return of any of their kidnapped peoples," she said.

"Interesting," I said, but frowned all the same.

So they tried to combat the slave trade by aiding it. A single gold coin wasn't a fortune at all... not for a slave. Especially if one had to take into account that one had to go over there, capture them, and then bring them back alive. The food and time alone was far more than a single coin... but there were ways around that.

Like making several port stops along the way. Letting other people capture them, and sell them to another port a short distance away. And so on and so forth, until one could buy a bunch of slaves not too far from here for a smaller sum.

You didn't pay such evil away. You had to burn it. But who was I to tell the humans how to handle it.

Odds are those who participated in slavery simply tossed the ones not able to be sold, or old and sickly, at the embassy. These women were worth far more than that here.

"What's one of them worth in Lumen?" I asked.

"Thirty six," Ronaldo said with a low voice.

"And why would you know that?" Grilly asked for me.

Ronaldo panicked and shook his head. "I hear things, mother! Hard not to, with what we do..." he said quickly.

Grilly scoffed at him and went to puff on her pipe. "He's right. About thirty five a head for the blonde ones. Younger are more," she confirmed it.

"I see," I said.

"What are they talking about?" one of the women asked.

"How to split us, likely," one said.

"The boy won't stop staring at me," one of the longer haired women said.

"You'll be lucky to get him, Tonya. At least he might be gentle."

I blocked out their voices as they started to get more depressing. "Well Vim?" Grilly got my attention.

"Well what?" I asked.

"Will that be acceptable? For your company, I mean," she said.

Ah... she meant the embassy thing.

Maybe. I'd have to look into it.

"I'll look into it. For now let's just assume so. You take care of them. Make your boy handle them. We can deal with them when we get back to Lumen," I said as I turned to go.

"Very crass of you, Vim. I honestly expected you to be much more gentle with them," Grilly said.

"I'm only gentle to those who belong to me. They don't," I said as I headed for the stairs. I ignored the groaning man who was still bleeding on the ground. Especially since his eyes had gone dusty and hard, and most of the blood was pooling from his head. He was moments from death, and was no threat anymore.

"I promise on my flag, Vim! They'll be safe until Lumen!" Ronaldo shouted.

"Careful boy, such promises are dangerous. Especially with him," Grilly hushed him, but I noticed did so with a smile. She was proud of him.

"Yet they're profitable... when fulfilled," I said to them both, and headed up to the upper main deck. To question the men who lived... and maybe toss a few overboard while I was at it.

#### Chapter 129: A Tip

Being a banker was fun, until it wasn't.

"Come on, surely you won't mind a free dinner?" the man smiled at me as he leaned onto the counter, as much as he could before his nose bumped into the iron bars.

"I already have plans sir, I'm sorry," I said to him.

"Just change them," he said.

"Was there anything else you'd like me to help you with sir, or will that be all?" I asked him.

"If not dinner, a drink! My brother owns a wonderful tavern, with a balcony overlooking the sea!" he said as he stood back up.

"That sounds nice, sir," I said.

He rolled his eyes, and it made me want to bang his head against the bars that separated us.

How did everyone else deal with this? They made it seem so easy...

"Now, now son. Take a hint with pride and get going," another man behind him said. The man trying to flirt with me turned, to obviously protest, but the moment he saw who was behind him... he went silent.

"Uh... yea..." the man then coughed and hurried away, without another word or even a glance at me.

The older man who had been waiting behind him smiled as he walked up to the counter. Two men who stood beside him on either side were also smiling, amused.

"Thanks for that sir. How may I help you?" I asked the obvious nobleman. He actually wasn't dressed as nice as some of them, but his two guards were enough proof to validate the assumption. So far only nobles had such guards.

"I've come to authorize a check. The individual should be in tomorrow to cash it out," he said as he pulled around a letter.

He slid the letter along the counter, and under the bars. I accepted it happily; glad to have a normal customer again.

"I'll need to see your badge sir, and will need a signature," I said as I put the sealed letter down under the main counter, onto my own. I reached over to grab the small board we used to verify signatures. It was a fine pen and white paper, which was so thin it tore sometimes even when people wrote upon it. I've had to replace the paper half a dozen times already today because of it. It was my first day and I already wanted to complain and tell them to use different paper.

"Of course," the man happily pulled around his badge. He had made it into a necklace, so he had to pull it out of his shirt and off his neck.

Sliding the signature board over so he could sign it, I took the badge and studied it.

It had the number eighty three upon it, and the name Thraxton Albererc. The color if it was the same as all the rest, a burnt bronze, but his had a little emerald situated into the end of it. The little green jewel was used to let anyone know at a glance that it was for a noble, not a commoner.

As the man signed his signature, I noticed he had done so without tearing the paper. It told me he had done this often.

"Thank you, sir. I shall go verify this right now, if you'd like you are welcome to take a seat," I said the usual line as I gathered up his badge, letter and signature.

"I'll be here," he said simply.

As I stepped away, I noticed the stares of the guards. They weren't just glaring at me because they were weary, but for similar reasons as that other man had been doing.

Maybe men noticed me more when one of them tried to get my attention?

Walking to the back office, I passed a few other tellers. Most were human, but they were all friendly. The few that weren't busy talking to a customer gave me smiles and words of encouragement as I walked past them.

Most thought I was a new hire, and were wishing me luck in keeping the job. Supposedly it was hard to do, and many people tried many times to get a job here before succeeding... and then were fired shortly after.

Entering a back office, I found Sofia. She was near her desk, but like usual not sitting down. She seemed to never sit, even when she wasn't busy.

"Sofia I have a check that needs to be verified," I told her as I walked up to her.

"Oh? Whose it for?" she asked.

"Thraxton Albererc," I said. I hoped I had said his last name correctly.

"Ah, I know him well enough. Usually I'd just take a look at him to verify it, but since you're new let's do it the proper way. Come on," Sofia waved me to the next room, which was full of cabinets.

Each cabinet had a letter upon it. Yet not all cabinets were the same. They were different colored, to represent the different clients. Sofia took me to the cabinet in the center of the wall. A cabinet that was white, made of fancy wood, and only had four drawers.

She slid open the second drawer, and allowed me to scan the folders for the correct name. I quickly lifted his folder, and was surprised to find that it was... thick. Nearly three times as big as the others I had opened and seen before.

"He's actually a VIP. Chances are he only went to your window since you were new. He's kind like that," Sofia said.

Kind...? Because I was new?

We found his signature record, and I quickly compared it to the one he had given me. Then I compared the badge, its number, and the color and shape of its jewel.

It all checked out.

"All good?" Sofia asked.

I nodded.

"Then it's authorized. I shall accept that," she held her hand out for the letter, which I gave her.

"You destroy that," she said with a point to the paper with the signature.

I nodded.

"Then I make a receipt and you give him back his badge, and the receipt," she said as she stepped away.

I put his folder back and closed the cabinet drawer, following her quickly.

Sofia went to making the receipt, and as she did I wondered how many could authorize a check. "How many can authorize this? If you weren't here?" I asked. I went to tearing up the paper of his signature as I waited.

"Any member, Renn. There's a few... well, a few of them too," Sofia said gently.

We were alone in the office, but her office door was open and there were people not too far from it.

"I see," I said. I tossed the bundle of shredded paper into a bin next to her desk.

She handed me the receipt and nodded. "When you're done with him go on a break. You've been working since we opened," she said.

"I'm not tired," I said simply. Did she forget I wasn't human or something?

"I know. But it's weird if we don't pretend we are, Renn," Sofia whispered.

I nodded, understanding. "Right."

"Good," she smiled and nodded, glad I understood.

Leaving her office I returned to my stationed window, and quickly laid down the man's badge. "Your badge sir and your receipt. It has been approved, and tomorrow your check will be cashable," I said.

"Thank you young lady," Thraxton said as he put his badge necklace back on, and then I slid him the receipt.

"No, thank you sir for helping me earlier. I really appreciate it," I said with a nod to him. He had helped me, even if it honestly hadn't been very needed.

As he took the receipt, he also laid down a coin next to it.

"Huh?" I stared at it, and wondered if he wanted to now make a deposit.

"For you. Keep up the good work. Don't let foolish men like that bother you, they're not worth the effort it takes to toss them out," he said with a smile.

"Ah..." the man turned away before I could figure out what to say. "Thank you!" I said as he and his guards left.

Reaching over to pick up the coin before anyone walked up, I slid it along the countertop and made it fall into my other hand.

A gold coin.

A... a gold coin? As a tip?

"Lucky..." one of the other teller girls whispered nearby. I turned to look at her, but she looked away real quick.

"Ah..." that was what Sofia meant.

He was kind to the new girls.

Reaching under my counter, I grabbed the closed sign and went to hanging it up. Everyone ignored me as I walked to the back hallway, as to go on this supposed break that was enforced.

Staring at the gold coin as I headed to the employee hall, I wondered how much it was worth.

Vim and I had a lot coins... but they had been the currency of Telmik, not Lumen. And although I was literally working in a bank... I still had no real clue on the buying power of the different coins I was handling.

Here the currency was called Marks. Lumen Marks. They even called the different metals the same thing, too. Silver and gold were both called Marks, oddly enough.

There were bronze and copper coins too, though I hadn't seen many of those. Most of the coins used in the bank were silver and gold.

Wonder how much that check had been for...

Passing some gossiping women, I rolled my thumb along the coin's edge as I headed for the lunch room. I didn't have any plans to eat, but I had to go through that room to get to the main lobby from here.

"Oh new girl! How's your day been so far?" a happy woman smiled at me as we passed one another, speaking happily.

"Very good! It's fun here," I said.

"Fun! This aint' fun, this is life! Keep it up, this is the best place in the world honey don't let it get taken from you!" she said as she passed.

I laughed gently at her. Taken from me... it seemed most of the human workers here thought the same way as her.

They worked hard, and went far and beyond their duties... because they didn't want to be fired or replaced.

I wasn't entirely sure what they were paid, or given, since of course... I wasn't a human. I was a member of the Society. We didn't get paid. Any of us could get any amount of money we wanted just by asking for it.

I'd ask Reatti later. It'd be interesting to know... and would probably help me understand the value of the currency too.

"Vim really should have answered some questions before running away," I whispered.

But that was the kind of man he was. He expected me to just... learn on my own, I think.

"I heard someone mention Vim!" a happy shout came from the lunch room I neared.

Laughing as I entered the room, I raised my hand to Reatti. She had stood from her seat with a weird looking fruit in her hand which was half eaten.

"Of course it was you!" she shouted at me.

"Indeed it was," I admitted as I walked up to her.

She wasn't alone. She was sitting with two other women... but I didn't recognize either of them. One was dressed in the attire of a banker; the other wore a messenger bonnet.

"How's being a banker?" Reatti asked as I stepped up to the table.

"I got a tip already," I said as I showed her.

"What the heck!" the woman dressed as a banker shouted, nearly knocking over her cup in the process.

I shifted away, in case she spilled its contents. The banker's uniform was black, and it would ruin easily if I wasn't careful.

"Wow, jeez..." the messenger woman whistled at the sight too.

Reatti sighed as she reached out to take the coin. I let her, as she spun it around her knuckles. "Tip? You must be crazy good at flirting, Renn," Reatti teased.

"Uhm..." should I tell them I had gotten it because I hadn't been good at it?

"It's real...?" the messenger asked while staring at it. I noticed the other woman was too. As the two drooled over it, I also noticed others at nearby tables started to look our way too. Some had begun to whisper amongst themselves.

"Ah well, just goes to show it does happen. Here ya go," Reatti handed it back to me without a thought.

"Hm," I nodded as I took it back.

"Have you gotten a gold mark before Lynn?" the messenger whispered to the woman she sat next to.

"Not even a silver mark," the banker didn't whisper.

Suddenly a little conscious, I smiled at Reatti and nodded. "I'll see you later Reatti. I need to get something done before I go back to work," I said.

"Oh! Keep it up!" she let me go with a knowing smile. She waved the half eaten fruit at me as I left.

Leaving the lunch room, I headed for the main lobby... and did my best to ignore the conversations I left behind. None were... mean, or bad, but it didn't feel good to have received something that so many others seemed horribly envious of.

I didn't deserve it. I didn't need it. Or care for it. Yet by the sounds of it...

Glancing down at the fist that now hid the gold coin, I wondered if it would have actually changed lives as some of the humans had whispered it would do.

"Maybe it would," I said as I remembered the conversation with Vim. Back in the beginning, in Ruvindale. When he had taught me about the coins of the north.

He had told me a single gold coin could buy the whole Sleepy Artist, and everything in it.

Maybe this coin was the same.

Hopefully not...

What kind of man would tip that much wealth though? Just for doing my job?

"Oh! Renn! How've you been? Did you find my sister's dead body anywhere?" Brom asked me as I entered the main lobby. He was standing guard near the stairs.

"She's having lunch," I said with a smile at him. I liked these two a lot.

"Damn," he sighed and nodded.

"Mind answering something for me, Brom?" I asked as I stepped up to him. I glanced around to make sure we were somewhat alone. Or well, as much as we could be in the main lobby.

Here it was busy, but it was the kind of busy that was loud yet not. I'd need to whisper to make sure no one could actually hear me.

He nodded and turned a little, since I had approached him on his scarred side. I stepped to the left, so I'd be able to whisper into his remaining ear.

"I got this as a tip. How much is it worth?" I asked him, and showed the gold coin to him with a cupped hand.

Brom frowned at it. "A gold mark?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Well... hm..." he looked around, and then nodded. "That's more than a year's wage for most of our workers, Renn. Who gave it to you?" he asked. I noted he actually sounded concerned. He didn't want to know because he was jealous, but because he was worried that I might have caught the eye of someone strange.

"That's very Vim of you," I said to him.

The man blushed and stepped back, his mouth going agape. "What!"

A few people looked at us, but I ignored them as I giggled at him.

That reaction wasn't, though.

As he tried to settle himself down, I noticed his scarred part of his face and head didn't get red like the rest did. It remained a pale white.

Brom coughed, quickly getting himself under control. "Thanks," he then said.

My smile broadened as I nodded. "Thanks," I giggled at his honesty.

He sighed and shifted. "All the same, that's a mighty gift. To us it doesn't mean much, of course... but most humans would happily kill you for that," he whispered.

"Even in this town?" I asked.

He nodded. "Especially here. Money is like their gods here," he said.

"I see... It had been a noble. A man named Thraxton," I said.

"Oh... oh good," Brom visibly relaxed, which made me feel a little better.

"You know him too?" I asked.

He nodded. "I should. I've had to guard him a few times. He's the king, Renn."

I blinked, and the coin fell out of my hand.

Brom was the one who panicked and bent down to hurriedly grab it before it rolled away.

"Sorry," I apologized as he hurriedly went to hand me the coin.

"Careful," he warned.

I nodded as I accepted the coin back. "The king? Really?" I asked.

"Well, as much as one can be a king here. He's not one yet, I guess. They haven't passed the declaration yet. He's the man who rules Lumen. The head of the royals," he said.

"Wow." Why hadn't Sofia said that?

"That coin makes a lot more sense then. By the way, he knows about the Society. Or well, I don't know how much he knows... but he knows that we exist. He knows we're special. He's offered the city to have Vim for a year, before," Brom said.

"Wait what?" I nearly lost my bonnet as my ears jumped up at what he had said.

Brom raised a hand, telling me to lower my voice. I stepped away from him, and nodded.

"I don't know the whole story, Renn. You'll have to ask someone else. I'm sorry," he said.

"Alright." I would.

"You're either very lucky, or the opposite. Not sure what to think of you yet," Brom said.

"We're going to find out. You're still willing to spar later?" I asked as I prepared to step away, to head up the stairs to Gerald's office.

He nodded, and smirked. "You bet I am. I'm winning that spear, and there's nothing anyone can do to stop me."

"Sure and..." I stopped three steps up the stairs, then turned back to look at the man. "What?" I asked.

"Hm?" he tilted his head, wondering what I wanted to know.

"What do you mean win a spear?" I asked as I hurried back to the floor, to confront him.

Brom stepped back as I drew closer, and did so again when I stepped towards him once more. He couldn't retreat anymore as he hit the edge of the stairwell's handrail. He groaned as he gave me a worried smile. "Vim... he promised me one of those spears if I didn't let you beat me while he's gone," he said.

"You're kidding!" I shouted.

The whole room went silent, and we were now the center of attention.

Brom raised his hands, to try and calm me down. "I'm sorry... I thought you knew and..." he mumbled, now worried.

For a tiny moment I didn't see Brom, but instead only my anger. But that fraction of a moment passed quickly... and I let it go, and smiled at the man who was now cowering before me.

"It's ok," I said.

It wasn't.

"Is it?" he moaned with a tiny voice.

"I'm not angry," I said.

At Brom.

"You sure...?" he whispered and looked around, as if for help.

"I'll just have to beat you harder, is all," I said.

"Please don't..." he groaned.

"Then, I'll beat him..." I mumbled as I went to climb the stairwell.

As I left Brom behind, I ignored his relieved sigh.

I couldn't believe Vim. Really? He promised one of the spears? To keep me from winning of all things!

I can't believe he'd do such a thing. Really. That man. That protector!

"Free will my butt!" I grumbled as I knocked loudly on Gerald's office door.

"Enter!" he said.

Opening the door, I stomped into the room and slammed the door shut behind me.

Gerald yelped, standing up from his desk.

"Renn! What is it?" he asked worriedly. He was alone, and had been writing something... writing with a pen that was now...

Staring at his left hand, and the broken pen that barely was hanging on within it, I sighed and felt horrible.

"You broke your pen, Gerald," I said.

He looked to his pen, then back at me... then at the pen again. He coughed and nodded. "So I did..."

Taking a deep breath, I calmed myself and realized I really needed to not get so angry around these people yet. Even Brom had been scared of me a moment ago... luckily he was made of stronger stuff than Gerald.

"Sorry Gerald. I had just been... I just learned something upsetting. If you don't mind I think I'm going to stab Vim in his sleep when he gets back," I said as I stepped up to his desk,

Gerald, surprisingly, grew a huge smile. "Please do!"

"You seem oddly happy at that idea," I said.

"Well... better you stab him than anyone else. Plus it's not like it'd work after all," he said.

"True," I said. Though... why wouldn't it? Although we could endure a lot of damage, we could still die. Even Vim wasn't free of that rule.

Gerald tossed his broken pen into a small chute near his desk, and pulled open a smaller drawer as to procure another.

"Sorry again," I said.

"It's fine. I break them occasionally... though..." he slowly sat down as he pondered it. "A few years it's been. I think," he noted.

Great.

"Did my letter ship yet?" I asked. That was the entire reason I had come here after all.

"It has. Though Renn, it will take many weeks... maybe even months, depending on the passes, to reach her," he said.

"That's fine. As long as it does," I said.

Hopefully Lomi enjoyed reading it as much as I had written it.

He nodded. "It shall. The couriers we use are the ones the whole Society uses, Renn. We pay them exceedingly well, and hand pick them from our other messenger programs. They're basically raised from birth to be trustworthy," he said.

"Raised from birth?" I asked. I thought of the messenger girl in the lunch room, who had been sitting with Reatti.

Gerald nodded. "We fund many of the orphanages throughout the town, and even most the country. Through the church in the west as well. A part of that charity is used to find skilled and trustworthy children, to take in and raise to become workers. Employees or servants."

Slowly sitting down in the chair in front of his desk, I stared at the man who just calmly told me something absolutely amazing.

"We do that?" I asked.

He nodded. "Rather our sisters and brothers in the church do. I don't know the entire process or details... we don't get them until they're of age, usually," he said.

"I see..." I wondered if that was a good thing. "By the way... I was wondering why all of our employees seem to think I'm going to be fired soon," I brought up to him.

"They all think that, because they worry over it for themselves. We hold raffles for employment, and are very scrutinizing when we do. Compared to most other guilds our pay and benefits are nearly night and day in levels," he said.

"We pay well?" I asked.

"We pay three times the average as a base. We also provide many benefits, perks, and give bonuses. We also provide housing to those with families, for a much reduced fee," he said.

"We give houses?" I asked, I sat forward. That was...

He nodded. "Just to those with families. They need a child... though lately I've noticed a vast uptick in early births and marriages. I think we might need to reconsider how we do it..." he said as he thought about it.

"Huh..." I wasn't sure what to say or think.

Great pay. Bonuses. Homes...

"You're like a church unto yourself," I said.

Gerald frowned, but nodded. "Well, our guild stems from them. Most of us here aren't devout like those back west, but there are a few who are... and Brandy, for as sinful as she is about money, is heavily religious too," Gerald said.

That was new information. And it made sense, too.

That was why she was the bookkeeper. It was why the Chronicler and the rest trusted her, then.

And also explained why Vim didn't seem to care for her much either.

"What do you have there?" Gerald noticed the coin in my hand as I scratched my ears beneath my hat.

"Ah... a coin. The uh... King? Thraxton gave it to me as a tip, I guess," I said.

"Thraxton was here?" Gerald blinked, staring at the coin.

I nodded.

"He gave you a... a gold mark, as a tip?" he asked me.

I nodded again.

Gerald sighed and sat back, suddenly looking tired. "You're..." he groaned.

"I'm what?" I asked.

"Nothing... nothing... what are you going to do with that? It's a fortune, Renn. If any of our human employees saw that..." he shook his head, unable to finish his words.

"Know anywhere I can buy paint and a canvas?" I asked.

Gerald lifted his head in thought. "Paint and canvas? You wish to paint something?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I see... Yes. I can procure them for you. Or would you rather go buy them yourself?" he asked.

"I'd rather buy them myself, if you don't mind. If it won't cause trouble," I said.

I wanted to see the town.

"I'll send Reatti with you then. I don't want you to be offended Renn, it's not that I don't trust you... but the art of painting is still something only the wealthy and powerful indulge in. Even here in Lumen. The shop is one that will get you noticed just for looking into its window. Please understand," he spoke kindly, but firmly. He wouldn't back down on this.

"I'm completely okay with that," I said.

Gerald breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. "Good. Good. I'll let her know... that coin can be used. I doubt you'll spend it all, but depending on what you buy and how much it might take a good portion of it. Plus they'll have change for it too," he said with a nod.

"Painting is that expensive?" I asked. It hadn't been that bad in Ruvindale.

"It is."

"Hm..." Maybe it was because of locations.

"Did Thraxton say anything to you? Anything odd?" Gerald then asked.

I shook my head as I slowly stood from my seat. It was time I went back to work. I wasn't entirely sure how long a break was... but it had to be over by now. "Not really. He just wanted to verify a check. For someone tomorrow," I said.

"Ah... that's probably what Sofia delivered a few moments ago, then," Gerald said with a look to the right of his desk. Where a little box was, with a single small parchment left in it.

"Likely," I said.

"Thank you Renn," Gerald said as I went to leave.

"For what?" I asked.

"For being what Vim said you were," he said as he went back to work, focusing on the piles of paper before him.

Hesitating at the door, I wondered what Vim had said I was.

Opening the door, I thought of the way I had scared him upon entering... hopefully Vim didn't mean it that way.

Yet...

"Bye Gerald," I said as I left.

He nodded quietly, and I left him and his pen strokes alone as I went back to work.

Chapter 130: A Swell of a Storm

The wave crashed up over the deck, dousing me again.

I huffed and brushed sea water out of my face, only to get splashed even harder as the boat lurched the other way.

"I swear," I complained as I turned to look at the rest of the deck.

It was a mess. The ocean swells had already taken most of the stuff off the deck. The deck side cannons were gone, thanks to the left railing breaking off. Most of the loose rope, barrels and crates were either gone completely or stacked in a corner near the upper deck's stairwell. Tied with haste to keep hold of them.

As the ship rolled again, I shifted my weight to keep myself stationary. I wasn't tied down like the five other men on the deck. They all had three ropes each tied around their waists. One to the nearest mast to their station, one to a metal chain hook on the center of the deck, and a third and final one to tie them all together.

I had recommended them to not tie each other to themselves, but they hadn't listened. To them it was a smart idea.

Smart ideas didn't come when one panicked.

"Grab hold!" a man screamed as he lunged for the nearby iron mast. I turned to see what had spurred the instinct of survival.

A great wave, higher than our ship, was heading towards our port side.

The ship would be fine, I knew this... even the sailors knew this, but they weren't as lucky.

Men were feeble. Weak. They were nothing in the force of nature.

So what did that make me?

The wave hit us, and the boat suddenly disappeared from beneath my feet.

For a tiny moment I was weightless... then I felt my feet land onto the smooth wood once again. I crouched as the whole world went dark, and I wasn't able to see anything anymore.

The huge wave rolled over us, blocking out what little sun the clouds let thru, and once again I was in the ocean instead of above it.

As fast as the water came, it left. It swooshed loudly as it poured off the deck as fast as it could, as if the ocean waters didn't want to be on the boat anymore than we wanted it here.

"Hoorah!" the five men loudly bellowed their survival, and I was half tempted to join them.

I didn't though. It wasn't fair if I did.

Slowly standing up from my crouch, I looked up at the giant masts and sails. A few had torn and ripped before we had been able to get them rolled up, but most were still fine. Even the smaller masts in the rear were still in one piece.

This was a well made ship, all things considered.

Something touched my foot, and I looked down and realized I had lost my shoes. A crab was walking upon it. The hairy legged thing was doing its best to escape.

I let it be, and wondered where my shoes had gone.

They were nowhere to be seen on the deck.

"Another, lads!" one of the sailors bellowed a warning.

Ignoring them, and the oncoming wave, I decided to head downstairs. If not to find another pair of shoes, but to at least check on the boy and the women.

As the wave came roaring towards us I headed for the doors to the lower levels.

I didn't need to open the doors. They had been broken off hours ago from the waves. One was stuck half bent inward, as if something heavy had landed on it... maybe a cannon had done the deed.

The wave hit as I headed down stairs. The whole ship rocked, and for a few moments I had to put my foot on the right wall as to stand up straight.

Women screamed as the ship rolled with the wave, and then went back upright. It was interesting that in the roaring of the storm and waves, a woman's cry could be so clearly heard yet nothing else.

Heading down the rest of the stairwell, I stepped into the ankle high water. It was murky, and there was a bunch of junk floating everywhere. I noticed a single shoe nearby, but wasn't in the mood to chase its sibling down.

"Come on! Get out of there you idiot!" Ronaldo was clinging to one of the cage's open doors, trying to pry out the last woman who hadn't left it.

I frowned at him and quickly looked around. The rest of the women were out, and were huddled near the front of the room, where it was the bow of the ship.

Seemed he had tied a bunch of ropes to the keel of the ship. They all clung to the ropes for dear life.

I counted their soaked heads, and was glad to find they were all still here and alive.

Or well... all but one.

"Vim she won't get out!" Ronaldo noticed me and shouted at me over the roars of the storm.

"Then grab her," I said as I approached.

"She keeps scratching me!" he whined.

"Don't be such a virgin," I stepped past him and into the cage.

The woman let loose a blood curling scream as I grabbed her by the waist. Hefting her, I pulled her out of the cage. Luckily the cage's bars were soaked enough that I didn't de-glove her fingers by pulling her away from the bars.

"Let me go! No! Cartha, help me!" the woman screamed wildly as she tried to struggle herself free, but it was useless.

I was going to toss her at the boy, but decided against it. He was clinging to the cage for dear life too.

Sighing, I stepped around the cages and headed for the group of women near the end of the room.

By the time I reached them, the woman I carried realized what I was doing. She stopped screaming and fighting, and let me hand her off to her fellows. They went quickly to tying a rope around her waist once she was in their grasp.

"Thank you," one of them said to me.

"Is anyone hurt?" I asked.

"Jezzia has a broken arm, we think," one said. Several of them pointed to one of the smaller girls, who was huddled in the center of them all. She was holding her arm.

It did look broken.

"The storm will pass in a few hours," I told them, and then turned to the boy. He was still clinging to the cage. "Ronaldo! Get something to make a splint!" I yelled at him.

"What?" he shouted back.

"A splint! For an arm! Get some wood and cloth!" I yelled at him.

Although the boy was as scared as the rest, he must have noticed my tone. He immediately let go of the cage... right as the ship rolled with another massive wave.

He fell back, and probably only didn't get too hurt thanks to landing in the foot or so of water. He rolled upward, alongside the ship as it rocked, and found his feet.

The lad had sea legs at least.

"We're going to die," one of the women sobbed.

"You'll all be fine. Anyone else hurt?" I asked as I looked at them all. They all being pretty much naked made it easy to check on them. It was hard to tell though; since most had already been bruised up rather badly before the storm had even begun.

"He's speaking in that weird tongue again," one of them said.

Ah shoot. "Anyone other than her hurt?" I asked them again, this time in their language.

"I don't think so," the scarred one said. She was standing at the edge of the group, where it was the most dangerous.

She had a spine.

"Have him help you splint that arm. He'll not harm you, but if you harm him I'll kill every last one of you," I told them.

They all stared at me as I turned away and headed back towards the boy.

He had a bundle of broken wood and leather in his arms, and trying to pick up a floating pair of pants. Once I reached him he got it all together and started my way.

"One of them has got a broken arm. Splint it then tie yourself to them and stay with them," I told him.

"But!" he started to complain, but I ignored him.

"Stay with them!" I ordered.

"Storms," he cursed and hurried away to obey.

Heading back up to the main deck, I wasn't too surprised to find no one else here.

I sighed as I stared at the empty deck, and then hurried across the soaked deck to get to the upper one. Where the wheel was.

Reaching the helm, I shook my head at the lack of anyone. There wasn't even a piece of rope left to let me know what had happened.

They were gone.

Going to the helm, I grabbed hold and for the smallest moment... was at peace.

"Good thing Renn hadn't come," I said as I spun the wheel, to put us back on course.

Grilly and the rest of her men had stayed on the Braque; they had likely been fast enough to outpace the storm. They might not be in Lumen yet, but they should be fine.

As I turned the ship, I looked out to the east. To the vast sea, in all its dark and brooding glory.

Not a sliver of sunlight reached out there, even though it was midday.

The six men that Grilly had given us to sail were gone. Only I, Ronaldo and those women remained.

And they were all huddled beneath deck, tied to one another. Useless.

As the wheel spun, I noticed something in the darkness. Something... shifted in the sky. It didn't take long for me to realize it was a massive wave. Maybe thrice as high as the one earlier.

That was probably why the sailors were gone. They had taken the chance at being lost to sea over being hit by that while on the ship. Abandoning the rest of us in the process.

Cowards.

Stopping the wheel from spinning, I firmed my grip and glanced down at my feet when I noticed that they were a little cold.

No shoes, right.

Looking back up to face down the wave... I directed the ship to the left a little. The wave was eerily quiet as it approached, and I went to finding the best path to keep the boat from being completely eaten by it.

As I turned the wheel, I realized how big this ship really was. I could see it now thanks to being up here at the helm, and feel it through the wheel.

Was a little odd to be so alone on such a big ship. At least up on deck.

"A man and the sea," I said as I smiled.

Then the wave hit.