

Non Human 131

Chapter 131: Qualm During the Calm

Gulls squawked above me, happily talking to one another as I kicked the body off the rail.

The dead man rolled off the side of the boat, and a moment later I heard the splash he made. The splash sounded... real loud, even though the boat was actually pretty high up.

And the reason was obvious. The sea was calm. The ship barely making noise as it gently floated along the gentle sea also made it seem quieter than it were.

It wasn't actually quiet after all. The sea still made noise. The ship creaked, and things that had broken during the storm were banging and clanking as the ship rocked. And then of course...

The giggling and laughter on the main deck was very noisy. The thirty one women were in the center of the boat, all around the large fresh water barrels. They were washing themselves off, and enjoying the warm sunshine.

Walking back down to the main deck, I ignored the group of women as I headed back under the deck. The inside of the ship wasn't as flooded as it had been during the storm, but the lowest level still had about a foot of water.

I sighed as I walked to the hallway in-between the lower decks, opposite of where the cages had been.

"Shoot," Ronaldo's voice carried as I heard pots and pans banging in the mess hall.

I had told him to make himself and the women food. Sounded like it wasn't going well.

He'd be fine though. For now I needed to get all the dead bodies out of the ship before we reached port.

It turned out that a few men had hid away when I and the rest had commandeered the ship. In the lower levels. They had likely planned to hide away and escape, or maybe take it back over when they thought they could.

The storm had punished them before I could.

Reaching the back, I stepped into the water and pushed aside a half floating barrel to get to the last body. The man was the largest of those who had been stuck in here during the storm.

Grabbing the body by the leg, I hauled it to the hallway. Luckily the man had only died last night during the storm, and not days and weeks ago. It allowed me to not have worry about making a mess as I dragged the body through the hall and to the stairs.

"Dang. Wait..." Ronalldo sounded frustrated as something fell to the ground. Whatever it had been broke, by the sounds of it.

I'd make fun of him for not knowing how to cook, but I knew that wasn't the cause of his difficulties.

The storm had made a mess of everything. He was probably just trying to do what he could with what he had.

"Almost done Ronalldo?" I asked loudly as I pulled the body to the end of the hallway.

"Uh... No. But I'll get it done! I found some food!" Ronalldo shouted back, he sounded worried.

While he went back to banging around, I pulled the body up the stairs to the main deck.

The group of women paused as they watched me drag the body to the edge of the ship, and then toss it over.

I sighed as I heard it splash into the ocean, and I wondered if I really wanted to go look for any more. There was another floor beneath that one, the main hold of the ship, and there was a good chance there were more in there... I had searched it, but had done so during daybreak. It had been somewhat dark and it was a horrible mess down there too. There were hundreds of boxes and barrels, supplies and who knows what else down there.

Leaning against the rail, I scanned the horizon. The mountains in the distance told me we weren't too far from Lumen, maybe another two days or so. Honestly the storm hadn't taken us off course too badly. Though that was probably because I had taken the wheel so early into the event.

"Sir Vim, can we go look for more shoes?"

I turned away from the sea to look at the woman who had walked up to me. She and a few others were now getting dressed. None of the clothes seemed to fit them, obviously what little we had found had been meant for the sailors not them. Grilly had given us some supplies before we had separated, but thanks to the storm all of that was missing... or gone.

The woman was holding a man's boot. She was smiling at me in a way that told me she found it hilarious.

"Uh... yeah. Just stick together in groups, and don't go to the lowest level," I told her.

"The... Ah the bottom, yes," she nodded, understanding.

I nodded. It seemed some of my words were... archaic to them. They understood me, and I them, well enough to communicate but there was definitely a regional issue. Not a surprise though, considering my knowledge of their language was from over a hundred years ago.

"He said we can search. Just not the bottom of the ship and we need to do it in groups," she hurried back to the group to let them all know.

"Can we find food too?" one asked.

"The boy's supposed to be making you all something. You can go help him if you'd like," I said. He probably needed the help.

"I'll help him. I'm starving," one said. A few others quickly agreed, and in no time the group of women split into two. One to get food, another to find clothes for everyone, and then...

The scarred woman walked over as the rest went to do what they set out to. Only a few stayed behind, and most were still cleaning themselves.

"My name is Lamp," she said, and I noticed she got close enough to talk to me... but not too close.

Most of them had realized that Ronaldo and I weren't a threat to them. But there were still a few who were weary, and I didn't blame them for it. This scarred woman however...

"Lamp. I'm Vim," I accepted her introduction. Wonder how she got a name like that.

"Vim..." Lamp said my name slowly as she studied me.

She had given the previous captain of this ship the finishing blow. Before the storm had hit I had gone down to tell Ronaldo and to get them out of the cages so they'd not get hurt, and found he had already done so and that she had done the deed immediately.

He must have been cruel to her. But I knew his cruelty wasn't the cause of her scarred face. Half her face was covered in a deep craggily scar. It made her left eye look odd, since it was permanently half closed, and a bit of her left lip curled upward. It was a very old injury. Something that had happened to her years ago, likely during her youth.

It made me wonder why she had been captured in the first place. The rest of them were young and pretty.

She looked away from me, and to the women behind her. The four that remained were all around one of the fresh water barrels, talking amongst themselves as they cleaned their hair.

"Is there anything I can offer you to free us?" she asked while staring at them.

"Free you," I said. A statement. Not a question.

She shivered, and I noticed the way the thin rag she wore did nothing to protect her from the sea's breeze. It was warm today, but the wind could still chill. Especially after washing oneself in cold water. "You're a man of worth. Surely we can reach a deal somehow," she said as she looked back at me.

Man of worth? Wonder what that meant to her. It was obviously a culture thing, but I couldn't really remember their culture much. Not enough to understand her meaning in its entirety.

"Even if I was willing to entertain such a thing... what would you have to give me?" I asked her.

She gestured in a way that told me exactly what she could offer.

"A sad joke," I said.

Lamp flinched, and I realized my words had probably cut her as bad as the wounds that had given her those scars. Although it was sad to see a woman with such low self-esteem in this situation, I wasn't going to retract my statement.

I would have said such a thing no matter her appearance. Now if Renn had said such a thing instead...

"I could... I could..." she started to speak, and seemed to stumble with her words. She wasn't sure what to say.

I sighed at her. "Just let it be for now. Technically right now you're not even mine, but Grilly's. The woman you saw earlier, the sick one."

"The sick woman...? What will she do with us?" she asked.

"Who knows?" I said.

Lamp's eyes glared at me, and I noticed the fire within them. She really did have a backbone. That spine had probably gotten her that scar, or instead had been forged thanks to it.

"Lamp, we got food!" a woman poked her head out of the open stairs that led downstairs. She shouted happily as she waved her in. The four women who had been cleaning themselves quickly went to drying themselves off and hurrying to the stairs.

Lamp though remained before me. She waved at the women who stared at her for a moment before going downstairs.

"Go eat," I told her.

"Not before I figure out what to think of you," she said.

"What's there to think?" I asked.

"A lot. You're a warrior, yet not like them," she said.

"You only think that because we can communicate," I said.

"I'd think you blind to your own fellows... but maybe you don't realize how cruel men can be, since you're the way you are," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"You force men to go against their instincts. Like the boy. You order him around, and he obeys without fail," she said with a gesture to the barrels. Ronaldo and I had carried them up to the deck.

Or well, I had. Then Ronaldo had rolled them to the center, and opened them for the girls.

"Lamplight is known for being hard on the eyes," I said.

She flinched again, and I regretted my sharp tongue. Why did my words always slip out so smoothly?

If Renn had been here she'd have retorted back.

Before Lamp could regain her composure and say something, I raised my hand to stop her. "I get it. You're worried for your future. And I fully understand why. I'm not stupid. For now you and the girls are safe. I promise. I'll not let anything happen to you or them until we get back to Lumen," I said.

"Lumen...?" she asked.

"A port city. It's two or so days away at this rate," I said.

"What happens then? After we get there?" she asked.

"As I said. You're not my property. You're Grilly's. For your information, she has promised to not harm you. Though I can't honestly say what your future holds... for now it's nothing too dark. You're free to try and escape, or make a deal, with anyone and anything you wish. I'll not stop you. But this boat will reach Lumen. I made that vow and will fulfill it," I told her.

Lamp stared hard at me, and for a very long moment... she held my gaze.

She reminded me of Renn. Though a little taller... and her breasts were a little bigger, too.

I blinked as I realized I found her attractive. Maybe that was why I was entertaining her foolish conversation and...

"Vim...!" she raised her hand to point past me. She was staring over my shoulder now and...

Turning around, I frowned at the sight of something in the ocean. At first I wasn't sure what it was... but as I studied it I started to recognize things.

The flags. The sails. The masts, half sticking out of the water.

A wreck.

Taking a deep breath, I gripped the rail of the ship as I stared at the wreckage of the barque. The ship that Grilly and her crew had been upon.

Debris littered the sea, and I turned and hurried to the helm.

"Go get the boy!" I shouted at Lamp.

She stared out at sea for a moment, and then turned to comply. While she headed below deck, I grabbed the wheel and quickly took in the ocean. Yes. It was definitely the wreck of her ship. It looked to be in three pieces, and most were still sinking... slowly. There was debris everywhere, from barrels to broken bits of the ship.

Great. Just great.

"They hadn't survived the storm," I said as I turned the wheel, to direct us a little closer to the wreckage.

They should have. That ship, although had a longer keel than this one and not as high above the water, had the speed to outmaneuver that storm. They should have been able to hug the coastline, if not even dock at the coast until it passed.

Maybe something had happened. Maybe some of the crew they had taken prisoner had done something.

Ronaldo hurried up on deck, his head spinning around. He had his axe in his hand, ready for anything.

"What is it?" he asked as some of the women hurried up with him. Lamp was pointing to the wreck in the distance, and the boy's quick mind seemed to become sluggish as he stared at it.

As we drifted nearer the wreckage, I glanced up at the main sail. I had folded up the front and rear sails, or at least most of them, since they had gotten damaged in the storm. If we were going to come to a stop, not only did I need to drop anchor I was going to need to...

"Ronaldo! Get the sail ready to reef!" I shouted at him.

"Ah... Oh gods!" Ronaldo though was realizing what was before him. He was realizing which ship was sinking right in front of him.

"Ronaldo!" I shouted as I turned the wheel.

The boy jerked, as did the women who were watching us. He turned to look at me and even from the distance I could see the whites of his eyes. He might even be in shock.

"Get the sails up! We'll drop anchor near it!" I shouted at him.

The boy looked away, to the wreckage... and then nodded. Then he dropped his axe, right there where he stood, and then hurried to the rigging of the main mast.

Sighing at him I guided the boat between the floating debris and decided I'd round the wreckage. It was a good thing the sea was as calm as it was, else this wouldn't be easy. Did this ship even have any smaller boats? I hadn't noticed any... if it had, they were probably gone now. Lost to the storm...

Actually why didn't I see any other ships nearby? Such a wreck had not only happened a while ago, but the debris was probably covering miles and miles of sea. Other ships would have seen it and searched out the wreckage. Both to save people, and to get the spoils.

"Vim I can't get this one!" Ronaldo shouted at me from the port of the ship. He was struggling with one of the ropes.

"Lamp!" I shouted at the scarred woman. She startled, as did the other women, and she looked at me as I waved her over.

She hesitated for only a moment then hurried over.

"Do you or anyone else know how to sail?" I asked.

"I uh... kind of. Yes," she said.

"Take the helm. We're going to round the wreckage, and anchor between it and the shoreline. You understand?" I asked.

"Yes."

I nodded and stepped away. She took the wheel, and I went down to the main deck to help the boy.

Before going to help Ronaldo, I spared a moment to glance at the axe he had dropped. Most of the women had come up onto deck to see what was going on, and...

And it was still there. Untouched. Several of the women had glanced at it upon his dropping of it, but it had been left alone.

"You let her take the wheel?" Ronaldo whispered harshly as I went to see what he was having problems with.

The rope was stuck. It must have gotten dislodged during the storm, and then redone in haste. Then during the commotion knotted up and...

Grabbing the rope from him, I pointed at the other rigging. "Get that side," I said.

He obeyed as I pulled the ropes free. They gave way, and then became taught as I pulled. The pulleys made odd noises, telling me they were probably damaged too, but they worked all the same. The main sail began to fold up into itself.

Ronaldo and I got the rest of the sails folded upward, and then I pointed at the helm. "Take the wheel. I'll get the anchor," I told him.

He happily complied. Although a young boy, and not as cruel as most sailors... he still seemed unwilling to let a woman hold the reins.

This ship had two anchors. They were at the bow of the ship, and both connected to the same chain stopping mechanism. It was a giant turning apparatus, with a single metal lock holding it in place.

I stepped up to the railing and peered over at one of the anchors. They were large, with three arms and flat bills for flukes. Not the nicest, nor the best, but they'd work. Especially in these calm waters and this close to shore.

"Ho Vim!" Ronaldo got my attention, and I watched as he spun the wheel, putting us on course. He was young, but knew without me telling him what to do.

Lamp was standing next to him, watching intently.

Looking back to the wreckage, I studied it and all the debris around it as we sailed around it. Ronaldo gave it a huge berth, more even than needed, but I didn't fault him for it. One never knew what lay beneath.

I didn't see rocks, or reefs. But I did see part of the ship that was mostly sunk. The front of the ship, where the front mast had been, was hundreds of paces from the rest of the wreck... and facing in a different direction.

The ship had broken in two. A wave had hit it, and whoever had been sailing at the time had not done his job. Or her job, if it had been Grilly.

I sighed and looked around for survivors.

There were bodies floating, but none seemed to be alive... and at first glance I didn't recognize Grilly amongst them.

Our ship was slowing, thanks to the lack of sails, and a few minutes later we got in position. I went ahead and stepped up to the anchor weight, and then kicked the bar which held it locked in place.

I stepped back as it made a loud bang, as both anchors immediately fell into the water.

The chains roared, scraping and breaking the wood they slid and grounded against as the anchors went deeper into the water. I stepped a few more steps back since the chains went wild.

One shackle. Two. A third even.

This area was deeper than I thought.

On the fourth shackle, the chains finally stopped rolling as quickly. Although they still flowed out into sea, most of their momentum had been lost. I reached out and kicked the stopper once more, locking it place.

The lock didn't want to engage right away. It fought me, so I kicked it again. This time the mechanism came to an abrupt stop, and the chains clanked.

I felt the chains drag along the ships side, and then the whole ship lurched a little as the anchors found their teeth. Some of the girls made noises as the ship rolled, then tilted, then came to a stop.

Once anchored I stepped up to the rail and looked down. The chains had broken some of the rail's wood, but nothing too badly.

This ship was going to look like it had gone through a fierce battle by the time I was done with it.

"Hey!" one of the women shouted, and I turned to see Ronaldo pushing the girls out of the way as he hurried to the edge of the ship. To stare out at the debris.

"Mother!" Ronaldo shouted, and even the women who didn't recognize the word he had screamed felt his emotion.

Walking to the main deck, I studied the ocean. There were bodies... but no one was waving or shouting for us. One of the bodies even had a large bird perched upon it, pecking at it without a care.

I sighed as one of the girls hurried up to me. "There's someone over there. He's alive," she said with a point to the stern of the ship.

Oh?

"Don't tell them that! Let them drown!" one of the women shouted.

"They'll find out anyway!" another shouted back.

I ignored them as I went to the other side and looked for who she spoke of. It didn't take long to find him. A man was on a large block of timber, waving at us. His voice barely audible over Ronaldo's shouting and the women arguing.

Of course I didn't recognize him, and there was no point in calling Ronaldo over to verify who he was. The boy probably couldn't see that far.

A quick look around verified that this ship had no life rafts or smaller vessels. Which meant...

Was I really going to have to swim over there? Why couldn't he just swim here?

"Should we go get him?"

Turning to look at Lamp who was staring at the man, I shrugged. "He can swim to us," I said and turned away.

"He is harsh," one of them whispered as I went back to stare at the main wreckage. Two pieces of the ship were still floating mostly above water.

"I'll go check," I said.

"Huh?" one of the women startled, and I realized I had spoken in their language.

"Ronaldo, I'll go check. Stay here," I told him.

He looked at me with tears in his eyes, and I didn't wait for his response as I stepped up to one of the spots where the railing had been broken off. Where one of the cannons had went overboard.

Stepping off the boat, I leapt into the ocean.

As I sunk into the ocean, I realized I was going to be soaked again. I had just gotten dry not too long ago.

Breaching the surface, I began swimming towards the largest floating piece of wreckage. The one where her cabin had been, near the back.

It didn't take me long to reach the wreck... and as I swam up to it, I found a spot to climb up onto it. Using a broken mast, and all the rope and pulleys layered on top and around it, I climbed up onto the broken deck.

This part of the ship was tilted. The angle was enough to make it a pain, but not so bad that I couldn't stand up and look around.

The thing was a mess. It looked like it had gone through the storm just as feebly as our ship had. There were floorboards broken upwards, revealing the skeleton of the ship and the lower sections. I couldn't see any water within them... but I could hear it all sloshing around beneath my feet.

This thing was sinking, just not that fast. But that didn't mean it wouldn't give way at any moment and plunge into the depths.

I made my way towards the end, where the cabin was. It was above water, but thanks to the angle that this thing was sinking at... it wasn't easily accessible.

"Grilly! It's Vim, can you hear me!" I shouted as I hopped over a broken beam.

For a small moment I listened to the world around me. The sinking of the ship. The waves. The birds. Thunks of wood as they banged against each other on the waves.

Yet no sound of people.

Glancing around, I took a moment to look back at the ship. The one still sailing.

The large man-o-war looked... nice from this distance. Even though one of the back masts was now leaning a little too strongly.

I wasn't worried over the women killing Ronaldo and taking over the ship. Even if they could accomplish it, I sincerely doubted they could get the anchor back up. Even if they were able to somehow break the locking mechanism to free the chain completely, I wasn't too worried either.

Especially since I could just swim back to shore from here.

"Grilly!" I shouted her name again as I finally reached the cabin's entrance. The tilt was now strong enough that I had to enter the cabin in such a way that I had to step into the room by walking on what had been its walls.

The cabin door was missing, and the cabin itself was an absolute mess. All the fine furniture and livery that had been in here was now scattered every which way... and most was missing. Half the windows were broken out and missing.

"Grilly?" I asked as I went in deeper. As I did I found myself walking more and more onto the side of the wall than not. This part of the ship was quite literally on its side.

"Grilly!" I continued to shout her name as I listened for her.

No response came.

Kicking a broken table over, I looked around for any sign of her. Or at least any sign of what could have happened to her.

As I pushed the table over, part of the wall it and I were standing on gave way. The wood cracked loudly, and suddenly the floor plunged downward. I tried to steady myself, but I fell anyway and landed on my ass and back. I landed on the table that I had kicked, and beneath it I heard more wood and junk bang and clatter... and beneath all that I heard the splashing of water.

"Stupid," I cursed at myself as I quickly rolled upward and onto my feet. I had to crouch since I had only fallen a floor below, and thanks to the pile of wreckage there wasn't enough room to stand up fully.

Holding onto one of the broken floorboards above my head I looked around at the half submerged room. It looked like this had been some kind of sleeping quarters, based off the floating hammocks and bedding and...

A familiar long piece of wood bumped up against a box near the table I was standing on. I stepped forward, into the dark water, and reached out and grabbed hold of it.

Once it was in my hand I waded through the water back towards the rubble beneath the hole I had fell through. Once beneath the hole, I ignored the creaking and the feeling of the water listing and looked at the pipe in my hands.

Grilly's pipe.

"Least you died at sea," I said. That was better than a very slow death in bed.

I slid the pipe into my pant's waistline to keep it safe, and then went to climbing out of the hole.

It wasn't difficult. There were more than enough places to grab and pull myself back up into the cabin area. Once I reached it however, I heard the sound of rushing water. Something snapped somewhere, and the part of the ship I was in lurched and began to creak loudly.

The thing was going to sink quickly now.

I didn't hurry, but I didn't take my time as I clambered out of the cabin. Reaching the door, I peered out and saw that the broken half the ship was now sticking upward. The ship was sinking at a much stronger angle now, but it made it easy for me to get back to the open sea. All I had to do was walk along the cabin's walls to the edge of the boat, and hop over.

While I swam away from the wreck, I noticed the tug of the pull from it sinking. It wasn't strong enough to stop me, but it did make a lot of the floating debris gather closer. I had to push floating boards and sail pieces out of the way as I swam back to the ship.

Reaching the ship, I reached out for one of the flailing ropes. It was a dark color, implying it was probably one that had held a cannon in place. It was now flapping without purpose over the side of the ship.

Using it to climb myself up, I chastised myself for not making sure to toss over anything to let me climb back up the ship. Why hadn't I thought of it? Usually I was a little more observant...

Though Ronaldo could have done so for me...

About half way up the rope, I heard some voices. Looking up, I watched as the blonde haired women peered over the rail to stare at me.

"He's back," one said.

"Does he need help?" I heard another ask.

As they talked amongst themselves I climbed the rest of the way up.

I sighed as I pulled myself up onto the deck. I ignored the women who stepped away, unsure of themselves. They had tried to help me up but I had ignored them.

Scanning the deck, I noticed Ronaldo near the center. He was on his knees... and...

"Is he hurt?" I asked.

"He's weeping," one of them whispered, as if he could understand their language.

Weeping...

Yes. I wanted to weep too.

Now back on deck, I relaxed a little as my soaked clothes dripped with ocean water. Turning back to look at the sinking wreckage, or what was left to see, I shook my head and sighed.

That ship had been beautiful. Far more than this one... even before this one had incurred the damage from the storm, too. I'd have chosen that ship over this one any day of the week. It was even sinking beautifully.

"That was my ship," I groaned as I watched the rear-mast sink into the ocean.

Chapter 132: Spoils

Slowly walking down the stairs, I sighed as I rubbed my throbbing left arm.

Brom hadn't broken it, I don't think... but it definitely hurt. I shouldn't have tried to block his kick with it. I should have ducked instead.

Reaching the hallway, I studied the colorful lamps I walked past.

Why was this so disheartening? Being beaten by Brom wasn't... that surprising. He was a seasoned warrior, who had also been trained by Vim... yet...

"Yet I wanted to win," I whispered the truth.

Forget winning, I hadn't a chance. The pain in my left arm told me that even if I had been willing to sacrifice something... like an entire arm, or leg, it still wouldn't be enough.

Brom was just too skilled. Too apt. Too aware. And I was...

Well... I wasn't sure what was wrong with me.

I was stronger. Faster. My reflexes, now after sparring enough times with him, I've realized were superior too. Brom sometimes panicked because of how fast I reacted. When he did, I got hurt... but that wasn't his fault. He simply defended himself from a worse mistake.

My arm had been one of those moments. He hadn't been able to stop his kick in time. It hadn't really been his fault.

The worst part was it hadn't gotten me any closer. I had planned to take his kick and reach him with my sword. All it had done was send me flying across the roof.

Reaching my room, I slowly opened the door and stepped into it.

Unlike the first two times, I didn't immediately fall to the ground and start crying. Though I did let my eyes become watery as I closed the door behind me and put my sword up against my desk.

Walking around the easel that had the almost finished painting, I groaned at myself. I was tired. I hurt. I wanted to sleep.

But I couldn't. I was dirty. I had rolled around on the roof, and had worked in the storage depot today. My pants were covered in weird gunk thanks to one of the boxes I had moved being so filthy.

I needed a bath. Not just to clean myself, but the idea of sitting for a while in hot water sounded good.

Even if taking a bath, alone, after losing a spar against Brom was so insulting.

Sluggishly walking to the bathroom, I pushed aside the sliding door that hid it and walked over to the large hole in the floor.

In the center of the bathroom was a circular recess. The bathtub. It was big enough, and deep enough, that I could lay down in it flat and still have room to spare. There were two little pipes that water poured in from, one poured hot water and the other had cold.

Turning the little knob that let the tub fill with hot water, I realized I had forgotten to put the plug back into the hole in the center of the bath.

Stepping into the tub, I flinched. An odd pain had ran down my right leg from my hip. It had hurt upon stepping downward. Had I bruised it too? Maybe during the fall from the kick.

As the tub filled with hot water, I went to both undress and ready the nightgown I was going to wear to sleep. I knew there was a dinner being made, and that soon it would be available... but I wasn't in the mood to eat. Nor to eat with everyone else.

Stupid as it was... I wanted to mope.

"Foolish," I chastised myself as I undressed.

Tossing my dirty clothes into a hamper, I went back into the bathroom. The hot water was... actually hot. The room was already steamy. The large full sized mirror in one of the corners had already fogged over.

Glancing down at my body, I noticed the few bruises. Some new, some not.

Vim had never given me bruises.

My shoulders shivered, even though the room was warm. Stepping into the hot water, I went still as I felt it scald my foot. It was too hot... but it felt good all the same.

I stood in the bath as it filled up. Once it was full enough I went over and turned the little knob to close, to stop the flow of water.

Slowly sitting down, I took a deep breath as I submerged myself in the hot water.

I knew a human, like Nory, would not have been able to have done it. The water would have hurt them. But for me... right now...

It felt great.

Releasing a pent up sigh, I relaxed and laid back in the bath.

I didn't deserve this.

Yet if I didn't find a way to beat Brom and soon... it was likely this would be all I'd ever have.

This room. This bath. The people here. The jobs. This city.

Honestly... I shouldn't be upset. I shouldn't feel... like a loser, for ending up with them.

They were everything I wanted. If I had found this place first, and not the Sleepy Artist... well...

"I'd never have gone with Vim," I told myself.

Why would I have? This place was full of people I could become friends with. Make relationships with. There was enough activity and different things to do, that even decades from now I'd not be bored.

And Vim would have come and went, half the time without me even noticing.

I'd not have ever realized what he did, what he truly did, since I would have been blinded by this place.

He and I would not have spoken more than a few words every half dozen years. Hundreds of years might have passed before I even really knew the man.

"Thank goodness," I whispered as I closed my eyes and thanked whoever was listening that everything had gone the way it had.

In a way... that could have happened in Ruvindale for me too. If Amber hadn't been killed.

I felt horrible, thanking the fact that others had suffered for me to experience joy... but it was the reality.

Yet... for how much longer?

Vim hadn't actually said it outright, but it was obvious. He wanted me to beat Brom, to prove myself. Then he went ahead and promised Brom a reward for not letting me do so.

Which meant he had known, and not only known that I would have failed... but had actually gone the extra step to ensure I wouldn't.

Brom, for as sorry as he was for beating me each time... was not going to relinquish the spear. Right before this afternoon's sparring, he had sat with me on the bench and told me so. He had said he felt horrible, and his sister had threatened to kick him out of the guild over it, but he wasn't going to let me win. He wanted the spear. And he wanted to do so for Vim, since Vim rarely asked for a favor.

I could respect that. Which was why it made me struggle to hate him.

I splashed a bit as my tail swayed back and forth on the surface of the water. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed to float easily.

Lifting my left arm out of the hot water, I stared at the growing bruise on my forearm. I might have damaged it. Maybe a fracture or break... it did feel tender, and was still throbbing.

Letting it fall back into the water, I sighed. "What am I doing?" I asked myself.

The last few days I hadn't even really been paying attention to my work. No one had said anything... and it wasn't like I was neglecting my duties... but it was obvious even to me. I spent all day thinking about one of two things.

The painting.

Or how to beat Brom.

And everyone here had noticed. And even though they had noticed... they were kind about it. They were gentle. They gave me the space when needed, yet still came over to spend a few minutes talking to me all the same. As if to remind me that they were here, if I wanted them.

Even little Merit had come over and said some words of encouragement the other day. Though she had made it a point to do so when we were alone, and no one else could hear her.

I needed to spend more time with her. She was older than me, and had a unique perspective on life thanks to her body.

And something told me she needed a friend.

Breathing in the steam, I relaxed a little more and...

A heavy knock startled me awake.

Blinking, I sat up and realized the water was cold. And the sunlight from the window was now a deep red. I had fallen asleep.

More knocking told me it was someone at my door. The knocks sounded... odd. I didn't recognize them, but that wasn't too surprising. Only two people have knocked on my door since arriving here. Brom and Reatti, and both had only done so once.

Splashing out of the bath, I hurriedly went to grab one of the towels. I didn't dry off completely, just enough. A quick wipe down was all I did. "Coming!" I shouted a little loudly. The bath made my voice sound weird.

The knocking stopped for a moment, and I knew it was because whoever it was had heard me.

Hopefully that wasn't Brom or Reatti... Those two had noticed my obvious depression lately, and were doing everything they could to cheer me up but honestly it was having the opposite effect.

I wanted to hate Brom, not love him. He was stopping me from proving myself. From getting what I want. He was the only enemy I had right now, in my whole life.

Yet he wasn't an enemy. And I hated that fact.

"One moment," I said as I hurriedly put on a long dress. It clung to my still wet skin and hair, but I didn't bother with it. Whoever it was, was a member of the Society. We were all far too old to be so prudish to be bothered by it.

If anything it was probably fine to even open the door naked... if not for the fact I'd be embarrassed over it.

Opening the door slowly, I peered out at the one who had knocked... and found someone I didn't recognize.

"Yes...?" I steadied myself as I studied the woman. She was a tad bit taller than me, probably my height with my ears... but had large breasts. The kind that made you notice them before you noticed anything else about her.

"Well look at you. I must admit, you're exactly what I expected," she said upon studying me. I noticed her strange colored pupils were looking me up and down as much as I was doing her.

Opening the door fully, I stood up a little straighter. The action had probably been seen as confrontational, thanks to the way my dress stuck to my skin. "Am I?" I asked.

She nodded and reached up to cup her chin as she studied my body. I noticed the way she looked at my hips and stomach... did I look weird to her or something? "So this is his type. I admit, it makes sense," she said with another nod.

"Excuse me...?" His type? Who was she talking about?

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"No."

The woman blinked, and then broke out into a laugh. As she guffawed I noticed she had lots of little teeth... they were small enough to be odd, yet somehow fit her. Who was she?

"No! Ha! I'm going to like you!" she heaved as she laughed, and her laughter sounded so pure and real... it made me smile and laugh too.

Shaking my head at her I stepped back. "Come on in," I said. How could I hate someone so genuine?

"Oh thanks... I'm Brandy," she stepped into the room and held her hand out.

Brandy!

I renewed my examination of her as I took her hand and shook it. "Renn," I greeted her.

"That you are. Really... how interesting." She looked around my room as she spoke, and I realized some parts of her hair were different colors. She had white mixed into her brown hair.

"Oh...?" she noticed my painting and stepped over to it. I glanced out the door, and was a little glad to see no one else out there. I closed the door and went back to the bathroom as Brandy examined my painting. Before going into the bathroom I grabbed another set of clothes.

"You have... weird tastes," Brandy said softly as I took my dress off and went back to drying myself off. I had slid the bathroom door closed a little, but not all the way.

"How so?" I asked as I dried off.

"Are you a believer of the Epoch?" she asked.

"Epoch...?" I asked as I went to getting dressed.

"You don't know? Did you paint the cross weirdly on purpose?" she asked.

Oh. The cross... was that the faith the Clothed Woman believed in? Epoch?

"I didn't. I was just painting something I saw not too long ago," I said.

"Ah... you saw it at the sanctuary nearby. I see," she sounded much calmer. It made sense to her.

"Yes. We met the Clothed Woman before coming here," I said as I left the bathroom.

"Hm... honestly I think the last dress suited you better," she said with a smile as she studied me.

I smiled back, even if her compliment was entirely a joke. "Thanks. I uh... have water?" I offered. There was a jug on the desk, but it was a few days old.

She waved me away. "I came to get you. I have a gift for you," she said.

"A... a gift?" I asked. Really?

She nodded, seemingly proud of herself. "Before that though mind if we walk and talk? I left them in capable hands but they can't speak their language, so I'll need to get back quick," Brandy said.

"Oh...? Okay?" I nodded, unsure of what was happening. I went to put my boots back on.

As I did, I wondered why I felt so full of energy all of a sudden. I had felt so tired earlier... now I felt good. Better than normal.

Maybe that laughter Brandy and I had shared earlier had been the reason.

"Vim's not here, by the way. I'm not sure when he'll be back," I told her.

"Huh? Oh. Well..." she went silent as she looked to my bed. I followed her gaze and noticed she was staring at my sword.

"I've been training with Brom," I told her.

"I've heard. He says you're probably going to be one of the strongest members we have. That's a high compliment coming from him," she said.

I paused mid-tie of a shoelace, and looked up at her. "Huh?"

She nodded. "You've been given high praise all-round. And not just from the folks here, either," she said with a smirk.

Finishing up my shoes, I hesitated. "Should I wear a hat?" I asked. I decided to just ignore her comments and headed for my dresser. The hats I've accumulated hung on the side, on little pegs.

"Yes. Oh, you've got the company's hats? No, no... wear this," she reached past me and grabbed my own hat. The one Lellip had made.

"Okay..." I took it and obliged her.

"You have nice ears. Bet you can hear a mouse sneeze three floors down," she said.

I smiled as we both headed for the door. "My hearing's not that good," I said honestly.

"Not that good, she says." Brandy snickered as we left my room.

Walking alongside Brandy, I realized she was... deceptively skinny. Her large chest made her seem larger than she was. "How've you liked the company so far?" she asked.

Company. She called it the same thing Vim did.

"Very nice. I could see myself staying here," I said.

"Could see it, huh," she smiled at me, and I realized she had read between the lines.

"The people here are great. It's... wonderful," I added.

She nodded, understanding. "I'm proud of this place. A lot of deaths went to building it," she said.

I gulped. Great. She was going to be like Vim wasn't she? Saying things that made my heart stop.

Brandy guided me down the hall towards one of the exits, and I noticed she ignored the sounds coming up from one of the stairwells. Some members were downstairs eating together, by the sounds of it.

"Have you worked everywhere yet?" she asked.

"Uh... everywhere but the auditors, I guess," I said. I hadn't worked each and every position, of course, just in every other department so far.

"Eh Lawrence is boring, but he could teach you a lot" she said as she opened the door.

As she did I noticed she did so easily.

Brandy was strong.

She stepped aside and closed the door behind me, as if wanting to be responsible for it.

"I heard you went to the Bell Church?" I asked.

"I did," she said.

"I've been told I'd probably like it there," I said.

"Oh? By who?" Brandy paused for a moment.

"Kaley," I said.

Brandy's face contorted, and she bellowed a laugh again. I couldn't help it; I smiled and laughed with her. Why was her laughter so contagious?

"Kaley! Ha!" she patted me on the back, and then wrapped her arm around my own. She grabbed my hand, stepping close, and I suddenly felt very conscious of her.

She leaned against me as we returned to walking. "I might need to fight Vim for you, you're adorable," she said.

"Might not need to, honestly..." I said as I glanced down at my arm. It was smothered by her chest. I wasn't bothered by it... but this was the first time one of our member's had been so... touchy with me.

Brandy giggled as we headed down the hall and then took a right. She was taking me towards the depot it seemed.

"Just between you and me, to start our friendship right and true... I want you to know that I'm jealous," Brandy said.

"Jealous...?" She wanted us to be friends? I liked that idea.

"Of you," she said.

"Why...?" There was no need to be.

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked as we rounded a corner and entered one of the larger hallways. One that usually was lit up well, but was now rather dark. The lamps had been put out.

For a few moments Brandy studied me as I stared at her. What did she expect me to say? What was there to be jealous of?

She, like most of the members of the Society... have been part of it for hundreds of years. Born into it. They had known about it their whole lives... and knew exactly their position and purpose within it. Brandy and the rest didn't have to worry about not having a place to call home, or being banished because they didn't do their job properly.

She was jealous of me? That was the opposite of the truth.

"I got spoils, you see," Brandy then said.

"Spoils...?" I asked. The change in topics was bothersome, but I was used to it by now. Vim did that too.

Brandy nodded as we headed down some stairs to the first floor. The doors to the depot came into sight as we entered the very dark hallway. So dark that most humans wouldn't have been able to see within it.

Both Brandy and I opened the door together, since we each had an arm and hand occupied. The large metal doors swung open effortlessly, thanks to the fancy hinges they hung on.

"I brought spoils you see. Spoils of war," she said as we entered the depot. A closed and dark depot. It was odd to enter a place that I had grown accustomed to being the nosiest place here, and finding it silent. Or well... almost silent.

Entering the oddly dark and eerily quiet warehouse... I glanced around for the source of sound. There seemed to be chatter and metal clinking and...

The depot was closed up. The large gates were lowered, and locked. No one could get in and out, not at least from the depot itself.

In the center of the depot, where usually was nothing since it was where carts and wagons moved along were a bunch of people. Sitting where they would normally have been trampled by the coming and going of horses.

Women. Women with blonde hair, a rarity here. They were sitting on small boxes and chairs. There were a few dozen of them at least, and nearby was a large carriage. There was no horse near it, but it was obvious that they had arrived thanks to it. Most looked... disheveled. Wearing weird mismatched clothing... and looked sickly. Were they ill? They were all sitting around a large pot that was simmering, and each and every one of them was scarfing down the soup it held within.

"Since they're Vim's spoils, and he doesn't want them... I think I'll give them to you," Brandy said with a wave at them.

"Wait what?" I stood up straighter as Brandy let my arm go and stepped aside. She nodded quickly and gestured at them with a smile.

"They're your responsibility from this moment forth. He doesn't want them... and since right now, technically, you're his companion... that makes them yours," Brandy said with a very firm and definitive nod of the head.

I gulped at the sudden burden, and wondered what the hell she meant. Spoils of war? The women?

"Them?" I asked.

She nodded and turned. "Lamp!" she shouted, and then spoke quickly in a rather... odd sounding language. One that made my ears itchy. She suddenly sounded as if she had a hoarse throat.

One of the women perked up, and then all of them looked over at us. Then one stood. A tall woman, who handed her bowl to another and stepped towards us.

As she approached, I sighed at the sight of her. She was beautiful... even with half her face marred by a horrendous scar.

"Renn, this is Lamp. She and her people don't speak the language here, but she can read it. So you can communicate by writing. You and her are going to take care of them all until we can do what needs to be done," Brandy said.

"You're kidding me..." I said.

Brandy ignored me and said stuff to Lamp. I heard my name amongst her guttural words, so I figured she must be introducing me. After a few nods of the head, and a few sentences between the two... Lamp finally extended her hand out to me and gave me a dashing smile. One that didn't let the scar that malformed it lessen its brilliance.

She said something to me in her language as I took her hand and shook it.

"She says any woman of Vim's is a friend of hers," Brandy translated.

My smile became stiff as I sighed.

"Of course."

Spoils. Great.

Chapter 133: Tests

Brandy huffed as she rounded the stairwell, and headed for me.

"Don't huff as if you're tired," I told her as she went to sit across from me.

She smirked as she sat down. "Well why not? You always leave me with all the burdens, the least you can do is let me complain about them," she said.

"You toss those burdens on others, Brandy. Some heavy lifting," I said.

Brandy waved me off as she leaned back into the chair, getting comfortable. "It's a test," she reasoned.

"Test," I spat the word. I didn't like hearing that from her.

She nodded as she glanced to the nearby balcony railing. She couldn't see over it, thanks to where and how she sat, but she knew what was beneath us. This balcony overlooked the depot, and right now in the middle of the day it was busy and loud.

We were above one of the offices that used to be used, but isn't anymore. It was now used as a storage room. One had to enter that office, leave to the patio outside and then walk up the steep stairs that rounded this balcony as to get to this balcony. It was angled in such a way that from the main floor, where they were loading and unloading wagons, that it couldn't be seen. The only workers who probably even knew this place existed were the ones who have had to climb up top to the catwalks on the ceiling to untangle or fix the pulleys and cranes. And usually we didn't let the humans do that, but our own members.

This balcony was a good place to talk and not have to worry about being overheard, or found. Few members looked here, if ever. Brandy and I used it often when here.

I had whistled at her a few minutes ago, since I had snuck back into the building without anyone noticing.

Didn't want anyone to know about me just yet. Wasn't in the mood.

"She's lovely. All the letters, and everyone here, didn't do her justice. She'll become someone very important, I can see why you're willing to let her stick to you like glue," Brandy said as she leaned forward to talk to me.

Although I had just returned, Brandy had been back for a few days now. I had sent her on ahead with the women, as Ronaldo and I had docked the ship for the Society. The ship was in such a condition that I didn't want people seeing me unload thirty one women from it. It would have been... well... troublesome.

Slavery was illegal in Lumen, after all.

So I had moored off the coast near the Bell Church and got Brandy. Luckily I had got to her right before she had left. Or well, she had actually left. I had gone to the church and had to run full sprint to catch up to her. Then I had to explain everything, and we had to work out how to get the girls to land and into a carriage. That had added a few days to our trip all on its own.

"You and the rest are looking into it too much. She just hasn't found a place that makes her happy yet," I said.

"Sure, sure," she shrugged, accepting my... well...

It wasn't a lie. Yet it wasn't the truth either, was it?

My hope maybe?

"You gave her the eastern girls?" I asked.

Brandy nodded. "They're at the human apartments. It was empty, so the perfect place for them. I have her getting them all cleaned up and checked out. Some were hurt," she said.

"Abused," I said simply.

Brandy nodded softly. "Like most women in this era, yes," she said.

"People suffer in any era, Brandy. The last was no better," I said.

"For us it was," she said.

"So some women say," I said.

"So we do," she said, and seemed to be willing to let that debate end there.

"Your test you speak of. What's the purpose?" I asked.

"See? You are worried about her. Don't worry; I'll not ruin what you're doing. I just wanted to see how seriously she'd treat them... they being human, and whatnot," she said.

"You should have known from the letters what she's like concerning humans," I said.

"Yes, but unlike you I can't just test on trust. I need to see it for myself... and test in other ways. Every other way," she argued.

"So? Just to see if she'll do what you tell her to? A poor test. Even a dog can obey commands," I said.

"Please Vim. I wanted to see how she treated them. The little details. Don't act like you don't know what I mean," she said without getting upset.

I sighed. She was no fun. Too smart for her own good.

Which was what worried me about Renn. She was smart too... what if some day she didn't play along with my teasing and jokes?

"Fine. So she passed already? You said she's taking care of them." I said.

"She has. In that form, at least. Without me actually telling her entirely about the plan, she parsed it from me and Lamp. Once she found out about the Eastern Embassy, she formulated the idea herself and asked me for permission to go check it out. Check it out, I note. She wants to make sure it's legitimate before giving them over," Brandy told me of what's happened with a smile.

"She's wise like that," I said.

"She is. She really is... A part of me thinks she hates humans, yet then she does that. I can count the number of our members on one hand who would have been concerned enough over them to even consider that the embassy could be bad for them," Brandy said.

"I can think of a few more than five," I said.

"Because you remember those no longer here anymore," she said.

Tilting my head at that, I wondered if she was right.

Brandy waved the topic away. "In the next few days we plan to go the embassy. To see if it's legit or not," Brandy said.

"I hope it is," I said.

"Sure you do. Not for their sake, but for Renn's I'm sure," she said.

Frowning at her, I wondered why she found that odd. Of course I was thinking about Renn. She was a member of the Society, they weren't.

"You're right. I should be more careful. She would dedicate..." I stopped talking as I realized something important.

She had dedicated years to humans before.

Leaning forward, I groaned as I realized I had made a horrible mistake.

I shouldn't have let Brandy actually act out her idea of letting Renn handle them. I should have just done it myself.

"Vim?" Brandy didn't sound too concerned over me, but that was normal. She never worried about me. Why would she? She's known me for nearly five hundred years and I'd never broken in front of her. She had never actually seen me truly struggle, so didn't know it happened often. She like most in the Society had no clue how much I worried sometimes.

Renn had never told me the whole story about those human siblings... but from what I had gathered, she had basically raised them. She had chanced upon them, and one thing led to another and she fell in love with them. Then there was that Nory. The human woman who had been raised in an orphanage, and abused. She had spent almost eighty years with her.

I might have just doomed Renn to a generation of helping and supporting all those women.

A harsh, cruel, and needless burden.

How was I going to get her out of it if that embassy didn't pass her judgment? If it wasn't safe enough in her eyes?

Would I have to deliver those girls home myself, to make sure Renn wouldn't get dragged down by them and...?

"Vim, really. What's wrong?" Brandy waved to get my attention. She was tired of me being lost in thought.

"Nothing. I'll come with you," I said. Maybe going with them to the embassy would let me... in some way, ensure it worked.

"To the embassy?" she asked.

I nodded.

Brandy leaned forward a little more, to study me. She blinked, and then I noticed she had figured something out.

"What?" I asked.

"She is special," she stated.

"No more than any of you," I said.

Brandy smiled in a way that told me she didn't believe me at all.

Sighing I sat back and made a promise to myself. To never let such a foolish thing happen again. Why hadn't I thought of it?

Lately I've been doing very badly at being preemptive. What was wrong with me? Was I tired? I couldn't even blame Renn for this one, since it was about her. Entirely about her.

"You had Brom sparring with her," Brandy then said.

"Yes. Don't tell me anything about it," I warned her.

Brandy blinked, and then gave me a toothy grin. "I see."

I ignored her stupid smirk and wondered if I should go back to the boat.

Maybe I should just sail away. That ship was beaten to hell, but I could fix it up... make it better... head east then south...

To the islands near the ice. It was nice there. I missed those islands.

"You're making a mistake, Vim," Brandy then said.

"I am?" I asked. I mean. Yes. I was, and had, but she couldn't know what or how.

"A horrible one," she nodded.

"How so?"

"You mean who," she corrected.

"Renn?" I asked. Wait... there's no way she actually realized what I was thinking. Brandy, unlike most of our members, saw humans as valuable. Assets for the company. Tools, yet not. Most of the measures the company and Society had to support our human members and those who were involved in the Society were thanks to her. She was one of the few who advocated for humans. There was no way she'd see Renn's willingness to help and dedicate years of her life to help a human as a negative thing.

"Who else?" she said sarcastically.

"Do tell," I gestured for her to tell me already.

"She'll be wasted here," Brandy then said.

Oh. Thank goodness. I smirked, and not just because she hadn't figured out what was really bothering me. "Of that I doubt. You've not tested her well enough then. I thought you wiser than that," I said.

"No Vim... that's not what I..." Brandy started to say something, but we both went silent when a door beneath us opened.

I frowned as I heard someone enter the office beneath us. And had done so quickly... and then they walked out onto the patio right in front of the stairs.

Brandy turned, frowning as well. No one had ever intruded upon our meeting here since we built this place. Not once in the many decades.

Then I heard the sound of a huff. It was the intake of a breath. A quick one. Yet within that breath... within that intake of air... was a voice very familiar... that I hadn't heard in what felt like a long time.

Renn.

"Well, she found me," I said surprised. That was too bad. I wanted to sneak into her room and get in the bath and...

"Vim!" she screamed at me, upon hearing my voice.

"Up here," I told her. A moment later she hurried up the stairs, and after a quick look around found me.

Frowning at her, I watched as she stormed towards me. Her hat was lifted upward, forced by her stiff ears... and her tail was actually out behind her. It too was stiff and straight.

She was furious.

"Renn?" I was about to ask what was wrong, but then she slapped me.

I rolled my head along with her blow, so that she'd not break her hand... and actually blinked a few times. My face stung.

Since I had turned my head with her attack, I was now staring at Brandy... who was sitting up straight in her chair with huge eyes. She looked so shocked it made me smile.

Turning to look at Renn, she flashed a toothy scowl at me as she growled and lifted her hand... for another slap.

Woops, maybe smiling hadn't been the best response...

She slapped me again. This time much harder. The chair I sat in actually skidded along the floor from the force of the blow.

The sound of her palm and my face colliding echoed in the large depot, and even made the place become a little quiet. People recognized that sound.

"Spoils! Slaves? Vim!" she shouted at me, and her voice filled the depot.

Oh.

"Well," I was about to say something to defend myself but she hit me. Not a slap. Not another scream. A full blown punch.

I let the fist force my head back. I was too tall for the chair, so the headrest wasn't able to stop it. Which was a good thing; it let me bring my head back far enough to not shatter every bone in her hand.

Even though I completely rolled with the punch, I still heard and felt bones break. And not my own.

The chair lifted, and I had to quickly bring my feet down and re-adjust my weight to keep the chair and myself from falling over.

She had quite a punch.

"They're people, Vim!" she shouted at me.

Taking a deep breath, I focused on the very livid woman. Had she ever been this upset with me before? With anyone?

Not as far as I could remember.

"Renn..." I raised my hands, not to try and calm her... but to block and catch any other fists thrown. I didn't want her breaking anymore bones.

She took a huge breath, to yell at me and attack me again... but right as she did Brandy made a tiny noise. A mix of a cough and giggle.

Renn immediately turned her head, and her hat nearly fell off in the process. Her cat-like pupils went wide at the sight of Brandy, who lightly waved at her with an apologetic smile.

Then Renn went red in the face. A deep flush that reached her ears. She then turned to look at me, and I gave her as gentle a smile as I could form. She barely noticed it as she looked back at Brandy... and then her face scrunched up, and she let loose a very unique moan.

And then she turned and ran.

Renn hurried away, nearly leaping down the stairs as she did.

"Wait...! Wait, no! Renn! Aww... I wanted to watch more," Brandy hurriedly stood from her seat and hurried after her, complaining and chastising herself for making the noise and alerting Renn to her presence.

As both women ran away, going downstairs... I sighed and sat back.

Opening my jaw, I noticed the faint tinge of a stiff joint. I reached up and rubbed the side of my face that had been slapped. It felt fine, of course... but...

Running my tongue along my cheeks, I tasted it. Sticking a finger into my mouth, I rubbed it against my cheek and then pulled it out.

Sure enough, there was a very... light red tinge on my finger.

"Tests," I scoffed as I rubbed my blood between my fingers.

Chapter 134: Brandy

Lamp shook her head as she read my question. I frowned at her and turned the little clipboard over to write another.

She could read our language... but couldn't write it. It made communicating a little difficult, but not entirely impossible. I just needed to sometimes rephrase a question or comment, since she could really only answer me with a yes or no.

"Is there anyone among you that might know someone here?" I wrote a new question.

Showing it to Lamp, I watched as she slowly read it. I wasn't sure if she read so slowly because it wasn't a language she was familiar with, or if she was like most humans. Most were illiterate. Only able to read a few words at best. The few who could actually read rarely ever needed to, so sometimes struggled.

Lamp then said something and she pointed at the group of women at the tables nearby. She said someone's name, and a taller girl stood up.

Oh?

The woman walked over, and I did my best to remember her name. Lamp had called for a Bayley or something, hopefully that was her name and not just some random word she had used to get her attention.

The two talked for a moment and I did my best to follow their conversation. There was little point, honestly. I had no frame of reference for their language. Usually I was able to hear words I recognized, but in this case it was impossible. They even spoke with... a weird growl sometimes, making their words roll along the tongue.

Then Lamp looked at me and smiled and nodded.

Turning the paper around, I wrote another question.

"Does she know their name?"

Lamp read it aloud for the girl, who then looked at me and said, "Trinitak."

"Trinitak," I repeated the name and they both nodded, pleased with themselves.

I wrote it down, and showed it to Lamp and the girl. Both nodded and pointed at it as they spoke to one another, excited.

So they did know someone here... interesting. I'd need Vim or Brandy to come by later and talk to them about it.

We still planned to go to the embassy soon, but if they actually had family here that might be a better place to take them.

While the two talked to one another, I noticed the bruises on Bayley's arms and wrists. They weren't just from chains. They were fingers and hand prints. From men.

They were all smiles and joy right now... but it was very obvious they had just gone through a very peculiar type of hell.

I gulped as I realized I was staring, and then looked down to my notepad. Not to write upon it, but just to occupy my eyes and re-read the questions and stuff I had written.

Neither of them had noticed I had been staring, nor probably would have cared even if they had... but it still made me feel horrible. I should respect them by not making a big deal out of it. I bet they wanted to forget about it as well, as fast as possible.

Smiling at them, I wrote down a new sentence. This time not a question. A statement.

A promise.

Showing it to Lamp, she read it slowly... and then I noticed she read it again.

She blinked then looked up at me... and then pointed at the board and read it aloud to her friend.

Bayley shifted on her feet, looking a little troubled... but then gave me a smile. A kind one, that made me shiver.

Lamp then tapped my board, to get my attention. I looked up and she pointed at herself, then to table of her friends.

"Oh... you want to go eat with them. Yes. Okay," I nodded as I understood.

She smiled, and then reached out and wrapped me in a hug.

I went still at the sudden display of affection, and blinked watery eyes as she leaned back and then said something alongside my name. Then she stood from her seat and hurried away with Bayley.

Was that a thank you?

Taking a deep breath I did my best to control my emotions as I too stood. Stepping out of the small lunch room, I walked down the hall and peered into the rooms I passed. This section of the guild building was... different. It was basic. Empty. There were no doors where there should be, and everything was as plain as could be.

Most the small rooms now had beds in them. Beds that were now mostly full. Only a dozen of them were in the lunch room, the rest were all sleeping. Exhausted.

They had arrived three days ago. And in that time I had gotten, with the help from the Society, new clothes, these rooms, and of course food and aid. Many had been hurt. Not just the bruises either. There had been broken bones, broken teeth, and large cuts and gouges. The worst of them all was a very frail woman...

Walking over to her room, I peered in and watched her sleep. She was bundled up carefully, and looked... tiny. Like a child. But she wasn't. She was a grown woman. She was just shockingly skinny. Malnourished beyond measure. She had no strength now, after laying down yesterday.

I worried for her, as did the others. I was comfortable with leaving her alone, since every so often one of them would come check her... but something told me she wouldn't make it.

Her captors hadn't just abused her, she had also given up. Lamp said several others had died the same way... in their sleep, not from wounds or abuse.

Hearing her soft breathing, barely a snore, I nodded and stepped away. Heading to the hallway that led to the rest of the building.

I didn't like leaving them alone too long, but I knew they were relatively safe. There was only one entrance to this area from the outside, and it was locked tightly. Brandy had let me seal it with a chain and lock, and only she had the key. The other ways in and out of this section all led to the rest of the Animalia building. Which meant if one of them tried to leave, we'd notice... or if someone else tried to get in they'd first have to get through us too.

Considering we had guards stationed at all times, thanks to the bank and warehouses, I didn't really need to worry.

Yet I still did, of course.

Whether intentional or not, Brandy had given me full responsibility for them. I intended to take that to heart. If any of them suffered or died from this point forward... it was on me. No one else.

It's been a long time since I had been responsible for someone.

"Ah, there you are," Brandy rounded a corner in front of me and got my attention.

Glad she was here I picked up my pace to meet her.

"You look better," Brandy noticed.

I felt the shy smile plant itself on my face as I nodded.

After hitting Vim this morning... then seeing Brandy there staring wide-eyed at me, I had ran away in shame and utter embarrassment. Brandy, not Vim, had been the one to chase me down and talk to me and calm me down.

She realized quickly that most of my shame hadn't been the actual act of hitting Vim... but having been seen doing so. She was kind enough to let me know it was all okay, and that I had nothing to be ashamed of.

It had still taken most the day for me to get my heart under control, but spending time with Lamp and the rest of the women had helped.

"Where you headed?" I asked her.

"Was coming to find you. I need to drop this off at Gerald's office, and wanted to know if you'd walk and talk with me while I did so," she said as she lifted a little envelope. It was the size of a letter.

"I'll come," I nodded.

Hopefully Vim wasn't anywhere along the way... or at the office.

"Vim's not in his office, it's fine," Brandy said with a smirk.

"That obvious?" I asked with a laugh as we headed down the hallway she had come from.

"It was!" She smirked.

I moaned and wondered what to do with myself.

"It's okay, Renn. I find it adorable, I'm sure he does too," she said.

"Easy for you to say..." I said.

"It is!" she happily said.

"Has he uh..." I coughed. "Has Vim... said anything?" I asked her.

Brandy's smile widened into a huge smirk, and I immediately regretted saying anything.

"He hasn't. But I'd not worry, trust me. You know Nebl?" she asked me.

Surprised at Nebl being brought up, I nodded. "Yes."

"Nebl once tried to kill Vim. Very seriously too. He put a lot of thought into it. Should have seen it. He brought an entire mountainside down onto him," Brandy raised her hand, and brought it down heavily on the other... as if to mimic what had happened.

"You're kidding...?" I couldn't believe it. Nebl? Those two? They were friends!

She nodded. "Seriously. There's a whole back-story to it, and you can ask them for it. Not mine to tell. But the point is you saw that they were friends right?" she asked.

I nodded. Exactly.

"Exactly. My point is you just slapped him... twice... then hit him. You're fine," she waved it off as if it was no big deal.

"Did Nebl do it for no real reason, and just because in the stir of the moment he had been fighting a flurry of emotions and was blinded by them, and thus regrets it terribly?" I asked her.

Brandy slowed a little and her smile hesitatingly became smaller. "Well... No... Nebl had a good reason. But you're not entirely without reason, Renn. Your reason is just... not something we in the Society are used to understanding, or experiencing. Vim especially," she said.

I sighed and nodded. That was sure.

I knew Vim didn't see them as I did. He was kind to humans. But not to the level that he should be... that any of them should be.

Most of the Society hadn't been willing to help me with the girls, simply because they had been human. I had asked Brom and Reatti for help, and they... although kindly, had offered to only do the bare minimum and nothing more. They felt we shouldn't be wasting our time on them.

So far only Brandy, Pierre, and surprisingly Lawrence had offered to help in any real fashion. Pierre and Lawrence had especially been a surprise, since I had thought both hated humans. Pierre was... odd and skittish, being a mouse, and Lawrence had always seemed completely oblivious and ignorant of the humans he worked with.

Yet both had showed up unannounced, and without being asked, to help me. They had helped me prepare beds and the food for them.

Kind men.

"You seem to accept it," I said.

"I may be a merchant, but I'm also a sister of the Church of Songs, Renn," Brandy stated.

"Oh?" I hadn't realized that she was actually a member of the Cathedral. I mean, yes... she was a part of the Society... and an important member, being the bookkeeper... but...

She nodded. "And I'll be honest, you should be too... Though I think your actions alone make you one, I suppose," she said.

I wasn't sure what to say about that. Especially since I was already worried that Vim was upset with me... last thing I needed to do was add fuel to that fire.

Entering the main lobby area, I noticed that most lamps were out completely now. It was much later than I thought it was.

Climbing some stairs to the second floor, we entered the hallway that Gerald's office was in.

This hallway didn't have any lit lamps, but the windows let enough moonlight in to not need them.

Brandy then suddenly giggled, and I glanced at her. We had been walking in silence... what was she laughing at now?

"You actually hit him," She snickered.

"Brandy..." I groaned.

"Sorry, sorry... it's just..." She shook her head as she laughed.

Reaching Gerald's office, I knocked on the door... yet Brandy didn't wait. She opened it without waiting for Gerald's response.

And for good reason. Gerald was already at the door, waiting for us. He stood from the couch nearby and hurried up to me.

"I heard all about it! Well done!" Gerald happily patted my shoulders, looking almost as if he wanted to give me a hug. He didn't though, as he guided me into his office.

"Heard what?" I asked.

"You hit him! Right in the mouth! Quick, quick... sit! Tell me, did it feel good? Did you break his nose? Well?" Gerald quickly tossed a bunch of questions at me as he forced me into a chair in front of his desk.

I huffed at him as Brandy laughed maniacally behind me. I glanced at her, and watched as she struggled to close the office door. She was laughing too much.

"Well? Well?" Gerald asked as he sat in the chair. Not the one behind his desk, the one next to me. He was that interested. That serious.

Shaking my head at him, I looked back at Brandy. "Really Brandy?" I asked her.

"What! You can't expect me to keep something like that a secret, Renn. It's worth too much!" she said as she giggled and walked around the room, to Gerald's desk.

I glared at her as she went and took a seat into his chair, behind his desk. Upon sitting she slid the little envelope she had wanted to bring to him into one of his drawers, as if to keep it out of sight.

"I slapped him," I said.

"Yeah?" Gerald inched forward, his eyes wide and expectant.

"Then I did it again..." I said.

His smile broke into a huge grin as he nodded, waiting for more.

"Then I hit him..." I said with a sigh.

Gerald chuckled at first, and then started laughing. "Wonderful!" he barely got through his laughs.

No it wasn't!

I closed my eyes and groaned at myself. Great. The whole Society was going to know about what happened.

I'd forever be known as the crazy cat woman who hit the protector, without even explaining why.

"It was honestly even better than that Gerald. You should have seen Vim's face when it happened," Brandy said as she drummed her hands on the top of his desk, enjoying the moment.

"You were there!" Gerald turned to her, his eyes wide.

"I told you I had been!" she seemed insulted he hadn't remembered.

"You said you saw it, I thought maybe at a distance!" he then looked back at me. "What'd he do? What'd he say?" he asked.

"Uh..."

"Yeah, that's about what he said and did," Brandy laughed at me.

"Ha!" Gerald put his hand on his head, running his fingers through his hair as he leaned back in awe.

"Come on Brandy..." I groaned.

"What? Honey, I'm nearly six hundred years old. Do you know how many times I've seen Vim with a face like that in that time?" she asked me.

I shook my head. Six hundred years old...? She looked good.

"Twice."

Gerald whistled, and I felt a strange sweat cover my body.

"What... what am I going to do...?" I groaned as I lowered my head.

"You'll be fine, honey. Jeez that's what you're worried about?" Brandy giggled at me.

"She should be worried..." Gerald whispered.

"Oh shut up you. Go find a pigeon to peck at or something," Brandy tossed a pen at him, but I ignored them.

Two times? She had only seen Vim act like that twice in her long life...?

Great. Not only had I failed to beat Brom but I had just lost all the respect and friendship I had earned over this last year.

Maybe I should just go join the Clothed Woman and hide forever...

"He hasn't come talk to her yet...?" I heard Gerald whisper to Brandy.

"Seems not," she said.

"He hates me now," I whispered.

The two didn't say anything, and I thumped my head with my clipboard. It didn't hurt, but I wish it had.

"Hm... should I uh... tell her?" Gerald asked Brandy.

"If you do I'll pluck your feathers Gerald, I swear it," Brandy warned him with a fierce tone.

Looking up, I glanced at the two who were staring at me with odd smiles. Gentle smiles. Not ones from amusement, but actual joy.

"Tell me what?" I asked.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it," Brandy said.

Taking a deep breath I shook my head. "Don't be like that. What is it?" I asked.

"Sorry Renn... Brandy swore she'd hurt me if I told you, and like Vim she keeps her promises," Gerald said apologetically.

Looking at her she smiled with a weird wink. "You'll find out soon enough."

Sighing at them, I wondered if I should worry or not. I didn't feel as if I did... I mean... they'd not be smiling like this if it was something bad, like being banished or something... but...

Hopefully Vim didn't hate me now. He hadn't seemed that upset when I had slapped and hit him... in fact he had even smirked there for a moment...

"Did you see the smirk he gave? Before I punched him?" I asked Brandy.

"Oh yea. That was a weird one," Brandy snickered.

"He smirked?" Gerald asked.

I nodded and put my clipboard down to push my cheeks up, trying to mimic the weird angle he had at the time. "Like this?" I asked Brandy.

She guffawed a laugh and pointed at me. "Look'er!" she barely got the words out.

I stopped messing with my face and smiled at her. She really did laugh well. It sounded great... made me smile too, even when she was laughing at me.

Gerald started laughing again, but because of Brandy. He looked as if he couldn't believe the level she was heaving and laughing. She had even snorted mid-laugh.

Brandy leaned over and rested against the desk as she tried to stop laughing. She sounded as if she was struggling, and failing at it.

"Have you seen Vim since then?" I asked Gerald. I had slapped him this morning; it was dinner time now so...

"Oh? Yes. Just once. He was uh... well... Yeah," he nodded at himself, and coughed.

He was what?

Hopefully not furious.

But...

Although I was worried about it... I couldn't help but feel that it was a useless worry.

Vim? Angry that I slapped him? Knowing that man he had not even felt it.

I had hit him with everything. My ring and middle finger in my left hand had even started to swell. I had broken them in the punch.

Looking down at my left hand, I opened and closed my fist and noticed the way the two fingers looked... a little out of place.

"Did you break them?" Brandy asked. She finally got herself under control.

"I might have," I said.

"Want Herra to look at them?" Gerald asked as he stared at my hand.

I shook my head. "They'll heal in a few days. I've broken fingers before," I said.

"You sure? Bandaging you up might result in... some interesting results," Brandy paused mid-sentence, and I knew it was to rephrase what she had actually wanted to say.

"You mean to say he'll... treat me differently if I did?" I asked her.

"Oh heck yea he would," Gerald nodded.

"Really?" I asked.

Brandy nodded too. She leaned forward, which wasn't hard for her since she was already leaning onto the desk. I noticed the way her large breasts pushed papers and folders out of the way as she did so. "Vim has a severe weakness to those he hurts," she whispered.

Gerald nodded, telling me it was true.

Did he...?

"Hm..." Maybe I should have my fingers... maybe my whole hand bandaged.

"She's considering it," Brandy whispered to Gerald, excited.

"I should go get Herra," he whispered back.

"It's fine. Thank you though," I said, stopping him. He was actually about to stand to do so.

"Aww..." Brandy leaned back, upset.

"Maybe... maybe later. I have an idea I want to try first," I said.

"Oh...?"

I nodded, but wasn't going to tell them. After all... it was a long shot, and rather... well...

"Come on, what is it?" Brandy asked.

I shook my head. "Sorry. You two get to keep a secret today, and so do I," I said.

"Damn. See Brandy?" Gerald growled at her.

"How was I supposed to know she'd be this coy!" she shouted at him.

"That's your job! And I could have told you that! She's a cat, not a chicken!" he said.

"Liina's a cat too and she aint nothing like her!" Brandy argued.

"Huh!" I stood.

The two went still, and then Gerald coughed. "Oh... seems you didn't know. I apologize... and I uhh... think I'll leave now..." Gerald stood, wearily.

"Don't you dare. We're in this together," Brandy stopped him.

"You said it not me. Goodnight Renn! You can tell me the rest later. If you're going to punch him again please do it in front of me next time, okay?" Gerald said as he actually hurried to leave.

"Gerald!" Brandy yelled at him, but he ignored her as he actually left.

Watching him close the door, I looked back at Brandy and she groaned.

"Well?" I asked her.

She sighed and nodded, losing most of her earlier jubilant demeanor. "Liina's a cat. But she's not like you, Renn. She's... a smaller cat. A tiny desert cat. She's meek, and fickle. I'm sorry... if she hadn't introduced herself and told you that means she didn't want you to know. So uh..." Brandy gestured blindly, as if not sure what to say or do.

"She's been avoiding me..." I whispered. I had noticed it. After all no matter how busy she was, or I was... there still had been many opportunities to talk.

"So it seems. I'll ask her why, and find out for you. For now though please respect her wishes," she said.

I nodded.

Maybe she really was like me. Brandy said she was a desert cat... but...

Maybe her family had been like mine. So she was afraid of me. Scared of me. Like how I would be if I met another like myself too.

"I can't blame her," I said softly.

"Hm... I'll find out for you. I promise," Brandy said.

"Thanks."

Sitting back down, I took a deep breath.

"I know right? We go years and years without anything happening, then all of a sudden, boom! Action! Drama! Romance!" Brandy raised her hands and then spun in her chair, making it spin around.

I hadn't even realized Gerald's chair could spin like that.

"Not sure if it's a good thing or not," I said honestly.

"It's great, Renn. The reality is, even when bad things happen it's a good thing. Life is meant to be enjoyed, and suffered. Otherwise it's no life at all," Brandy said.

"That's a quote from the bible in the Cathedral," I recognized.

"Oh? So you really did read it in full," she said.

I nodded, and kept myself from reciting the whole verse, and the annotation that had been written next to it. Vim probably didn't want me letting people know I could remember things in such detail.

"Fascinating... you know it makes me wonder why he likes you so much. He usually hates the religious," Brandy said.

"Vim? He doesn't like it when I express interest in it," I said.

"See? Yet he overlooks it for you. Interesting," she smirked at me.

I shifted a little, and felt something at my feet. Looking down I realized I had dropped my clipboard upon standing earlier. I bent down to pick it up, so I'd not step on it and break it.

Looking down at the board, I read the thing I had written for Lamp. Before leaving her.

"I'll help you all. Vim saved you, so I'll help you," I read.

A silly promise. One that in any other context might not have made sense.

Yet she had understood. They both had.

Smiling at it and myself... I had a sudden urge to head back to the girls. To check on them and make sure they were all okay.

For their sake and my own.

"That's a good smile. What are you looking at?" Brandy asked.

Looking away from the note, I nodded to it. "Just all the scribbles I made talking to Lamp," I said.

"Hm... it is an interesting method. If you had time I bet you could use it to learn their language," she said.

"I probably could... but hopefully we can get them home before that's needed. Speaking of that, one of them knows someone here. I don't know if they're here in Lumen exactly, but they're here in this nation. On this side of the sea. I have their name here," I said.

"Oh? Here, tell me it. I'll get it to Lawrence and see if he can find them," she said as she reached over for a pen.

She had thrown one at Gerald hadn't she? Yes. There. Near the desk. I bent over to pick it up.

Putting it on the desk for them, I waited until she was ready to write before telling her. "Trinitak," I said.

"That's definitely an eastern name. If they're in our records he'll find that. Did any of them know anyone else?" she asked.

"Lamp only mentioned them, but when I asked her about it only a few of them were up. Most are sleeping right now," I said.

Brandy nodded. "I bet they're exhausted."

Hm...

"Do you pity them?" she asked as she tapped the pen on her paper.

I nodded.

"Really...?" she asked.

"Yes. I... I've never gone through what they have, of course. I was lucky to be born who... rather, what, I am. I don't need to worry about being chained, or overpowered. I don't need to fear the brutality of a man. I pity them, for having to live their whole lives while fearing such a thing," I told her.

Brandy sat back in the chair, staring at me.

Had I said something weird? She was a religious person wasn't she? Surely she understood? At least in a way? Or was, even while being religious, she so old and... non-human, that she couldn't comprehend it?

"You would have been a great asset in the last era, Renn," she then said.

"Hm? Last era?"

She nodded. "I'll not bore you with it now... but just know that your comment just now held a lot of weight with me. I think you and I really will get along well... if you haven't realized it, I am extremely overjoyed with you. I know I probably have an odd way of showing it, but..." she shrugged.

"I'm glad I make you laugh," I said.

She smiled. "You do. And that is a good thing, really."

"I know. I wasn't saying that sarcastically. I meant it," I said.

"Good. If the embassy doesn't work out, what then?" she asked.

"Well... I'm not sure. Something tells me the Society won't be too happy if I let them stay here forever... so I'll either find a way to get them home myself, or maybe... well..." I shrugged. Maybe Vim would let me beg him to help me.

"Vim won't help you do so. He'll not abandon the Society for humans," she said.

I hesitated. "That obvious...?" I asked with a hollow voice.

She nodded. "I'm sorry Renn... Vim is... in reality, a good man. But in this instance, he's not. He will not help them if it means abandoning the Society. He'll save them if he's there at that moment, but that is where his kindness ends," she said.

I nodded. I had experienced that a few times already. "That's too bad... but I suppose I understand the reason behind it," I said.

"I don't. But we can agree to disagree," she said stiffly.

"You don't?" I asked.

"I don't appreciate how he'll ignore the immediate, for those who don't even deserve it. But as I said, let's agree to disagree for now, please," she said.

Ah... that was a very serious statement. Especially from someone with so much power in the Society.

"Can I be honest?" I asked her.

She nodded.

"I don't disagree with you at all."

She blinked.

"You and I are definitely going to be good friends," she said.

"I don't disagree with that either," I said.

She smiled and I smiled back.

Chapter 135: Sixteen Days

Leaning against the wall, I listened to the chatter of the three women.

"She's trying her hardest Glanny," Lamp said softly.

"It's not fair, Lamp! She's dead!" Glanny sobbed.

"I know she is, Glanny. We all do," Lamp said, a little firmer this time. Though she was trying to be strong, I could hear her own emotions in her voice. I knew if I turned and leaned around the door frame I'd see that Lamp was just as distraught as Glanny.

Renn was sitting with the two crying women, and I didn't need to look to know she was crying too. I could hear her sniffs and sobs. Crying over a woman she hadn't even known. The woman had arrived here weak. Dying. They had probably not exchanged more than a few words before she passed in her sleep.

Yet...

That was why I was so fascinated with her, wasn't it?

I squeezed my elbow, and had to squeeze harder when I didn't feel anything. I relished the feeling of my elbow joint straining as I dug my fingers into it.

What are you doing Vim? What are you thinking?

You're not allowed to think thoughts like that.

"What will they do with the body?" Glanny asked.

"Brandy said they'll properly bury her. They have a graveyard outside of the city that they use. She said we can go watch them bury her if we want," Lamp told her.

Glanny sobbed.

I wasn't sure of the relationship between Glanny and the one who had died in the middle of the night... but out of all of them, she was the most distraught. Half the hallway was crying and sobbing, yet it was her who was being nearly frantic.

The sound of a charcoal pencil filled my ears as Renn wrote something. A few moments later I heard Lamp muttering as she read it.

"She wants us to check on everyone else. To make sure no one else gets sick," Lamp said softly.

"More could die?" Glanny heaved her words.

"No, Glanny. She just wants us to keep an eye on everyone to make sure they don't. Everyone else is able to get up and walk around, remember?" Lamp tried to reason with the girl.

Glanny took a deep breath, and then someone handed her something to blow her nose with. As she did I glanced down the hallway. Only half the rooms had lights on, little candlelight from only a few of them. The hallway ended and turned right at the end, where the rest of their rooms were... and I knew any moment someone would come out. It was late. Very late. In only a couple hours the sun would start rising. Most of them were awake already, woken by the commotion of Lamp finding the dead woman.

That commotion was what had brought me here. And then sent me to get Renn and Brandy.

To be honest me knocking on Renn's door in the middle of the night had been... a mistake. I had avoided her all day yesterday after she had hit me... Then I go and knock on her door in the middle of the night? She had jumped out of bed and opened the door so happily and excitedly, that telling her the news had not just broken her own heart but nearly my own.

Watching that pure joy filled face, on a woman who was wearing nothing but a nightgown... full of expectations and excitement, die swiftly had been... Her expression had melted and turned into a gut wrenching expression that had nearly been enough to make even me crumble.

I squeezed my elbow tighter, and there was now pain. Real pain. Yet I still held my grip.

I wasn't supposed to feel for her that deeply. I wasn't supposed to allow her emotions affect me to such a degree.

Yet the honest truth was the moment I had seen that look on her face, I had been half tempted to dispose of these humans on the spot.

That was dangerous. She was dangerous, to me.

"Vim?" Renn called for me, and I realized I had missed some of their conversation. Lamp and Glanny were muttering something about Renn. About not understanding what she wanted.

Pushing all those thoughts away I stepped around the corner and into the room. It was a room to eat. There were tables and chairs everywhere, and another door on the other side of the room that led to a smaller kitchen. One almost too small for all of them.

Lamp and Glanny looked up at me from the bench they sat on, and sure enough both of them had tear stained faces.

"Sorry, Vim... but would you tell them that they need to go rest and that we'll get together tomorrow? Brandy said tomorrow afternoon we'll go to the cemetery, and they can come," Renn said.

She spoke evenly, and kindly. A stark contrast to the way she had treated me earlier.

I looked at Lamp, who was waiting patiently for a translation. "The two of you need rest, Lamp. You two go sleep. Tomorrow you all can go with Brandy and Renn to the cemetery to bury your friend," I told her.

"They'll let us?" Lamp asked.

I nodded. "Of course they will. Renn is trustworthy, Lamp. If she promises you something... not only will she do it, but I'll also do everything I can to make sure it happens as well," I said.

Lamp smiled at me as the other woman wiped her face with her shirt. "I guess I can trust that love, if nothing else," she said.

Love? Was it?

Maybe.

"I've taken the body to the depot. I promise you she will remain untouched until we lay her to rest," I told them.

Glanny sobbed, renewing her efforts. Great.

Renn glared at me, as if she thought I had said something rude. I raised my hand to her as to calm her. Last thing I needed was for Renn to hit me in front of these women, they'd not understand why she'd do so. And something told me that they'd actually take Renn's side, even though they couldn't understand one another.

"Go sleep. Make sure everyone else does too. Tomorrow afternoon, a little before sundown, you all can go to the cemetery. I promise," I told Lamp.

She nodded. Then she stood, pulling Glanny up with her. "Come on, Glanny. Let's go get some sleep," she said.

"Okay..." Glanny cried and nodded, allowing herself to be pulled out of the room.

Watching the two go, I sighed and looked back at Renn. She was staring at the door where the girls had left with a terribly sad expression.

"They'll sleep. Tomorrow they'll go with you to the cemetery," I said.

"Thank you," she said. She squeezed the little board she used to talk with Lamp. It was covered in words and scribbles. And not just that singular paper. There were other papers around, all likewise covered in charcoal stains.

"It happens Renn."

"It shouldn't," she whispered.

"Maybe..." I stood there, waiting for her to say something.

After a moment of silence, I decided to just sit next to her. I sat down next to her on her right, where Lamp had been.

The bench was built into the wall. So it was uncomfortable. I leaned back, but all I could do was sit up straight thanks to the wall.

"I had thought she'd pass, but not so quickly," Renn whispered.

"She gave up Renn. One cannot help anyone once that happens," I said.

"I know... Glanny had been her sister. She had been there the whole time," Renn said.

Ah. That explained why she was taking it the worst.

"I think she's so distraught because they're safe now. Or at least, in a way. I think she wonders why she died now, when they were finally safe," Renn said softly.

"That's usually when it happens," I said.

Renn took a deep breath, and she and I went to sitting in silence. I had sat right next to her, but there was still a small gap between us. One that felt... too big.

Glancing around the room, I studied the way the chairs and tables were littered. They all probably spent most of their time in this room, since they had nowhere else to really go. There was the kitchens, their rooms, the bathrooms, and then here. We weren't letting them go anywhere else.

One cage to another.

"Thank you Vim," Renn then said.

"For?" I asked.

"Handling it. And getting me. You didn't have to, yet you did," she said.

I leaned forward, putting my elbows on my knees as I stared at her. Thanks to leaning forward, I could look at her face. It was mostly hidden by her hair, since her head was hung low.

She wasn't crying, but she looked like she was about to.

"Our little spat is nothing when it comes to it Renn. I'd never let such a thing impede the important stuff," I told her.

A tiny smile grew on her face. "Little spat..." she whispered.

"Wasn't it? I admit I'm surprised it took this long for it to happen, but there you go," I said.

"We've yelled at each other before, Vim," she said.

"I didn't yell?"

Renn twitched, and I heard her ears under her hat move the most. "... I guess you didn't," she admitted.

I chuckled at her, and then tapped her on the knee. "Come on. Let the girls sleep," I said as I stood.

She grumbled but obliged. I helped her collect all the little papers she had written on, and then we left the room.

Heading down the hallway to the main section, I glanced down at the leaflets in my hand.

Her handwriting was pretty. Even when full of emotion, she had a certain quality of penmanship rarely seen. Whoever had taught her had done well. That witch, maybe?

Most of the notes and things written were... simple. Simple yes or no questions. I could play out what had happened just by reading them. Her finding Lamp, and the rest. Calming them down. Talking with Lamp, as Brandy and I left to handle the body. Then of course, the end result. To where I had returned, and hid myself behind the door.

Renn had heard me though... which was unusual. Usually no one did.

"How'd you know I was there, Renn?" I asked as we rounded a corner, leaving the apartment section behind.

"I heard your leather. Were you clenching your fists?" she asked.

"Something like that."

She glanced at me, and I handed her the papers. She took them with a gentle smile, as if they were precious to her.

Reaching the door to the main building, I reached out to open it for us... then stopped.

Renn shuffled her papers, and then looked at me as she wondered what was wrong.

Turning to her, I studied the woman who had somehow become precious to me.

"There are many things I should probably say... and likely a few things I should probably do, too."

Renn shifted, and her eyes focused on me. She became fixated on me, and I relished in the attention. It had only been... what? How long?

"How long had I been gone?" I asked her.

She blinked. "Uhm... Well... Sixteen days, if you include yesterday," she said.

"Why would you include yesterday? I was here," I said.

"Yes... but you and I didn't really..." she looked away, and in the dark of the night I saw her face flush.

"We met. We even touched," I teased her.

"Well! I mean... That's not the same and..." Her blush deepened.

Smiling at her, I shook my head and opened the door. Letting her pass through it first, I followed her out and closed the door behind us.

She and I hadn't really spent time together. To her that was the same as me being gone.

Did she even realize how adorable that was?

"Sixteen days," I said as I thought about it. It had felt longer than that, yet at the same time... not.

"Sixteen days," she nodded. I was now walking behind her as we headed for the Societies households.

She usually didn't walk in front of me like this. She was usually to my right... right beside me.

This wasn't too bad either. It let me stare at her back, and her ass... and...

Her hat shifted, drawing my eyes to her head. It was shifting in a way that told me she had rushed, and probably hadn't properly pinned it to her hair.

"Are you tired?" I asked her.

Both of her shoulders went up a little, and then down... as if she had gone stiff. "Not really," she said softly.

"You look tired," I said. She was walking a little... unnaturally. And not just because she was being overly conscious of me.

"You woke me up," she whispered.

"Sorry about that," I said.

"It's okay... I hadn't really been asleep," she whispered.

True. She had leapt out of bed on my first knock. Meaning she had been waiting for it. Expecting it. Hoping for it.

My eyes wandered down her body again as we rounded a corner. I sighed as I realized what I was thinking about.

"Sixteen days for me is nothing. A blink of an eye," I said.

She didn't say anything.

"At least... it should have been," I added.

Her hat shifted. "It had felt... longer than it was," she finally said.

As we walked the hallway, I noticed she had slowed her pace. I had accidentally drawn closer to her, simply because she had halved her walking speed.

Did she not want to go back to her room yet?

My shoulders stretched as I thought about taking her back. The idea was wonderful, which was why I had to deny it the right to exist.

I wanted her. But I knew the moment I took her, our relationship would be over.

Plus something told me she'd not appreciate me trying such a thing after she had experienced something so sad.

What kind of man made a move on a woman when she just dealt with a death, especially of someone under her watch?

Not a good one, at least.

"Will you come with us?" Renn then asked.

Come with her? I'd go with her anywhere.

"To bury the girl? Yes. If you want me to," I said.

She shifted oddly, and I noticed her tail peek out from under her dress. The tip of it twitched. I tried following it up her dress, to her rear. I could see its outline just barely, and was distracted before I could follow it to the end.

Renn came to a stop. As she did I worried about what she'd do or say next. What if she did something that made me break?

Then I realized why she had stopped. The door to the Societies' rooms was before us. The metal door looked cold.

Reaching around her, I pushed it open for her. She smiled at me, and I realized she had made me open it for her on purpose.

It was such a silly little thing, but it made me smile at her.

She entered... then stopped as she turned to stare at me. She frowned, and I knew what she was wondering.

Why wasn't I following her?

"I was going to ask if you'd let me sleep with you, but I think if I did I'd get in trouble," I said.

Renn's ears turned straight up, making her hat slide off her head. It landed near her feet and her eyes widened at me.

Before she could say anything, especially something that would make me change my mind, I reached out and tapped her on the chin. "Next time hit me there, it's more effective," I told her.

Her red face contorted into a wry smirk. "Mind if I test it now?" she asked.

Laughing at her I shook my head and went to closing the door. I planned to go find Gerald, or someone else, to distract me from the thoughts in my head.

"Goodnight Renn. I'll see you later," I said.

"You better."

Chapter 136: To Be Kind To Those Who Deserve It

The carriages were not as quiet as they had been when heading to the cemetery.

Three wagons, three medium sized ones with cloth coverings, were all rolling in a line along the city street. There were ten women per wagon, and they were all noisy now. They were talking, although with somber voices. At least they were noisy. I couldn't understand them, of course, but the way they all pointed out the wagon at the buildings and people we passed told me that their friend's funeral had gone well.

Even Glanny, who had sobbed so much at the funeral that I feared for her, was now laughing.

Leaning over to Brandy, who sat with me on the front of the carriage's seat, I whispered to get her attention. "Think we could stop somewhere? To let them eat or something?" I asked her.

"Sorry Renn, but this many of them would draw far too much attention," Brandy said. She didn't whisper, but I knew it was because there was no point. The girls didn't speak our language.

"I see," I nodded. I had expected as much, but it was too bad.

Brandy and I were on the wagon in the center. Vim was guiding the first wagon, alone, and behind us were Brom and Reatti in the third.

Surprisingly, Lawrence and Wynn had been at the cemetery waiting for us. They had helped in the burying and rites of the girl... and had done a very good job. They had known some of the traditions that these eastern girls had expected, and performed them properly. It had surprised me to hear Lawrence talk to them in their language. But at the same time, maybe not. He seemed... old. Like Vim.

Those two hadn't rejoined us on the trip back, however.

"Was hoping to make it back in time to go to the embassy after we got back, but oh well," Brandy sighed.

"Hm..." I nodded. The sky was growing dark, and quickly. Another storm was nearing.

Lamp poked her head out from the cloth curtain, and said something to Brandy. She spoke in a happy tone, and I watched as Lamp glanced at me and smiled as she spoke.

Smiling back at her, I listened to Brandy's response. It had been a short one.

Lamp said something, and then went back into the wagon to relay whatever had been said.

"She asked if we'd let them all hold a eulogy for the girl, and all the others they lost," Brandy informed me.

"Eulogy?" I asked.

"Just something they do for the deceased. They'll probably spend the night singing songs in their honor, or telling stories. She's basically asking for permission for them to be noisy throughout the night," Brandy said.

"Ah... why would we say no to that?" I asked.

"Most would, Renn. Different religions usually don't mix well," she said.

"Oh. I see," I nodded as I understood what Brandy was actually trying to say.

"They might even sacrifice something in tribute... maybe I should get them a goat?" Brandy wondered.

"A goat...?" I asked.

"Some cultures do that. Never met a pagan before?" she asked.

"Is that what they are?" I asked. They hadn't seemed like it.

"Basically. They'll eat it though, so don't worry about it going to waste. It's more of a ritual of symbolic nature. Or does it disturb you?" Brandy asked.

I noticed the way she studied me. This was one of her questions that had importance. "It's odd, but if it doesn't harm anyone I think it's fine," I said.

She smiled at me and nodded in a way that told me she liked what I had said.

"Would Vim be okay with it?" I asked.

"Vim doesn't tell anyone no," she sighed.

"He doesn't like a lot of things though?"

She shrugged and pulled the reins a little. To slow the horse, since Vim had slowed his wagon as well. I couldn't see the reason, but based off the sounds and how busy the streets were becoming it was simply because of traffic.

We weren't too far from the guild building after all. From what I could remember, just a few turns from here and we'd be entering the depot.

"To be honest with you Renn, I'm surprised none of them have tried to run away," she said.

"Huh?" I glanced at Brandy.

"The girls. I expected some of them to run. Maybe even all of them," she said with a shrug.

Glancing at the cloth behind me, which hid the ten women who were all talking amongst themselves... I wondered how serious Brandy was being.

"Is it that surprising?" I asked her.

"Very. We've been kind to them, especially you, but this is still... well... They haven't had a happy experience, that's for sure. For none of them to even try makes me wonder if maybe Vim had saved one of them or something," she said.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, now a little more interested.

"When a man saves a woman, especially when she's going through such turmoil... well, they become very cordial. I mean really, Renn isn't it obvious?" Brandy smirked at me.

"Lamp does seem to think highly of him..." I complained.

"Who wouldn't in their position? Though don't worry about it. They like you too. They find your efforts adorable," Brandy said.

"Oh?" they had talked to Brandy about me? Or had Brandy been the one to ask them? Maybe she had asked to make sure I was taking care of them properly.

Someone walked up close to our wagon, and I turned to quickly see who it was. I calmed down at the sight of Brom. He stepped up near us, walking alongside our slowly moving cart. "I'll go ahead and make sure that they make room for us in the depot," he told us.

"Please do," Brandy said.

Brom nodded and hurried away. I noticed he paused to talk to Vim before running ahead of us.

"Good lad, Brom. I'm sure you've realized it by now, but if anything ever happened and Vim isn't around go to him. He's proven himself. He'll not cower when it comes to it," Brandy told me.

"I figured," I said. I had the bruises that proved that fact. Though... I also had bruises because he did cower, in a way. He panicked when I put him in a dangerous position. He'd toss me onto my back whenever I got too close to hurting him, instinctively.

The wagons turned to the right, and then we came to a stop on the new road. I recognized the buildings we stopped near, and I knew that we were now waiting in line to enter the depot.

We were close enough that honestly we should just let them out of the wagons and walk in... but I knew Brandy and the rest wouldn't allow it. They didn't want anyone thinking the Animalia Guild dealt with slaves.

And they, thirty women of foreign descent all looking the way they did... well...

That looked like slavery, from a distance.

Although they were all cleaned up, and in fresh clothes that actual fit... They still had bruises. They still looked malnourished. They still had haunted looks in their eyes. And now, of course, they probably also looked as if they had all just been sobbing for hours... because they had been.

"They are very docile," I whispered as I stared in front of us. One of the girls was peering at us from behind the cloth cover of the wagon. I couldn't tell who it was, but she was smiling at us.

"They know they're safe with us. But yes... as I said, I'm surprised," Brandy said.

The wagons slowly started moving again, and I watched the city slowly pass us by.

Most of the buildings in this area were warehouses, or businesses. And most of the buildings were huge... with little room between them and the next. The few alleys we passed were dark, and full of stuff. Boxes, crates, and other junk.

Yet every so often... I saw people within them.

People wearing cloaks. People that looked like they didn't belong. People without any colors or insignia's to mark them, and let people know what company they worked for.

"Is the city dangerous Brandy?" I asked her.

"Yes. Sadly it is. These girls are proof of that, Renn," Brandy said.

"I see..." I stared at the alleys we passed, and wondered if the people hiding in them were some of those dangerous things.

"It's as you said before... we're lucky. We don't need to worry over certain things. Though that's not all of us, Renn... some are weak. Some aren't blessed with our strength," Brandy said.

I nodded. I knew that. I had noticed several who struggled with the heavy metal doors of the Society.

"I heard you sent a letter to Twin Hills?" Brandy then asked.

"Oh...? I thought stuff like that was private?" I asked.

"It is. I just happen to be the one Gerald asked to handle it, which is why I found out," she smiled at me as she told me how she knew.

"Hm... It's for Lomi. A young fox girl who Vim took to live there, about the time I joined," I said.

"I know her story, though I don't know her," Brandy said, and then she had to tug on the reins to stop the horse. Vim's wagon came to a stop again.

Leaning over, I stared at the scene in front of us. Vim had hopped off the carriage in front of us, and Brom was now hoping up to take over.

"What's going on?" Brandy asked.

"Brom swapped with Vim," I said.

"Oh?"

Vim then said something to Brom and then turned to look at me.

He smiled at me, and I couldn't help but smile back at him.

"What happened?" Brandy asked. I blinked as I realized she had been staring at me, since she couldn't see him she was looking at me instead.

"Nothing..." I said as I sat back up and straight.

Brandy chuckled, and I knew she had a very good idea of what had happened.

Jeez...

Still...

Leaning over a little, I peered around the wagon in front of us to see Vim again.

Watching Vim as he spoke to one of the women in the wagon in front of us, he made her laugh as he pointed at Brom. Vim smirked, and then waved as the wagon in front of us lurched forward.

"Finally," Brandy sighed, and with a snap she sent this wagon forward too.

We rolled forward, and I stared at Vim as we drew closer to him. He stood still in the middle of the street, watching us pass.

"What are you doing?" I asked him as we passed.

"My job. What are you doing?" he asked.

"My... job?" I wondered if I was.

"Don't have such a huge smile then, it's weird," Vim said as we rolled past him. I couldn't say anything in response, since we left him behind.

Brandy snickered as we slowly rolled along.

A small part of me wanted to hop off the wagon, to join him... but I knew better than to leave Brandy alone to deal with the women on her own. She'd be fine, of course, but it wasn't fair.

"Makes me wonder what happened for you to look so lovingly at him already. You just yesterday broke his nose," Brandy teased me.

"I didn't break it," I argued.

"You tried to."

I had... but... Could I even if I wanted to? He hadn't even flinched at my attack...

Brandy directed the wagon into the depot, behind the wagon in front of us. I noticed that although people were in the depot, working hard, there weren't any other wagons or carts in the other lane at the moment.

They had stopped the other carts and wagons from entering so we could unload the girls without drawing attention.

That must have been what Brom had hurried ahead to do.

Magdalena approached the two horses which were pulling our wagon, and had them stop. "Welcome back," she greeted us.

"Thanks," Brandy said as I went to hop off the wagon.

As I did Brandy stuck her head into the wagon to tell Lamp and the rest to disembark.

The cloth flapped open as they all hurried to hop off the wagon. As they did, the third wagon behind us guided by Reatti entered the depot.

Vim spoke to Reatti as he guided the horses of their wagon into the depot.

Lamp said something to me as she patted me on the shoulder. Whatever she said sounded happy, so I just smile and nodded at her.

While the three wagons became empty, I watched as all the women who had been separated for the last two hours went to talking with one another.

Doing a headcount, I quickly counted the thirty women. They were all still here.

I hadn't even thought about any of them trying to escape, or run away. Honestly it's not like we'd really stop them... but I hoped none tried or did so.

Unable to speak the language here, there was a good chance they'd only end up suffering again if they left us.

As I studied them all, I noticed that the women were quickly gathering around Vim. He was now talking to Lamp, and I noted the... happy smile on her face. He said something, then she said something back and the whole group laughed.

Although... jealous, that I couldn't understand what they were saying, I still found myself smiling and enjoying it all the same.

I liked how, even though he didn't truly care for them... he was still gentle and kind to them. Even though he didn't have to be.

Then Lamp said something and pointed over at me. I shifted as most of the women looked at me, and then several spoke up. Very quickly I heard my name come from most of them, as they told Vim all about whatever they were talking about.

"Uh..." I glanced around for Brandy, hoping for a translation. Especially since Vim had one of his amused smiles on his face. He was enjoying whatever they were saying, which meant he'd probably not tell me. Just because it was funny to him.

Brandy was over with Magdalena, talking. Not paying attention to us at all.

Great.

Then one of the girls walked over and grabbed me by the arm. She pulled me, kindly, to the center of the group. Lamp gestured for me to come up next to her, who stood next to Vim.

I obliged, and felt a little... silly, as they all talked in their odd language all around me. Some of them were taller than me, so it made me feel a little out of place amongst them.

They were all blonde. Pretty. Young. And their happy smiles and demeanor made them all the more beautiful.

"They want to tell you something, Renn," Vim then said to me.

"Oh?" I nodded, wondering what they wanted.

Lamp said something, then so did another. Very quickly they all said the same thing to me... with only minor variations.

"Thank you for your kindness... basically," Vim translated for me.

Oh.

My eyes grew watery as I nodded. "Thank you," I said.

Vim said something to them, with much more words than a simple translation of my own words would have been.

They all laughed at me, and suddenly I was wrapped in a hug. Startled, I watched Vim's face as I was wrapped in another hug, and then another.

Accepting a hug from each one of them, I smiled and nodded as each one said something to me as they did so.

What were they all thanking me for anyway? For letting them bury their friend?

I hadn't been the one to make it happen. Brandy and Vim had...

"Alright! Stop smothering her!" Brandy approached, and then started yelling at them in their language. They all released me and turned to listen to her.

I watched as they all smiled at her, and then Brandy finished her speech. They all nodded, and begun chatting amongst themselves excitedly.

"Renn," Lamp patted my shoulder, and I turned to watch her then reach over and tap Vim to get his attention. She said something to him, all while holding my arm.

Vim said something to her, and then gestured to Lamp. "She's inviting you to their wake. The uh... celebration, of their friend's death. Brandy just gave them permission to do it on the roof tonight, she's even going to get them a lamb I guess," Vim said.

"Oh..." I glanced at Lamp who was smiling eagerly at me. "Should I say yes Vim?" I asked him. I wanted to, to see what this supposed celebration was... but...

"It'd be fine. They're just going to sacrifice the lamb in her name. They won't even kill it. The eastern people sacrifice by claiming the animal holy. They make a promise to their gods that they'll not kill the beast for food or resources, until it dies of old age. So they'll just have a ceremony, maybe sing some songs, all while being together and having fun. It's a moment of joy," Vim described it to me.

"Then yes, I'd be happy to join them," I said.

Vim told her, and Lamp happily nodded and gave me a quick hug. As she did, I noticed that like most... she felt skinny. Too skinny. More bones than not.

They had a long way to go.

"I'll take them back," Brandy said as she waved for the women to follow her as she began shouting in their language.

Lamp said one last thing to me, and then she reached over and kissed me on the forehead. I stood there, a little dumbstruck, as she gave me a happy smile and then stepped away to join the rest of her friends.

Watching the thirty women follow Brandy into the building, I reached up to touch my forehead. Where she had kissed me.

"Don't tell me you fell for her or something," Vim said.

"Maybe," I said as I rubbed my forehead. It tingled for some reason.

Vim shifted, looking at me oddly.

"What?" I asked as I smiled at him. He looked jealous.

"You did spend years with a woman, didn't you," he mumbled.

"Nory. Yes. I loved her too," I said with a nod.

Closing his eyes he took a deep breath and sighed.

Laughing at him, I glanced back at the crowd of women entering the building. They were forming a line as to pass through the large doors.

As they left someone walked over and then hopped up onto one of the wagon that Vim had been on earlier. It was a worker I didn't recognize. "Where do they put them?" I asked Vim as he flipped the reigns and made the horses start moving.

Another man came over, and with a small nod to us he climbed up onto the second the wagon. I stepped back alongside Vim to get out of the way as they went to moving the wagons. "There's a warehouse across the street that has our carts and a stable for the horses," Vim said.

"Why aren't they stored in the building?" I asked.

"Why should they be?"

"To make sure nothing happens to them...?" I suggested.

"That warehouse is guarded too. It's fine," he waved the concern off easily.

"Hm... Brandy said this town can be dangerous," I said.

"It can be."

Glancing at Vim, I wondered what to say. I was running out of common conversations...

He and I hadn't actually had a real conversation since I had hit him. A few here and there, like last night when Glanny's sister had died... And this morning, when we had been preparing for the burial. But mostly our conversations have been of work, or rather... not about what had happened.

Vim had said that what had happened was a little spat. As he called it.

Yet I hadn't apologized yet. And even though he seemed more than willing to laugh it off, and wasn't bothered by it...

I felt that I should say something. That I should properly apologize and...

"Your painting is almost done, by the way," I whispered.

Vim stopped watching the wagons roll away and looked back at me. "Oh?"

I nodded. "I'm sorry. I've been... busy," I gestured at the door that was now closed. They were out of sight now.

"Yea... that's mostly my fault, so I'll forgive you there," he said.

"Oh? So you admit you made a mistake?" I asked him.

"Damn right I did. I should have tossed them overboard when I found them," he said.

"Please don't say that," I said, unhappy to hear him say so.

"Hm... I guess you're right. I'd not have done so. Let me rephrase it... I wish they would have tried to kill me or escape, so I could have done that justifiably," he nodded as he spoke, as if proud of his reasoning.

I sighed at him, and wondered if he'd actually kill them all if he could.

"Would you Vim?" I asked, unable to not.

Vim shifted, and then pointed at the large gate we had just come from. "It'll take them awhile to start their tribute. Not until sundown. Willing to accompany me until then?" he asked.

"Oh! Yes," I nodded quickly. Too quickly. He smirked at me, and I knew my reaction had been... too much. I blushed a little as he turned and I went to follow him out of the depot.

Reatti and Brom waved at us as we left, they were walking back into the building too. Why had they waited so long...?

Watching the way they whispered to each other, I realized that they had been watching me. Or well, me with Vim.

While we left the depot, the warehouse started to get back to work. People began to whistle and guiding the next wagons in.

Walking behind Vim, I followed him across the street and then we took a left. To head away from the port.

Wonder where we were going. Was he hungry? Thirsty? Maybe he'd take me somewhere he liked, like that time in Telmik.

We hadn't eaten together in... well...

Since the day we got here.

"I'm surprised you got Brom and Reatti to help us. They hadn't really wanted to help before," I said.

"You just need to know how to ask," Vim said. He turned a little, and stepped towards the side of the sidewalk. He wanted me to walk up to his right, to walk beside him.

I picked up my pace a little as he slowed his, and I took my place to his right. "In other words you strong-armed them?" I asked.

"You think someone like me would ever do that?" he asked back.

"Oh definitely not," I said with a smile.

Vim had us take another left, and suddenly we were heading towards the center of the city. Towards the massive castle not too far away.

As we walked I glanced at the alleyways we passed. I didn't see anyone within them... but...

"What have you been looking for, Renn?" Vim asked.

"Huh?"

"You've been staring into the alleys for awhile now, what caught your eye?" he asked.

"Oh. I've seen people in them. I'm just wondering if they're..." I stopped talking as someone walked out from a building's door in front of us. They ignored us as we passed them, and they locked the door they had left from.

"Most are workers. The few who aren't are either the homeless or people up to no good. Just leave them be," he spoke a little callously, as if he didn't care.

"You really don't care much for anything other than our Society, do you?" I asked him.

"I don't have the luxury of doing anything else. And why do you ask that now? Do you suddenly feel like saving everyone or something? You become responsible for a few poor women and now you want to help everyone?" he asked me.

"Huh? No... That wasn't what I was thinking at all. I was just trying to understand the city a little more... How come it's so wealthy, yet there seems to be such an issue. Telmik didn't have people in the alleys," I said.

"Yes it did. Just not near the church," Vim said flatly.

"Oh..." I didn't like that.

"But... you are correct. It's worse here. Probably the worst out of anywhere. It's because of the port. People hop onto the ships from all over and come here thinking they'll change their fate. Become rich. Become healthy or happy. They get here and nothing changes," Vim said.

"Why doesn't it? Aren't there lots of jobs here?" I asked.

"Says who? Haven't you noticed how hard the humans struggle to make sure they keep the jobs at the company? For every open position they have hundreds of applicants, Renn," Vim said.

"Oh..." I see. That made a lot of other things a lot more understandable.

Vim guided me around a corner and we finally left the area of the Animalia company. Other symbols and names started to pop up on the windows and signs as we walked down a smaller street. One for feet, not wheels and hooves.

"Have you walked around the city yet?" he asked me.

"Hm? The only time I left the building was with Reatti. To get painting supplies," I said.

"She was with you?" he asked.

I nodded. "She had been. We went to a place near the port. It was... interesting. It smelled like the Sleepy Artist, but was small. They didn't really sell paintings, just the supplies," I said.

He nodded as if he knew the shop I spoke of.

"Is that what we're doing? Are we going to check the city out?" I asked, a little excited. I had thought he had already done this, since before he left the company. For him to have also invited me to join him was...

"Just a single section of it. I want to see the stock... I mean the booth market, and then I figured I'd take you out on a date to properly earn your forgiveness for what I did," Vim said coolly.

I stopped walking for a moment, but he didn't stop. He kept walking... even though he knew I had stopped.

I huffed as I hurried to catch up with him. "Date?" I asked him.

"Something a man and woman do... or well I guess any two people, really. A special moment to be alone, basically. Usually involves food, fun, entertainment, flirting, and sometimes a stabbing," he said.

"Stabbing?" I asked with a laugh. I knew what a date was, but I hadn't realized he'd actually use that word to describe our little outings.

"Those are the best kind of dates," he said with a nod.

"Jeez... I like the food and fun part. Reatti has told me of some kind of underground pub that's here that she and the others go to..." She hadn't told me the name of it yet, which was odd, but she had said it was near the castle.

"The Sunken Barrel. Yes. We're not going there," he said.

"Hm... she wants me to go with her," I agreed.

"Plus it's just for drinking. She must not realize you're more of a food girl," he said.

"I am," I admitted.

He chuckled, and then gestured for me to join him in crossing the street.

We crossed easily enough, thanks to there not being wagons or carts... but the street we were on was now a little busy. There were more and more people walking around. Most were dressed nice, but there were also plenty who weren't... which told me this wasn't a place only for the rich and powerful.

"By the way, why were you surprised I hadn't checked the city out already?" I asked him.

"Figured you would have wanted to. You like new things," he said.

I smiled at him, and wondered why he hadn't realized that what I enjoyed was experiencing those new things with him.

"Gerald didn't want me to wander around on my own," I told him.

"Ah... I guess he is like that. He doesn't mean any ill will by it, so don't get too upset with him," Vim said as we rounded a building, and went down one of the alleys I had been studying.

This alley though wasn't dark and dreary, but rather wide and well tended. There was an actual brick path, and it was free of both refuse and junk. It looked as if it was intended to be frequented, instead of hidden away.

"They should make all their alleys like this," I said as I stared at the lush bushes along the sides of the buildings we were walking in-between.

"Too expensive."

I bet it was.

"What's a booth market by the way?" I asked.

"A place that lets a city know the current price trends of items. Stuff like materials, and goods. Useful for large companies, more than a smaller one. But traveling merchants find the most use of them," Vim said.

"Why are we going there? The guild has one," I said. I had seen that board, in Lawrence's office.

"It's not the prices I want to see," he said.

Oh. He wanted to see the people there. To see how people were acting, talking, and if there was tension in the air or not.

Vim glanced at me as we reached the end of the alley, and he paused before we stepped out into the new road. He smiled at me for a moment, and then held out his hand.

At first I wasn't entirely sure what he wanted, but I realized quick enough. I took his hand with my own, and felt a warmth fill me as he nodded and squeezed my hand.

"So far so good," I told him.

"Good is good enough," he said, and we crossed the street to head for the market he wanted to examine.

Chapter 137: Heart's Stock

The city of Lumen was growing.

The little booth that used to make up the common locals stock market was now a full blown building. There were different divisions, for different sectors, and there was also now an entire department to help people buy and sell. It was no longer just a place to watch the prices and trends, but an actual market.

This massive building was almost as big as the Animalia's depot, and it was more busy. There were hundreds of people here, from all walks of life, and they were hurrying and running around in all directions.

Some were making deals. Some were messengers. There were younger people in brown clothes that were the market's workers, and then there were obvious servants and employees of other guilds here in Lumen. There were even a few blue and white colors mixed into the crowd, telling me that Gerald and Lawrence kept people here to watch even though there was no need to.

It was... almost terrifying. I had blinked and all of a sudden the world had taken another step forward.

For me that was no big deal. I knew where the world was going. I knew the future that was coming. But those who I was responsible for... those in the Society...

They could not survive in that world. They could not afford that future to arrive.

Yet it would. And there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"Oh no, thank you though," Renn turned down an offer of employment again as she walked towards me. She barely gave the older man a single thought as she hurried up to me.

I stared at the older man, who studied me, and then with a huff turned away. He hadn't been intimidated by me, but had given up all the same.

"Vim, they even have our company up there," Renn said happily, pointing to the main board over on the right.

I nodded. They did. "I see that," I said.

"Does that mean they can buy and sell our company too? How's that work?" she asked.

"They can't. They use that board with our symbol to let people know when we do something in the market. For instance if the Animalia Company purchased a bunch of wheat, they'd put our company's logo on that board next to the wheat to let them know. If they were able to find the price we paid they'd put that information there too," I explained to her.

"Oh... So they're using us as a way to gauge the market," she said, understanding perfectly.

She was scary sometimes.

"Basically. There's very likely many people and groups that don't even do anything until they find out what we do," I said.

Another failure on Brandy and Gerald's part... but I couldn't do anything about it. Not anymore.

"I didn't realize we were that influential," she said.

"We shouldn't be," I said softly.

Renn looked up at me as I watched a woman climb up onto a small podium behind the main counter. She had a large bell in her hand, which she went to swinging wildly. To get everyone to look over at her.

Suddenly the whole building went dead quiet.

"One hour to close! One hour!" she shouted, nearly screaming.

Renn's hat made noise as her ears shifted, and then we watched as everyone renewed their business with vigor.

"Let's go," I said, reaching over to put my hand on Renn's waist.

She nodded, happily letting me guide her out.

As we left, I noticed the few men who had approached Renn when she had gone to all the boards to examine them. A few had wanted to employ her, one had wanted more. They stared at us as we left, but did nothing more.

"So neat... though loud. I could sit there all day," Renn said as we left.

"Please don't," I said, fearing the result.

Renn smirked at me as we rounded the exit, and to avoid the people coming and going from the booth market I guided her across the street and towards the local taverns and restaurants. I had promised her a date, after all.

"Did you see what you wanted?" Renn asked.

I nodded. That and more.

"Can I ask what it was?" she asked further.

Glancing at her, I found her smirk had faded into a tiny smile. One that was unsure of herself.

"There were a lot of things I wanted to see... but mostly what I wanted to see was the stability of the market here in Lumen," I said.

"Stability?" she asked.

"I wanted to see if there was inflation or instability. I wanted to see if there was a trend of prices in certain goods becoming... unsustainable," I said, trying to explain it without being too obvious.

"You mean like the price of coal doubling in a few weeks?" she asked.

"You noticed?" I asked as I stopped walking.

"I did. But I cheated. I've overheard people complaining about coal, ores, and other stuff associated with mines. In the company and outside it," she honestly told me.

"Oh. I see," I said. Jeez she had scared me. She was bright, and quick... but that would have shocked the hell out of me.

"Rather I'm wondering why no one in there was talking about the fraud and forgery of the checks," Renn said as she glanced back at the building we had left.

It was a good thing we hadn't returned to walking yet, since I would have stopped again anyway.

"You're kidding me," I said.

"Hm? No? Why?" she asked, worried.

"How do you know about those?" I asked her.

"I worked at the bank for a few days. Overheard it all, though I hadn't seen one yet," she said.

I sighed and wondered what I was going to do with her.

Put her to work as an auditor, obviously, but I didn't want to.

Lawrence didn't deserve her.

"Did I say something wrong?" she asked.

"No. Why do you think no one in there was talking about it?" I asked her as I returned us to walking. I noticed she stayed close to me as we did. She wanted me to keep my hand on her waist.

"It's important. Plus they were all talking about the price swings of the coal and stuff from the mines. And the issue is because of the mines, isn't it? They're the ones using forged checks and payment ledgers. So it just makes sense they'd all realize they go hand in hand," Renn calmly, and easily, revealed the hidden hand of the market that most of the merchants and nobles in town hadn't realized yet.

"Who told you about all this?" I asked her.

"Reatti told me about it originally. But she just told me how to catch them. Then when I was at the bank, Sofia and one of Lawrence's staff, Pauline, told me more."

Ah... actually I did remember overhearing Reatti tell Renn about the forged ledgers.

"Well you're right. Those scams and the price of the goods are connected. And the reason no one in there were talking about it is for two reasons. First, they're not powerful enough to know about the fraud. Most the people in there are representatives, workers or employees of the smaller companies. Most couldn't know such information even if they paid for it," I said as we rounded a corner and headed down a rather busy street. One that was littered with taverns and places to eat.

"The second reason?" Renn asked.

"Odds are no one else knows yet. The only reason the Society knows is probably because of Lawrence. He's... skilled at that stuff," I said.

"Ah... are we doing it?" she asked quietly.

I stopped walking, and Renn actually stepped forward a step... making my hand leave her back. She looked at me, then behind her... and then actually stepped backward, as to put her back up against my hand again.

Staring at her, she smiled and stared up at me... as if daring me to say anything.

"You think it's us?" I asked her.

"Well... it'd make sense. If no one else has noticed, and we're not bothered by it..." she shrugged, as if it was obvious.

Damn, she was smart.

"Have you told anyone your idea?" I asked.

"No. Should I?" she asked.

"Should tell Lawrence. Let me know what he says or does," I said.

She smiled and nodded, as if excited to be given permission to do so.

Smiling back at her, I nodded too, and then chose a restaurant. One that looked like it had a second floor balcony that overlooked the sea.

Walking towards it, Renn stopped me. She patted my thigh, as if to get my attention without anyone seeing.

"Hm?"

"Not that one, please," she said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well... The man who owns it, his brother bothered me at the bank. I don't want to give them business," she said. Staring at her, I realized she was completely serious. Then she pointed down the road a little farther, to the building on the corner. "How about that one? The one with the blue lanterns?"

Staring at her, who happily stared at the building that caught her eye... I wondered what I was going to do with her.

That statement she had just made, had made me upset. The kind of upset that usually didn't settle and go away.

Walking past the one she had told me not to go to, I stared at it. I memorized the name, and location. I scanned the building and the people going in and out of it.

"Honestly I'm not sure if that's it, but I don't want to risk it," she then said honestly.

"What?" looked away from the future Animalia conquest, and stared at the woman on my arm.

"He just said his brother owned a tavern with a balcony overlooking the ocean... but if I look at it, it's not really a tavern. Plus most of these buildings have a balcony, I see," she said softly.

Blinking, I sighed and suddenly forgot all about the building I had just planned to acquire. Through force.

"How'd he bother you?" I asked her as we approached the restaurants she had picked. It was a quieter one, with a woman playing a violin inside. She stood in a corner, sitting on a little stool and dressed in a blue dress. To match the color of the building.

"He wouldn't leave me alone. The King saved me though, so it's okay," Renn said as we entered.

"Welcome! Bar or table?" a waitress greeted us as we entered.

"Table please. Can we have that one? Near the window?" Renn asked with a point.

"Oh...? Uh..." the waitress looked at me, and I realized she wanted to know if I was willing to pay extra for it.

I nodded. "It's fine."

The waitress's smile broadened and she gave the okay. "Take a seat!" she hurried away as Renn dragged me to the table.

Sitting with Renn at the four person table, I sighed and looked around. The place was almost full, but not packed to capacity. The tables were spread far and apart, intentionally. To give people privacy. The extra room and the violinist was probably the businesses efforts of making this place feel a little more personal and higher class than the taverns and bars it was surrounded by.

A worthless effort, but Renn seemed to be enjoying it.

She was staring at the woman playing the violin, smiling broadly. "What is that?" she asked.

"A string instrument. From the east," I said.

"Huh... It's..."

Staring into her eyes, I noticed the layer of tears forming on her eyes.

Great. She loved it. That was probably why she had picked this one. She had heard it from the street, and wanted to find out what it was.

It was interesting the sounds didn't hurt her ears, but maybe it was the purity of the notes. The violin sounded rough, and not properly made... but it was still a violin. Or well...

Glancing at the woman playing the instrument, I watched as she plucked the strings with a metal thimble. Not a bow.

So civilization was advancing, but not that quickly. That was something at least.

"It's beautiful," Renn finally whispered.

Great. Now I needed to get her one.

If I did I'd also have to teach her how to properly play it. Listening to her pluck the strings like the woman was doing would give me headache after awhile.

"Any alcohol tonight Madam?" the waitress appeared and asked Renn first.

As Renn gave her order, I wondered if maybe the waitress thought Renn was my employee. She had looked at me for permission to sit here, and yet was here now letting Renn order and pick the food, not me.

So in her eyes either Renn was an employee that I was taking advantage of, or a woman I was trying to woo. Great.

"Sir?" she asked me after Renn had already ordered for me.

"She's covered it, I think," I said.

"Right away!" the waitress hurried away, without even having to take a note on our order.

"Don't we need to pay first?" Renn asked quietly.

"Not here," I said.

"Huh," she found that odd.

While we waited, Renn went to playing with the little confectioneries on the table. They had put little vases with flowers onto the tables. She happily stared at it, as if it was precious... even though it was just a common wildflower found in any field around town. It was blue, though, which matched this building's color scheme.

After she moved it a little closer to herself, she smiled contentedly as she nodded at it. Happy with where it was, she returned to looking at the violinist.

"How many people can play that thing?" Renn asked.

"It's difficult, but not hard. You'd be able to learn it, I'm sure," I told her.

She smiled at me, finally looking away from the woman. "Am I that easy to read?"

"Rather I just know how to make you happy," I said.

Her smile softened. "Which is sad, since I'm not sure yet how to make you happy."

My thumb thumped the table, and her eyes darted to it. She returned to looking me into the eyes, unfazed by my movement... but I felt a little conscious all the same. Why did she notice such little things so easily? Most wouldn't have. Even astute warriors on the battlefield didn't notice such tiny fidgets half the time... yet she seemed to notice them all.

"That was an invitation to let me know, Vim," Renn said softly.

"I know."

Her soft smile became softer. "Don't want to tell me?" she asked.

"Don't feel like answering something you already know the answer to," I said.

She blinked, going still... but before she could smile or laugh at me the waitress arrived with our drinks. As the waitress prepared to put our drinks down I dug out the coins.

Three cold metal cups were put onto the table, then a large jug of Renn's favorite berry smoothie was placed down.

"Your mark sir?" she asked me.

I handed her the coins, which she blinked at. "Oh. Wow. You're the first customer to pay with money today," she said with a smile.

While she pocketed the coins I smiled at her. "I like being the first," I said.

Renn kicked me beneath the table as the waitress laughed and patted me on the shoulder. "I bet!" she teased me as she hurried away.

Looking at Renn who was now pouring herself a drink, I frowned at her. "Why'd you kick me?" I asked her.

Once her cup was full she put the jug down and went to take a drink. She had accidentally forgotten to fill my cup.

"Don't flirt in front of me like that," she said as she took a drink.

"Didn't I say earlier? Dates are when you flirt," I said.

"With each other! Not with random women," she said as she licked her lips. "This is great," she said.

"You say that every time," I said as I reached over to grab the jug.

She glared at me as I did, but didn't stop me as I poured some into my cup. I didn't fill it all the way, out of courtesy.

"Wish everything was this tasty," she said as she stared into her cup.

"Surprised you don't want to try other drinks. There are some local drinks here that you won't find anywhere else that are tasty, you know," I said.

"I know. But... I want to enjoy this moment. If I ordered something that tasted bad, it'd ruin the memory," she said as she held her cold cup close, as if she was hot.

Hesitating as I put the jug down... I stared at the woman who was smiling so gently, I wondered what was more sweet. Her words or her smile.

"You're a better flirt than me," I said honestly.

"Hm?" she tilted her head at me. She hadn't realized what she had just said was so beautiful.

Or maybe it hadn't been, and I was just...

As I took a drink of her favorite juice, I wondered if maybe I was just numb. Numb and desensitized from my age and trauma. Maybe she wasn't as lovely as I thought she was, and was just... overcompensating, in a way. Maybe my heart was so easily pulled every which way by her simply because I hadn't let it happen in forever.

The violinist restarted a new song, and Renn turned to clap alongside the rest of the crowd. She had a toothy grin as she did.

No... the sad truth was simply that I was drunk on her.

So what did I do about it?

Putting my cup down, while the rest of the room was focused on the violinist, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

Looking to my right, I frowned as I stared at another pair of eyes.

Peering at us from outside, was... a child? No. someone just short, or young. Their eyes were too far apart and big to be a kid... They were standing on the other side of the street, from between an alleyway and...

They turned and left, most likely noticing my stare.

Frowning as I watched them disappear in to the dark of the alley, I wondered what the hell that had been.

Looking around, I tried to pretend that they hadn't been looking at us. That they had been watching someone, or something else. Maybe just staring at the restaurant itself as a whole, in envy or hatred.

But no. There was nothing unique, nor anyone worth glaring at here.

Plus our eyes had locked rather instantly. They had been staring at me before I had looked at them.

"Vim?" Renn noticed my look, and I stared at her as she tilted her head again. This time without as much love, but more so concern.

"Everything's fine. Was just wondering if I should flirt with the waitress again or not," I said.

She frowned, and I smiled at her as she sighed and reached out to take another drink. "Seriously," she mumbled.

Renn had been staring into the alleys. Had something happened? While I was gone?

Surely not. She had said that she had only left the building once, and with Reatti. Reatti would have told me instantly of anything that might have happened. She would have spilled everything, no matter what it could have been.

Then... what?

Maybe Renn was picking up on it instinctively. She was a cat, and did have a rather insane level of spatial awareness. Maybe they had been watching her for awhile and she had felt it.

"Don't go out without me from now on, Renn," I told her.

"Huh?" she stopped drinking as she looked at me.

"Just... don't leave the company without me, okay?" I asked her.

"Sure... why?" she agreed, and asked in the same breath.

"Don't want you flirting with anyone. You said the king helped you out? How am I supposed to compare to that?" I asked her.

Renn blushed, and then laughed at me. "Jeez Vim!"

The waitress arrived with our food, and I couldn't help but make Renn laugh more with a joke to the waitress girl.

When I got both of them to laugh at once, I had no choice but to admit and accept it.

Renn had somehow purchased the stocks in my heart.

She had taken possession inside there. Deep, deep down. Into my soul, even. Which was surprising since I wasn't sure where it was anymore.

I honestly had no idea how she had done it. Nor what she had purchased my heart for... but...

Hopefully she wouldn't go bankrupt from the venture.

Chapter 138: Lamp's Farewell

The roof had gone quiet.

I sat in the circle alongside the thirty women. Lamp was in the center now, standing in front of us all and deep in the middle of a story. She spoke with her guttural accent and language, which somehow only made her display and speech all the more captivating.

Of course I didn't know the language, so I wasn't sure at all what was being said... but I could tell by the other listeners, the other women, that what was being said was beautiful. Beautiful and heart wrenching.

My own eyes watered to join the rest, and then one by one they began to weep. What had been a very festive, and rather rambunctious merry-making... was now somber and a gentle sobbing session.

Lamp's very obvious emotions, and her severe and blatant dedication to what she was saying only further enforced how deeply moving her words were. She clutched her chest, and had begun to whisper. She whispered so quietly, that I wasn't sure how some of the women had heard her over their own cries and sobs.

I watched as Lamp then thumped her chest, and made a motion. One that was... disgustingly understandable. She seemed to be speaking of what had happened to her. To all of them. The abuse they had endured, and the terrors they had been forced to suffer.

My eyes watered even more as even Lamp began to weep. It made her gruff language begin to sound scratchy, and high pitched.

As she continued, I realized she was telling their story. Not just hers. Not just the woman's who had died. But all of theirs. I heard Vim's name appear a few times, and the mention of a very obvious battle.

She wept as she made a motion of stabbing someone, again and again. Had she watched Vim kill someone? Or was she saying she had done the deed?

A few of the women whooped and hollered, glad to hear of what she was saying. Glad to have been able to witness it.

Then after a few more cries and shouts... Lamp became quiet. The circle became quiet.

A few fire pits littered around us, but they were small. Barely audible over the light wind, and the silence. They were more boxes of fire, than anything else. Yet they lit our little circle up well, and kept us warm. Lamp then pointed at me, and I sat up straight at the sudden inclusion.

I had been here since the beginning. From the sacrifice of the sheep, thru the drinking and laughter, and until now. Yet this was the first time any of them had actually singled me out, or addressed me. They hadn't ignored me... but...

I looked around, and watched as they all nodded at whatever Lamp was saying about me. They all seemed to be agreeing with one another.

Then Lamp said my name, and with a very... very gruff voice said, "Thank you, Renn."

Blinking watery eyes, I nodded and smiled at her. She smiled back, and many others called out in their own language. Likely saying the same thing.

Over the next few minutes, people clapped and voiced their support for what Lamp had said and done. Staring at the group of women... I wished internally I could speak their language... yet...

Maybe a part of the beauty of this moment was my lack of understanding.

Someone coughed behind us, and it was a rough one. A familiar one. Looking behind me, I found Vim standing in the shadows.

Since Lamp seemed done, and the group was now starting to talk amongst themselves... I figured I was okay to stand up and step away for a moment. It was. None of them even noticed as I walked away from their little circle.

Lamp sat down where I had vacated, and I walked over to Vim. He was standing up against the wall near one of the doors.

"How long have you been watching?" I asked as I walked up to him.

"For a short time," he said.

I hadn't noticed, but that was the usual. He was sneaky... and this time I had a real excuse. I had been... very transfixed in that little moment.

Stepping up against the wall, to stand right next to Vim, I turned to watch the group of women. They were all talking together, seemingly happy again.

"Not sure what just happened, but I think it was beautiful," I told Vim.

"Hm. She had given a eulogy. A final farewell to the deceased. It had been beautifully done. She must have experience giving speeches," Vim said.

I nodded. It had seemed like it.

"They had been in cages, Renn. When I found them," he said.

"I heard," I said.

"Did you hear that I had not known about them until that moment?" he asked me.

I slowly nodded. Brandy had... spent a little time to give me as much information as she could. Information she had not gotten from Vim, but Lamp and the other girls. It seemed that although Brandy had enjoyed my little... spat, as Vim called it, with Vim... she had also wanted to cheer me up. To help me out.

It had been kind of her.

"Brandy said the girls made it clear you did save them. Though they do think that you are... odd, and very strong. They said you are the only reason they're alive. Not just because you freed them from the cages, but because you faced down the storm of the gods alone and won... Brandy thinks that was a fancy way of saying you defeated someone very strong," I told him everything I knew.

"Brandy thinks she's smarter than she is. They meant it literally. We had gotten stuck in a storm. A bad one. One that should have sunk the boat," Vim said calmly.

"Oh?" That was interesting.

"You've earned their loyalty Renn," Vim then said, changing topics.

"I've not done anything that special," I said with a shake of the head.

"On the contrary. Humans are... unique. They're willing and able to lay their lives in the hands of those they deem exceptional. Unique. Special. In their eyes you're all of that and more. So they're willing to entrust themselves to you," he said.

"You heard all this in her... eulogy?" I asked.

"I did."

That was strange. I hadn't interpreted that at all from Lamp's speech.

"The reason I say this... is because you're in a unique position," Vim said.

"For what?"

"To make them yours," he said softly with a wave at them.

Looking away from the girls, I stared at the man who sounded a little too serious. "What's that mean, Vim?" I asked him.

"Exactly what it sounds. Have you not realized what we do with humans, Renn? We keep the ones close who will, or can be, trusted. That can be utilized. That are useful," he said gently.

"Ah... you mean there's a chance we can take them into the Society," I said as I understood.

He nodded. "It's just an idea. No one else has mentioned it, not even Brandy... even though she's usually the first to do so. But I think that's because I'm here. They know I hate such things, so are avoiding it I think," he said with a sigh.

"Then why bring it up? If you hate the idea?" I asked him.

"Because it's you," he said simply.

Blinking already watery eyes, I smiled at him. "That's a lovely way to tell me you trust me," I said.

"Don't rub it in," he huffed.

Giggling at him, I nodded. "I understand what you're saying... but Vim... I want them to get home. I want them to be happy. I promised them we'd try to help them," I said.

"I know. But that doesn't mean you can't give them the opportunity to choose. Take it from one who has seen their lands. Who has stayed amongst them, and lived amongst them. Their homes aren't anything special. Their lives there no better. Part of the reason they're so happy right now is because they feel safe. The east is... dangerous. Different than here. Especially for women," he said.

"Do you want me to give them the chance?" I asked him.

"I don't know. No. Not really... but I want you to know that you have the right to, and possibly should. I... I believe everyone has a right to choose. If I didn't tell you that you, and they, have that choice... then I'd be going against my own principles. Which, although infuriating, is the way it is," Vim said.

I nodded as I understood him. He didn't like it, but had to give me the choice. That was his entire thing.

"Could they though Vim? They don't speak our language," I said.

"So? They can learn. And even if they don't, you can learn theirs. There's a tactical usefulness for having people around you that no one can understand. It'd make them useful, in more ways than one. Especially since you being the only one they can talk to would only further enforce their reliance of you," he said.

"That's... that's an underhanded way to think about it," I said.

Vim shrugged.

We watched a few of the women separate from the circle, to go sit near the little fires. They were getting cold. Which meant they'd probably go downstairs soon enough.

"Before I forget, since my memory isn't as good as yours... Lamp's farewell was to you as well," Vim then said.

"Wait? Me? I'm not dead," I said.

"She knows," he said with a chuckle.

"Well?" I asked him to tell me more.

He nodded. "She... well... She and the rest of them like you. They can tell you actually care about them. She thinks that she should stay behind with you, to work and pay off the debts they have to us. To me, and you," Vim said.

"Wait what?" I glanced at Lamp who was talking with Glanny and another woman.

"It's not just an eastern thing. Think about it... they're worried they'll be in debt forever. A debt they'll never be able to pay back. Plus... Well... Renn, can I say something that might upset you?" he asked me.

I nodded.

"She's ugly. Her scar is bad. The kind of bad that probably makes her life hell no matter where she is. It's the sad reality of today's era. To her staying here with you is probably a better option than going home, especially since she might not even have one. Slavery is not only legal in the east where they're from, it's normal. You think whoever took them all had done so with force? Doubtful. They had been bought. Purchased with coins from their own people. Maybe even sold by their own families," Vim said.

"You were right. You upset me," I told him.

He nodded, not surprised.

I sighed as I stared at Lamp. Ugly? She wasn't ugly. She was beautiful.

"Which is why you suggested I consider asking if any of them wanted to stay here with us," I said, understanding.

"Well... yes and no. To be honest Lamp asked me earlier. To ask you. I just... wasn't sure how to phrase it to you without making you want to hit me again," he said.

I punched him in the arm.

He glanced at me, and then laughed.

Laughing with him, I nodded. "Good. Glad you understand," I said.

"Oh, indeed," he chuckled, enjoying himself.

"What do you want me to do, Vim?" I asked. My mind was whirling wildly, as was my heart. I needed something solid to start from, and his desire was the best place to start.

"Me? I want you happy. And I don't want to lie or hide anything from you... for whatever reason. Really, what is wrong with me?" he asked himself.

"Just answer me, please," I complained, ignoring his happy smirk.

"I want you to understand that if you send them home... That it is not the same as saving them. They could suffer and die all the same. Many will die on the trip home. Half might not even ever go home. The embassy might give them the same choice I'm suggesting you give, and most might choose to stay here and work. Though what they will do for work," he shrugged. "Also, I want you to understand their fates are not your responsibility. All duty you have to them ends at the embassy. And I will enforce that, with force," he added.

"What would you do?" I asked him.

"Carry you out of the city. I'd carry you for miles if I had to," he said.

"You really would, wouldn't you?" I asked him.

He nodded without any hesitation.

Although a little... strange, I still smiled at him.

"Personally I suggest taking them all to the embassy. Then give them the option. Tell them that if any decide to stay in Lumen, after hearing the embassy options, to return to the Society. Or well, the Animalia Company. And that they will be given employment, housing, and be taught the local language. Over the years it takes them to acclimate, they'll become loyal humans who we can utilize. You help them, they're happy and safe, and the Society benefits. We all win," he finally gave me his answer.

I was perturbed at how... simple he made it sound. Yet at the same time...

"That's a beautiful conclusion. And I thank you Vim, for being the kind of man to not just allow that to happen but to think of it," I said.

"I'm good at socially engineering loyal serfs," he nodded to himself.

Ignoring his comment, I thought deeply about what he suggested.

"I'll... think about it. And I'll let you know if I do it," I told him.

"Or don't. How about you don't? I don't want to know," he said.

"Oh I will. If anything just to annoy you," I said with a smile.

"Great. Lovely."

"I am," I agreed.

"You are," he also agreed.

Hesitating, I glanced at the man who lately had been saying things so brazenly... did he even realize what he was saying sometimes?

"Plus..." Vim paused a moment as he stared at the scene before him. I ignored whatever he was staring at, and instead focused on him.

"Plus what?" I asked.

"If you plan to accompany me, you can't take them with you. So take that into account," he said.

While staring at him, I failed to notice that most of the women were headed our way. I coughed and stood away from the wall, and Vim. I had drawn a little too close to him as we had whispered to one another.

"They're done?" I asked.

Vim waved at Lamp who approached and asked her something. She giggled, as others did, and then Lamp said something with a smile at me.

"They're done. I'll take them back to their rooms, if you'll do me a favor," Vim said.

Glancing at the mess they left behind, I wondered if I was going to have to clean it up. "I'll clean it up," I agreed.

"Huh? No. I'll do that later. I want you to go get your sword and mine. I'll meet you back up here," Vim said, then stepped away to open the door for the girls.

Watching him go, I glared at him as he held the door open for everyone. Several patted him on the chest as they passed; one even kissed her hand before doing so.

Why were they so flirtatious with him? He was average looking! They shouldn't be so attracted to him...

"Well?" Vim asked me. He wanted me to follow after him.

Walking past him and into the stairwell, I also patted him on the chest.

He chuckled at me, which made me blush.

Damn... they had made it look easy.

As Vim closed the door to the roof and followed us down the stairs, I was forced to listen to his silly chuckle the entire way.

Chapter 139: A Torn Shirt

Renn hurried out the door onto the roof, carrying our swords with a huge smirk.

Upon seeing me she quickly tried to control herself. She forced her smile to a more normal shape... or at least tried to. All she accomplished in doing was make her smile look quirky. She slowed her pace as she approached. It was odd she had her hat on still, yet had her tail out. Her tail was twitching, fully exposed now. A part of me wanted to chastise her, since there could have been a chance a human could have been up here as to clean up the mess or a straggler from the eastern girl's ceremony... but I decided to let it be.

She knew I would have been here, after all. And... I liked that happy expression upon her. Especially since lately it had seemed to be missing, thanks to my own actions.

As the excited jaguar hurried up to me, I glanced over at the rising moon. It was bright, and although a storm was on the horizon it wasn't that cold. The wind wasn't strong, the air not chilly.

A good night to sweat a little.

"Did I make you wait?" she asked as she stepped up to the bench I sat on.

"Forever," I said as she handed me my sword.

Her quirky smile adjusted, and then her tail twitched as she laughed.

Smiling at her, I watched as she took her hat off. She did so carefully, since it had been firmly pinned thanks to her having sat in the ceremony with the eastern girls. She had worried their festivities would have dislodged it accidentally.

"Did you enjoy the ceremony?" I asked her as she put her hat onto the bench next to me.

"I did. Even if I didn't understand most of it," she said.

I nodded. That probably had made it odd. Those eastern pagan rituals were weird enough as it were.

Renn had changed clothes before coming back. Probably one of the reasons she had taken a little longer than she should have. She now wore the leathers and boots that Lellip and Nebl had made her, instead of the dresses of the Animalia Company.

Standing up, I sighed as I hefted my sword. It was cold, for some reason.

Renn also drew her sword. She left the sheath on the bench and smiled at me. "Brom called it a scabbard," she said.

"It is. I call it a sheath because that's a short-sword. And it's leather, not metal," I told her.

"Oh?" Renn stared at it for a moment as I stepped away.

I had already cleaned up the mess left behind by the eastern girls. They really hadn't made much of one, but I didn't want anyone to become upset at Renn for not taking care of her dependents.

Though, we weren't where they had their little ceremony. That was a little ways away, past the garden.

This was an open space, with benches scattered around the outer perimeter. A perfect place to spar. Flat. Open. Nothing to trip on.

A place that represented a rarely had battlefield.

"Let me see what Brom taught you," I told her as I hefted my sword.

Renn smiled at me as she hurried to take a stance across from me. She raised her blade and put both hands on her handle.

She nodded, and I nodded back to let her know it was okay for her to start.

And start she did.

One moment she was in front of me, the next she was half a step away. She had ducked low, crouching, and with both hands was now preparing for a full frontal upwards swipe. Right in-between my legs. As if to slice me in two from the groin up.

Renn had a penchant for attacking from below. She instinctively knew that most men were not just taller than her, but had wider stances. She, without ever actually verifying it, seemed to know that most men wouldn't be able to handle such a straight-forward attack to our nether regions.

Most men would try to side-step, or back step. The few who would try to just block, or parry, would be met with death. After all, most men didn't have the strength to block or parry her sword. Either would have resulted in failure. Anyone who tried to escape, to the sides or away from her, would just get overwhelmed. She could move forward quicker than they could escape.

Yet I wasn't most men. Nor was I inexperienced. I've fought countless people who were more adept and versatile when it came to attack patterns such as these.

With the point of my sword I kept her blade from reaching my groin, or legs. I had it skid and slide up the side of my blade, and then with a flick of the wrist sent it upward to my left. Her sword flung away from me, and caused her whole body to turn alongside it as it followed her momentum.

This was usually where she failed. This was where I'd usually consider kneeing her in the face, or stomach. Or maybe whacking her in the head with the blunt side of my sword... but it seemed she had learned a thing or two while sparring with Brom.

She spun with the momentum, and in the time it took a heart to beat she did a full rotation, and brought her sword back into position. She spun forward, and lunged. Her sword snapped forward, like a spear, straight at my sternum.

An attack that used not just the renewed momentum from my parry but even some of the forward momentum from her earlier leap at me.

It was a well done, flawless attempt. One that would have shocked the hell out of me had she done it before I had left her.

Once again I stabbed the side of her sword with the point of my own. The moment my blade connected with hers, I pushed and turned my own blade as to slide it along the side of her sword.

Her sword point went from pointing at the center of my chest, to harmlessly stabbing into the air a few inches from my head. I felt the powerful wind follow the stab as it blew past my ear, and into my hair.

Sliding my sword's edge along hers, I swung my blade as if to cut her. I watched as her cat-shaped irises became slim in shock as she skidded to a stop and with a weird noise she delved to the right, as to duck my own attack.

"Gwak!" she scoffed as she inhaled and exhaled in quick succession, pulling her sword away as she dodged my own attack and hurried to step backward out of my reach.

If I had pursued, it would have been over. She took three steps back, and it wasn't until the third before she got her sword back in front of her and ready to defend herself.

With a huff she blew some hair out of her face. It really had grown longer since I had seen her.

Odd. Our kind's hair usually didn't grow that quickly. Especially those like her, who was obviously thick in the blood of their ancestors.

Her nails grew quickly too. They looked ready for another one of her cutting and polishing sessions.

"You didn't even move," she complained as she glared at me.

"I did?" I asked her. Did she not see me swinging my sword?

"Your feet, I mean," she corrected.

"I hadn't needed to."

Renn grumbled, but didn't argue.

Smiling at her, I wondered if I should voice my praise to her or not.

I wanted her to know I was impressed. I wanted to praise her, to the sky and back... but a warrior didn't grow with praise.

Yet... did I want her to become a warrior?

"Did you attack Brom that fiercely?" I asked her.

"Huh...? Oh... Um..." Renn shifted, and swapped the position of her hands on her sword's handle. She went from having her right on the top, to putting her left in first position. Was she planning on attacking me from the right this time?

"Yes and no. I... I did get a little emotional a few times. And when I did, I think I overdid it. But normally no, I didn't put as much strength into my blows... usually," she said.

Hm... "That would explain the faint bruises. Did he hit you?" I asked.

I had already known that Renn had been... difficult for Brom. One of the first things he had told me upon my return was that she was someone he couldn't properly train. She was too strong for him. He couldn't completely block her blows without resorting to throwing or forcefully stopping her attacks. Which meant their sparring ended up with one of them actually getting hurt. Either him or her.

Should I tell her about his broken bones?

"Well, he'd throw me sometimes. Make me fall on my back. He never hurt me on purpose," Renn said quickly.

Oh? Was she defending him because she was worried I'd be upset, or because she didn't want me to think she was embarrassed over her failing to beat him?

Brom was a good man. To not hurt her, even though she had so obviously harmed him. So obviously endangered him, and made him fight for his life.

"How'd it feel being thrown by a meerkat?" I asked.

"Meerkat?" she asked.

"You didn't know?" I asked.

"Know what?" she shifted. She was now looking at my waist. Why did she seem to favor attacking me from the legs?

"Brom and his sister are meerkats. A mongoose. Small animals, barely bigger than a rabbit," I told her.

Renn stopped planning her next attack and stood up a little taller. Her ears turned a little, to face me more directly. "Small?" she asked.

I nodded. "Weasels. They're categorized as predators, but in reality they're as feeble as most of the rest of our members," I told her.

"Feeble..." Renn's face contorted as I watched her realize what I was implying.

Yes, Renn. The man you had spent more than a week sparring with, and failing to defeat, was not strong. Not a true predator.

"He was weaker than me. But it didn't matter. He still beat me," she said.

"Strength isn't everything," I said, glad she understood. So few predators ever did. They thought strength was everything.

Renn lowered her sword point, and shifted her feet. To stand more appropriately.

Her stance reminded me of Reatti's. Had she sparred with her too? Impossible... she had said she hadn't...

Then Renn charged forward.

Flipping my sword upward, I blocked her first blow. One aimed at my right side, near my waist. Then she pulled her sword back, and with a burst of speed stabbed at me five different times. She tried to stab my face, my shoulder, my thigh and stomach in quick succession.

I parried each stab, and on the final one she stepped to the right and then hefted her sword to bring it down onto my shoulder. A heavy, hard, blow. One that probably had worked on Brom.

He was quick, but didn't have the strength to continuously block such a flurry of blows.

It was probably right here, in this moment, that Brom would hit her. Either a kick to the stomach, since it was exposed with her sword hefted high, or he'd step in to grab her by the wrist and fling her onto her back.

I did neither. I let her blade come straight down.

Letting it hit the spot on my blade right before my hilt, I let her blade skid down my own blade as I diverted her sword's path. It ended up skidding off my blade and nearly hitting the tiled rooftop floor, and before she could suck in air as to renew her efforts...

I reached out and flicked her in the ear. One of the big ones, on the top of her head.

She yelped and hurried away, stepping away more than back-stepping as a hand shot up to touch her ears.

"Jeez," she glared at me as her ears flicked wildly and she rubbed them.

"If it wouldn't work on Brom, why would you try it on me?" I asked her.

"You wanted to know how I had attacked him, so I just..." she flinched as she rubbed her ears some more. Maybe I had flicked it too hard.

"Ah..." I realized what she meant.

She had simply been showing me what she had done with Brom. To make him panic and resort to other methods to stop her.

Woops...

"I see. So did you just keep trying the same methods? The whole time?" I asked her.

"No. Not at all. I tried a lot of things," she complained.

"Then show me," I said and gestured for her to continue.

She grumbled, scratched her ears wildly for a moment... and then nodded. Even as she took a stance, her right ear still flicked a little as if annoyed.

I'd need to apologize later.

Renn spent the next few engagements showing how she had tried to defeat Brom. Of the few dozen she displayed, I noticed the five that had probably worked.

The one's that had resulted in Brom's broken bones, shattered wrists, and fractured his legs.

After one last display, right as I stepped around Renn as she spun forward, losing momentum thanks to my parry, I stepped away from her as to let her know to take a moment to rest.

She skidded on a heel, and then relaxed as she saw the way I had lowered my blade and begun to pace around her. She took a small defensive stance as I began to circle her, studying her.

"I wish I had found you ages ago, Renn," I said.

Her ears perked up, and I noticed the way the one I had flicked twitched. It was still bothered. I must have hurt her.

She tilted her head at me as I nodded at her. "Before this age, at least. Maybe not the age before that one... and definitely not the era before that," I said.

Renn's eyes stayed focused on me even as I rounded her. She turned her head to keep her eyes on mine, and even began to turn around when needed. Something that if we had still been sparring, I would have chastised her for. You never took your eyes off your enemy, but should also never let your neck and head cause you to become so un-centered by straining them in such a way.

"I wish so too, but I'm not that old Vim," she told me.

"I know. But all the same... You would have done well in that era. Before our Society fractured. Before the humans ruled," I said.

She frowned in a way that told me she didn't really understand, or maybe even care for what I was saying.

Renn was... emotional. But she was a realist. She didn't think of what could have been, just what might be.

She wept when disaster struck, but never got stuck in the past because of it.

"I think you would have made a difference," I told her. "I think you would have been... very..." I stopped talking as I realized there was no point to tell her. She couldn't imagine the world in the past. Few could anymore, since only a handful even remembered it.

"I'm here now, Vim," she said to me.

I nodded. "You are."

"I'm glad you're here now too, Vim," Renn then said.

"Oh?"

She nodded, her tail twitching. A small breeze came by, making her hair flow in the wind a little. "I hope... my not being able to beat Brom doesn't make you abandon me here. I hope you'll still give me a chance," she said.

I stopped walking for a second, and she noticed instantly. She stood up straighter, and squeezed her grip on her sword. She thought I was about to charge at her.

"You didn't fail to beat him, Renn," I told her.

"Yes I did... If he told you otherwise, he's just being kind. He is a kind boy," she said.

Boy. They were the same age, roughly. She needed to stop comparing other men to me. I was a poor standard, if one at all.

"Brom has broken arms and legs. Shattered wrists. A fractured femur, amongst other wounds," I told her.

Renn at first didn't register what I had said... but then she did. Her sword lowered, and her shoulder slumped as she stared at me with her wide, gleamy eyes.

"He's hurt?" she asked, worriedly.

"You should know. You're the one who had hurt him," I said.

Her eyes narrowed as her ears fluffed around. "What...? Vim? What do you mean?" She stepped forward as she asked what I meant.

I returned to my pacing, which only made her glare at me. "You didn't fail Renn. You broke him. Dozens of times," I said.

"Impossible..." she whispered as she stopped walking towards me.

"No it's not. You broke your fingers, Renn... yet look at them now. Only a couple days later and now able to hold that sword as tightly as ever," I said with a glance to her hands.

I liked how her hands gripped her sword. She held it firmly, yet with a grace that most couldn't.

Renn quickly lifted her hand, opening her hand with a big stretch to stare at the digits she had broken. "Don't say they hadn't been broken. I had felt them break on my nose," I teased her.

She took a deep breath, but shook her head instead of saying anything.

"He's not as... well, Renn, to be honest he's just simply a little too human. He has our strength. As does his sister. But they're not as apt as you. He's more like... well... Lellip, than you," I said as I tried to compare him to anyone she knew or had met recently.

Lellip had fit the bill close enough.

"I never beat him, Vim!" she yelled at me as she stepped towards me.

"You did. How many times did he throw you, Renn?" I asked.

She hesitated, and seemed to delve into herself. To scour her memories. "Thrown..." she whispered as she pondered.

"Actual throws. Where you had probably even been tossed to the ground?" I asked further.

"Twenty one times," her striking memory quickly answered her.

"Well... then you beat Brom twenty one times, Renn," I told her.

She shook her head as she stepped closer to me. "Vim..."

"The reason Brom had thrown you those times, Renn... is because you had been about to hurt him. Or hurt yourself. Maybe even endanger his life. He resorted to using those techniques, to grappling and throwing, to avoid getting hurt or hurting you in response. It was an instinctual self-preservation method," I told her.

Brom had been brutally honest, after all.

"Vim!" Renn screamed at me, and stepped towards me.

I kept walking around, in the same circle I had started. "His arms are busted. His fingers had been mangled. His legs fractured. I think he shattered a hip too, though it was mostly healed by the time I checked him out," I said lightly, ignoring Renn's approach.

"No...! Vim!" Renn dropped her sword. It clanged just twice before coming to a rest on the floor of the roof, and she left it there as she hurried up to me.

I came to a stop as she stepped right up to me, and grabbed me by the shirt.

She wasn't tall enough to grab me precisely on the collar, but she had done so a little below it. She pulled my shirt as if to pull me towards her, to bring us face to face... but I didn't let myself get budged.

I held my ground, and went still.

For the tiniest moment I thought she was about to rip my shirt and the leather bracer I wore above it off my chest. Yet she stopped, right as it begun to tear near my right shoulder. She noticed I wasn't letting her get any closer.

She growled at me, and stepped closer as to stand on the tip of her toes and glare at me.

"Don't hate him for not saying it, Renn. He didn't want to admit to you how badly you had hurt him. He was... also unsure of what to say or do, since I was gone. He didn't know if I wanted you to know yet, or not," I said, defending Brom while also trying to keep her rage at herself in check.

Renn suddenly groaned as her glare faltered, and she looked down a moment... to stare at my nape.

I could read her emotions clearly. She wasn't just upset at me, for keeping it a secret... and Brom of course, but was more so angry at herself.

She had hurt someone that she considered a friend, and hadn't even realized it.

"Then... why did he keep sparring with me? Why didn't he stop or...?" she whispered at herself.

"His injuries aren't that bad, Renn. They'll heal soon, just as your fingers did. Just as my torn cheek did from your blow the other day." he said.

She slapped me.

My head turned, and tilted, to roll along with her sudden attack. The quiet night became loud for a heartbeat as the sound of her palm against the side of my face echoed throughout town.

"Don't keep such things from me!" she screamed at me, and re-grabbed me by the shirt.

Looking back at her, I frowned. "I hadn't. I had just told you," I said.

"Days later!"

Renn was furious. She was glaring at me with livid eyes which were tinged with tears. I was about to smile at her, and her sudden adorable beauty, but I noticed the way her shoulder tensed.

If I smiled now, she'd slap me again.

"I'm sorry Renn. We have been busy. Plus you had been upset with me, for most of the first day I had been back..." I said to her gently.

Her tail puffed from anger, nearly doubling in size from its standard... then her eyes wavered and... narrowed... then...

With a heavy sigh she closed her eyes and looked away from me, as if in defeat.

"Is he really not hurt badly?" she asked me. Seemed she had understood I had not done such a thing on a purpose. I mean... it really had only been a couple days. And most of that time we had been busy. If not apart from one another, but dealing with people and in places we couldn't talk openly. Like with those eastern women.

I nodded; even though she wasn't looking at me I knew she could hear me. Especially with us this close. Her ears were eye level with me. "You're free to go see him after this... or well, tomorrow. He goes to sleep early, Renn. Plus if you do go ask to see his injuries, do so gently. He's a meerkat, but has a lot of pride. Half the reason he hadn't told you and hadn't let you know that you had been hurting him was simple pride. He was ashamed, embarrassed," I said.

"A foolish male," she whispered.

"There's... more to it than that, Renn," I warned.

Her ears danced on her head, as she heard more than just my words. She had heard my emotion. She looked up, with eyes that told me she was willing to hear me out.

She still held me by the shirt, which was odd. She was still angry at me, it seemed.

Was this going to become habit? Normal? Was this her more normal temperament, and had only finally surfaced because of our relationship becoming more founded... or was this because I was just being an ass to her and not realizing it? Maybe this was my entire fault. Maybe I was just being inconsiderate.

She was normally so gentle, even when angry.

Though, granted... she knew her slaps didn't hurt me. Couldn't.

Yet everyone else knew that too, and none of them did such a thing either.

In fact she's the first to actually act like this towards me in...

"Well?" she asked. She was tired of me staring at her, it seemed.

Too bad. I was enjoying the view.

"He's this location's guard, Renn," I said.

She blinked. A heavy blink, that sent a tear down the right side of her face. "Huh..." she whispered.

I nodded. "Brom's the guard. Of the company. Of here. Of our members here, he has taken up the mantle as their protector. For when I'm not here," I explained.

Renn's quick mind, even when wrapped in anger, worked swiftly. It was amusing to watch her eyes go wide as she understood my complete meaning.

Although she obviously knew what I meant, I still went ahead and explained it aloud. "If he told you that you were too strong for him, and were hurting him... Others might hear it. Since you obviously don't know everything about our Society, or how it works, he was worried about what to say or do in front of you. As most are. If they learned how weak he was, from you or otherwise, then..." I shrugged, which only made my shirt rip at my right shoulder. The seam she had stretched had given way, since she was still pulling on my shirt with balled fists.

We both ignored it as she went into deep thought. She groaned as her tail coiled, and lost most of its density. Its hairs going back to the smooth silky state they usually were.

I nodded as she understood.

"They'd run away Renn. If those here thought he couldn't protect them... if he was weak, or even just seen as too weak, they'd not trust him. He would lose his place, and then most here would scatter. To the corners. If they thought they were suddenly not safe... well..." I nodded as I finished explaining it to her.

"They would," Renn agreed with a dull voice.

"They would."

She gulped.

"It's also... my fault. I have a lot of blame in this, Renn. I honestly had not thought you'd be that strong. I should have, I mean... I've been sparring with you for months. And I've been watching and studying you. I was even the one to train Brom and his sister. I should have known exactly where you all stood when paired together. I had no idea you'd actually push him to such limits, Renn. I'm sorry. I really am," I said.

Suddenly she was upset again. She firmed her grip and snarled at me. "So you had wanted me to lose!" she shouted.

Damn. She had almost let me go too...

"Well, no. I had expected you to receive enough praise from him that I'd concede. Meet you in the middle. Praise you for your hard work and efforts, yet also be able to tell you that you had much to learn and so forth," I admitted.

Renn's eyes bore into my own as she searched for something. Maybe something to slap. Yet no slap came, and I sighed after a moment of her glaring.

"Please Renn, do not get angry at him or yourself. Brom is fine. He will heal quickly. Just let this all... pass without a word. For his sake, and your own," I asked her.

For a tiny moment she seemed to consider it, and then she frowned at me.

"If you're lying to me I'm going to bite you," she warned.

Smiling at her, I reached out and wrapped my hands around her wrists. Her own grip on my clothes tightened, as if she dared me to try and pry her off. But I didn't. I just... grabbed her wrists, gently. As if I was holding her hands.

Her wrists were thin. Common for a woman, yet... surprising all the same. Especially since she was pulling on my clothes with the strength of ten grown men.

"You're strong Renn. In more ways than one... even if you do seem to cry at the drop of a hat," I said.

"Only because life keeps slapping it off my head without permission," she countered.

"That is true," I nodded. Everyone was getting slapped it seemed.

"And then there's this jerk who flicks my ears when I don't have one on, too," she added. Her ears flicked quickly, as if to make a point.

"That is also true... Did I fail to mention that flicking you like that had hurt my soul? I regret it," I said.

Renn held my gaze, and after a moment her eyes shook... as if about to cry... then she flinched and her ears began to twitch. She sighed and then shifted a little, to put weight on one heel... and then she went to staring at my hands. They were right in front of her, thanks to the way we were standing.

I stared at her eyes that stared at my fingers, and I wondered what she was studying. My grip? Where to bite? The scars?

"How much stronger than Brom am I?" she asked while looking at my hands.

"I can't say. I wouldn't know without doing some tests, but I'd say at least twice more. He said some of your attacks he could not block because of how much force you had behind them. Thus his throwing of you, to negate the attack and keep both you and him safe," I said.

"And how much stronger are you than me?" Renn asked me.

For the tiniest moment... I considered squeezing my hands.

But I didn't.

Even if she'd heal. Even if she'd forgive me.

She must have noticed my thoughts for she looked up at my eyes... and then back down at my hands. She squirmed in my grip, but didn't let go of my clothes.

"That... Renn, is the entire reason I had not properly calculated the difference between him and you. To me you're both stronger than most, but not by much," I told her. Renn's jaw clenched, yet she... seemed to not get more angry at that, but instead actually started to smile. As if she found such a thing positive, not a negative. "Strength is meaningless after a certain point, Renn," I then added.

Her eyebrow tilted in a way that made me smirk.

"Did you just think of slapping me again?" I asked her. She hadn't moved or shifted her arms, but she had definitely had that look on her face.

"I did," she smiled as she nodded.

"Just to warn you, I might start liking it," I warned her.

Renn blinked, and leaned back onto her heel away from me. Suddenly she wasn't as close anymore. I couldn't feel her hot breath now, which was too bad.

For a very... strangely comfortable moment, she gave me a steely look, and then sighed at me.

She had realized I had only been partly teasing her.

"If strength isn't everything... why are you teaching me this? Why did you have me spar with Brom?" she asked.

"For you, Renn," I whispered.

"Me?"

My hands finally moved. They moved upward, as if to pry her hands free from my shirt... but they hadn't needed to. She let my shirt go, so I could take her hands into my own.

"So you can survive, even without me," I said. She and I both ignored how my shirt became loose, thanks to being torn and stretched out.

Renn's eyes went wide, and this time even without a heavy blink a tear slid free. It slowly ran down the left side of her face, glistening the entire way.

Her hands trembled, but they weren't cold. They were warm. Blazingly warm.

I almost hated how... at place they felt in my own.

"Please, Renn. Become strong. Become wise. Shine as brilliantly as you can, for as long as you can. I care not if it's for the Society or for yourself... but just do so. Do it, since so many won't. Since so many can't," I told the woman who looked too precious for this world.

Another tear fell as she slowly nodded. Her fingers slithered within my grip, until they found my own. She coiled her hands into mine, squeezing them tightly as she held my gaze.

"Stand tall," She whispered.

I nodded. "Stand tall."

For those who couldn't.

Chapter 140: The Eastern Embassy

This place had an odd smell. The kind of scent that put me on edge. Not because it was necessarily bad, unnatural or foreboding... but simply because it was a smell I had never encountered before.

Was it strange food I'd never encountered before? Candles? The people themselves? Some kind of animal? A plant? The smell was... layered, beneath everything. Humans always stank. They smelled of old clothes. Sweat. Grime. Bad breath. Old sex. Yet here and now, mixed right under all of that stuff... was something I'd never smelled before.

I had no idea the source. Yet I wanted to know.

Too bad everyone here was speaking in a language I didn't understand.

Brandy and Lamp sat in front of me. They in turn were in front of an older woman who sat behind a large desk. She had odd marks on her body. I had thought they were moles or birthmarks, but as I had studied her I realized they were some kind of ink markings. She had tattooed odd circles and dots all over her body, it seemed. They didn't seem to have any real pattern or purpose, but they were definitely eye catching in their own way.

The old woman was speaking in the language of the eastern girls. They had been talking now for a good hour, and so far based off Brandy and Lamp's smiles and general happy sounding tones and the occasional giggles it seemed to be going well.

Lamp then nodded quickly, looking to Brandy to say something excitedly.

After a small exchange between Brandy and the old woman behind the desk, Brandy then turned to look at me. For the first time since we had entered this office. "They're willing to accept all thirty of them, Renn. There's even better news too, one of them has a sister here," Brandy said.

"A sister?" I stepped closer, putting my hand on the back of Lamp's chair. Lamp looked up at me and smiled, even though she didn't understand what was being said she could tell it was something good.

"Young Pram. Her older sister works here. She's not in today, but she'll be notified to come visit us after we leave," Brandy said.

Pram! One of the youngest women, but loud spoken. A good person, from what little I had been able to discern from her.

"That's... that's wonderful news," I said and looked to the old woman. She smiled knowingly; she spoke our language... though her accent was strong.

Brandy and the two eastern women went back to talking, and I squirmed a little. I wish I was able to learn languages quickly. I swore I was starting to pick up on certain words, but honestly whenever I thought I heard something I understood I lost all meaning to it a moment later. Maybe their words had different meanings for different things, when spoken in certain ways.

The language that the witch had taught me had been like that. That old language, where one word could mean ten different things depending on where it was in the sentence.

Wonder if I could even read or write in that language anymore. It's been decades since I had even thought about it.

"The Animalia Guild has a long history of having a good foundation of support for its people. I've never dealt directly with any of you before, but I'm glad to see that your reputation was well deserving," the old woman spoke to Brandy and myself... or well, maybe more so to me.

"This is the first time we've ever directly associated with your embassy as well. I'd apologize, but in all honesty our lack of needing to do so was probably a blessing in its own way," Brandy smoothly accepted the old woman's praise and returned it in kind.

"Indeed so. Yet nonetheless, I cannot express how deeply thankful I am that you'd help my sisters and daughters as you have. Would it be acceptable for one of our representatives to accompany Stapi tomorrow while she meets her sister?" The old woman asked.

Stapi. Pram's sister. I looked forward to meeting her... not just for obvious reasons, but also to see what she looked like. So many of the girls, like Lamp, looked sickly. Worn down. Scrawny. I wanted to see what Pram's sister looked like to as to compare how healthy they should be.

Brandy nodded, but did so slowly. "It would be fine. We only request you don't bring many people, nor allow news of this incident to spread just yet. After all the girls have yet to accept your conditions and until they do they're in our care," she said.

The old woman's eyes hardened a little, but not in a bad way. She seemed to become even more relaxed thanks to Brandy's words. "A fair condition," she nodded in agreement.

Brandy then said something to Lamp in her language, and for a small moment I was excluded again.

I watched as Lamp asked a question, and then frowned and pondered the answer given. Then the old woman added to that question, which made Lamp shake her head.

Lamp quickly said something, and then looked at Brandy. For a long moment there was silence... the kind of uncomfortable silence.

"Lamp?" I asked and leaned down a little. To see what was wrong.

The scarred woman glanced at me, and then glanced away. She then said something, and sighed.

Brandy chuckled, and then said something back.

What had been wrong? The old woman looked calm and collected, as always.

A few exchanges later and Brandy stood from her seat.

"Let's let Lamp walk around with her, we're going to go talk to the Lord of the East," Brandy said.

"Huh?" I stepped back from the chairs as Lamp also stood up.

Lamp and the old woman went into a light conversation as Brandy patted me on the arm and led me out of the room.

"Will she be okay?" I asked as we left. Lamp was focused on her conversation with the old woman, and didn't even glance at us as we left.

"Of course. She's just going to be shown around. There's quite a few of them living here, so she's going to see those people and talk to them. To judge if this place is as good as the old woman says it is," Brandy said as we entered the hallway.

"Is it?" I asked worriedly. It seemed... normal. When we had entered, and walked around the offices until now, it had all seemed rather standard. Not as clean or nice as the Animalia buildings, but not bad either. Plus I didn't smell death or anything nasty. There was that strange smell in the air, but it wasn't anything I recognized as something bad.

"Seems so. They offered them either jobs or help in returning home. Lamp believes most will choose to stay here," Brandy said as we walked down the hallway.

"You really think so?" I asked. Vim had said something similar. Was their homeland that bad?

"It's a long, dangerous journey home. And most of them had been sold, so it's not like they have anything to go back to," Brandy said plainly.

My stomach knotted as we rounded a corner. Of course Vim was right. He rarely wasn't... Rather, so far, he hadn't been once... yet I had honestly hoped he would have been this time.

Sold? By possibly their own families? Why? For what purpose?

Yet I knew the truth.

My own family would have done such a thing too, if we had been in such a culture.

Maybe that was why I found it so disgusting. So disheartening. It could have happened to me, so I hoped it didn't happen to anyone. I knew I'd sooner die than sell someone I considered family.

"Don't grow too upset, Renn. It's just the way the world is today. To them it's sad, but normal. A part of life," Brandy said.

"It shouldn't be," I whispered.

Brandy nodded but didn't voice her agreement.

Heading back down the same hallway we had entered from, I heard the far off sounds of people. Their voices were a mix of the language of their people, the language here, and other languages I didn't recognize.

"Are we meeting the King?" I asked Brandy.

"King? No. Just the Lord who owns and runs this place. A prominent figure in the east that is charitable. Turns out his daughters had suffered from slavery, and so he runs this place," Brandy said.

His daughters... "Had he been able to save them?" I asked.

"No."

Great.

Entering the main front entry, I followed Brandy through the open room to another hallway. The two women at the counter, and the two guards who stood at the nearby front door, all stared at us but didn't say anything as we passed through.

"Have you been here before?" I asked.

"No, why?" she asked.

She didn't act it. Maybe it was just...

Vim would have done the same. He walked around like he owned the place, even when he didn't. Maybe it was just something our kind did... Did I walk like that? I figured I didn't, but maybe...

After heading down the hallway Brandy and I found an open office. The room didn't have a door, and within were two men and a woman. The three of them were lightly talking as one of the men was writing something at a desk.

"Ah, the Animalia Representative," the woman noticed us first, and stood from her seat to greet Brandy.

"One of many. My name is Brandy," Brandy easily introduced herself. She stepped into the room and took the woman's hand, shaking it.

Following her into the room, I realized that strange smell was nearly nonexistent in this room. In fact it had grown... diluted since we had headed down this hallway. Maybe the smell was coming from deeper into the building.

"Brandy, yes. I've heard great tales of your negotiating tactics. I worry if I should actually shake your hand..." the man who had been writing stood as well, and although spoke with a firm tone had a gentle smile on his face.

"But that's what makes it so fun!" Brandy stepped away from the woman and went to the desk, to shake the hand of the man who stood behind it.

The woman and other man both stepped aside, and with nods at me actually left the room. As if dismissed.

"A pleasure to meet you Brandy. I'm Jurto. I'm dubbed the Lord of this Office, but the reality is I'm just the one who funds it the most," Jurto greeted Brandy.

"Money is king at the end of the day, so accept your crown Lord Jurto, even if begrudgingly!" Brandy chuckled as she went to sit in one of the chairs in front of his desk.

Jurto chuckled and then gestured to another chair. For me.

I obliged and sat. As I did, I noticed the chair was kind of... uncomfortable. It was wooden, and had a cushion, but the cushion was flat from use.

Glancing at the rest of the room, and the furniture... I realized most of it was old. Worn down. It wouldn't have been too strange to notice such a thing, except so far ever part of this place had seemed... worn down. Not so much cheap, just... frugal. There were no rugs. Only a few small paintings. Even fewer decorations.

A part of me worried over the girls because of it. What if this place didn't have the wherewithal to support them? Yet at the same time... it was better than them having fancy stuff. It meant they didn't waste their money frivolously.

"And please, no need for the Lord. I said it in mostly jest, I still have lands in the east but my son has taken full ownership of them. I'm now just an old man spending the wealth his ancestors have accumulated in the best way I possibly can," Jurto said.

"The lords of this town could learn from you then, I swear most of them have forgotten their names!" Brandy smiled as she spoke.

Jurto chuckled as he nodded and sat back down. "That's the truth. I still don't know the full names of most of those we work with here... I've lived here most my adult life, yet I still can't get used to it!"

The man then glanced at me, and seemed about to say something but Brandy spoke up. "I'm sure you've heard, but we have recently come into possession of some of your people," she said.

"Yes. I have," Jurto quickly looked away from me and nodded at her. "A surprise, but... honestly a happy one. I'm told you have over thirty women? How exactly did they come to rest under your roof?" he asked.

Oh? Did he actually care? His tone told me that he wasn't just making small talk, but actually accusing us.

"A recent venture in the sea. We purchased a ship, and well... they were in it," Brandy said.

Jurto blinked and sat forward. He crossed his arms upon his desk, and glanced at both of us. "Truly?" he asked.

I nodded as Brandy did. "Truly," Brandy said.

The man took a small breath and shook his head. "Is there.... anyway I could know what flag that had been flown on the ship you found them upon?" he asked softly.

"I'm afraid those details are beyond us. The branch that purchased the ship had done so in the north, and escorted the girls as quickly as possible to us here in Lumen. The ship itself is still docked out at sea near the Isles," Brandy said.

"Oh... wow... I sometimes forget how massive your guild actually is. Your branches must be that large, huh?" Jurto sat back a little, as if in awe. He seemed genuinely impressed, even though I had expected him to be bothered by Brandy's lack of providing him the information.

"Every perk has its downside," Brandy nodded.

"Isn't that the truth..." Jurto sighed.

"I'm sure the girls can give you the full story. We've had them under our care for about a week now, thanks to circumstances, and honestly if you'll forgive our crass perspective it is something that must come to an end. If it was only a few it would not be a problem, but there are thirty of them. Financially we could attribute it to a possible loss of investment, but being responsible for thirty individuals whom

we can barely communicate with is not the greatest situation for us to be in," Brandy spoke smoothly, and something told me it was very similar to what she had been telling the old woman earlier.

Jurto nodded slowly. "I could hardly think less of you for saying such a thing. The mere fact you didn't simply sell them or toss them overboard is beyond praiseworthy all on its own. Do you need us to take them in immediately? I'm sure we could make arrangements but..." Jurto seemed to relax a little more once again. Maybe Brandy being so matter of fact was actually working in our favor.

"We could house them for a short while longer if needed. I was told by Miss Tropil that a few of your members will come to our guild tomorrow to check on the girls. Hopefully at that time they'll be able to find out exactly what they need and will need going forward," Brandy said.

Jurto sat forward again, and I noticed the way his eyes focused on Brandy. "You're okay with us meeting them at your guild?" he asked.

"The Animalia Guild has nothing to hide, Sir Jurto," Brandy said smoothly.

I nodded. Maybe most guilds were the opposite. Maybe they were all much more secretive.

Of course... we did have a lot to hide. Things much more important than the mere living quarters of a few dozen young women. Which was likely why Brandy and the rest didn't hide such things from anyone. If we were so open doing business, then they'd never suspect us hiding such a serious secret in truth.

"I must say I am impressed. And also a little troubled," Jurto said as he sat back into his chair again.

"Troubled?" I asked.

He glanced at me, as if remembering I was here. "I wish we had been able to associate with your guild earlier than today. It would have been... much more pleasant than those we do associate with currently," he said.

"There's always today," Brandy said simply.

Jurto frowned, and then nodded.

Oh? Had Brandy just gotten something out of this? Or rather, the Society.

"That is the truth indeed... I'd like to abuse that open invitation, to be honest, but I shall hold myself back until we can verify those in your care... I hope you will not be offended by that," Jurto said.

"Hardly. I'd think less of you if you hadn't," Brandy said.

Jurto smiled knowingly and nodded. "Right? So many here in Lumen put their carts before the horse. A strange society... but I suppose in a place where most succeed that is to be expected."

Brandy nodded with a huff, agreeing with him. "Isn't that the truth. As a fellow merchant, I applaud initiative and drive but sometimes one must be more surefooted before running onto the ice!" Brandy said.

"Thin ice indeed!" Jurto laughed, and I realized by Brandy's sudden giggle and smirk that she had made some kind of joke. One that he had not only recognized, but found hilarious. Jurto began to chuckle and smile in a way that was very obviously comfortably.

Maybe it had been a joke from his region. I understood the phrase, but it didn't seem that funny to me.

"Well... If you'll forgive a little abuse of your good-will then, may I also accompany them tomorrow? To check on my people?" Jurto asked after the two calmed down.

"Sure. I'll just charge an entry fee," Brandy said.

Jurto paused a moment, and I glanced at the woman who had sounded as serious as Vim did when he spoke of his duty. Then Brandy brandished a huge smirk and laughed.

Jurto joined in the laughing again, but this time I could tell he wasn't as genuine in the emotion. Although still real, it was tempered and more even. His laughing also died down quickly.

Brandy then stood from her seat, so I quickly hurried to join her.

We were done already?

"Tomorrow, after verifying the girls you and I can sit and talk in depth," Brandy said.

Jurto quickly stood, and I noticed the man's quick hurry to take Brandy's hand again. He even thumped against the edge of his desk, as if in a sudden panic. "Yes. We shall," he spoke evenly though, his voice not betraying him.

Brandy nodded happily and then after another shake of the hand she turned around. Before she turned around completely, she then said something to him in their language.

The Lord of the Eastern Embassy froze in place, his eyes going wide. A long weird moment passed, and then he broke out into a huge grin and said something back to her. Suddenly his voice was thick of their accent, which was odd. I had not even noticed an accent from him earlier.

Brandy nodded at whatever he said, and then glanced at me. To let me know it was time to go.

Leaving the room with her, I turned and nodded to him as I left. The man smiled at me kindly and nodded back.

Heading back down the hallway, towards the entrance, I kept my tongue in check as long as I could... until I couldn't wait any longer.

"Did that go well?" I asked her.

"Very. I had heard he was... well... a simple man. But I hadn't realized he was genuine in his charity," Brandy said as we entered the front lobby.

A quick look around told me that Lamp wasn't here yet. She must still be with that old woman, Tripol, as Brandy had called her.

"You could tell that from that short meeting?" I asked her.

"Yes. The men here in Lumen, those with wealth... they all fall into one of only a few groups. He's one of the ones who spends his wealth without hesitation, for what he deems as something good. He may be shrewd in business, but when it comes to this place and everyone who he supports... I bet he's an open banknote with them," Brandy said softly.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I noted. She had sounded... upset over it, even if relieved.

She said nothing for a moment, and then nodded to the front door. They were closed now, and the guards were off in a corner talking quietly to one another. The sun was still bright beyond the windows, so it was obviously not time to close up... maybe they just closed the doors every so often on purpose.

Following Brandy outside, I flinched at the gust of wind. Ah. That was why.

"We'll stick around here until Lamp is ready," Brandy said as she looked around.

The Eastern Embassy wasn't on a main road. There was a road in front of its doors, but the road was one for feet. Not hooves or carts. To the right of the large building, and this road, was another. A main road, similar to the ones the Animalia building loomed over. I watched a carriage pass by on that road in the distance, but it seemed a little... empty. But I knew that was because I was comparing it to the roads in our neck of the city.

This place was far from the port, and the merchant sections. In fact it was nestled between two large churches, another embassy, and some kind of housing complex. Brandy had called them apartments.

"And the reason I might have sounded upset, Renn, is because I hate it when humans act so honest. It's unsettling," Brandy whispered finally.

"Hm? I thought you didn't mind humans," I said.

"I don't. But... in my experience, humans end up never being as good as they pretend to be. It might take years, decades, but eventually they'll break. Eventually their true desires corrupt their compassion. He seemed... genuine. He wore old clothes. Those weren't last season's but ones from many years ago," Brandy noted.

"The furniture in the building was old too," I said.

She nodded. "Yes. Most other places here in Lumen... even those that aren't meant to be profitable, like the churches or other support branches, are littered with wealth. For this embassy to be as... poor as it looks is actually surprising. A good surprise, yes, but still one that worries me. He's a wealthy man. He owns a fleet of trade ships, and three warships that protect them. He's not poor. Not even close," Brandy said.

I wasn't entirely sure what a fleet of ships, or warships, meant in terms of wealth and power... but from the way Brandy was talking about them, it was something remarkable. "So... should I be worried? You and Lamp had seemed... happy, earlier," I said.

"No... It's probably a useless worry. They had offered Lamp all that I had hoped they would have. A home. An offer to be taken home. Jobs if they stay here. Safe housing and the teaching of the language and culture here. They even have a relationship with the church here, to proselytize," Brandy said with a gesture to the building to our left. It was several stories taller than the one we had just left, and was decorated in crosses and statues of angels.

After examining it for a moment, I looked down and noticed someone.

Smiling at Vim, who was leaning up against a wall across the street, I wondered how long he had been there. He had not been at the Animalia building this morning to come with us, but I should have known he would have turned up eventually.

"Will they force the girls to... convert?" I asked Brandy.

"If they know what's good for them, yes. Pagans won't survive here, not happily," Brandy said coldly.

Hm... Was that her religious side speaking, or her merchant one? Or maybe her non-human side?

After a moment Brandy glanced at me, as if she had noticed my silence. For a small, weird and uncomfortable second... she and I stared at each other in silence.

"You disagree with me, don't you?" Brandy asked.

"Hm..." I wasn't sure what to say.

"It's okay. You can, I'll not be offended," Brandy said.

"Well, to be honest I'm not sure. I do agree with you... in this land, believing in the same religion would make it easier for them to be accepted. To make this place a home. Yet... forcing something like that on someone is unsettling. But, is that not what we do anyway? If one is born here, it's inevitable they become a member of the faith. Hard not to when it's seen as normal and expected," I said.

"Vim's tainting you. But I'll let that be and yell at him when I see him later," Brandy said with a sigh.

"You can yell at him now?" I offered. Had she not noticed?

Brandy tilted her head at me, and the obvious look of confusion told me she hadn't noticed at all. So I went ahead and pointed behind her.

She turned, right as Vim crossed the street and reached us.

"What the heck?" Brandy stood up a little straighter... in a way that I noticed made her breasts stick out a little more than usual.

What the heck indeed...!

"What?" Vim asked as he got closer.

"When'd you show up?" Brandy asked, sounding upset.

"I've been here. How'd it go? Did you sell Lamp already?" Vim asked as he glanced at me.

I blinked as our eyes met, and I noticed that although he didn't smile... his eyes did. They softened a little as they stared at me.

"She's being given a tour. So far Vim, it looks great. They're legitimate, maybe even too legit. This Lord Jurto also seems the genuine article. He looks like a common merchant, not a Lord," Brandy said with a shrug.

Vim frowned and then looked at me again. I nodded, to confirm it. "It does seem good. Lamp had seemed absolutely joyous," I said.

Brandy nodded, agreeing.

"Then shall we go get the rest of them?" Vim asked.

"Ah... no. One of the girls, Pram, has a sister here. They're going to bring the sister and the Lord and a few of his people are going to come to the company. To check and see, to verify our story basically," Brandy said.

Vim's eyes narrowed a little as he glanced to the nearby doors. We weren't directly in front of them, but they were close by. An open window or two would probably let anyone listen into our conversation.

"A sister... really?" Vim asked, finding that as amazing as I had.

"Isn't it?" I asked him.

He glanced at me, and I noticed Brandy smirk as she watched the way we glanced at each other.

"I'm actually glad. It will let us find out the truth of their embassy easily. We can just ask the sister. Plus them wanting to actually visit our own company is a good sign too. It means they want to actually see what we're doing. Not sure what they'd plan to do if they found out we were compliant in the slave trade, but maybe they have their own methods," Brandy said with a shrug.

"You did say warships," I said.

"Mine's nicer," Vim said.

Looking at him, I frowned as he smiled at me... as if he had a reason to be proud all of a sudden.

He had a warship?

"Speaking of ships, I hear you made Lawrence give that ship to some pirate? What was that about?" Brandy asked.

Blinking at the mention of pirates, I focused on Vim's face as he frowned. "That was part of my deal, yes. Ronaldo is a good kid, he'll be fine," Vim said.

"Giving a warship to a boy... A literal one. Not even a man yet," Brandy grumbled.

Vim shrugged. "What's a few years?"

"If that ship sinks or gets taken from us I'll be expecting a replacement," Brandy said stiffly. She even stuck her head up, as if to dare him to challenge her on the promise.

He frowned at her, and then glanced at me. "See Renn? That's what greed does to a simple creature. You give them a mighty gift, and all they do is complain," he said to me.

I hid my smile with a forced frown as Brandy shook her head at him. "Gift? More like headache! Who's going to hire that ship knowing the captain's a mere boy! I swear Vim you're..." she started to go off on him, but the door to the embassy opened.

Turning, we all watched Lamp hurry out. The way she ran out worried me, until I saw the giant smile on her face. Not even her scarred face could hinder it.

Accepting a hurried hug from her, I laughed as she went on a quick ramble in her language. I wasn't sure what she was saying, but I heard my name... and I definitely heard the pure joy in her voice.

Something great must have happened.

Standing there, I got a heartfelt squeeze from Lamp... and as she spoke quickly, I noticed Vim's expression. Through Lamp's hair, out of the corner of my eye... I saw the protector of the Society actually breathe a sigh of relief as he stared at us.

Smiling at him, as he smiled back, I nodded.

This was the real gift.