

Non Human 141

Chapter 141: To Gift A Weapon

She was being watched.

A part of me wanted to step away now. Right here, to go and grab whoever was targeting Renn... but there was something wrong.

It was a woman. Not a man.

"Pram will be so happy. I can't wait to tell her," Lamp said excitedly.

Brandy translated for her, since Lamp was more so talking to Renn than Brandy.

"I'm sure she will be. Did you meet her?" Renn asked.

Lamp shook her head as Brandy translated again, and I noticed the figure appear in the new alleyway we were walking past.

What the hell.

I looked away from the cloaked woman, and back to the three women in front of me. Renn was walking in the center, with Brandy and Lamp on either side. Listening to Brandy translate willingly was... something I probably would have enjoyed. If not for noticing that stalker again.

This was the second time I had seen them. Yet something told me it was not the second time they've been following her.

I would have expected them following myself or Brandy... or maybe even Lamp, an obvious foreigner to this land... but Renn?

Why Renn? Why not Brandy, one of the few higher ups of one of the greatest companies in Lumen?

And why did it take this long for me to notice?

We rounded a corner... and I waited until we crossed the street, and passed another dozen buildings before checking again.

One alley was empty. The next had junk, and someone rummaging through it... Then the third proved it.

The cloaked woman hurried between the alleyways, as to get ahead of us.

Was it possibly someone from the embassy? I had seen them for the first time when Renn and I had gone to that restaurant, after the visit to the cemetery... but that didn't mean they couldn't be a member of the Eastern Embassy.

Someone might have heard about the girls after all. Or seen them.

Hopefully that was all it was. Just someone from the embassy keeping tabs on the one who was supposed to be in charge of the eastern girls.

Yet...

"Still, I'm glad that everything is going well so far," Renn said.

Brandy nodded as she repeated her words for Lamp, who nodded quickly and reached over to take Renn's hand. "So far!" Lamp said as she drew closer to Renn.

Watching Renn, I noticed the way her hat shifted a little. I knew if I was able to see Renn's face I'd likely see a huge smile, and probably a blushing face.

Maybe I should worry for other reasons.

Renn was beautiful. And that was not just something I begrudgingly admitted. Even in a massive city like this, where the beautiful moved to in droves to find a better life amongst the capitalist riches, Renn was unique. Pretty enough to draw eyes, while also even-natured enough to make anyone who got a chance to talk to her swoon. Man or woman, it seemed.

Which was better? A spy from the Embassy, or some kind of weird pervert who Renn had ensorcelled with but a smile?

"Vim?"

I blinked and looked away from the empty alleyway we were walking past. The three women were looking back at me, staring at me.

"Hm?" What had I missed?

"What do you think?" Renn asked.

"Think what?" I asked back.

"About the Embassy," Brandy said. She sounded... off put. She was also staring at me with the most concern. Lamp and Renn didn't look that bothered, but Brandy did.

"So far it sounds good, no?"

Renn nodded, and Brandy sighed. "It does, doesn't it," Brandy said as she looked away from me.

"Are you okay with what is happening?" Lamp asked me.

"What's happening is what you and Renn want, that's all that matters," I told her.

Lamp gave me a weird smile, made weirder thanks to her stiff scars. Renn noticed it and frowned at her, and then her frown turned into a glare as she looked at me.

"What?" I asked Renn.

"What'd you say to her?" she asked. I noticed that Renn's hand squeezed Lamp's a little. Maybe not enough to hurt her, but enough to make Lamp look down at her hand. She had noticed the increase in pressure.

"She asked if I thought everything was going well. I said as long as you and she believe so, then yes it is," I told her honestly.

"The only honest man to walk the earth," Brandy said softly.

Renn glanced at her, and we had to come to a stop as a set of large wagons rolled by the street we needed to cross. They were empty, probably heading to a warehouse to be loaded.

While the wagons crossed... I noticed a figure out of the corner of my eye. I kept still, and didn't even turn my head, and glanced at the cloaked woman. She was hurrying across the street, doing her best to look normal and not out of place as she ran across the street before the wagons reached her.

She had meant to use the wagons to hide her from our sight.

I sighed as I planned on what to do next.

Now that I knew for sure she was stalking us, I needed to deal with it. But I had to do so carefully.

If it was really just some kind of employee or guard of the Eastern Embassy, my capture or slaughter of them would just ruin everything Brandy and Renn had accomplished so far.

It was a woman after all. I hadn't noticed before, but now that I saw them more clearly thanks to the daylight and seeing them so many more times I could tell by their frame and the way they ran. And

although there were plenty of female bandits, thieves and whatnot... she didn't seem intent on kidnapping or attacking us. Just following us. Or rather, following Renn.

Looking back at the women in front of me, who were all now back to talking amongst themselves... I decided to pull Renn aside once we were back and Brandy and Lamp were safe inside the Society building.

Renn had asked about the dangers of the alleys before. Maybe she had noticed something. Seen something, or done something. Maybe just by asking her a few questions I'd be able to discern the truth.

"Let's go," Brandy led Renn and Lamp across the street. I hesitated a moment as they crossed, and did my best to keep myself from charging into the alley that the cloaked woman had ran into.

I'd be able to catch her. Easily. But as much as I wanted to...

"Damn," I whispered as I stepped forward, following the women back to the company.

Half an hour later, and a few coins tax for crossing a district, we finally returned to the company. We entered through the depot, since it was near closing hours for the main lobby and bank, and they'd be busy at this time. Last minute deposits and business was always a rush here in Lumen.

"Renn," I stopped Renn from entering into the building alongside Brandy and Lamp.

She still held Lamp's hand, and now also Brandy's. Somehow that had happened without me noticing. My fault really, since I had instead focused on the cloaked woman who had followed us all the way back home.

"Vim?" Renn tilted her head at me, and I could see her thoughts on her face.

She wanted to go with them. To tell the girls the good news. Or well, to see their reactions upon hearing it from Brandy and Lamp, since she wasn't able to say it herself.

"I'll need to borrow you for a moment," I said.

"Borrow? Renting her isn't cheap, Vim," Brandy teased.

I gestured lightly in defeat, which made Renn smile and nod. "Okay. Tell Lamp I'll come see them soon," Renn said as she looked at Lamp and smiled apologetically.

Brandy explained the situation, which made Lamp smile at me. "Don't like sharing her, do you?" she said to me.

"He doesn't!" Brandy laughed.

"You're the ones not sharing right now," I said back.

The two burst into laughter as they released Renn, who quickly looked at all of us. She hadn't understood of course, yet she had a huge smile on her face all the same. She stepped away from them, giggling happily as she came to me.

Before Brandy and Lamp stepped into the building, Renn reached down and grabbed onto my right hand.

"Look'ter!" Brandy broke into another laugh as they went into the building, and I ignored Brandy guffawing all the way into the building, being pulled along by Lamp with a quirky smile.

"Why'd you grab my hand Renn?" I asked her. Had she understood? Surely she hadn't learned the language yet?

"You seemed jealous," she said with a smirk.

Taking a small breath, I felt an odd twitch run down my spine as I stared at the very obvious amusement on her face. She was mostly teasing me, yet a part of her was completely serious.

Since she already held my hand, I decided to use it. I pulled her along, over near a few empty carts. Ones that the workers should be getting ready to transport to the nearby warehouse where they were stored. They were empty, and without horses attached to them. I took Renn into the center of them, hiding us a little. A perfect place to talk quietly.

"What's wrong Vim?" Renn asked as I stared at one of the carts. It had a weird scratch on its side, near the wheel. Looked like an axe's work.

"That cart's been attacked," I said.

"Huh? Oh... Well, it does look it," she agreed. She didn't seem to find it as interesting as I did.

Looking away from it, to stop myself from wanting to go find out what had happened, I looked at Renn. She smiled up at me upon my fixation, and her hand squeezed my own... reminding me we were still holding hands.

"Did you notice?" I asked her.

"Your jealousy of Lamp? Yes. It's clear as day... and although not entirely unfounded, I must admit a little silly."

Blinking at her, I was about to say something but stopped myself.

Not entirely unfounded? What?

Renn giggled, most likely thanks to what she saw before her, so I simply sighed and let it be. "When I was gone, did anything happen Renn?" I asked her.

"Lots," she said.

"Anything that I should know?" I specified.

She frowned, and her hand squeezed my own again. "What happened, Vim?" she asked, and most of her earlier teasing had disappeared. She was now taking this seriously.

"I'm not sure yet... but there's a problem," I admitted.

"What kind?" she asked as she looked around. Her eyes fell on the damaged cart, and her eyes narrowed at it.

"Not the carts," I said.

"Oh." She seemed glad about that, for some reason.

"You asked before about the people in the alleys," I said.

She nodded. "You said to avoid them."

"Yes. Avoid them. Why did you ask about them?" I asked her.

"Well... I saw them. And just wanted to know what they were doing, and why. There seemed to be a lot of them, and none of them seemed to be working or doing anything... just kind of hanging out in the dark," she said.

I nodded. "Did you talk to any of them?"

She shook her head. "No? Not that I know of. I mean... I talked to a lot of people Vim, while you were gone. I worked at the bank for two days, and also in the depot. I talked to not just those who work here, but the customers. A lot of them. Hundreds of people," she said.

"Any of them noteworthy?"

She nodded. "The king was one. The man who gave me that gold coin as a tip. Then there were a few like that man who tried to flirt with me, the king scared him away though," she said.

I nodded. She had told me about them during our little dinner date. "Anyone else?" I asked.

Renn thought about it for a moment, and I knew better than to doubt her memory. That was one thing I could always rely upon, after all.

"Honestly not really. I... haven't really had any issues, Vim. Even the man who had annoyed me, by ignoring his advances, wasn't that big of a deal. It's not like I was ever in any danger, or felt like I should be," she said.

"Then why are you being followed?" I dared to ask her.

Renn blinked and looked up at me... and after she realized I was being serious she looked around, as if she'd suddenly see them.

She wouldn't. They hadn't entered the depot, and from what I could tell had ran off once we entered it.

"Am I?" she asked.

"I believe so."

"Why do you think that?" she asked seriously.

"They're not following me, or Brandy. I thought maybe it was Brandy... but they had followed us to the restaurant the other night, and I found them waiting for you at the Embassy. They hadn't followed me from the building, but instead had been waiting for you and the rest to exit the Embassy," I explained.

"Huh...? Really?"

I nodded.

"Sure they're following me, Vim? There's Lamp too," she said.

"I've thought of that. I'm hoping it is someone from the Eastern Embassy, checking you and the rest out. To see if we're abusing the girls or not," I said.

"Ah... would they do that?" she asked.

"They might. They do have a knight order, though I know nothing about it," I said.

"They do?" she asked, her hat shifted as she looked up at me. She had found that interesting.

"They do. Lawrence told me about them. They're supposedly rather dangerous," I said.

"Is... that a good thing? Should I not let Lamp and the others go there then?" she asked worriedly.

For a small moment I stared at the woman who was suddenly far more concerned with those human women than she herself.

Renn stared at me, waiting for my answer.

She really did value them. Or was it that she just... didn't worry? Maybe she thought she'd be fine, no matter what? Because of me.

"You should worry for yourself Renn, someone might be targeting you," I said softly.

The jaguar blinked, and suddenly her eyes were narrow. Her pupils became slits, becoming very inhuman looking... and then she gave me a toothy grin. "Worried? While I have you in my hands?" she asked as she lifted her hand; the one holding my own.

Taking a small breath, I sighed at her. "Careful Renn. You're strong, but you can still get hurt," I warned her.

Her smirk softly died, and our hands went back down as she lost her little moment of joy. "I know, Vim. I know full well how easily I can die. I have seven ways to prove it," she said.

"Seven? The seven sins?" I asked, wondering what that meant.

Renn tilted her head, and then that toothy grin returned as she suddenly giggled. "Seven sins! Haha!" she laughed, a hearty one that made me glance around to make sure no worker came by to see what all the fuss was about.

There weren't just humans here after all. Magdalena and Wynn worked in the depot... I smelled Wynn nearby, but hadn't seen him yet.

If he knew what was good for him he'd stay gone.

After a moment Renn's giggling died down into soft chuckles, and she reached up with her hand that held mine to wipe her eye free of happy tears. I let her move my hand around, even as she used the back of it to wipe her other eye.

"Seven sins..." she giggled and nodded. "In a way that's correct... But no, Vim. I mean seven family members. Seven people just like me. Just as strong. Just as astute. I know I can die, since I had watched all of them do so," Renn said gently.

Ah.

Her eyes went downward, to our hands. She had noticed that I had squeezed her hand a little tighter.

"Sorry," I apologized, hoping I hadn't hurt her.

"Hm... for making me laugh, or making me cry?" she asked.

"Both?" I wondered. She hadn't realized I was apologizing for the hand.

She nodded. "I suppose I can accept that. So... what do you want me to do? Or say? What should I do?" she asked me.

"As the protector, it is my job to protect you. However... if I overreact, and the observer is simply someone sent by that embassy, my actions might endanger what you are doing. It might... impede or even ban them from being allowed into the embassy," I told her.

"That'd be horrible," she said.

"Yet those humans are not worth losing you, or any other member. By all rights I should not even worry about them, and go find out immediately," I said.

A horse neighed nearby, and I noticed the many sounds of hooves as they drew closer. They had brought the horses to take these carts away.

Renn noticed a few moments after I, and smiled softly at me and then pulled me away, back out of the carts. Towards the door.

"Are you giving me the choice, Vim?" she asked me as she headed for the door.

"Will I regret giving it to you?" I asked her.

After all, that was the entire point. I was the protector, and I did my job... but I was not the arbiter. I was not the jury. I guarded, but I still had to get permission to do certain things.

Killing immediate dangers? Sure. But right now there was no proof that woman was a true danger. Not yet.

I mean... for all I knew it was just an admirer. I'd believe it, since I couldn't keep my eyes off her either... and if it was that bad for me, who knew what it was like for normal people.

Yet... what if Renn didn't accept my protection? What if she really did tell me no? That she didn't want my help? Like so many others?

How many of those I protected have refused my efforts? Refused my protection?

Many. And I had no choice but to abide. Even when they suffered because of it.

Trek was like that.

"If I asked you to find out?" she then asked.

"I'd go hunt them down now. I could probably still catch them if I left now," I said.

"What would you do once you caught them?" she asked.

"Well..."

We came to a stop before the door, and I watched as she hesitated before opening it. She glanced at me, and held my gaze for a moment.

"What if you found out they were from the embassy? And that they don't mean any harm, and were just investigating us?" she asked.

"I'd still have to kill them, Renn," I said softly.

"But why?"

"Who knows what they've seen while watching you. What if they noticed something they shouldn't?" I asked her.

"What if they didn't?"

I shook my head. "I can't think like that at this moment," I told her.

Stepping around her, which made my arm somewhat wrap around her since she still held my hand, I opened the door for her. To stop her from getting too emotionally vested in this conversation.

"If you tell me not to kill them on sight, I will accept that... but there will be a price for that," I told her.

"What kind of price?" she asked as I pushed her into the building. They were hooking the carts up nearby, and I was tired of the workers staring at us.

Stepping into the hallway, I closed the door behind us and was glad that I couldn't see or smell anyone nearby.

"I'll go see if I can find them. Then follow them. If they go back to the embassy... I'll accept that they're probably just checking on us. If they go elsewhere, I'll do what I need to," I said.

"How's that a price Vim? That's the best scenario I could ask for," she said.

"The price is that while I'm gone, you're going to be sitting right next to Brom and Brandy. Until I get back," I said.

"Oh. That's not much of a price either, Vim... I like them both," she said with a smile.

"Hm... You might change your mind later. Brom and Brandy can both become painfully overprotective when they put their mind to it," I said.

"I look forward to it," she said with a smirk.

Stepping down the hallway, I pulled her along. "Then first let's go to my room," I said.

"Oh? Shouldn't you hurry?"

"I should. But Brom will need his gift if I'm to leave him to protection duty," I said.

"His... Oh..." Renn's hand squeezed my own as she realized what I meant.

"I'll give him the one I've been carrying Renn, not yours," I told her as we headed up the stairs.

"I figured... but I was still hoping you wouldn't have," she said honestly.

"Why's that?"

"We won't match if you do," she said softly.

I paused before opening the Societies door, and looked back at the woman who was smiling softly at me.

"That's what you're upset over?" I asked her.

"Yes and no... I was more so upset that you had promised him that spear in the first place. As if you didn't even want me to win, or have a chance to," she said quickly.

"Renn..." I sighed as I opened the metal door. I held it open for her as she entered after me.

"What? What was I suppose to think? You offered me a wonderful prize, then went and offered him a more serious one. I mean... a bath, Vim! Just a bath! It's not like I was asking for your bed," she said.

"For your information I had planned to give him the spears when I made them," I told her.

Renn paused, and her hand squeezed me to a stop.

I paused again, and knew I should probably not let her keep me any longer. That woman had been a human, but if I didn't hurry even I'd lose her scent.

"Spears?" she asked oddly.

Hm? Oh. Plural.

"Yes. I had planned to give them both. One for him, the other for his sister. She's the better warrior of the two, Renn," I told her.

Renn groaned and released a deep sigh as she shook her head. "You give and take, I swear," she mumbled.

Chuckling at her, I renewed my tug on her to get to my room. I needed to hand her the spear, and then hand her off to Brom swiftly. To catch that woman.

Plus...

Glancing back at the woman who was sniveling at me, mumbling under her breath about how I was stealing her prized treasures and gifts... I found that I couldn't help myself.

"You don't need permission to climb into my bed, by the way."

Renn's face remained red all the way until I left her in Brom's capable hands.

Chapter 142: His Scent; Missing

Vim wasn't back yet.

Walking behind Brom, I found my eyes once again glaring at the spear resting on his shoulder. It was angled upward, and he held it in his right hand comfortably. It was a little... annoying to see that he not only looked so familiar with a spear, but even made it look like it suited him.

He had a huge smile on his face too, still basking in the ether of his joy.

Watching Vim hand it to him had been... enjoyable... I had to admit that. Brom had smiled so greatly, it was as if he was a little boy receiving his first gift from his father.

Plus...

Brom's thumb tapped the spear, giving it a slight ding. He seemed to enjoy that sound. And didn't seem bothered doing it... but it should have. His thumb was black and blue.

I really had hurt him.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I hoped that spear was enough of an apology.

"Ah, Brom!" he and I turned around to see who had shouted his name. Sofia hurried over, her heels made odd sounds on the stone floor as she approached.

"Sofia," I smiled at her as she nodded at me and then gave Brom a weird look.

"The heck is that?" she asked him.

"Hm? Oh, nothing special..." Brom blushed a little as he answered, which made me forget most of my upset feelings about it.

"Sure it isn't... Gerald wants you. What are you doing Renn? I thought you were going to the embassy?" Sofia asked.

"Been and back again. The embassy is sending someone tomorrow to check the girls out, then they'll start taking them in over the next few days," I told her.

"Ah... good. They don't stink, but they're noisy," Sofia said with a sigh.

"They don't stink to you?" Brom asked, sounding actually surprised.

"Not really? But unlike you I deal with humans up close, and I don't stab them," Sofia said with a huff.

"I don't stab them..." Brom grumbled as he rolled the spear in his palm a little, making it spin.

Sofia huffed at him then looked at me. "Want to have lunch Renn?" she asked.

"She has to stick with me until Vim gets back," Brom said.

I nodded. "I do."

She raised an eyebrow at me, and then looked at Brom. I could tell by her expression she wanted to hear the full story.

Brom noticed and only shrugged.

Which wasn't because he wouldn't talk about it in front of me... but because he himself didn't know the reason. Vim had not mentioned it, only that he wasn't supposed to let me out of his sight until Vim got back.

"Well... fine. Later then," Sofia nodded.

"Sure," I agreed.

"Good. Merit wants to have dinner anyway," she said.

"Dinner it is," I agreed again.

Sofia smiled and nodded, and hurried back down the hall.

"Then let's go see Gerald," Brom said.

"Do you have to... handle humans often, Brom?" I asked as I followed him.

"Sometimes. A few dozen times a year, I think," he said lightly.

Jeez... Maybe Sofia had a point.

Following him to Gerald's office, we found his door open and him waiting inside. He was standing next to his desk, staring down at some kind of...

Stepping around Brom to go up to the desk, I frowned at the small green plant.

It had spikes. "What is it?" I asked.

"A cactus. They're common in deserts, but not so much here," Gerald said.

Leaning towards it, I stared at the little golden... spikes looking things upon it. Somewhat similar to the thorns on all the bushes in the northern forests I was from. The main body of the plant looked hard, and the spikes sharp. "They're almost like needles," I said.

"They are basically. They're the spines, technically their leaves. It was a gift," Gerald explained.

"From?" Brom asked. He had remained at the door, resting up against the door's frame as if to make sure no one would enter behind him.

"Well... that's the issue. It was given to me by a southern merchant. One that just left. I summoned you Brom, just in case," Gerald said.

"Oh?" Brom stepped out of the office, to glance up and down the hallway. He must not have seen anything.

"Why would you need Brom because of a gift?" I asked.

"The southerners give cactuses as gifts to those they're declaring war to," Gerald said simply.

"You're kidding me..." I suddenly found it much more interesting.

"Not at all. We had to turn down his offer of contract for the ship Vim brought back. He wasn't too happy about it," Gerald said as he went to sit down.

Before he did, he glanced at me and then Brom. "Why does he have your spear?" Gerald asked.

"That's not mine," I said.

"It's mine! Vim made it for me!" Brom said with a smile. He stepped back into the office, to show it off.

Gerald groaned as he slowly sat down, shaking his head.

"I know right? I lost the bet, so he won," I said with a sigh.

"It was fair!" Brom said quickly, as if worried I'd slander him.

"It was..." I admitted.

Gerald looked at me, and I noticed the pure... uneasiness in his expression. I smiled apologetically to him... at least, I tried to.

"Well I'd like you to go make sure the southern merchant has left the premises Brom. Technically we're not actually at war, it is more of an economic one... but I want you to make sure he doesn't do anything foolish as he leaves," Gerald said.

"Ah... Come on then Renn," Brom nodded.

"Hm? Why must she go with you?" Gerald asked.

"Vim wants me to keep her in my sight until he gets back," Brom said without any hesitation.

Gerald groaned, and then slid the cactus forward. "Take it Renn. My gift to you, take it and go," he said.

"Declaring war on me?" I laughed as I went to pick it up. The small fist sized thing was in a pot, made out of... clay? Tapping it with a fingernail told me it was some kind of hardened earth, not metal.

"Declare war on you? Doing so would be the same as declaring war on Vim, and not even a Monarch is that stupid," Gerald complained.

As I picked up the pokey item I hesitated a moment. Gerald sounded far too serious.

"Well... thank you for this, all the same. Do I plant it?" I asked.

"You can. It doesn't need as much water as normal plants. Ask Merit, she's our local gardener," Gerald said as I went to follow Brom out. We should really go check on that merchant.

"Merit," I nodded as Brom and I left the office.

"When's Vim coming back by the way?" Gerald asked.

"Who knows?" Brom shrugged without a care.

"Oh... Jeez," Gerald went quiet as we left his office behind, heading for the lobby.

"Why'd he sound so... worried about that?" I asked Brom.

"Feels bad for you probably," Brom said.

For me? "Why?"

"Well... who knows how long I'll have to watch you? He probably just worries you'll get annoyed over it," Brom said with a shrug.

Annoyed over it... "Are you saying that you'd... watch me, even if Vim was gone for a long time?" I asked.

He nodded. "Obviously?"

Oh. Wow. "So... what if he's gone for a year or so?" I asked.

"Then he's gone? Don't worry, I'll earn this spear I promise," Brom nodded, confident.

"Great," I mumbled. Brom was a likable sort, but having to spend every waking moment with him for such a long time would probably annoy me indeed.

Following Brom to the main lobby, I chose to stay on the second floor balcony while Brom went downstairs to talk to his sister Reatti. Leaning over the railing, to look down onto the main lobby, I listened in as he asked her about the southern merchant, and if he had left peacefully or not. She was sitting at the center desk, to guide those who came to do business with the guild. She was basically the first person any newcomer to our company met.

It had been... odd to learn she had such an important job, but Vim had mentioned she was the better warrior between her brother and herself. Which somehow made her position much more believable.

She wasn't just there to keep an eye on everyone, but to be another layer of defense for the Society.

"The man who stunk of sand left some time ago. The only thing he did wrong was not take you with him back to the desert," Reatti told him.

"Careful, sis," Brom smirked as he tapped the butt of his spear against the stone floor.

Reatti went still in her seat, and I noticed that Brom actually went still too. The two stared at one another for a moment, and then Brom finally coughed and looked away. "Well... keep an eye out for the desert merchant. He gifted Gerald a cactus," he said.

"Oh? Maybe he'll give it to me so I can shove it somewhere," Reatti said.

"Want it Reatti?" I asked.

Most the room didn't hear me, but Brom and Reatti had. They both turned to look at me, and then Reatti smirked at me. "Oh!" she giggled as I held out the cactus, to show her I had it.

Brom shook his head as he stepped away from the counter, to head back upstairs to me. "As prickly as your personality," he mumbled.

"Better to be poked than prodded!" Reatti countered.

"And you wonder why no one'll ever prod you!" Brom shouted back as he climbed back up the stairs.

The rest of the room glanced at them as Reatti stood from her seat, nearly growling at him... but she coughed and sat back down as Brom returned upstairs.

"That one was a little sharp," I told him.

"She needs to hear it sometimes," Brom said confidently.

Did she?

Following Brom back down the hallway, towards Gerald's office, I wondered if Brom and his sister had ever gone to blows. Sometimes their teasing didn't seem that bad, but then other times one of them seemed to get genuinely upset.

"Have you two ever gotten into fights with each other?" I asked.

"Me and Reatti...? Just three times," he said.

"Oh?" Three times? And they were nearly as old as I was? "That's not bad," I said.

"Hm... not sure about that. Last time Vim had to... well..." Brom went quiet, and I realized I had probably stepped into conversational territory he wasn't comfortable traveling with me in.

"Did you win at least?" I asked him.

Brom's spear spun a little on his shoulder as his shoulders fidgeted up and down... as if he had wanted to shrug, but had failed to do so properly.

Vim had mentioned she was the better warrior. Which seemed... rather strange to me.

Reatti was short. Smaller than me, even. Though I suppose that didn't mean anything for us. After all was I not stronger than most grown men too?

Passing Gerald's office, I noticed he was busy writing something. He didn't even realize we had walked by.

"Where we going now?" I asked.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to drop you off at the houses. So that I can make the rounds, though I guess you could join me if you'd like," Brom said.

"Oh? You'd actually take your eyes off me?" I asked.

"Well... you should be more than safe in the houses. No human can get into those doors. Plus Merit is in there too," Brom said.

Merit again. This wasn't the first time someone had mentioned her in such a way.

I know I had just thought that it was... wrong to assume someone's abilities by their appearance, but Merit looked like a genuine child. She didn't look much older than Lomi had.

Yet based off Brom's tone, he'd trust Merit to protect me without fault.

Studying the man I was following, I stared at his... lack of ear. The scar was rigid, and looked like it hadn't been burnt off but rather torn off... and violently at that.

While heading for the society house doors, I wondered what Vim had found out. Had it been someone from the embassy? Someone else? He had seemed... concerned. Not too terribly concerned, but concerned all the same.

I knew after all that if it had been something very drastic and serious, he would have acted immediately. Without asking me for my input. Which he honestly hadn't really taken into account too much, to be honest. I had been okay with him finding out, as long as he made sure it wasn't someone from the embassy first... but I knew he probably would have done such a thing anyway no matter what I had told him to do.

"Do you know anything about this uh... ship and pirate, that Vim brought into the society?" I asked Brom, changing my mind's focus. I knew there was no point wondering or worrying until Vim got back.

"Just that the ship was payment for whatever Vim did. But part of the deal was to give command of the ship to the son. He's actually been tasked with sailing another ship, to prove himself. Especially since the warship was damaged, and is being repaired," Brom said.

"Huh..." seems like there was a lot more to the story than anyone had told me.

Although a good thing that Lamp and her people would be back with their own kind soon, it was also regrettable. It meant I didn't have the time to learn their language and find out from the source themselves what had happened.

I had kind of tried to ask, but it was difficult when I could only ask yes or no questions.

"Lawrence would know most of it, if not Brandy or Gerald," Brom said as we rounded a corner and the metal door came into sight.

"Right," I nodded. I'd need to ask them later. Brandy wouldn't really work... she seemed willing to answer stuff, but was always busy. She'd answer a few things then have to run off or change topics, because she was always doing something important.

Lawrence would work. Gerald seemed to keep secrets. Plus...

Lawrence and Vim were friends. Seemed their relationship was something similar to the one Vim had with Nebl. So I needed to spend some time with him, or rather more time. I had only worked in his office twice so far.

Honestly ever since the eastern girls showed up I'd been... lacking in the whole working department. I wonder if anyone in the society was bothered with that? Or maybe they didn't mind at all? After all it's only been a week or so... and to most of our kind that seemed inconsequential.

Even to me, honestly... it had only been lately, since finding the society, that I'd come to start actually noticing the passing of days again.

"Don't leave without me, Renn. If you really need to leave for some reason ask someone to come get me," Brom said as he opened the door for me.

I nodded as I entered. "Sure. If someone from the embassy comes, please let me know," I asked.

"Sure," he nodded as he shut the door behind me.

Once alone, I frowned and wondered why this was okay. I mean... he had a point that no human could come in here. The door was simply too heavy for them. Yet at the same time...

He had been so serious about keeping an eye on me all this time, yet had so willingly and calmly looked away from me. Either he trusted me, so as I'd not wander out without his permission or Vim's orders weren't taken as seriously as I had thought they would be.

Heading down the hall, I knew I should probably head down to the first floor where the kitchens and open rooms were at. To see if anyone was there. Sofia had invited me to dinner, so I'd eventually have to head down there to join her and possibly anyone else in cooking.

Brom had said Merit was here too... maybe I should ask her to spar with me later. It'd let me find out if everyone was being serious, or if it was some kind of running joke amongst them all.

She was a guard, though... so maybe it wasn't a joke at all.

Heading for my room, I decided to change clothes. I had worn a dress to go to the embassy, and honestly it was a little uncomfortable. The seams were prickly.

Glancing down at the... cactus, in my hands, I wondered if it'd be okay on my windowsill in my room for a few days.

Another reason to find Merit.

First though, a different outfit.

Reaching my room, I paused a moment and glanced at the door across from my own.

It was open.

"Vim?" I asked if he was there as he went to pushing his door open.

The room inside was dark, and cold. As if it hadn't been entered in ages, it felt... empty. Too empty. More empty than it actually looked.

There was no one inside, but...

My eyes narrowed as I smelled something odd. A scent that didn't belong in Vim's room.

Looking down the hall, I wondered who it had been. Vim and I had just been here, a few hours ago. We had come here to get his spear, to give it to Brom. And this smell hadn't been in his room then.

I stepped into Vim's room and took a deep breath. It didn't take long for me to recognize the scent.

Herra.

Shifting on my feet, I looked around and wondered what she had been doing. And why had she left the door open? If Vim had been in the room with her, he would have closed the door behind him upon leaving.

He always closed the door to his room when he left it. He never locked it, but he always closed it.

"Really..." I mumbled as I looked at the weapons littering his bed. His sword, some smaller knives, and the bow and quiver were all laid against each other.

Hm... I'd think that maybe Herra had come in here to check the weapons out, but they all seemed... unbothered. I had actually been the one to lay them out on his bed like this. When we had come here to get the spear for Brom, Vim had carelessly let them all clank onto of each other as he unfastened the leather pouch which had held them all. I hadn't liked it, and sorted them carefully while he rambled on about how I needed to stay near Brom or Brandy until he got back.

Not only did the weapons not look bothered... neither did anything else. His bed was as crisp and clean as ever, implying he still had yet to sleep in it, and the rest of the room didn't have anything to bother either. Just a small chest near the wall, which I knew had extra pillows and blankets in it. I knew they'd also be untouched, at least by Vim.

Right before leaving his room, I hesitated.

The room smelled.

It smelled of the society. It was clean, but I could smell... age. Wear. The stones here were old. Some were nearly a hundred years old, and you could see and smell it in certain places. The smells weren't horrible, but they were obvious. Then of course there was the smell of mold and rotted wood occasionally... most rooms were safe from those stenchs, but some of these un-lived in ones stunk of it. Vim's room had stunk when we first moved in, but yet eventually stopped doing so. And not because Vim had cleaned it up or anything.

Vim didn't just not have a scent... he eliminated the scents around him. That bed in his room, although he had not slept in it yet, he had sat on it and near it enough now that I could no longer smell the old cotton within the mattress. His weird lack of smell had overpowered and diluted the other smells.

Just like the weapons he carried. Before we had started this trip here, at the smithy, those weapons had smelled of metal. Metal and polish.

Yet now I couldn't smell them even if I was right in front of them. And that was because he had carried them for days.

Grabbing the handle to his bedroom door, I took another few breaths of his room.

Yes. It smelled now. I not only smelled Herra, I could now once again smell some of the room itself. Some of the wood from the bed's frame. The stone, and the mold from the old wooden beams in the ceiling.

Scents that I shouldn't be able to smell, thanks to Vim.

Had Herra somehow... bothered, whatever Vim did to the smells around him? How did that even work?

If it was just someone coming in and bothering stuff, why didn't I do that then? I touched and clung to Vim all the time, so why didn't his clothes smell?

And that couldn't work either, could it. Back at the Cathedral, we had slept in the same bed for several days. Enough time that the bed had begun to smell like me, and not anything else. Yet my own smell lingered, even when he had slept in the bed the entire time.

"Or am I simply able to smell myself because it was my own smell?" I asked myself.

"What the heck are you talking about?"

I jumped, nearly dropping my cactus as I turned to find no one... then looked down, and found the white hair on the small girl.

"Hi Merit," I greeted her.

"Hi yourself. What are you doing?" she asked as she stepped up to me, to peer into the room. She frowned at the sight of it. "Ah, Vim's room is it? Is he here?" she asked as she looked for him.

"No."

"Then what are you doing? Please don't tell me you're like the others who try to pounce on him. That's so weird," Merit complained.

"It is weird," I agreed.

"Oh? You agree? You also think he's ugly?" Merit asked, excitedly.

"Well... Vim is a little plain looking," I admitted.

"He is! Why don't they see it?" Merit asked as I stepped out into the hallway. I left Vim's door open for a moment, and then pointed into it.

"It was open when I got back. I was going to close it, but then I smelled..." I stopped talking, and realized I probably shouldn't say it. Not only was it personal, but I could be horribly misunderstanding something.

"Smelled...?" Merit stepped towards the door, and then stuck her head into it. I watched as she took a few small breaths, and then sighed. "Herra..."

Merit shook her head as she grabbed the door's handle and shut it firmly, and then she actually wiped her hand on her shirt as if she had just touched something nasty.

"I had heard she tried stuff like that... but people were serious, weren't they?" I asked.

"Very. Her, Magda and Reatti all try. One time all three of them tried to sneak in at the same time. They broke out into a huge fight, Vim actually jumped out of the window and ran away that time," Merit said.

"Vim would do that," I nodded.

"Can't blame him. Those three must be broken in the head to even want him, so of course he'd run away from them," she nodded too, firmly.

I smiled at her, and then remembered I wanted to ask her about the thing I held. Lowering it a little, but not so much that she'd be offended, I showed her my new cactus.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked her.

"A succulent," she said.

"Huh? I thought it was a cactus..." I frowned at the thing. Brom and Gerald, and even Reatti had seemed to think so too.

"It is. Where'd you get it? They're rare here," she said. She reached out and poked it, a little roughly too. The tiny little needle spikes made noises as they bounced off her finger.

"Gerald gave it to me. He got it from some kind of southern merchant... he said it was his way of declaring war," I said.

"Ah... yes. You gift a cactus to imply that you must prepare for a long drought. In merchant terms it'd be the same as saying start saving your coins, for you'll not get anymore for a long time," Merit said.

"Seems... silly. It's kind of pretty. Too pretty to mean something bad," I said.

"This one will flower too... though maybe not for a long time. You can either put it in a proper pot, or plant it upstairs on the roof in the garden. I'll get you what you need later," Merit nodded, pleased with the idea.

"That'd be wonderful," I said.

Merit smiled up at me, and I smiled back at her.

Then her face scrunched up, and then she sneezed. I blinked as I watched her rub her nose, and groaned.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I'm allergic to flowers," she complained.

"You... you are?" I pulled the cactus away from her.

"Yes. Not sure why, but they make me sneeze a lot," she sniffed, yet didn't sound too upset over it.

"Yet... you work in the garden?" I asked. At least Gerald had said so.

"Yep, I do. When I'm not being a guard," she said.

"But you're allergic to them...?" I worriedly asked.

"I am. I sneeze like crazy on the roof too," she said.

"I... I see..." I wasn't really sure what to think of that. She was allergic to them, to the point of sneezing that badly... yet still enjoyed them?

So odd.

Merit sneezed again, and I noticed this time it had sounded kind of cute.

"Least it sounds cute when you do it," I said.

"Does it?" she asked with a tilt of her head.

I nodded.

"That sucks," she complained.

"Not really..." I said softly.

Merit took a deep breath, sniffing the entire time. "I've never heard Vim sneeze before," Merit said.

"Oh? Hm..." I quickly thought about it. "Me either," I said.

"See? What kind of thing doesn't sneeze? I'm telling you he's not real," she said.

"He's..." I hesitated again. "Not real?" I asked after a moment to gather my thoughts.

"Definitely... anyway, I came up here to get you so you can help me cook. We have a dinner date," she said.

"Yes. We do. I was going to change first," I said with a point to my room.

"Is that your room?" she asked as she stepped around me to my door.

Without even asking, Merit opened the door to my bedroom.

I didn't stop her as she peered into it, and wouldn't have stopped her even if she had stepped into it too. Yet she didn't, she simply looked in.

"Hm... I'm surprised," she said.

"Of?" I asked as I peered into the room above her. It was easy to do since she was so small.

"I kind of figured I'd smell Vim in here, but lo' and behold I don't. You two must not be as close as some of them think," Merit said.

My ears twitched under my hat, and some of the hairs in them getting caught on the pins reminded me I needed to take it off. It was growing itchy. "Uh... you can smell Vim?" I asked, choosing to focus on that and not the other important thing she had said.

"No. Of course not. But you can smell him if you pay attention to what you can and can't smell," she said.

Stepping around her to go into my room, I paused for a tiny moment as I entered my room and put the... cactus succulent thing onto my windowsill. "Can and can't smell," I said as I thought about it.

"Think about it. He has no scent, and erases other ones. If you pay attention you can use that to... well... smell him, in a way," she said as if it was obvious.

Right. It was. Actually, it really was.

I nodded as I slowly undid the pins in my hat. "You're very right," I said.

"Of course I am. Vim stinks. Also, is that an easel?" she asked with a point at the thing standing in the center of the room.

"It is," I said. I was glad that I had moved the painting aside. A blank canvas was lying on my bed, about to be placed onto it. I had this morning woken up a little earlier than I had planned and was going to start my next painting... but Brandy had knocked on my door before I could actually get at it.

The painting of the village and the cross that Vim wanted from me was sitting up against the wall opposing the desk. It was at an angle that Merit couldn't see it, especially so thanks to her height.

"You like to paint?" she asked.

"I do, sometimes," I said. Honestly I didn't really enjoy the art itself... but I had a few things I wanted to paint. A few memories, that I really wanted to see with my own eyes and not just my heart.

"Any good at it?" Merit asked as I tossed my hat aside and went to my dresser, to dig out some of the looser guild clothes that were a little too casual to wear in front of humans.

"Not really sure..." I said honestly.

"If you are I'd like you to paint me something," she said.

"Oh? Sure?"

Getting undressed, I ignored the odd silence from Merit until it became... a little too odd. Turning to look at her, I found her staring at me as I slowly slid some trousers on.

Tilting my head at her, I wondered what was wrong.

"Merit?" I said her name gently.

"How old are you Renn?" she asked softly.

"Almost two hundred years old, I think. I could be off, though," I said.

Merit took a very deep breath, and then sighed. "I see..."

"Uh..."

I noticed the way she looked away, not at herself though... but at the floor.

Glancing down at my own body, I wondered what she was actually focused on. It couldn't be my breasts, since they weren't that big honestly. It was why I had been so bothered to learn that Vim had found larger ones more attractive. And my butt wasn't much better, either... especially since my tail kind of made it look funny... and...

"I wasn't jealous of your body Renn, but rather your boldness."

Turning to look at the young looking girl, I found her smiling gently at me. She looked like a child, but had the smile of an old woman.

"Boldness..." I whispered.

She nodded. "You had no shame just now. Though that might be because you don't really think about me much, or maybe because you see me as a friend. But... I'd not strip before you. At least, not without feeling horribly ashamed as I did so," she said with a very honest tone.

"Ah... well... I hadn't stripped nude, Merit," I said. I lifted the little undergarment a little, to show it off.

"I know. Yet still. Could you have done that in front of Vim?" she asked me.

I nodded. Could I? I have. Several times.

Merit groaned and shook her head, but not in a way that told me she was upset or bothered with me... rather she seemed bothered with herself.

"Do you... want to be able to strip in front of people?" I asked her.

"Huh? No... I just... well..." Merit shifted, and then she turned to glance down the hallway. After a moment she stepped into my room, and although didn't close the door all the way behind her she did nearly shut it. "I'm a knife-fish, Renn," she then said with a whisper.

"A..." I frowned and shook my head. What was that?

"A glass knifefish," she said with a nod.

Slowly nodding, I wondered what it was. A fish, supposedly... but glass? Knife? Was that why she was so little? And why her hair was white?

"I uh... I'm kind of..." she shifted and then sighed. Then she pointed at her chest. "My uh... skin, is a little transparent. It makes me look weird," she said.

"Transparent?" I tried to see what she meant, but I couldn't. Merit looked... normal? Other than her white hair, and the obvious fact she looked like a child.

"My chest and stomach and stuff. You can kind of see some... organs and bones and stuff. It looks weird," she said as she looked away.

"Huh..." I frowned as I tried to imagine it. Bones and organs? Really...

"Also when I get embarrassed I get all... staticky, like so," she reached up, and ruffled her hair. As she did, I heard little pops and saw small flashes of blue and white.

"I noticed that before. Like a spark, when Vim tapped you on the head," I said.

"Well, yeah. He's embarrassing," she mumbled.

Smiling softly at her, I resisted the urge to go over to her and try to mimic what Vim had done. She'd probably not appreciate it.

"Tell you what, after our dinner why don't you take a bath with me? My bath is big enough," I offered.

Merit's eyes focused on me, and then narrowed at me. "Didn't you hear me? I get embarrassed when I..." she stopped talking as I continued to smile patiently at her.

A long few moments passed, and then she sighed and nodded. "Okay. Sure. But don't tell Sofia," she said.

"Really? Cool. And I promise... though surely you're not embarrassed with her? You've known her forever," I said.

"You must not really understand what it means to be embarrassed," she mumbled.

"I do. Vim makes my face burn so hot sometimes I want to run back to the snowy mountains," I said as I went to putting on the rest of my clothes.

"That's not... Well... Hm..." Merit seemed to give up as I giggled and finished with my dressing.

"Well?" I asked her as I showed off my outfit.

"You look like someone Brom would try to flirt with," she said.

"You're kidding..." I suddenly lost interest in the outfit.

"Hm. He likes to pretend to be into pretty town girls. It's a front, he actually likes real old women," she said.

"Real old women...?" I asked, suddenly feeling a little better about the stuff I was wearing.

"Old. He's gross too. Come on, Sofia will be off soon, and she'll complain if she finds me in your room," Merit said as she turned to leave.

"Why would she do that?" I asked as I went to follow her.

"I'm supposed to keep an eye on you... but I usually never go into anyone else's room. Sofia's been trying to get me into her room for years. She'd be upset," Merit said.

Ah... that was why she came to find me. The main reason, at least. Wonder who had told her that she needed to keep an eye on me.

"You could just go into her room, Merit," I said as we left my own. I closed the door behind me, and we headed for the stairs.

"No I can't Renn. Her rooms full of plants and trees, I'd be slobbering snot for a month," she complained.

Smiling at her reason, I happily joined Merit as we went to cook dinner.

Vim wasn't back yet, so I might as well enjoy the moment while I could... since he might return with bad news.

Chapter 143: Lamp

The alleyway was dark, and not just because it was night. The buildings on either side of me were conjoined from the third floor up to their roofs. The alley felt more like a weird hallway than not, thanks to how they had built them.

Stepping over a weird looking puddle, I tried to plan my next move.

I had failed to track down the woman.

I'd blame my own lack of urgency, by not chasing her down as quickly as possible... but there was something strange going on. When I had left the Animalia Company, only a short time later I had thought I had found her. Only a few blocks away, heading towards the port. I had seen who I had thought was her at a distance, in an alley much like the one I was walking through now.

Yet by the time I got closer to her, she was gone.

Which wasn't possible. There were alleys, and backways, and of course buildings aplenty to hide in... but one moment I was following her down a large alley, then the next she was gone. She had crossed a small street, ran into a smaller alley, and by the time I had picked up my pace to enter the alley behind her she had disappeared.

Disappeared completely. I wasn't hunting her on the level I'd hunt others, but I had still been in pursuit. I had still wanted to know who she was and why she was stalking Renn. So it wasn't like I had been leisurely strolling...

Rounding a corner, I tried to focus through the stink of the port. There were far too many smells here to actually track her down by smell alone, but I was hoping I'd do so anyway. She had been heading towards the port, so odds were her place of operations was nearby. Or at least whoever she reported to was here.

It was around here that I had seen her the first time too. At that restaurant Renn and I had gone to, with the violinist. That place was only a few streets down. I was making a typical sweep along the port, methodically looking and trying to find traces of her scent.

Yet the last few hours had yielded no results. Not only had I not found her, I hadn't smelled her since I lost her.

I should have been more attentive. I should have simply ran forward and grabbed her, uncaring of the repercussions.

The worst part was... even though I had her in my sights for a good while, I really didn't know much about her. The color of her hair, her face, or stature. I had no idea about any of that thanks to the thick cloak she had worn. For all I knew she wasn't even a woman but a young boy who was just thin and gangly.

It wasn't often I failed such a simple task as this... but I knew another chance would show itself. They always did.

Sighing as I left the dark alley and stepped out onto the street, I ignored a tall man who went still upon my exit. I walked past him, and ignored the very concerned look on his face as I did. He must have thought I was a mugger, thanks to the way I had stepped out of the alley.

The man sighed in relief as I headed back towards the company.

Wish I could sigh in relief.

Slowing my pace, since most of the traffic walking around was doing so leisurely, I rolled my shoulder and decided to grab them the next time. Those embassy people would come tomorrow, I bet some of them will leave with them and Renn will of course join them. I'll grab that stalker then.

Crossing a street, I studied a pair of men on the corner. They were laughing at something said, and looked like dock workers. They weren't wearing the Animalia guild logo, but they wore common work clothes. There was a chance they were employees of the company, just simply wearing whatever common garb they had at the moment.

Brandy was trying so hard to make the company something more than it was. Putting the logo everywhere, making everyone in different stations wear different clothes and follow different dress codes.

Pointless. You did such things in the military, not a business. Or at least, you didn't do that in this era. The people here wouldn't, and didn't understand it. The idea of a brand logo was beyond them, since it didn't exist.

Most people in this era didn't even realize that their coins half the time had different crests and names upon them. All they knew were the colors and weights. And how much bread a single one would buy.

But who could blame anyone? Life was hard enough as it was. When surviving the cold, and keeping food on your families table took all your attention as it was why notice or care about anything else?

Did Renn even realize how gentle she and the rest of them were? Even the members of our society, who didn't care for humans, were willing to help them out to a certain extent. A rarity... and not just because they weren't human themselves.

People weren't kind in this era. Even the religious had their trepidation's about helping strangers.

I rounded a large warehouse, and the Animalia Company building came into sight. The thing was large, with flat walls and tall roofs, made in such a way to hide the inside roof-courtyards from sight. Other than the pointy and tall roof walls, the rest of the building was plain and simple. Unimposing, and without much decoration.

We had built it that way on purpose. I had built it that way on purpose.

Yet I knew soon that type of lifestyle choice would come to an end. Brandy and Gerald were changing the way they operated. Changing how deeply they got involved in the cities politics, and how much money they made.

I sighed as I crossed the street and headed for the main entrance, since the depots were now all locked up and shuttered.

The main entrance was the only doors open this late, and would only be open for a short while longer. They were the last to close, as the human workers slowly made their way out and home. Rarely did anyone actually enter the building during these hours.

Sometimes I'd sneak in through the rooftops, but I wasn't in the mood to clamber up the side of the depot like I did. I had never gotten caught doing it, but sometimes being... normal was best.

"Normal," I scoffed. Sure. I was totally normal. What kind of normal man returned home after half a day of searching for some would-be kidnapper or stalker?

What kind of protector failed to actually catch the bastard he was chasing?

"This one," I told myself as I stepped up to the main door. It was closed, but there were lights inside, and voices.

There were half a dozen doors, all very large and usually propped open, but I knew only the two in the center would be unlocked. I pushed one open slowly, being careful just in case a human was just behind it. They got hurt easily.

Entering the main lobby, I glanced around at the few who were in it... and was a little surprised to find Brom amongst the group, yet no Renn.

Brom noticed my entrance first, and perked up. He hurried over; carrying the spear I had gifted him earlier today, and smiled as I shut the door behind me. "Welcome back, Vim!" he said happily.

"Hm... did you lose her already?" I asked him.

"Huh? Oh... no. Renn is in the houses, with my sister and Merit," he said softly.

I noted he spoke softly not out of shame, but necessity. The rest of the group in the lobby, mostly women who wore clerk uniforms, were all human.

"She better be," was all I said as I stepped past him and headed for the hallway hidden behind the stairwells.

Brom groaned quietly as I left him in the lobby, and realized I probably shouldn't have said that so... directly.

Walking past the group of clerks, I ignored their stares as they all went silent as I walked past them. By the time I rounded the stairs and went into the hallway I heard them asking Brom who I were and what I was doing.

I didn't care about hearing his answer as I headed for the Societies doors.

Merit and Reatti? Reatti I understood... but I hadn't expected her to become close with Merit. But why should I be surprised? Renn tried to become friends with everyone, why wouldn't she also try to befriend someone who used to hunt our kind down?

Opening the Society door, I made sure to close it with care. The bottom floor ones were always a little worn, thanks to being the ones most opened and closed. It was why I tried to not use them often.

"Then why did I just use it?" I asked myself as I headed down the hall, to the kitchen and eating areas.

Ignoring the answer to that question, I peered into the kitchens I passed. I could smell lingering scents of food and cleaning supplies. They had not just cooked recently, but had cleaned up too.

Following the sounds of voices, I noticed the deeper voice of Wynn and... As I peered around an open door, I saw the few sitting at a table nearby. They all had cups in their hands, and were talking lightly. Something about some rumor of the war to the south they had overheard from someone.

Wynn and Magdalena were nodding in agreement to what Jasna had just said. Pierre and Reatti were shaking their heads, however.

Reatti, but not Renn or Merit.

Stepping past the door, I ignored the mention of my name being spoken lightly. Reatti had noticed me.

I didn't find Renn in any of the other rooms, so I headed upstairs... then to the next. Heading for her room, I wondered how long Brom had abandoned her into Merit's hands.

It really wasn't that big a deal. It wasn't like Renn was actually in danger, just yet anyway... and Merit, well...

Renn was safer with Merit than she was Brom and Reatti, if it really came to it.

As I approached her room, and my own, I slowed a little as I heard light chatting.

Renn's happy voice somehow pierced the walls and her heavy bedroom door... I could just barely make out what she was saying, which told me most others wouldn't have been able to do so... but it wasn't her voice that I found interesting.

"You think so too?" Merit asked Renn her opinion, and I came to a stop right before her bedroom door.

They weren't actually in her bedroom, by the sound of it... their voices had a very slight echo. They were in the bathroom and...

Sure enough, I heard the sound of faint splashing.

They were taking a bath together.

"I do! How could I not when he says such things!" Renn said, a little loudly.

Frowning, I tried to imagine it.

Renn and Merit? Was anyone else in there too? Surely not. I didn't hear anyone else.

Merit was actually... Wait, no... Renn's tub was one that was recessed into the floor. There was a good chance they were just soaking their feet in hot water. It was chilly, and damp in the air thanks to the storm that was about to hit the port.

I nodded at myself. Yes. They weren't actually bathing together; they were just sitting and soaking their feet.

Surely.

After all if they were actually in the bath together... then...

Turning around, to leave before I got curious enough to actually open the door and check, I headed down the hall to the metal door at the other side of the housing area.

Exiting the Society area, I closed the door and headed towards the eastern section. To the apartment block and storage.

Time to check on the eastern girls, I guess.

Renn was fine. Especially if she had somehow been able to make Merit comfortable enough to bathe with her.

How had she done it?

I'd need to tell Renn later how serious Merit was... and what kind of friendship she had just earned, however she had earned it.

Merit used to kill those who had seen her naked, after all.

Heading downstairs, I walked along the dark hallways until I found another door. A metal one, but not as heavy and not as locked as the ones we used for the society housing area. I opened it quietly, and made sure it closed quietly too.

Walking down the hallway, it didn't take long until I started to hear the loud talking of many women. Most of the conversations that I could make out amongst all the chatter were positive, and full of excitement.

Slowing to a stop near the entrance to one of the community rooms, I listened into a small group.

"Pram is so lucky," one said.

"She is? More like we are. If it really is Pram's sister, that means we can trust her to tell us the truth. No more guessing," another said.

"Does it matter? Whether it's here or there we're still better off than we had been," a third gave her outlook. A couple others chimed in to agree with that statement.

I nodded; glad that at least a few seemed to understand their predicament.

They didn't have much a choice in the matter in the first place... so they should be thankful for what was happening, and that it wasn't that bad.

But... that wasn't what people like them wanted to hear. Even if it was reality. And not just because they were humans, either.

Stepping past the room, I went deeper into the apartment building. I passed a few bedrooms which were empty, but then another that had a sleeping woman inside it. She was curled up under her blankets, like a child.

"Vim?"

Nodding at Lamp, who stepped out of her room, I approached her slowly. To take in the rooms and people I passed.

They all seemed relatively fine, if anything a little excited. Pretty much most of them were awake, even though they should be getting ready for bed. They must be anxious over tomorrow.

"How's it going Lamp?" I asked as I stepped up to the scarred woman.

She smiled up at me, and I noticed the way she glanced around... as if to make sure no one else came over. I'd wonder why she'd do such a thing, but she gave me the answer as she reached over to grab me by the wrist. She pulled me into one of the larger rooms, one with a single table and a few chairs. For some reason it was cold.

"Where's your girl? She usually comes to say goodnight around this time," she asked.

"Occupied. There's stuff that needs to be handled before your embassy folk show up tomorrow," I told her.

Lamp nodded, acting as if that made perfect sense. Well... maybe to her it did.

"Brandy was here earlier. Telling me that she wants to be there when Pram meets her sister," Lamp said.

"She probably just wants to make sure it all goes well," I said.

She nodded and then stepped over to one of the chairs, as to sit in it.

Once she was sitting, she smiled and gestured to the chair next to her.

With a small sigh I accepted her invitation, and pulled the chair a little away from the table... so I could sit in front of her. It let me put my back to the wall, and not the door to the room. Not that I needed to worry about anyone here sneaking up on me, but it was just habit.

"You're an odd man, Vim," she said with a smile as I sat in front of her.

"Why do you think so?" I asked.

"Just... the way you sat down. Did you not want to sit to my left?" she asked as she shifted a little.

"Oh... no, Lamp. I didn't want to put my back to the door. It had nothing to do with you," I said gently.

She had thought I hadn't wanted to sit staring at her scarred face... not that her right side was much better, but it was a little more normal than her left.

"Your back... do you worry one of us would attack you?" she asked, suddenly smiling again. Although I wasn't too happy to have her talk about this, it was better than her thinking I had been discomforted by her looks.

"No... it's just habit. Something I've acquired over a lifetime," I told her.

Lamp giggled, and it somehow reminded me of Renn. They didn't have the same giggle, or laugh, so why had it done so?

"I wonder who learned their kindness first. You or Renn," she wondered.

"I'm older than her," I said.

"Still, something tells me you were a brute before you met her," she said and nodded to herself, as if it was obvious.

Frowning at her, I wondered why she thought such a thing. I mean... there was no way to tell her that I had only known Renn for a short time, but even if I did I doubted she'd believe it.

"Mind if we change topics?" I asked her.

She tilted her head as she nodded lightly.

"Do your people plan to accept the embassy's offer?" I asked her.

"Yes. If we can. Though... I'm not sure how many will choose to risk the journey home. I think we'll all end up staying here, or maybe just going to one of the other embassies closer. Tripol said there are a few nearby, ones only a few weeks away and it's at a city where most people speak our language," she said.

I nodded. "That'd be a good place if you chose to stay in their employ," I said.

Lamp slowly nodded, and then glanced at the door. I slowly followed her gaze, and we watched as two heads ducked out of sight. Their bare feet slapped against the stone floor as they hurried away back to their rooms, giggling.

"Some are younger than you think," Lamp whispered.

"All of you are younger than you think," I said gently.

"Hmm... makes me want to prove to you I'm not as young as I look," she said softly.

Please don't try.

Looking back at her, I wanted to sigh at her warm smile... and the small gleam in her eyes. That wasn't the kind of look I wanted to see right now. If we had been alone, hundreds of miles from anyone... maybe a hundred or so years ago...

"Has Brandy or Renn talked with you about another choice?" I asked her.

Lamp blinked, and the little lights of passion in her eyes died down a little. "Another choice?" she asked.

They hadn't yet? Though... I had told Renn to do so after the embassy. And it wasn't like I had given her much time to do so. Plus she might have chosen to not offer it either.

"What do you plan to do?" I asked her.

"Well... probably work at the embassy, if I can. I have no home to go back to... and spending another year, or so, on a ship or wagon doesn't sound too fun anymore," she said.

A year. Had they been slaves that long? It was a miracle they not only had survived, but that their minds had as well. Maybe that was why she desired me. Hard to fault her for that then.

"What did you think of the embassy?" I asked her.

Lamp shrugged. "Seems... fine? Normal, I guess. Everyone there seemed happy enough, but I did notice most of the people there were older... and a few were like me," she said lightly, and tapped her left cheek. Where one of her scars was curling the deepest into her cheek.

"People unable or unwilling to venture home," I said, understanding what she meant.

She nodded. "It was a little obvious."

"There's nothing wrong with not risking such a perilous journey. As you so obviously know, they're not always fun or quick," I said.

"Obviously... but a few of the girls do have homes to go back to. A few have husbands, or children. Though... who knows if any of them would even take them back even if they made it home," she said.

She spoke callously, but honestly. It seemed she and the rest had long talked and pondered such things... probably even before I had found them in those cages.

"Would you do me a favor?" I asked her.

"Anything," she said. Rather quickly too.

"I expect Renn to ask you, and the others, if they wish to stay here. In the employ of our company. The Animalia Guild," I said.

Lamp blinked, but said nothing.

"If you do you'll live well, be paid well, and be taught the local language of course. You won't have to stay here in these apartments either, you'll be given real living quarters. But, at the same time... it's probably the same as what your people's embassy is offering. Plus they have a bunch of your own kind there, so that's something we don't have to offer," I said.

"You have other things to offer, though," she said. I was about to continue, but stopped. She nodded after a moment, and then gulped. "Like yourself. Or Renn. Or Brandy. And the others who have helped us out. People that are... good, even if we're different. Even if we can't speak to one another," she added.

"Renn and I will not always be here. We're travelers," I warned her.

"I know... Renn and I have had many conversations, Vim. Though they're odd ones," she smiled as she thought of them.

"Though... we would return occasionally. And there are others here, that you've not met, who are like Renn and myself. People you could learn to trust and be friends with, just as much as us," I said to her. As I spoke I glanced at the door again, expecting to see more eavesdropping girls... but instead it was just one of the younger ones walking by. She smiled and waved, but didn't stick around.

She nodded. "I've seen them."

Oh? Wonder who she saw?

"Though I'm not sure how many are like you two... so far I've seen three at least, not including Brandy," she said as she thought about it.

My wandering eyes smoothly went back to Lamp, and I stared hard into her eyes as she looked upward in thought, and then nodded. "Yeah. Three. A little girl with white hair, that Lawrence, and I think that man who drove that carriage too," she said.

Parts of my shirt became a little... tighter upon my body as I realized what she was talking about.

"Lamp?" I asked softly.

She blinked, and then looked down at me. "Hm? Am I wrong? The girl is obviously one, she speaks like my grandmother. I don't know the words she says, but her tone and the way her eyes stare at me make

it real obvious... and Lawrence spoke like you, in that old accent from generations ago," Lamp lifted a finger to point and wave, as if proud to declare how obvious it was that we weren't normal.

Spoke like me. She must mean from the ceremony. From the funeral, where we laid that girl to rest. Maybe one of the rites he had preached upon burying her had been something archaic.

The cold room became much colder, and what had been just a simple and happy conversation suddenly became very serious.

I kept myself from moving. I gripped my knees, so I wouldn't shoot my hand out to grab her by the throat.

"You've noticed?" I asked her softly.

"Well... I've been starring at you and her, so..." Lamp blushed a little as she shyly smiled and looked away, not realizing how serious this suddenly had become.

While staring at her happy face, I felt a bile and disgust begin to form in my stomach.

This woman had noticed we weren't normal. That we weren't human. And instead of hating us or wanting to kill us or tell anyone... she instead found herself more attracted to us all the same. Or maybe simply overlooked it entirely.

Hell she was blushing and smiling in such a way that it'd make one think she found it a positive, not a negative at all.

"Plus, I mean... Vim... you're way too strong. I watched you lift that anchor all on your own!" Lamp ended all doubt of what she meant, and did so with a smirk.

"Right..." I said softly.

My hands slowly released my knees, and I began to breathe again. Slowly, at first.

Lamp smiled warmly as she nodded, and didn't seem to be bothered at all. It made me wonder how long it had been since I had met someone like her. How long had it been since I myself had met a human who realized what we were, and not cry out in terror or run away? Or run to the church?

Maybe it was because they were pagans. Or maybe her life she's lived until this point. It had obviously not been a kind one at all. I could only imagine how much pain and suffering she's had to endure, even from her youth.

She saw the unnatural, and instead of running or fearing it she instead embraced it and found it... well... something special. Like a warm fire to rest at, after a long walk in the cold rain.

Even though she had suffered terribly to get to this point... Lamp, even if I didn't want to admit it, was someone perfectly suited to be given the opportunity to join the Society.

"Would you... come with me, Lamp?" I asked her.

"Hm? Please don't invite me to your bed Vim... I really would like it, but Renn would hate me if I did and I value her over you and," Lamp quickly began to blunder through a gentle rejection, which made me shake my head and scoff.

"She'd not hate you, but me!" I said.

"True, but still! It'd be very awkward! Just think, me trying to talk to her and her trying to talk to me... then she'd stab you, and then get her little wooden board and..." Lamp started giggling at the thought.

"Stab me she would..." I said softly.

She'd do much worse if I broke your neck too.

Slowly standing, I chuckled as Lamp went to giggling away, her thoughts must have gone even further and whatever they had found had been hilarious to her.

Smiling down at her, I realized I'd not be able to kill her. Not yet, anyway.

"I'd like you to meet Renn... to show you something about her," I told her.

"Hm? Meet..." Lamp slowly stopped her giggling, and then looked up at me and went quiet.

I held out my hand... and after staring at it for a moment she nodded.

She took it, and I smiled gently at the young, scarred woman who was doing all she could to be positive in one of the darkest moments of her life. She was the embodiment of so many of our members. She'd be able to fit in and live amongst us, because the rest of the society would see themselves in her.

"Just me?" she asked softly.

To think I had come here just to occupy my time, while Renn bathed with Merit. Hopefully by now they'd be done.

"For now. Maybe the others can come later," I said.

"Sure. But I swear Vim, if you take me to a bed I'll hop into it and you'll have to deal with the consequences," she warned.

"Duly noted," I accepted.

Chapter 144: Friends and a Vim

Staring at Lamp, who was in turn staring at me... I shifted a little on my chair.

I felt uncomfortable, as if I was itchy all over. Yet it wasn't out of fear but just... concern. Worry.

Yet at the same time... I felt warm. And not just because I had soaked in a hot bath for a good hour with Merit.

Lamp said something, and out of the corner of my eye I watched Merit and Vim stare at her as she spoke.

Merit then responded, and I blinked to look at her. Finding out she spoke their language was a surprise, but somehow the oddest part was the voice she had when she spoke it. She didn't sound... young, like she did when speaking in the language I knew. The guttural tones of Lamp's language gave Merit a deeper tone, and thus made her sound older... as if she was a grown woman.

Vim said something in return, which made Lamp smile softly. Then Vim looked at me and nodded.

"She'd like to touch your ears, Renn," Vim said.

"Oh. Yes. Of course," I stood from my seat, which made Lamp's smile grow massively. She leaned forward as I went to kneeling in front of her chair; I decided to just... crouch down onto my knees, since I expected this to take a moment.

Lamp was very, very gentle with me as she touched my right ear. I felt her skinny fingers poke me at first, and then find a little confidence as they begun to brush my ears with a gentle pat. As if I was some kind of cat.

The scarred woman giggled as she touched me, and then said something that made Merit scoff... then she too stepped forward, and suddenly my left ear was being touched too. This time with smaller hands, like a child's. Her hands were cold which was odd; we had just soaked in a hot bath.

"Merit?" I asked.

"What? If you'll let some human touch them why can't I?" she complained.

Well... that was true...

"I've never got to touch them like that," Vim complained.

"You touch her and I'll shock you so bad that you'll not be able to touch metal for a week," Merit said swiftly.

Vim sighed, and I wondered what the heck she meant. Shock?

"You've touched my ears before Vim," I said.

"What?" Merit's hand left my ear, and between my low hanging hair and bangs I saw her turn on him, as if to yell.

"What?" Vim said back, sounding defiant... as if daring Merit to do something about it.

I giggled as Merit began to mumble about going back to her old ways and...

Then Lamp said something, and pulled her hand back from my head.

"She's done Renn. She's flabbergasted, and isn't sure what to think," Merit translated for me.

Oh. Looking up, I frowned at Lamp's expression. It wasn't... a bad one, but that happy smile was gone now.

Had my ears not been... good enough?

Lamp then turned to Merit and asked something. The question made Merit's eye twitch, and a tiny little spark of light popped near her forehead.

Vim leaned forward, putting his hand on the back of the chair that Lamp sat upon, and said something gently. Lamp nodded quickly as Vim spoke.

"Hmph," Merit turned her head, and then stepped away... she stepped over to one of the other chairs and tables, and sat upon it with a huff.

"What'd she ask?" I whispered to Vim.

"She wanted to touch Merit's hair too," Vim said.

"Not gonna happen," Merit complained.

"Didn't say you had to, Merit," Vim said to her.

"Renn can touch it, but no one else," she nodded, making the decision.

"Ah..." I kind of wanted to touch it. It looked like normal hair, but seemed... denser. And her bangs and other parts looked clumped together oddly too. I had also noticed, while in the bath, that her hair hadn't gotten wet like normal hair did. It was... more like the fur on my ears or tail. It got weird when wet. I bet it felt odd. But it'd be rude to touch it when Lamp wasn't allowed to. I'd do it later.

Lamp then reached a hand out, smiling gently at me as she said something along with my name. I realized what she was trying to do, and accepted her help. I took her hand and she somewhat pulled me up off the ground, back to my feet.

"Thanks," I said to her, and then wondered what to say or do now.

"Well Merit?" Vim asked.

"Well what? She's fine. She's not scared, nor bothered. That's a pagan for you," she said from her seat.

"She might start worshipping us, however," Vim warned.

Merit shrugged. "Better than the alternative."

"I'd rather not be worshiped," I noted.

"Yes... I don't need you becoming a saint either," Vim agreed.

"Oh... for once we agree on something," Merit said.

Lamp smiled as she turned her head, following us and our conversation. She couldn't understand of course, but it looked like she was trying to.

"Would you ask Lamp how she noticed we weren't human?" I asked Vim.

"Hm? She noticed my strength at first, Renn. I had hauled up an anchor on the ship, alone. I had not thought any of them were watching, but obviously she had been," he said to me.

"Then... how'd she notice I wasn't one?" I asked.

He blinked, and Merit snickered in amusement as Vim sighed and looked at Lamp. He asked her the question, and after a few back-and-forths Vim nodded and looked back at me. "Your eyes. The pupils. She noticed that they're oddly shaped sometimes," Vim said.

Oh... That wasn't good was it? It meant others would notice too if I stuck around a singular place a lot and...

Merit then giggled, and tapped the table with her small hand. It would have sounded like a slap had it been a normal sized hand. "Don't lie!" she laughed.

"I didn't," Vim glared at her.

"Huh? What?" I asked worriedly. Vim had lied? Surely not...

"Lamp saw the way your eyes narrow when you look at Vim. And only him. It's why she noticed, since she finds you both very attractive," Merit giggled as she spoke, making her already odd sounding voice even odder.

Wait...

Glancing at Vim, he sighed as he nodded. "You focus a little... when you look at something you find interesting," he said.

I blushed, and then Lamp and Merit both erupted into laughter.

Vim shook his head, but had a smile all the same.

"Oh? What's this? Merit laughing, a blushing Renn and... a human? One of the eastern girls?" Lawrence walked into the room, frowning as he took the sight in.

"Don't lie either! You've been standing out there for half an hour!" Merit shouted at him.

"I have not!" Lawrence argued back.

"True. It's only been about ten minutes," Vim said.

"Vim!" Lawrence groaned, but smiled gently afterward.

Lamp blinked as she looked around, and I felt a little bad for her. Wish I could speak her language... That was really the only reason Vim and Merit weren't talking in hers, so that I could understand.

Lawrence then walked up, and frowned as he focused on her. He studied her, and Lamp went absolutely still as she stared back into his eyes.

Then Lawrence said something, in her language. The two talked by themselves for a moment as we all watched them.

Lawrence was staring at her rather closely...

Then Lawrence nodded as he stepped back. "I see. So you plan to grant her asylum," Lawrence said.

"That's the plan," Merit said.

"Asylum?" I asked. Hopefully that wasn't anything bad.

"He means invite her to the Society, Renn," Vim told me.

"Oh. Yes. Yes," I said with a quick nod of the head.

"All of them or just her?" Lawrence asked.

"For now just her. Maybe the others later, after some careful selection," Vim said.

I wanted to protest, but knew better. I mean... what if some left for home before we gave them the chance? The poor girls would miss out on living with us, and being safe. Yet at the same time, Vim was right. Too many too quickly was dangerous. We needed to make sure we could trust them.

"Well... they'd be better than that foolish pirate of yours, at least. If we can get enough of them, they'd be quite useful in the archives and as auditors," Lawrence said.

"Wouldn't do much as guards, but yes... they'd be useful in a few ways," Merit agreed.

"For even you to agree... What'd Vim do, offer one of his legs?" Lawrence asked.

"Who'd want that?" Merit nearly spat at the thought.

"You could stand on them, you'd become normal height for once," Vim suggested.

Merit glared at him as Lawrence chuckled, then said something else to Lamp.

Lamp pointed at me, and then the two spoke some more, then laughed at each other.

"Is he teasing me?" I asked.

"Only slightly," Merit said.

I frowned, but wasn't too offended. If anything it was a good sign... if Lawrence, who seemed to be an older and more prominent member here was willing to indulge the idea of letting Lamp into the Society then I could accept a little teasing as the price for it.

Lawrence chuckled as he stepped away, and then gestured for Vim to follow him. The two men stepped away, heading for the hallway. Hopefully he wasn't pulling Vim aside as to tell him he was against it, or worse...

"Don't worry. He's just going to ask for permission to go get Gerald and the others," Merit said.

"Oh... yes... right. They all need to check, huh," I said.

"Well... kind of," Merit sighed as she hopped off the chair. It was a real hop, thanks to the height difference between her and the chair.

She walked over to Lamp, and the two went to talking to one another. I watched as Lamp smiled calmly while talking to Merit... it looked almost as if Lamp was doing her best to not get too excited. She seemed to be having a blast. Which was odd... you'd think she'd be worried, or concerned... but maybe she knew Vim, and thus me and the rest, wouldn't hurt her.

It had been... surprising to have Vim knock on my door, here in the Societies house area, and for Lamp to be standing right next to him. She had waved happily at me, which made me panic at first... I had thought maybe something had happened.

Not just with Lamp and the other girls... but Vim himself.

He had left to track down someone who had been supposedly following me, after all. Someone he thought might have been from the embassy.

I had worried he had found them, and found they had indeed been from the embassy... and had thus brought Lamp to me. I had no idea why he would have done such a thing, but it had been... a shock to say the least.

"Renn, she's a little thirsty. Would you go get her something to drink for me?" Merit asked.

"Oh? Yeah, sure," I nodded as I stepped away towards the hallway. The kitchens weren't far, just a few doors down from here.

As I left, I heard Merit and Lamp go into a rather deep conversation. One that made Lamp's smile become a more serious expression.

Hopefully Merit wasn't being too mean.

Hurrying to the kitchen, I paused a moment before another doorway. One that led to another visiting area. With chairs and couches, all near a fireplace. Vim and Lawrence were standing in front of the unlit fireplace, talking quietly.

I decided to let them be as I went back to my task. I hurried, but at the same time intentionally took my time. Merit had probably wanted to ask a few things in private.

These kitchens had frozen rooms. Ice rooms. Large storage places, that were so cold it made me want to run away from them... but it was where all the good stuff was hidden. Behind the wall of ice was tasty drinks and food and...

Daring the frozen door, I flinched upon touching the handle. It was a little hard to open, thanks to how cold the handle was, but I got it open. Quickly entering, I left the door open for just a moment as I went to find the metal cups lining one of the shelves near the door.

Grabbing a few of the cups, I had to kind of pull them off the rack shelves, thanks to them having gotten somewhat frozen to them. They were horribly cold in my hands, and the entire place was freezing too.

I wasn't sure how it was so cold, since I hadn't dared going too deep into the room of ice yet. I feared the door closing behind me somehow, since there was no handle on the inside as to open it. Why they had made it this way was beyond me, but it made me very conscious as I...

Turning around with the cups, I nearly yelped when it went dark. I huffed as I stared at Vim, who was staring at me with a funny face. He was standing in the doorway, blocking most the light. "What scared you?" he asked as he held out his hands.

I gave him the cups, and glared at him. "You. I thought the door closed or something," I said... then pushed him out of the ice room, and out of my way. So I could get out too.

"Hmph," Vim stepped aside as I went to closing the door. I once again flinched as I had to turn the frozen handle, to lock it closed.

"Why's the handle freeze too? And why isn't there a handle inside? What if someone gets locked in?" I asked.

"There is a handle, Renn. It's not on the door, but next to it. On the wall, there's a lever that you pull. It'll open the door forcefully, even if it gets frozen shut somehow," he said.

"Oh... why didn't anyone tell me that?" I asked as I glanced at it. There had been a lever in there? I never noticed.

"Because it's hard to actually get shut in there in the first place... who would close the door behind them like that? That's why there's no handle on the inside, so you don't do it instinctually. You'd have to shut it with a hard tug, and get your hand free of it before it slammed shut," Vim said.

"True..." I took one of the cold cups from him, and went to open the other... not as cold, storage chest. It was in the ground, near some shelves.

Opening the floor chest, I reached in to grab the large pitcher of dark liquid. It was a nice tasting wine of some kind. I didn't really care much for it, but I knew Lamp would like it.

"No. Eastern women don't drink grape wine Renn," Vim warned.

"Huh? They don't?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Oh... so... milk?" she asked.

"That'd be best, yes. Didn't you get food and drinks for them? Have you been giving them wine?" he asked.

"No. Brandy handled all that for me," I said.

"Some caretaker you are," he teased.

"She wouldn't let me go buy it, Vim... I carried it in for them, from the depot, but that was it," I argued.

"Hm..." Vim nodded in understanding as I went to filling up the cold cups with the milk.

Once two were full, I glanced at Vim. He held two more, and was smiling oddly at me.

"What did Lawrence want?" I asked. He wasn't around anymore... was he with Lamp and Merit?

"He told me about the embassy. Said it checks out, that they're mostly legitimate," he said.

"Mostly...?" I asked.

Vim shrugged. "No one is completely clean here in Lumen, Renn. He said half their shipments from their eastern associates are smuggled items. Nothing too illegal, or bad, just... stuff they probably stole elsewhere. Or bought from pirates," Vim said.

"Should I worry for the girls?" I asked.

"No more than you should worry for anyone, for any other reason," he said.

I sighed as I finished with the milk, and went to put the pitcher back.

Once I was done, Vim and I carried the cold cups back to the room we had left Merit and Lamp in.

Sure enough Lawrence was there. The three of them were now in a deep conversation, and barely did more than nod at me as I handed them all their own cup of cold milk.

Once done, I realized I was one cup short... I had grabbed four. Merit, Lamp, Lawrence and...

Vim smirked at me, and then took a very tiny sip of the only remaining cup.

Frowning at him, I wondered why I hadn't realized I had miscounted. Now it'd look so weird if I went back to get another and... but before I could give the idea up, Vim went ahead and handed me his.

Smiling at him, I nodded in thanks and took it. Judging by the amount in the cup, he had only sipped a tiny amount. He had probably done it more so to tease me than actually take a drink.

Taking my own drink, I glanced back at the three in their conversation. Lamp had crossed her arms and was tilting her head as she tried to think of something. Then Lawrence said something that made Merit chuckle.

They looked... natural. Calm. And it was amazing, especially when I took into consideration where and what we were doing.

We were in the societies houses. A place that those like myself, the non-humans and other members of the society, could be safe. Where we could walk around without having to worry about hiding our non-human features.

And Lamp, a human, was sitting amongst us and talking calmly. As if she was as much a long time friend as the rest.

"I couldn't find her, Renn," Vim then said softly.

Turning, I found Vim had stepped away a few feet. He gestured for me to follow him with a nod of his head.

Glancing back at Lamp, who smiled gently at me and then returned to talking to Merit and Lawrence... I went to follow Vim out of the room once again.

"Should we leave her?" I asked him.

"Why not? She's joining this location, Renn... not ours," he said softly.

I gulped a mouth without any milk in it, and felt stupid.

Of course she was.

Yet... for as sad that made me feel, it also made me happy.

Ours?

"Do we have a location, Vim?" I asked him, wondering if he even realized what he had said... or rather, how he had phrased it.

"Our location is where we need to be," he said.

I nodded. That was his kind of answer. A very Protector type of answer.

Vim led me down the hall, to the same room that Lawrence and he had been in earlier. The one with the unlit fireplace. Vim however decided to change that. While I walked in and chose one of the couches to sit down at, Vim went to lighting the fireplace.

Watching him light the fire, I took a small drink as I relaxed in the couch. Today was... a long day. Even for me.

Going to the embassy. Coming back. Finding out I was being followed and then spending time with Brom and...

The bath with Merit. That had been... well... honestly that was probably why I wasn't getting teary eyed over what was happening with Lamp.

Merit and I had a very wonderful moment today. I had not expected to become so close to her so quickly. She and I were probably what one would call friends now... at least, so I felt. Hopefully she didn't think the opposite.

"I think I made a friend today, Vim," I told him.

"You did. We'll talk about that later. Right now I want to talk about your stalker," he said as the fire came alive. He brushed his hands as he stood away from the fire, which grew in strength and quickly began to pop and crackle.

I nodded as I watched him walk over, and actually sit down next to me. On the same couch... even though there were plenty of other places to sit, most of which close enough to have allowed us to still have a very private conversation, rather comfortably.

Going a little still at the sudden closeness, I glanced to my side and stared at the thighs touching my own. I studied the arms and elbow rubbing against my own as he leaned closer to me.

"I'll find her, but I'll need to grab her the moment I see her. Not sure how she got away from me... I think she slipped away into a building, somehow," he said quietly.

I nodded... even though I honestly wasn't too focused. He hadn't been this close to me in... well a long time. Which made the fact that I felt so conscious about it all the more weird. After all, on our journey here we had been close many times. Not just when we slept in the same bed too, so why did I suddenly...

"It's not a good thing, Renn. They might have noticed you're not human, just as easily as Lamp had," Vim said with a frown.

Oh woops. I was probably smiling really oddly, thanks to our sudden proximity and... I coughed and quickly took a drink of my cold milk. There wasn't much left now. I'd not be able to use it to hide my thoughts much longer.

"So... just grab them then? Why'd we need to leave Lamp and the rest for this?" I asked. Not that I should complain. This was nice.

"I was tired of listening to them. Plus I don't want them to worry," he said.

Listening to them...? Wonder what they were talking about. "But I can worry?" I asked him.

"It's our job to worry," he said, looking away from me and to the fireplace.

Staring at him, and the shadows dancing on his face thanks to the fire he had lit... I suddenly remembered one of my first conversations with him. One of the first real ones.

We had been at the Sleepy Artist, on a balcony. I had walked up to him, and he hadn't noticed for some reason... and he had a very similar face then... in fact it was probably the same one? I leaned forward a little, and yes. It was. At the time I had seen that expression back then, he had been sitting and I had been standing... so I was now looking from the wrong perspective, but it was definitely the same.

That conversation had been... somewhat similar. We had spoken about myself, but also him. He had told me how he was akin to a king. A man whose job it was to worry. To fret.

He did look troubled.

Which meant I was supposed to be too... since I was supposed to be like him.

Though maybe I'd not be a king, but the queen... if we looked at it that way.

"I'm sorry Vim... but I'm just... happy. I made another friend. A real one. And then you went and invited Lamp into the society and she accepted? And she's being accepted too? Then of course tomorrow we get to save who knows how many others as well? Vim... I want to jump up and down in joy, I want to run around and hug and kiss everyone... Worrying or being scared right now probably isn't something I'm even capable of," I told him.

Vim's eyes softened as the fire grew even hotter. "I figured... and you should be happy. Lamp isn't that big a deal, but Merit? You just earned a very powerful ally, Renn. One day maybe she'll tell you who she really is," Vim said.

"She said she's a knife fish," I said.

He smiled and nodded. "She is. Did... did you take a bath with her?" he asked with an odd look. He didn't glance at me, but I could tell he wanted to.

"I did. Jealous? It's your fault... you had your chance," I teased him.

He smirked and nodded. "Good. I'm glad you two are getting along," he said.

A little upset he didn't seem too... bothered by my joke, I decided to take his delight and add it to my own. "Me too," I said.

"Last time I took a bath with her she electrified me so badly I was peeling for a year," Vim said with a frown.

"Good you... des...erve..." I stopped talking as I realized what he just said.

Vim nodded as he frowned. "That had been weird," he said as he remembered it.

My eye twitched, and I wished the milk in my cup hadn't tasted good. Maybe then I'd be willing to dunk it on his head.

"The rest of the society is going to come and talk to her. After they're done, take her back to her room. They've made it very clear to her to not tell anyone what happened, or why, but there might be a chance she'll still tell them. If she does, we'll have to banish her. That's part of the test, Renn, so don't get upset if it happens. It happens about half the time," Vim then said.

I frowned at him, especially since now I disliked him even more. "She won't do that," I said confidently.

"We'll see. I don't think so either, but you never know," he said.

"If she doesn't, you owe me a bath," I said.

Vim's jaw tightened, then he glanced at me. His eyes narrowed, and then softened. "You that confident?" he asked.

I nodded.

"What do I get if she fails?" he asked me.

My cup shifted in my hands as I realized that was right. If one was to bet, both parties needed to levy, to risk, something.

"What... what do you want?" I asked, unsure of what else to say. After all anything I'd offer he'd probably just smirk and laugh it off. Like a kiss, or something like it. He'd probably just say that was something I wanted, not something he desired.

"Hm..." Vim frowned as he looked away, and went into thought.

I gulped a dry mouth, and because of it remembered to take a drink. I barely tasted the milk as I drank the rest down.

After a long moment Vim leaned back, to rest against the couch. Although he really hadn't moved much, he suddenly felt farther away. My shoulder, arm, and side all suddenly became a little colder... a little lonely. We still were touching at the thighs at least.

Vim looked a little silly leaning back and looked... kind of uncomfortable. As if he needed to re-adjust himself. Yet he went still as he thought about something.

Glancing into my cup, I sighed at the lack of anything within it. I wished it had been that wine. I couldn't get drunk, of course, but it would have tasted better. This moment needed something tasty to go along with the memories we were making together.

"I believe she'll not reveal anything about us... so that's not a fair bet. Instead let's bet on something else," Vim then said.

"Hm? Changing the rules already?" I asked.

"Just slightly," he said as he gestured at me. He tapped me lightly on my elbow, as if to get my attention... even though he already had it in full and then some. "Instead of a bet... let's give and take," he then decided.

"Give and take...?" I didn't like the sound of that. What did he want to take from me? I had so very little as it was... surely he knew that.

"You want a bath? I'll give it... if you'll do me a favor," he said.

"Oh?" I nodded. Another favor? Really? Already? I had expected to go months if not more before another was asked of me. He so rarely wanted help, real help, so it was hard to ever do anything like that for him. Small things, sure... like carrying a box, or something, but those weren't favors. Not in Vim's eyes, or mine either honestly.

"I'd like to give Reatti that spear, if you'll allow it. I'd be willing to make you another when we return to the smithy one day, so..." Vim spoke calmly, but his voice slowly got lower and lower until it finally died down and he went quiet.

I shifted, staring at the man who just asked me to give up something precious.

"You treasure it that much Renn?" Vim asked me gently.

I nodded. "I do," I said truthfully.

"Why? I've not even taught you how to wield it yet," he said.

"Do you have any idea how many times people have given me things in my life?" I asked him.

He frowned softly, but I could tell he had some idea. He still shook his head for me though.

I didn't have it in me to tell him the truth, since it made me sad. Not because of how few I have gotten, in my long life, but because it made me realize that my long years with those humans had lacked such things. Nory had never given me anything like a present in such a way. And that fact made me want to cry, so I ignored it. Another part of me didn't even want to tell him how precious I found the things he had given me. Since he probably didn't see them as anything special, so it'd just be awkward.

"I got another, earlier. A little cactus. From Gerald," I told him.

"A cactus?" he asked, his frown deepening. Becoming much more real. He was trying to think of the reason that Gerald would give me such a thing.

"He got it from some merchant. Form the south... he gave to me when he saw how interesting I found it," I said. At least, I thought that was the reason.

"A southern merchant gave him a cactus..." Vim shook his head at that, and not because he didn't understand.

"He said it was a declaration of war," I said.

Vim nodded. "Not a literal one, but one of commerce. Yes."

So it was true. Interesting.

"That cactus... The clothes Lellip and Nebl made for me... the sword and other weapons you made, my nail file and polishers..." I lifted my hand, studying my nails. It was time I did them again, I think.

I had more than just those of course. I had a hat Vim had bought me back during our beginning in Ruvindale. The painting he had saved for me, of Lomi and the rest.

"You'll still have the sword and bow, Renn," Vim said gently.

I nodded. "... I know... and I suppose it's my fault. I should not have assumed they were mine to have, you never actually said so after all," I said.

Vim sighed, and the fire popped a little loudly. A singular black ember flew upward, and landed back into the fireplace after floating for a moment. "Those weapons are special, Renn," Vim said.

"I know," I said.

"No. Or well, yes. You do. You know the metal is special. That spear... is special because the material is pure enough to persist for many years. It will last a few decades, as long as one takes care of it. Plus they're heavy. Heavier than the spears humans make. A normal spear would break or be unable to be used properly by our kind, thanks to them being made out of light wood," Vim explained.

"Ah... so you mean to give them weapons they can rely on," I said, understanding.

Vim nodded.

That was true. Brom's sword had been... dulled, and cracked and notched even before we had started sparring. It had only gotten worse as time went on. In fact, he had replaced his sword a few times.

"You wanted to give them proper tools. That would stand up to their strength and the test of time," I said, understanding.

"Basically. There are not many members in the Society that are even willing to hold a weapon Renn, so I try to support those who do as much as I can," Vim said softly.

I sighed as I nodded and twirled the now warm cup in my hands, spinning it by rolling between my palms. "I suppose I can understand that," I said.

"I'm sorry Renn. If I had known you'd have grown attached to it I would have made an extra. I hadn't thought you'd actually like it that much," Vim said.

"You should know better," I complained.

"I should," he agreed.

Glancing at him out of the corner of my eye, I tried to ignore the voices in the hallway. A group was approaching.

"Fine... but you better bathe with me, before we leave," I said. Who knew how long it'd take for us to find another place with a bath big enough for both of us.

Vim nodded. "Deal. You can give it to her later, if you would," Vim said.

I held my hand out, and smiled at him. He stared at it for only a moment, and then smiled at me. Taking my hand, we shook hands and made a deal.

"Deal," I agreed.

A spear for a bath? Might not seem a fair trade to most... but for me it would work. Especially if he was willing to make another for me later.

After all that meant he'd have to let me stick with him until he did so. Which meant a full circle throughout the society. A full circuit. A full journey. Many years. Years together.

And that was a much greater gift than a stick of steel.

Holding Vim's hand as he held mine, I smiled at the man who didn't try to pry his hand free... even though it was more than time to for us to let each other go.

"Oh? What's this? Flirting by the fire?"

I turned, and found Reatti, Brandy and Sofia. They were all smiling at us, and I couldn't help but smile back at them, especially when Vim pulled his hand free from mine and sighed.

Gifts. Friends. A purpose.

And of course... A Vim.

What more could I ask for?

Chapter 145: Promises Delivered... and To Be.

The embassy folks waved as their carriage started moving. The plain thing looked... out of place here, even though it shouldn't. Fancy wagons did frequent our company... but on the other side. The bank section got fancy carriages, but that was the other side of the building. This road was usually the depot traffic. A place for hard work... not leisure and especially not to show off wealth. Yet for some reason the plain wagon, and the even plainer canopy carriage box upon it, looked misplaced. As if it was lost and they had only stopped because they were looking for somewhere else and needed directions.

Renn let loose a deep sigh as she watched the carriage roll away. She wasn't crying, but her cheeks had tear-stains upon them. Stains from the hours before, they had started when she had watched and listened to Pram and her sister collapse in each other's arms. The event had honestly been the kind I usually avoided... but I had wanted to see the embassy people who had come to meet Lamp and her people.

I had hoped Renn's stalker would have been amongst them. Or her smell at least.

When neither had been, I had only grown more upset... and then of course, there was no head or tail of her now either. I was half tempted to invite Renn out, to spend the night out enjoying a date... just to bait that stalker out from wherever she was now hiding.

But that wasn't something I should do. Not only was it... dangerous, since I wasn't entirely sure what that stalker had been doing, it was also rude to Renn.

Who knows what she'd think if I told her I only wanted to go out with her so I could hunt another woman. The reason probably wouldn't matter; she'd still likely get upset with me.

"Think they'll be okay?" Renn asked me.

"Too late to worry about that now, Renn," Brandy said.

I nodded.

Lamp and seven other eastern girls had gone back to the embassy on that carriage. They had gone to spend a few days... to see if it was something that would work. Something that was trustworthy, and real.

Oddly... Pram, the one whose sister was at the embassy, hadn't gone with them. I wasn't entirely sure of the reason, but something told me it was on purpose. Wonder whose idea that had been.

"Back inside, then," Brandy said as she turned to head back into the depot.

Watching her go, I noticed the way she studied the crates and wagons around us. She had internally set aside the eastern girls and their needs, and now was going to go focus entirely on business. Real business.

"Should we follow them?" Renn asked me softly.

"What for?" I asked.

"To make sure they actually go to the Embassy?"

Staring at her, who glared at the carriage being drawn away... I wondered just what she thought could possibly happen to them.

If they didn't actually take care of them, they'd be making an enemy out of the Animalia Guild. A company beyond not just them, but nearly their entire nations which they represented. And they knew it.

"We can, if you want," I said... deciding it was probably better to not squish that strange over protectiveness Renn seemed to have.

"Really?" she looked at me with expectant eyes.

"Sure. It'll give me a chance to maybe see that stalker again too," I said.

"Oh. Right. That too," she frowned, telling me she had forgotten all about it. She even glanced across the street, to the alleys nearby.

They were mostly empty right now.

"Let's go then. Brom, let Brandy know what we're doing," I said to the man standing nearby, leaning up against one of the large depot's doors.

"Sure... and what stalker you talking about?" he asked.

"Don't worry about it. Yet," I said as I stepped out onto the road.

"Great..." Brom sighed as I crossed the street. Renn hurried to keep up with me.

Glancing up at the dark sky, I knew we'd probably get stuck in the rain... but if I went back in to get umbrellas or better clothes for the storm, the carriage would be gone before we got ready.

"Thanks Vim," Renn said as we headed into an alley.

"For?" I asked. We were walking quickly, but we weren't running or anything. The carriage was moving slowly, after all. It was plain and cheap looking, but it was still something meant for comfort not speed.

"Letting me make sure they'll be safe. I know you don't really care," she said.

"I do care. Just... not as much as you. Plus, in case you've forgotten, Lamp is a potential new member. That means I'll protect her just as fiercely as I would any other," I said.

"Potential. She's not one yet," she pointed out.

"I said that?" Hadn't I?

"You did... but potential to me means you won't care as much, just yet," she said as we reached the end of the alley and took a left, to head towards the other city block. The one that the carriage should be turning onto any moment.

"Potential falls under those protected Renn. I'd not stand aside and let someone who had the qualities and fit the criteria to join the Society die or suffer just because they hadn't gotten their names stamped into the tomes yet," I told her.

"Hm... true... You are like that, aren't you?" she wondered as I slowed our pace as we neared the end of the alley. Once we reached it, I kept Renn and I back a little, to stay out of sight. It helped the world was a little dark, thanks to the storm forming above us.

Sure enough, after a few moments... the eastern embassy carriage rolled by slowly, heading westward. Towards the embassy.

"Hm... it's slow," Renn said.

"And you wonder why we don't ride one when traveling," I said.

"It'd be fun though," she argued, and after a few more moments... once the carriage was farther down the street, I stepped out of the alley and headed for another across the street.

Renn kept up with me, and as we walked down the new alley, I noticed a large rat chewing on something. It was sitting near a small drainage section, a few bricks away from a rickety looking wooden door.

"If I see that stalker Renn, I'll be running after them. I'll probably just run off without warning, so don't be shocked if I do," I said.

"Hm. I'll just head back to the company if you do," she said.

"Glad you understand," I said, nodding.

"I do, don't I?" she said with a small giggle as we walked out of the alley, onto the new road. This one was much smaller than the others, one that a carriage wouldn't travel upon. I guided Renn to the right, and headed for the western block. The one that the carriage would be crossing, here soon.

Renn and I found a closed business, one that had tables and chairs outside, to use as cover. I sat in one of the tables, choosing one that let me stare into the dark windows of the closed... "Tea'bills," Renn read the name of the store as she sat across from me, smiling happily.

"Dumb name," I said, and out of the corner of my eye watched the main street not far from us. There were a few carts and wagons passing by, but so far the carriage hadn't arrived.

"What's the bills for?" she asked.

"Very likely the name of the owner. Bill," I said. It couldn't mean its literal play of words, since those didn't exist here in Lumen.

"Oh..." Renn seemed very unimpressed, and she glanced down the street. I looked again, and watched as the embassy carriage slowly rolled past.

"Seems to be heading the right way, Renn. There are only a few more turns and it'll be there," I said.

"Still... just in case," she said with a nod as she stood from her seat.

I sighed and nodded. This time Renn was the one who chose the alley, she took a left in the second to last alley to head across this block and to the next.

Oddly, it had been the one I would have chosen too.

Following her, I noticed the way she looked around as we chased after the carriage. She looked like she was enjoying herself.

"What will I do if Lamp chooses them over us?" Renn asked, slowing a little. Seems she was calmer now that we were already half way to the embassy, and the carriage was still on track.

Probably shouldn't tell her that there was a chance that the embassy itself was where they'd kidnap or hurt them, if they wanted to. Was much easier to do it in-house than elsewhere.

"You respect her decision, Renn. It's her will, not yours," I said firmly.

I heard her ears brush against her heavy leather hat as she glanced at me, and she actually glared at me for a moment before looking away.

Smiling softly at her, I wondered if she'd always be like this. I hoped she would be... it was why I...

Blinking, I glanced around to make sure the stalker wasn't around. She wasn't, but I wish she had been. My thoughts were drifting, and that was dangerous. More dangerous than a stalker, at least.

Reaching the end of the alley, Renn peered her head out around the corner and nodded. "They're turning right," she said.

Oh? Either they had picked up their pace a little, likely to try to avoid the incoming rain, or we had walked a little slower than before. Odds were it was a little of both.

Stepping up behind Renn, I paused a moment... then stepped to the left, as to not get too close to her, as I too peered around the corner.

Sure enough, down the road and pass the next crossing was the carriage. It was indeed heading to the embassy. I could see one of their little embassy flags in the distance.

"Feeling better?" I asked her.

"Yes... but I still want to see them enter it," she said as she stepped out of the alley.

I watched Renn hurry after it, even as she ignored the other people on the street who stared at her oddly.

Most people didn't walk in the alleys here. Especially not someone wearing the clothes of a mercenary. Mercenaries didn't like to be associated with actual thieves and hoodlums. It was a stigma they always had to fight against, so they became very prickly about it, usually.

Stepping out of the alley I went to follow after her. Renn had picked up her pace, since a few wagons had turned onto the road and were now blocking the line of sight we had on the carriage.

By the time we crossed the intersection, and got half way down the street... the carriage took a right. Turning onto the street that the embassy was situated upon.

"Hm..." Renn slowed as she stared at the alleys we passed, she was probably wondering how we'd sneak closer to get a look at them going into the building.

"This way," I guided Renn into one of the alleys, and she hurried to follow me.

About half way into the alley, I found the right spot. A large warehouse, with a wooden ladder built into the wall.

"Hm?" Renn looked up at it, as I pointed at it.

"To the roof," I told her.

Renn smiled and nodded, finding it a great idea. She hurried to climb up first, and I kept an eye on her as she went to climbing it.

Most warehouses had such ladders built into them, so that workers and others could get to their roofs with ease. But lately they had started falling out of fashion. More of the newer ones were being built like our own, where such ladders were inside and not outside.

Didn't want strangers on your roof, after all.

Climbing up after Renn, I did so slowly. Renn seemed fine as she climbed, but she still paused every so often. By the looks of it she kept glancing at, or into, the windows we passed as we ascended.

The warehouse looked dark inside, and seemed... mostly empty, but I didn't blame her for glancing into each window we passed. It gave me more time to stare at something too.

Reaching the top, Renn quickly climbed over the roof's ledge. By the time I got up there, she was already on the other side of the... roof...

Frowning at the disheveled roof, I stepped gently onto the worn down and broken shingles and plates. It looked like it had suffered dozens of storms, and no one had come up here to clean or fix anything since it had been built. Probably hadn't, by the looks of it.

They were lucky they had no windows up here; else there'd be holes and not simply a mess. Though it wouldn't be long until they'd have them anyway, by the looks of it.

Heading over to the corner of the roof where Renn was, I made sure to look around at the surrounding roofs. This building wasn't the tallest around, so I could only see onto a few of the buildings around us, but it seemed we were alone up here.

Stepping up next to Renn, I sighed as I watched the people below. There were carts and wagons... people walking around, and even a pair of children down one of the roads nearby running quickly. Probably hurrying back home.

"They're heading inside," Renn said gently.

I nodded as I turned my attention to the carriage. It was parked before the main entrance of the Eastern Embassy, and the girls were all clambering off and heading inside. They all seemed to be talking away to one another, excitedly.

After a few moments, they all headed inside... and the carriage then began to move again. Heading down the road, until it took a left and turned into a tiny alley next to the embassy. Probably where they stored it.

"See? Safely delivered," I said.

"Hm... Wish I could sneak inside too," she grumbled.

"And what? Watch them for months? Renn... at some point you must simply let go and hope for the best," I said.

"I know... but that doesn't mean I have to like it," she said.

I nodded, willing to at least give her that.

The embassy door closed, and that was it. The carriage gone. The girls gone. The point of watching, gone.

Yet still Renn stared at it, as if expecting it to just... blow up.

Looking up, I smelled the incoming rain. I turned a little, to try and look out at the nearby port and sea... but the buildings between us and the sea were blocking most of it. Yet still, I could see the storm clouds in the distance. They were very dark, and thundering.

A heavy storm approached. One similar to the one that had sunk my nice boat. The one I had wanted instead of that still broken man-of-war.

"Hm... did you see my stalker?" Renn asked.

"No. And although I'd like to walk around town with you, to bait her out... it's about to storm. Badly," I said.

"I don't mind a storm," she said softly.

"The humans do. We'd look strange here in Lumen if we wandered around in the storm. The people here hole up, hiding away during bad storms," I said.

"Sometimes I hate pretending to be what I'm not," she said.

"You say that, yet if I curled up with you on a large chair, reading a book together you'd probably love every moment of it," I said.

"Under warm blankets and near a fire?" she asked, smirking at me.

I shrugged and gestured for her to imagine her own fantasies.

Renn giggled as I stepped away, heading back to the ladder. "Let's go Renn. You've done more than enough," I said.

"I guess... even if it doesn't feel like it," she said.

"You'll one day learn to let go. Until you do, I'll let you cry on my shoulder," I said, and went to descend the ladder. Kneeling down, I hopped off the roof's ledge and held myself outward, holding onto the edge of the roof as I let my feet find the ladder.

"I'm allowed to cry on your shoulder?" she asked, pausing before the ladder and watching me as I began to descend.

"Just once, each shoulder," I said and looked up at her.

She smirked at me, then I watched as she... kind of clumsily replicated what I had done. She bumped her knee on the edge as she did so, and I heard her hiss a little as she quickly found the ladder and begun to climb down.

Had that hurt?

Reaching the ground, I stepped back a little... but not too far, just in case I needed to catch her if she fell. It didn't take long for Renn to step down onto the ground, and then away from the ladder.

As she did... I noticed her right pant leg. It was now torn.

"You okay?" I asked her.

"Hm? Yes. I scraped it against the roof," she said as she reached down to brush her knee off. She did seem to act like it hadn't hurt her, nor was she hurting.

"Sorry," I said as I stared at it. I saw tiny drops of blood seeping into the pant leg around the torn spots.

"Wasn't your fault," she said.

Yes it was.

A long moment went by, and then she coughed. I blinked, and realized I had been staring at her slowly bleeding knee.

Smelling the incoming rainstorm, I nodded. "Let's head back," I said.

"To a bath?" she asked.

My eye twitched as I turned around, to head down the alley the opposite way we had entered. So that we'd exit closer to the company building, and be able to head towards it instead of the port. "Did you give Reatti her spear yet?" I asked.

"I did. Last night. Not long after you told me to," she said.

Seriously? Already?

"I see," I said.

"So... the bath?" she asked happily, stepping up beside me on my right. She leaned forward, smirking at me as if we were children.

"I made a promise," I said.

"You did."

"Before we leave," I said.

"Well... yes..." She frowned, but nodded.

I nodded, happy with her admitting to it. "So we'll have your bath... before we leave."

Renn's frown deepened and she stopped leaning forward and looked away from me. "I can see why Merit thinks you're a coward," she mumbled.

"Huh?" I stopped. A coward? Me?

Renn didn't seem bothered as she stopped. "She said you'd find a way to get out of the bath, somehow. That you're a coward when it counts," she said with a nod.

"When'd she say this?" I asked.

"When we were in our bath. You promised it if I could beat Brom, but then you said I kind of did, and then she said that even if I really did beat Brom you would have still found a way to not have to bathe with me. That you'd fight through any and all hell for me, but won't do anything like that willingly. She said I should give up on you, and sleep with someone else if that was what I wanted. She said you slept with no one, ever," Renn said smoothly.

Staring at the woman who was talking without any hint of shame or worry, I wondered just what the hell she had done to become so close with Merit.

She hadn't been kidding at all when she had said she and her had become friends.

"Merit thinks I'm a coward?" I asked.

"Out of all of that, that's what you're worried about?" Renn asked, smiling at me. So she had been aware of the odd things she had been saying aloud.

"That's a shock to me," I said. Which was funny, since she was usually shocking in other ways.

"Well... I was being a little mean. Plus Merit had laughed when she said it..." she said softly.

I sighed, and wondered what to say.

Renn then brought her hands forward, clasping them as she nodded and winked at me. "She doesn't hate you, I don't think. I think she just... doesn't want me to expect anything from you. Doesn't want me to fall in love with you," she said.

Love.

My eye twitched at that word. I hated that word. Despised it.

"Coward," I said.

Renn smirked, and then laughed. "She had said it!"

Smiling at her, I stepped forward. Let her think that was why I had said it. After a moment of quick laughs, Renn finally followed after me.

Off in the distance thunder roared, telling me we'd need to pick up our pace soon.

As we walked out of the hallway, we crossed the street which was quickly growing empty. What had been busy of people and carts was now... a little dead.

"How much longer will we be here, Vim?" Renn asked.

"Not much longer. Brandy has something she wants me to do... one of our members is delivering something via a ship soon. She wants me to pick whatever it is up and take it with me on our trip. I suspect a few more weeks, maybe a month," I said.

"That's all?" she asked softly.

"We've been here over a month already, Renn. Almost two, if you include the time I spent away," I said.

"Well... yea... but we spent almost three at the smithy," she said as we rounded a corner, we were walking on the actual roads now and not through alleys.

"To wait for the passes. And based off that bridge collapsing, it had been needed," I said.

"Isn't that the truth."

Another roar of thunder rumbled the world, and I somewhat longed to head for the port. To watch the swells and tide as the storm hit.

I missed the old storms. The ones that no longer could form. Even if they had been dangerous.

"You have until that package arrives to decide, Renn," I told her as we rounded another corner. A part of the Animalia Company building came into view. Just a corner of it, where the bank was located.

"To decide what? The bath? Let's do it now," she asked.

"If you want to stay here, or work with Brandy," I said.

I got three paces away before I had to stop... since Renn had come to a stop too.

Turning around, I found the expected look on her face. The same one I had seen several times so far.

A troubled look of sorrow.

"You would ask that, wouldn't you?" she asked me softly.

I nodded. "It is your choice," I said. The only reason it had taken me this long to ask it, was because I feared her answer. Though I wasn't sure which answer I feared the most. Her staying would... bother me. But her coming was even worse.

Right?

She sighed and stepped forward... but I didn't return to walking, since it was obvious she didn't want to either. Renn only walked up to me, to stand closer. To talk quietly with me.

"This place is wonderful," she said.

"There's really no where else like it," I said. Not for us, anyway.

"I bet I'd never get bored. And I'd be able to accomplish a lot here too, for the Society," she said.

"Very likely," I agreed.

"But then you'd leave," she whispered.

"I'd come back. I come back here and to Telmik the most," I said. There were actually a couple other places I visited a little more frequently, but they weren't places she'd be able to stay at. Not comfortably at least.

"I'd get to make real friends here, I think. So I'd... not be entirely lonely," she said.

"Those are much more valuable than there are words to describe," I said.

She nodded, agreeing with me. "Yet..."

Staring into her golden eyes, I wondered if they were the reason so many found themselves attracted to her. Many humans had such eyes around here, if not gold at least a burnt yellow, but hers were... a little special. A little brighter. With irises that had lots of designs and shades within. The kind of pools of gold that could make one lost within if one wasn't careful.

"You can spend time to think about it Renn, you need not make a decision this moment," I said softly.

"I know. I just... wish I could have both," she said.

"Both...?" She wanted to go with me but stay here? To live here yet travel?

"It's too bad our Society is so fractured," she said softly.

Ah.

She wanted me to stay here. With her. Which I could only do if everyone was here. Only possible if there was nowhere else I was needed and no one else that needed me.

"Wait long enough and that day will come... sadly," I said.

She nodded, understanding my meaning. Eventually there would be only a few of our kind left, and I'd not need to travel so much. The air shifted a little, and then the far off rumble of thunder made Renn look upward, to the sky that was quickly darkening above us.

"Your painting is done, by the way," she said.

"Oh...?" I was a little surprised. She had mentioned she was almost done earlier, but that had only been a couple days ago. She'd been so busy lately; I'd not thought she'd finish so soon.

She nodded. "You can come see it when you come for the bath," she smirked at me.

"Ah..." I narrowed my eyes at her. How sly...

Renn giggled at me, and stepped forward. To return us to walking.

Following her, I shook my head at her. I should have known she'd have said something like that.

The jaguar walked ahead of me, not too quickly... but she had a little bit of pip in her step. If her ears and tail were out, they'd probably be fluttering and swaying happily.

It was too bad she had to hide them.

It was too bad I wasn't good enough of a man to have created a world where such a thing had been possible.

I had tried. And failed. Was still failing.

Walking around a corner, we headed for the road which would lead us back to our temporary home.

"Is Merit old Vim?" Renn asked, slowing a little to look at me.

I nodded. "The oldest here," I said.

"Huh? Including you?" she slowed, a little surprised.

"Oh. No. I meant of those who live here," I said.

"Hm... She acts it. She said she was old, but didn't really tell me to what extent," she said.

"Merit remembers not just the previous era, but the one before that. She's older than Brandy," I said. Though... honestly not by much. Brandy had been a child during that era, and secluded. Merit had been born in the middle of it, and had seen it at its height. In all its glory, and the horrible fall.

It was partly why she was so prickly. So... angry at the world and everyone that lived in it.

She had seen the best the world had to offer, and the worst. And found them all wanting.

Which was why it was such a surprise that she and Renn were getting along. Renn wasn't... a child by no means, especially not so emotionally, but there was still an age factor. Plus in Merit's eyes, and most others, Renn was... something similar to someone who was innocent.

She didn't know of the wars, or the terrors that had been born from them.

Though that wasn't to say she hadn't endured terrors in her own way.

Maybe it was the fact one could tell she has suffered, and endured, yet still retained that innocence... that made those like myself and Merit attracted to her.

"Merit came here not long ago. She had been somewhere else. She's only been here for..." I tried to think of when I had brought her here.

"Thirty-three years," Renn nodded.

Oh? "She told you?" I asked. Another shock.

"She said you did everything you could to save her home. She hates you, but will always love you for that," she said softly, while looking away from me.

My fingers twitched, and I wondered what to think first. About Merit's comments, or the fact that she had said such things to Renn.

Merit hadn't even told Brandy, or anyone else, as far as I was aware.

"What'd you do to earn her friendship?" I asked her.

"Merit's?" Renn glanced at me, and I noticed that her eyes were watery. If I had been human, I probably wouldn't have noticed such a thing in this dark. I could hear the thunders, not of the lightning but the rain out in the ocean. It was about to hit the port.

"She's not one easily befriended Renn," I said.

Renn slowed to a stop, in front of a still open shop. There were three people within it, and they were all workers it seemed. They were at the counter, talking to one another, so didn't notice us standing before their window.

"We bathed together," she said simply.

I nodded. That was amazing. Merit was... very self-conscious of her body. And not just her young appearance either. Yet that couldn't have been what made them friends. They had to have become such things before Merit would have allowed it. "What'd you do before that though? To get to that point?" I asked her.

"Why?" Renn asked.

Blinking at her sudden defiance, I couldn't help but smile at the way she stood up straighter and glared at me. As if she dared me to try and pry out information about her new friend.

How lovely. To be so fierce, even against me. Over this reason, especially.

"I worry you promised something desperate," I told her gently.

Renn's hard glare softened a little... then she smiled at me. "Oh. No... Vim we just... talked. Talked and spent time together," she said.

"Time. A few days worth at most, and you earned the friendship of someone who hasn't made a new friend in hundreds of years," I said.

Renn shrugged, as if she wasn't sure what to say to me. Or to herself.

Sighing, I decided to just nod and accept it. After all... there was a very good chance that really was all they did. Or she did.

Sometimes stuff like that... just happened. She and the Clothed Woman had been a little odd too. Maybe not friends, but...

But the Clothed Woman hadn't ignored her. She had actually talked to Renn, and had done so happily.

Even if I only saw it happen a handful of times, in all these years, it did happen.

Maybe she was far more charismatic than I realized.

"It's about to rain," Renn warned.

I nodded. It was. I wished I could stand within it. To douse the weird embers within me. The ones that hadn't been lit in over a millennia. Those weren't supposed to exist anymore, yet here they were too.

Another oddity, because of her.

"We could get soaked, and then take our bath," she suggested.

"Let's hurry back," I said as I grabbed her hand.

She laughed as I pulled her into a brisk run.

Chapter 146: A Storm's Quiet Puddle

How strange.

The storm wasn't gone... but it was. The dark sky was rolling by quickly, and every so often a few drops of rain fell... but the world around me was now secluded. Off in the distance, in all directions, weren't just darker clouds... but temporal tempests. Downpours, drenching the city of Lumen without any mercy.

Why wasn't the rain falling hard here, like it was across the street?

Standing alone near the edge of the garden, I ignored the small talk between Magdalena and Sofia. And the soft humming of Merit, not too far from them. They, like me, had been checking the garden to make sure nothing was too damaged. We had been tying stalks to small sticks and whatnot to support them. We had pretty much finished, and had originally planned to head back inside but the lack of rain made us linger a little longer.

Shifting, I looked down at the puddles. The roof had gotten soaked, just like the rest of the city. It made me wonder how the city wasn't flooding. There was an insane amount of water falling, and had been doing so for a whole day with no signs of stopping anytime soon.

"I'll be back."

I turned, and alongside the others nodded to Merit as she left the roof. Heading into the door that led downstairs, she left it just barely propped open.

A low rumble echoed throughout the sky, and I looked around for the flash. The world was... very dark. Cold. Windy. Even here. Yet although I heard the thunder, I hadn't been able to see the flashes of lightning. The clouds were actually that thick and dark, that most of the lightning wasn't visible.

I knew blizzards. Snowstorms. In the north, from before I had left my family... I had sat and stared into them for hours. Days. Weeks. Memories of sitting at the front of the cavern, where my older family members lived, and staring at the clouds and snow...

Blinking the memories away, I wondered why I found myself missing those days.

After all... there was no reason to.

Those days had been cold. Wet. Lonely. Sad.

And my family...

Turning a little, to look at Magdalena and Sofia, I watched as they messed with a black tarp of some kind. It was wrapped around a weird, skinny tree. One that looked like it wouldn't bear fruit, or flower, so I wasn't sure why they were so focused on protecting it from the storm.

Yes... Why desire the past, when the present and possible future is so much more important? So much greater?

Rubbing my fingers, I felt the wet soil within them. The plants I had messed with had all been planted in large pots, or in giant garden sections built on the roof. The soil within them all was healthy, and well kept... and now very wet. Soaked. And it clung to my fingers and beneath my nails.

Looking down at a finger, I stared at the elongated nail. It was time I cut it. Maybe the layer of dirt upon it, and beneath it, would give me a good cause.

Maybe I could find someone else to do it with. Though... Lately I've felt oddly happy while doing it alone. It was so weird, but it was the truth. I enjoyed using the nail tools Vim had got me, with Jelti's help. Sitting quietly, filing my nails... was soothing. And heartwarming. Even if Vim had only gotten it for me as to make a point. Thinking of that little blue box made me smile.

"What's so funny?"

I blinked at the weird voice. One I didn't recognize.

A woman but...

Turning around, I frowned as a dark cloud shifted. Alongside the shadow created by that very cloud, someone stepped out from behind a pair of tall plants. Ones nearly as tall as me.

The woman was... wearing a worn down cloak. And what looked to be several more jackets beneath it. Wearing layers, of dirty and old jackets and clothes... I could see the familiar gleam of non-human eyes from beneath the thick hood she wore. Her large eyes stared into me, and I realized suddenly that this was her.

My stalker... as Vim called her.

"I was thinking of a present I recently received," I told her, doing my best to not let my heart thump too loudly.

I wasn't too worried over my safety. But... There was still that weird feeling in the back of my heart, which made me want to step away from her. The strange worry gnawing at the base of my tail made me want to run away, yet I stood firm... since...

A quick glance, to the two women who I needed to make sure wouldn't get hurt... I felt my eyes go wide as I realized they were gone. I was about to panic, and accuse the stranger in front of me for their disappearance... but as I looked around I quickly found them. Or well, found them and lost them again.

Magdalena and Sofia ran into the door that led into the building, and disappeared.

Although a little surprised they had ran away so quickly, without me, I still felt a wonderful sense of relief. They were fine, and would be.

Me on the other hand...

"What kind of present?" the woman asked.

As she spoke, I noticed and heard the sound of something odd. Did she have something in her mouth? Or was she malformed?

"A nail box. Something to trim and polish my nails," I said as I lifted my hands, letting her see... though I knew she probably couldn't really tell. It was getting darker.

"Nails..." she whispered, with almost a lisp. But I couldn't see anything too wrong with her, or at least what little I could see beneath her hood. She looked like she had a rather normal face and a lot of hair but...

Wait... no...

"My name is Renn... what's yours?" I asked her.

"Renn..." she said my name, and I confirmed it. She wasn't deformed, she just had weird teeth. They were either too big, or she had too many. It made her sound a little odd.

A long moment passed, and I felt a few heavy raindrops fall upon my hat and shoulders. I ignored them, and the incoming torrent of rain, since the weather was right now the least of my concerns.

"You've been watching me lately... What is it you want from me?" I asked her gently.

The woman shifted, and I heard a weird sound come from beneath her heavy cloak. Was that just the many layers she was wearing, or was there something else? It was hard to tell much about her, since she was so covered... and...

Glancing down, I noticed her weirdly shaped shoes.

No.

Not shoes.

Just bundles of cloth wrapped around each other haphazardly.

Did she have huge feet, or was there just that many things wrapped around them?

"You do smell like the master, but..." the woman spoke lightly, as if to herself. Then she stepped forward, just a step.

Then the moment she did, and before I could say or do anything, she turned away. Her cloak flapped as she spun on a heel, causing fallen rain to splatter and splash as she ran off.

Stunned, I watched as she ran over to the edge of the roof... and then leapt over the pillars which blocked the roof from sight from the rest of the city.

She flew into the air, jumping high... then disappeared beyond the roof wall and out of sight.

"What the heck?" I breathed a sigh of relief, though wasn't sure if I should.

After half a moment, she appeared again. Leaping from one roof to another, deeper into the city.

I gulped as I realized she was much stronger than she had looked. Could I even jump like that? Something told me it wasn't possible.

Another figure stepped up to my left, and I yelped as I stepped away. My heartbeat thundered, just as the world lit up from a lightning bolt. Moments after the flash, lighting up Vim, the world roared and thundered.

Once the thunder died down, I heard the heavy rain increase in its downpour. It was drawing closer to us. Our strange moment of peace amongst the storm was about to be over.

"She was here," Vim said.

I nodded. Had he seen her?

"The balls on that woman," Vim growled as he stepped forward, heading towards the section where she had jumped off from.

Watching him as he stepped up to the pillar she had leapt over, I watched as Vim raised his head and seemed to smell the air.

I wasn't sure how he could smell her. I smelled the sea. The storm. I couldn't even smell the plants and flowers nearby.

"Is everyone else okay Vim? Magda and Sofia were up here earlier too, and..." as I talked Merit walked out the door and onto the roof. The small woman looked around, and focused on me.

Merit huffed as she hurried over to me, as if out of breath. Her eyes narrowed at me as she stepped up to me and grabbed me by the arm. "Renn, come on," she said firmly.

"Wait," I started to complain, but wasn't able to. Merit's grip was too firm, and her tug too strong. Without any chance to stop her, I was dragged off the roof and into the stairwell that led downstairs.

"Merit..." I complained as Merit turned around.

"Everyone's downstairs. We need to talk," Merit said as she slammed the roof-door shut. She wasted no time in sliding the lock-bar across the door to ensure it couldn't be opened.

I was going to mention that Vim was still out there, but I knew she had known full well. After all, Vim wasn't in danger. We were. Or well, maybe not Merit...

Once she was sure the door was shut firmly, she turned and dragged me down the stairs.

Glancing behind me, at the closed door, I sighed a little.

Not only wasn't I sure what to think about what was happening; I honestly didn't feel good about it either.

I still had that weird feeling at the pit of my stomach, as if something horrible was happening... yet it wasn't.

"What's happening Merit?" I asked the little girl pulling me along the hallway, towards the Society houses.

Her thick white hair bounced as she hurried, and shook her head.

"A hunter is here. That was a predator," Merit said stiffly.

Merit continued pulling me, even as she pushed open the metal door that led to the inner society section. I barely got out of the way before she slammed it shut behind me.

She locked this door too, which was the first time I had seen anyone do so.

Merit picked up the pace, and we headed downstairs to the first floor. Before we even reached the bottom, I began to hear the voices.

It sounded like the whole Society was here.

Reaching the end of the stairs, we rounded the corner and headed for the main rooms.

"Though why now? I don't believe they'd have followed Vim here. Maybe when Brandy went to the Bell Church?" someone asked.

Merit and I entered the room, and I felt a little silly as everyone watched Merit drag me to one of the tables everyone was sitting at. I felt a slight tinge of a blush as I sat down at the table, next to Brandy and Herra.

Brandy patted me on the back as I sat down, and I glanced around the room. Everyone was here. Even the strangely quiet Tosh, and he seemed rather focused for once and not staring off into the void. There were also surprisingly a few faces I didn't normally see... and also someone I didn't recognize.

Liina was here, who I had not gotten to talk to yet in any real depth, and she was sitting next to another woman. Someone who was tall, and looked kind of like Gerald. Too pretty to be real. Who was she?

"Did they attack you Renn?" Gerald asked. He was standing near another table nearby, looking worried.

"No? She... Just talked to me," I said.

I shifted in my seat as everyone glared at me, and I knew what they all wanted.

"I introduced myself to her... she said my name, then asked why I was smiling. I had just been happy, so there was no reason for it. Then she said I smelled like a master, and then ran off. Or well, jumped away. She leapt off the roof," I explained.

"That's it?" Brandy asked, leaning closer to me.

I nodded. "Yeah. She didn't even tell me her name, even though I asked for it," I said.

"What did she look like?" Brom asked. He was standing with his sister near the door, and both were holding their spears.

"She was wearing thick jackets and a worn down cloak... she looked... somewhat normal, I think? I noticed she sounded as if she had large teeth, and she had large feet I think too," I said.

Several people who were listening looked away from me and shook their heads, sighing or cringing.

I was about to ask why they had acted such a way from what I said, but Gerald answered for me. He stepped out to the center of the group, in-between the larger tables and raised his voice, "She's definitely a predator. Merit, did you see her?" Gerald asked.

Merit shook her head. "She was gone by the time I reached the roof. I had run to find Vim first... maybe I shouldn't have. Vim had been heading to the roof as well, when I found him. I apologize, Renn," Merit said to me.

About to shake my head and tell her it was fine, Pierre stood from his seat. "Is Vim in pursuit of her now?" the mouse asked.

"Not sure," Merit answered for me.

"If she was on our roof, he is sure to know her scent now. Should we remain sealed inside until he tracks her down?" Wynn asked.

"At the very least we should stay alert and together. Depending on what she is, there's only a few of us capable of fighting such a predator," Magdalena said.

Most of the Society agreed, and I frowned.

They were treating her as an enemy. As if it was guaranteed.

"She hadn't seemed intent on hurting me," I said softly.

"Predators rarely do, Renn," Sofia whispered next to me.

"You said she mentioned a master?" Reatti asked.

I nodded. "She said I smelled like the master, but was about to say more... then she turned and ran off," I said.

"Probably sensed me. I was running behind Vim to the roof. Another mistake," Merit groaned.

Glancing at my friend, who looked devastated and fully blaming herself... I wondered what to say to her. She blamed herself for not coming to me first, instead of going to find Vim, and then in the same breath blames herself for coming at all.

"She might have sensed Vim," I said to her.

"Ha!" Liina scoffed at me, and several others smirked too.

"Not possible. She'd be a Monarch then," Brom said, also smiling a little.

I frowned as several others agreed, as if it was obvious.

Was it though?

I mean... yes... Vim lacked a scent. And was sneaky, and I rarely noticed him when he snuck up behind me or something but...

But...

I had been able to find him a few times, when looking for him. Like that time I had slapped him, when he returned with Lamp and her people. Though I had no idea how exactly I had done that. Maybe I had been following Brandy's smell, and just had known Vim would be with her when I found her.

"Still... What could she mean by master? A stronger predator perhaps?" Lawrence asked calmly. He was staring at an open book in front of him on the table. I couldn't see it entirely from this angle, but it looked like one of the normal ledgers the Bank used. The man was working even during this moment.

"It must be. If they smell like Renn, there's little doubt to what that could mean," Herra said with a shrug.

"It would also explain why it's her and none of us. A few of us would be classified as predators, based off our bloodlines, but we're not pure. Not as thick in the blood as she is. Her scent is probably the strongest of all of us," the pretty woman sitting next to Liina said.

Everyone nodded, agreeing with her. "Likely," Gerald said.

I leaned next to Brandy, and she raised an eyebrow at me. "Who's that?" I asked quietly.

"Jasna."

Oh. I did know her then. I had heard her name before...

It was a little surprising to see her for the first time, finally. She was pretty.

"I do not like predators, so I avoid your kind. You can take that as you wish," Jasna said, obviously hearing what had just happened.

Blinking at her, I was about to tell her that it was perfectly alright, but wasn't able to. Brom and Reatti startled, and stepped back from the door. Everyone's eyes in the room hurried to the door and watched as Vim entered.

He was soaked.

For a long moment, the protector's eyes scanned the room. I felt his eyes slide along each and every one of us, staring at us in the eyes as he made sure we were all here and safe.

"I have her scent, but it's light. Too light to pursue in this storm, since it'll risk you all. I don't smell or sense anyone else, but there's a very good chance there's more than her out there," Vim said after a second.

Brom coughed and nodded. "Renn did say she mentioned a master," he said with a point to me.

Vim's eyes returned to my own, holding me in place as I quickly nodded. "She said I smelled like the master," I repeated it again.

His eyes softened and he sighed, but said nothing.

"What's the plan?" Brandy asked, sounding unperturbed. She even had a smile.

"It's obvious that Renn is their target, for one reason or another. The best course of action would be to take her outside of the company building, away from you all. Once the storm passes. Maybe even outside of the city. To allow me to be there the next time they try to approach her," Vim said calmly.

"If we're misjudging Renn's importance to these individuals, you would simply be risking the rest of us. What if they're simply targeting her first since they assume she's the strongest, based off her smell? Planning to attack the rest of us once she's out of the way?" Herra asked. Although she spoke firmly, I noted she did not do so with anger or spite. She sounded genuinely worried.

I wanted to voice my opinion but knew better than to do so. Even if I was more than willing to be used as bait, especially so since I trusted Vim, this wasn't just me agreeing to risk myself.

The plan would risk them as well, and that meant I had no right to argue with their choice.

"That's true. Scent alone she'd be the one seen as the biggest threat," Wynn agreed, nodding his head quickly.

"It is possible..." Merit softly mumbled, as if not wanting to actually voice her agreement.

"If all of you stay hidden within, they will get desperate. Break in with force. I'll be here of course, but if there are several of them..." Vim tried to argue, but no one was listening. Or rather, no one felt his argument was worth listening to.

"I say we all stay safely inside the Animalia building. Vim is here, as are Merit and the siblings. Even Brandy is here. Between all of them, and the rest of us, we would be safest together," Gerald spoke up, raising his voice.

While everyone nodded and agreed; some very decisively, I watched as Vim's shoulders drooped just a tad. Nearly un-noticeably, yet they had. He was disappointed.

Yet...

"No one leaves the building. Stay in groups," Vim said, agreeing with their wishes.

"Agreed," Gerald nodded quickly... and so too did everyone else.

Once everyone agreed, the room got quiet... weirdly quiet...

Then I realized they were all staring at me.

Oh.

Right.

Voting.

"Agreed," I voted quickly.

Chapter 147: To Sit

"He's still there," the woman giggled to her friend as they headed away from me and down the hallway.

I ignored the two, not just because they were harmless... but because I was in no mood to even glance at the human women who kept walking past me, in an attempt to get me to talk to them.

"Wonder why Herra said he's taken?" the one not giggling asked.

"She's just trying to claim him," the giggling one whispered.

The two continued their gossip as they headed farther down the hallway, heading towards the bank. I was just barely able to block out their opinions of my face, and body. I wasn't in the mood to hear their compliments, nor their minor insults.

No mood at all.

Across from the hall the gossiping humans were heading down, was another. One that led to the depot. Behind me, somewhat smaller and plainer without rugs or paintings, was the hallway that led to one of

the Society Doors. They all met together, here where I sat, and before me was the biggest of them. The hallway that led to Gerald's office.

I could just barely make out his office down the hall. Thanks to the lanterns and the way the hallway angled just a tad, I was able to tell where it was simply because I knew where it was. The door opened inward into the office, so I wasn't able to see the door nor the door frame around it... thanks to us having built it recessed into the wall a little.

Such doors looked fancier, and was something not seen in this part of the world.

Taking a small breath, I ignored the scent of the one approaching behind me. Pierre walked up behind me slowly, and rounded me a little more than he really needed to. He nodded at me, and waited until I nodded back before he smiled and spoke, "It's been a long while since I've seen you on guard like this," he said.

"Hm... when was the last time?" I asked him.

Pierre frowned, as if surprised I couldn't remember. "Forty odd years ago, I suppose. When you brought Sally here," he said.

Ah. Yes.

"Sally," I nodded.

"Sally. Though... that is why I came to find you," Pierre coughed a little, and glanced around. Once he was sure no one else was nearby, or even within earshot, he stepped a little closer and lowered his voice. "Monroe passed away this morning."

I blinked, and although wasn't surprised at all to hear the news... I was still a little shocked.

Surprised because I had completely forgotten about that human, since so much had been happening lately.

"I see. Does he have anyone to handle his remains?" I asked. If not I would handle it.

"We can't leave, of course, so Lawrence has gotten a group of humans we can trust to handle it. He'll be buried next to Sally," Pierre said.

I nodded; glad... yet not, to hear it. He deserved to be buried by one of us, not people who didn't or couldn't understand what he had sacrificed. Let alone what his wife had given up, for him and all of us.

But it wasn't Pierre's fault, or anyone else's. They had voted, and that vote still stood as law.

No one was allowed to leave.

Well, technically I could. I was not bound by such laws... but...

That would defeat the whole purpose.

"Just figured you should know," Pierre said as he nodded.

"Yes. Thank you. I had said goodbye to him, not long ago. He paid his dues," I said.

Pierre nodded in agreement. "Him and Sally both."

Yes. They both had.

Pierre turned and left, heading back down the hallway he had come from. He really had come just to tell me the news.

As he left an older woman approached from the depot. She was carrying a small binder, probably ledgers headed to Lawrence's office. "Oh? Still sitting Mr. Vim?" she asked.

I nodded. "I make a good statue," I said.

She laughed at me as she passed me by, and headed towards the bank. I knew she'd not reach the bank however, and instead take a right not too far from here. To head down the stairs to reach Lawrence's office.

As she left, I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. An odd kind of movement, which drew my eyes to it.

I found Renn, just a small part of her face at least, as she peered at me from around a corner not too far down the hallway that led to the depot. She stared at me for a moment, and I noticed she was now wearing the leather hat Lellip had made her. Not a hat of the Animalia Company.

She didn't stare at me long, and turned away. She didn't step out into the hallway, which told me she had left.

That hadn't been the first time she had peered at me, but it was becoming more common.

I had been sitting here for a few days. Today was the third. She started staring at me from the end of the first.

Although she hadn't said it, nor had anyone else told me... I knew she was frustrated.

Renn most likely wanted to suggest to me that she wanted to be used as bait. To lure out the predator who was stalking her.

I couldn't however, even if I wanted to do so as well. I couldn't since they had all voted against it. No one here had been willing to endanger or sacrifice Renn for their own safety.

She hopefully didn't take it the wrong way, since it did not mean they didn't trust her. Far from it. It meant the opposite. It meant she was seen as a genuine, in full, member of the Society. She was as cherished as the rest.

Some time went by without anyone else walking down the hallways, and I watched a few people come and go from Gerald's office. Brom entered, and then left. He like his sister were now carrying their spears around at all times. It gleamed a little as he headed out of Gerald's office, heading back towards the main entrance lobby. The gleam told me he had been keeping it clean and possibly even polished.

He was odd like that.

A depot worker walked by, only nodding at me as he did so. I recognized him from the previous days I'd been sitting here. Out of all the humans who walked past me, he'd been one of the very few who didn't seem bothered or concerned over me at all. He either didn't care at all about what I was doing, or believed I was doing something particular. Maybe he thought I was being punished, or committing some strange audit.

"Want a real chair, Vim?" Brandy asked as she walked up to me. She had been walking with a pair of human women, but those two left us alone as they hurried to the bank.

"Why would I?" I asked. The small chair I sat on was more than fine.

"That's a footstool, not a real chair," she noted.

"It's working," I said.

"You look uncomfortable," she said.

"You're making me feel uncomfortable, if anything," I said to her. I felt fine. It was just a stool, but it wasn't a very low one. My knees weren't too oddly pointed while I sat, nor was it too small for me. I honestly felt fine sitting on it.

Brandy shrugged at me. "Fine. Gerald received a formal letter from a small guild of southern merchants declaring economic war. They plan to outbid our guild in any and all opportunities on shipping spices or ores from the south dunes," Brandy said.

"Those people will pour out their treasuries to win such a war," I told her.

She nodded. "They would. And will. I plan to intentionally ship as much ores as I can to force their bankruptcy," she said.

I wanted to glare at her, but instead stared down the hall that she had come from. To Gerald's office. Renn had walked into the hallway for a moment, but then hurried into Gerald's office.

"Did we not a few years ago eliminate a few merchant families from the dune kingdom?" I asked her.

She nodded and frowned. "We did. About... well, almost twenty years ago I guess. Why?"

"They remember that stuff, Brandy. Those people down there have long memories. If you destroy too many families, rightfully or not, the kings and lords of that nation will begin to notice. They won't wage war with coins," I warned her.

Brandy smirked at me, and shifted a little. For a tiny moment my eyes left the hallway in front of me, to her. I didn't like that smirk on her face, it only meant trouble. For me, mostly.

"What?" I asked her. Nothing I had said had been wrong.

"You're right. Like always. I just wish sometimes you wouldn't be so..." she shrugged, as if not wanting or sure on how to finish her statement.

"I wasn't saying not to do so, Brandy. Just a level headed warning, was all," I said.

She nodded. "I know. I'll bring your warning up to Gerald and the rest. You are right... We also destroyed a few others not too long after we made this place, too. Remember those ships? The red ones?" she asked.

Yes. I did now. "Even more reason to solve this war peacefully," I said.

"Possibly. I'll sit with them and we'll talk about it. Though... you had done most of that one, Vim. What had it been? Five ships?" She asked.

Seven. "Who can remember?" I lied.

"Sure, sure... Also, not to change the subject too much, but did you know Renn and Merit have become close with one another?" Brandy asked.

"I have. Or well, I suspected as much. Merit's seemed oddly protective of Renn," I said.

Brandy nodded as she crossed her arms. A feat, considering her chest. "Indeed. Wonder how she did it. Merit still won't talk to me unless needed."

"You tried to sell her to a king, Brandy. You can do such things with me, but most others would find that very troubling," I said.

She smirked and waved at me, as if I had said something silly. "Please Vim! I'd not get anything for you, so why bother trying!"

I smiled and nodded, though I had somewhat hoped to have finally heard an apology from her instead. Should have known.

"Hm... Well, I'll go back to work. Don't collect too much dust, Vim, else the humans will start dusting you too," Brandy said as she stepped away.

"Dust. Sure."

As if.

After Brandy left, I noticed Renn peering at me from Gerald's office. She frowned at me, and before I could smile back at her she stopped leaning out into the hallway and went back into Gerald's office.

I huffed, and wondered what she was doing. It was adorable, and made me want to go up to her... but I couldn't. I'd not leave this seat until...

Well...

"Thirsty?"

I blinked and turned my head. A young woman, in the black attire of a banker, was holding out a small cup to me. She had a tinge of a red blush on her dark skinned face, and I gently smiled and took the offered cup. "Thanks," I said as I took what seemed to be fresh juice.

Her blush deepened, and before I could say or do anything more she turned and ran off. Her flat shoes sounded odd on the rug she ran down, as she headed back to the bank.

Watching her go, I wondered why humans were so odd sometimes.

Looking into the cup, I took a small sniff before drinking it. Not that I really doubted the woman, but...

"She's a newer hire. A family hire. Her mother had worked under Sofia for many years."

As I took a drink, I turned to Lawrence. He had a familiar binder tucked under his arm, and was standing next to me with a frown.

"Hard to hide our people, Lawrence, when you allow multiple generations to work amongst us," I warned him.

"She's one of the good ones. You very likely don't remember, but you and Sally had saved her mother. When she had first joined us. Likely the reason she uh... well," Lawrence shrugged, but I knew what he was implying.

"I see..." I tried to remember who he was talking about, but couldn't. Sally and I had saved her mother? Likely. Sally saved a lot of humans... and I had been alongside her on a few of those instances.

It wasn't often our kind actively tried to save and help humans. It was why I tried to support those who did, since it was rare.

"Renn reminds me of her. Though, not as pretty. But that might just be my own opinion," Lawrence said.

Raising an eyebrow at that, I wondered what he found unpleasing about Renn. Sally had been beautiful, but I'd not put her above Renn in any fashion.

"Rather than wanting to save all humans, I'd more so say Renn likes to simply help those she can when she can," I said.

Lawrence nodded. "Definitely. Part of the reason I came to find you. All of the eastern women are now at the Eastern Embassy," he said.

The little cup in my hand made a weird noise as I squeezed it a little too tightly. Thankfully it didn't break or shatter. It was just a common cup, found in any of the break rooms inside the company, but it was still half full.

"Already?" I asked. Had it not just been a few days ago the small group had left?

Lawrence nodded. "Lamp and the rest came back this morning, they were very adamant that the embassy was safe. Lamp however, made it very clear to me and Renn that she'll be back. As soon as the rest of the girls are situated, she will return. She might also bring a few others with her, by the sounds of it," Lawrence said.

I sighed.

"Oh? I thought you'd be glad to hear it," Lawrence said.

"I should be, shouldn't I?" I wondered.

"Yet not. Why?"

"Humans are heavy baggage. Especially for those like Renn. Like Sally," I said.

"Ah..." Lawrence nodded, fully understanding.

Staring at the liquid in my little cup, I wondered what I could do or say to Renn to keep her from becoming too attached to Lamp and her people.

Maybe that was why Renn was staring at me lately. Maybe she wanted to come up and talk to me about Lamp and the rest.

"We need those kinds of humans, Vim. Especially here," Lawrence said softly.

I nodded. "I know. How could I be upset over finding those we can call friends?" I asked him.

"Upset? You? Vim... please, don't insult yourself. When's the last time you actually got upset at humans?" he asked.

"Just now?"

Lawrence scoffed. "Sure. Even though they still live, and my shoes aren't soaked with blood. Sure, I believe you."

I rolled my eyes as I took another drink. Did he think I hated humans that much? Sometimes I did, but lately not.

"Honestly I have more pressing concerns," I said after I drank the rest of my cup.

"Yet, Vim, the world goes on. Danger or not," he said, and then held out his hand.

Staring at his open palm, I sighed and then handed him my empty cup. He took it carefully, as if it was precious.

"Thanks, I suppose," I told him.

"Hm." Lawrence nodded, and then turned and headed down the main hall.

While Lawrence left, Tosh walked up to me. I sat up a little straighter as he walked towards me, and I wondered if...

He stepped up to my left, and with his blank eyes... while staring lifelessly at the floor before him, he reached over and patted me on my shoulder.

Staring at his blank expression, Tosh's hand slowly left my shoulder... falling limply to his side, and then he walked onward. Heading behind me, down the hall towards the society door.

As he walked away, I couldn't help but smile.

So he was making progress.

Good.

Even if it would take hundreds of years, I'd be more than willing to wait to talk to my old friend.

Feeling a little happy over Tosh's little act of compassion, I sat alone and without a word as the world continued on around me. People came and went. Workers hurried past. Some tried to talk to me, others ignored me. A few Society members went by, smiling or nodding at me, while others stopped for a moment to tell me about stuff that had happened. Things like the king of Lumen coming into the bank again, asking about Renn. Or the depot having to shut down because a horse actually went limp, and had to be hauled away.

The day continued in such a fashion until the dreary, dark world outside became even darker. The rain had stopped, but the thunder clouds still remained. Looming over the city threateningly. But the night was here. The wind was picking up, and the hallways were starting to darken.

As workers entered the hallways, to light the lamps and lanterns, Merit walked out of Gerald's office. She headed straight for me, and I frowned as she approached.

She looked upset...

And Renn was now staring at me again, as she peered out of Gerald's office at us.

They had all been in there? All this time? Merit too?

Merit really had taken a liking to Renn.

As Merit got closer, I realized she was glaring and frowning at me. She really was upset.

Brandy had wanted to know how Renn had done it... well...

Me too.

Chapter 148: To Uncomfortably Sit

Merit looked tiny in front of Vim, which was funny since Vim was sitting on a rather small stool. It made him look uncomfortable, thanks to how low he was.

The two were talking, and I noted the way Merit stood. She had her hands on her hips, and her skinny arms were pointed oddly... as if she was trying to make herself appear as big as possible as to intimidate Vim.

She seemed to hate him in a way, even though her hate wasn't a true hatred. She just seemed to not like him much.

Stepping back into Gerald's office, I glanced at Brandy. She was the one sitting behind Gerald's desk, and she was reading a report. Gerald was sitting in one of the chairs before his own desk, also reading a report. They were going over some kind of trade route log from the south. Something to do with the southern merchant guild that had declared an economic war against us.

Warring with coins. Such a strange thing.

"Is there really no way I can convince everyone? I'm more than willing to do it," I said as I stepped back into the room.

Gerald shook his head as he lifted a paper, to look at something written on the other side. "Not going to happen Renn. The Society was formed exactly to stop such self-sacrifice. Before the Society existed, most of us had to sacrifice family and friends to those who ruled us. A few of us here remember that era, so the idea of using you as bait or sacrificing you is... well..." Gerald shivered, and I could tell it actually bothered him.

That meant he was one of the ones from that era. Like Brandy, and Merit.

I couldn't imagine being so old, even though I should be able to. I was old myself, in human terms. If I was lucky enough to live long enough... would I too think back to today and speak of a time that no one remembered? Would the culture and world in the future be so different than it is today? What could it possibly be like? It was hard to imagine the world being... different. How did it happen? How did one adjust?

Or was that the entire point. Most couldn't adjust. Thus our few numbers.

"Just give up on it Renn. Too many here like you too much, even if they'd be able to stomach it," Brandy said.

"A few don't seem to like me much," I noted as I walked over to the couch as to sit down. It was a silly action, since I knew I'd stand up soon once again as to peak around the door to check on Vim and Merit.

"Yet they voted against sacrificing you. Anyone who would willingly vote to sacrifice someone doesn't belong in our Society," Gerald said.

Really?

Then why had Lughes and the rest so willingly given up on Amber?

Or was that not seen as sacrifice?

To me it somewhat had been.

They didn't want to endanger themselves, so they let her die. They sacrificed her, to keep themselves safe.

Was it just because she had been human? Was that really the only deciding factor? Or was there more to it?

"Still... What if they never show themselves? Until I leave again?" I asked.

"Then that is what will happen. Really Renn, you act as if you've never been in danger before," Brandy said with a small smile.

"It's not myself I worry over," I said. Danger? I've been hunted before, several times. I'd not tell them about it though.

"We know," Brandy said with a small laugh.

I was going to complain further, but Merit walked into the office.

Smiling at her, I watched as she sighed and walked to the couch across from me. She sat in it with an odd plop, as if exhausted. Sometimes her actions matched her appearance. Was it natural to her, or did

she act in such a way on purpose as to pretend to be what she looked like? To act like the child she appeared to be, at least in front of humans.

"Vim's confident it won't take long. He thinks in a few days they'll come back," Merit said.

"You disagree?" I asked her. She had a look that told me she did.

Merit shook her head. "He's probably correct. Predators, normal ones not like you and Vim, are very instinctual. Very basic. They're not too capable of planning in much depth. This woman is likely just like the many we've met before, since she ignored all the rest of us and focused on you," Merit said.

"Undoubtedly," Gerald nodded as he put the papers he had been reading onto his desk, and turned a little as to join us in the conversation.

"Do I uh... stink that badly, by the way?" I asked them.

Before I could get an answer, Brandy broke out into a guffaw of a laugh. Even Gerald looked away, as to hide his own chuckling. Merit however was the only one to only smile gently at me.

"You don't stink Renn. You're just... a real predator. And predators naturally give off a strong scent. It's a different scent. One that's actually not as strong as the rest of ours, but distinct enough to be noticed first," Merit pointed upward as she explained it to me, all the while Brandy wheezed and laughed some more.

"Several of you aren't prey, so why am I so different?" I asked, ignoring Brandy's weird snorts as she tried to contain herself.

"Simple bloodlines. Plus Renn, think about it. We've all been living here for years. Decades. Our scents are settled. You're a new addition. Your scent is the one that stands out, precisely because it is new," Gerald said, he even raised his voice to talk over Brandy's giggling and laughing.

Merit glared at Brandy, who was getting it under control finally. "Really Brandy, it's not that funny."

"Yes it is! She thought she stunk!" Brandy returned to laughing.

Merit shook her head, but I found myself smiling. I liked Brandy's laugh, and the way she seemed to let it completely take her over.

"For reference Renn, you smell like the forest. A deep forest. One soaked from long storms," Gerald said.

"Huh?" I perked up at that. Long storms? Forest? I did?

Merit nodded. "Yes. It's a soothing scent."

"Hm. It's not bad, though I'll admit I definitely notice it in passing when my mind is wandering. So it startles me, until I realize it's you and not something or someone else," Gerald said.

A long moment passed as I watched the three nodded in agreement; seemingly happy to say such things aloud and inform me it was the honest truth.

I had a smell that startled them? Until they realized it was me who they were smelling?

"Am I really... so different? I don't think of myself as being that different than any of you," I said.

"You're a calm one. Most predators are more susceptible to their emotions. Did you have any siblings Renn? Were any quick to anger or did you ever consider them unwise or foolish sometimes?" Brandy asked, her laughing was done but she still had a wide smirk on her face.

Thinking of my siblings, and even the rest of my family, I wanted to nod... yet... "A few. Some were... very wise. The kind of wise that scared me, sometimes," I said honestly.

"Oh? Interesting. Any of them still alive? They'd be perfect for our Society if they're like you," Gerald said.

I shook my head, and said nothing more.

The three went quiet, and I replayed memories in my mind.

The brothers who were brutes. The sisters who had been evil... yet I had pitied them for how they had suffered.

The moment I thought of my younger brother, and what I had found him doing, made me toss the memories away... blanking my mind for a moment.

That odd feeling of emptiness filled me, and I realized I had drifted in my head a little too long. I blinked, and glanced around. Looking around, I found that the room was still quiet. Only Merit was staring at me, and I realized I had probably just now had a very awkward expression on my face. Thanks to the memories that I had just re-lived.

"Vim's gone three days now without a meal. Why not go ask if he'd like something to eat?" Merit then asked me, before I could say anything to break the odd silence myself.

Shifting on the couch, I recognized the very kind offer to excuse myself. Merit didn't like Vim. She didn't care if he starved or not... if Vim even could starve. She was simply offering me a chance to politely leave without being weird; since I probably just had a horrible expression and they were now concerned for me.

"Okay. Though he seems to not care much for my cooking," I said as I stood from the couch. I really didn't mind showing them all a sad look, but maybe it was best to accept her gentle offer.

"Ha!" Brandy went to giggling, but I ignored her and the rest as I left the office.

Walking into the hallway, I paused a moment when I found Vim was talking to another. I recognized the woman, dressed in the attire of an auditor who worked under Lawrence... but I wasn't able to remember her name. Which bothered me. Maybe I hadn't been told it, or overheard it. Yet her face was definitely familiar... the kind of familiar that made me feel as if I should know her name.

Slowly approaching, I listened intently to their conversation. She was asking about him. She wanted to know what department he worked at, and why she hadn't seen him before. Vim was gently answering her questions, with a strangely kind tone. One I usually only heard him use when talking to one of us, those of us in the Society. It was odd to hear him use it for a human, especially one who undoubtedly didn't belong to the Society since she didn't know who he was.

"I see... Will you be sitting here long Vim? What about during dinner?" She asked.

"Dinner? Well I suppose she'll be the one making it for me," Vim said as he pointed at me.

Stopping once more, I froze when the woman turned and frowned at me. Then the realization of what he was implying dawned on her, and her pale face became a pink shade of red.

"I see! That's good! I uh... um... Sorry, then!" she said and then turned, nearly tripping over her own feet as she hurried away. She ran down the hall to my right, passing me with her head hung low.

Feeling bad for her, I sighed as I walked up to Vim. "Why make me the bad guy?" I asked him.

"You're a guy?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Frowning at him, I wondered if maybe he had simply been annoyed with her. He was definitely annoyed; I had seen it since he had sat down. He wasn't fidgeting or looking around wildly... but it was there. In his face. In his eyes.

He didn't look bothered or concerned, but he was.

But I knew the source of that frustration wasn't the humans and workers bothering him. It was something much more serious. Something far more deadly, and important.

He seemed to believe he had failed already, somehow. Though I wasn't entirely sure if he had or not. He likely could have grabbed my supposed stalker already, if he had been a little more active... but was that really the right thing to do? She hadn't really seemed intent on hurting me...

"Who was she?" I asked him as I stood in front of him. I did my best to not turn around and glance at the human woman, even though I wanted to. I could still hear her mumbling. She was chastising at herself, in a way that worried me. She was degrading herself for actually trying to talk to a man again, and was swearing to never do it again.

Hearing that made my heart hurt. It meant Vim's rejection had been rather brutal for her... and likely not the first.

She hadn't been ugly, not in the least, so why...?

"She works under Lawrence. She said her name was Blaire," he said.

Blaire. I'd need to find her later. To talk to her. I wasn't really sure what I'd talk to her about or why I wanted to do so... but...

Vim tilted his head at me, and I realized we were almost eye level now. In fact I was probably a slightly bit taller, even without my ears. That stool he sat on really was small. "Was she a friend of yours? I'll apologize if she was," he offered to me.

"I'd like her to be one," I said.

"Really?"

I nodded.

Vim tilted a little, as to look past me. His frown deepened, and I wondered if she was still in sight. Probably was. Humans couldn't move very fast, especially the younger women while wearing those odd heel shoes. These hallways had thick rugs too, which made it even more difficult.

"May I ask why?" he asked.

"I feel responsible. You used me to hurt her heart," I said.

"Hurt her heart... Renn, I had simply turned down her invitation to have dinner together. It happens often, it's not that big a deal," Vim said.

"For her it had been," I said. Had he not heard her?

Vim's shoulders lowered a little, as if he was suddenly dejected. "You heard her whispers," he said, knowingly.

I nodded. "I'd have been surprised if you hadn't been able to," I said.

"She'll get over it Renn. It's not like I'm that charming in the first place, plus that was the first time we've ever talked. It's not as if I was some ex-lover or something," he said.

"I'm sure. But..." I wanted to argue with him, but wasn't sure why. It was obvious she'd get over it. She'd try again, and would find someone. It was very rare for humans to not find partners. Yet...

"Does it bother you so much because I had used you as an excuse...?" Vim asked me.

"I think that's most of the reason, yes," I said as I thought deeper about it.

"And here I'd thought you'd smile and stick your chest out, or say something to cement it," Vim said, and then sighed.

"Ah... well..." Honestly I probably would have, if she hadn't gotten the hint. I would have definitely done something like it, had she not gotten so stung by the indirect rejection.

Vim smiled at me, and I realized he read my intentions clearly. Chances are they had been visible on my face since before he had even pointed at me. I had been upset to find him talking to her, after all.

"I think I'm possessive," I said as I realized it. It was odd to realize that I was. I had never thought myself someone who would get upset over something so simple. But that was likely because I had never cherished something very deeply before.

Like my little blue box, that held my nail supplies. It was so silly and simple, but I cherished that thing with a strange level of affection. An almost worrying level.

Would I be the same way if Vim was mine? Was it my nature? A predator nature? Or my personality?

Was it something that would turn Vim off?

"Just now realizing it?" He smirked as he watched me process the realization.

Giving him, and myself, a shrug... I glanced around for another chair or stool. There of course wasn't one... and I had a few places in mind where I could go and get one, but decided against it. I simply stepped a little closer to him and went ahead and sat down. Right in front of him.

"What are you doing Renn?" Vim asked as I sat down on the thick rug, right in front of Vim, right in the center of the intersection of hallways. The rug was actually a little worn down here, probably thanks to the increased foot traffic, but it was still thick enough and soft enough that sitting on the ground was actually not that bad at all.

"We need to talk," I said to him.

"Take the stool, Renn. I can stand," Vim said as he started to do so. But I stopped him with a wave and shake of my head.

He glared at me as I leaned back a little, as to relax. Yes... this rug would do.

"They won't let me be used as bait as to lure the girl out," I said.

"They voted on it. They said no. Each one did," Vim nodded.

"Why can't we just do it? I'm okay with it," I said.

"They voted. Voted no. End of story," Vim said, a little firmer this time.

"But Vim..."

"No buts. Not even your nice one can change what happened. You either accept the rules of the Society or you leave it. There's no picking and choosing what rules you obey and don't," Vim said.

I rolled a little, as to cross my legs and sit a little more comfortably. Doing so, thanks to how I sat in front of Vim, made me remember of the long nights I had sat with my siblings listening to one of my grandparent's stories when younger. In that cave.

Maybe I should have taken the stool. The rug was soft, but for some reason it was starting to get uncomfortable.

"You like my butt?" I asked him. I have caught him staring at it sometimes, but it was hard to tell if he was staring at my rear or my tail when he did so.

"I'll enjoy kicking it if you keep arguing with me or them about using you as bait," Vim said.

Sighing, I nodded. "Fine. But I want you to know I'm not happy about it."

Vim and I sat in silence for awhile, and that silence continued until a pair of workers entered the hallway from the depot. They stopped talking as they approached, and I ignored their weird stares as they walked past us, heading to the bank. It didn't take them long until they started to whisper to each other, wondering what the heck we were doing.

"Not going to tell me to get up and stop attracting attention?" I asked Vim as the two depot workers left earshot.

"You attract attention just by breathing, Renn. I've learned to accept that," he said.

Tilting my head at him, and the soft smile on his face, I decided to interpret his words as a compliment. That smile wasn't the one he wore when he teased me, but instead when he was being serious.

"You've been attracting attention too, you know? The whole company is talking about the strange man on the stool," I said. Most of the building was talking about him, in one form or another.

"I'm forgettable, Renn. You're not," he said, as if to argue with me.

"I'm not?" I asked. Really?

He sighed but said nothing as he glanced down the hallway that led to the bank. I turned just enough to glance down it out of the corner of my eye. Someone was approaching.

"Merit wanted me to ask what you wanted for dinner. I'll cook it for you," I said.

"I'll eat once I've caught the one hunting you," Vim said.

"What if it takes days?" I asked.

"It's already been a few. What's a couple more?" he said with a shrug.

"Even I can't go too long without food," I said. I wasn't entirely sure how long I could go... but once I had starved when younger. It had only taken a few weeks and I had become weak. The pain had been enough to make me desperate.

"I'm a little sturdier than you, Renn," Vim said gently as the one walking towards us approached. It was a woman; she wore a fancy suit similar to what Sofia wore.

"Do you remember me Vim?" the woman asked as she stepped up to us.

"No," Vim said simply.

Glancing at him, and the eyes that stared straight at me and was ignoring the woman who now was smiling softly at him... I wondered if he had just lied.

"Figured. You saved my life, a long time ago. I work under Sofia. I heard you were making a spectacle of yourself, so I came to thank you... since I'm always busy when you show up and never get the chance to. You'll probably forget it, but my name is Clair Lightenfoot. I'm married now, I have two children. Both will be working here at the Animalia Guild soon, and will hopefully do so their whole lives," Clair said to him.

Glancing at her, I blinked softly as I realized what she was saying.

She knew who, or at least had an idea of what, Vim was. And she was trying to thank him, not just with words... but...

Vim turned a little to look at her. He studied her for a moment, and I held my breath... until he smiled softly.

"Clair Lightenfoot. I'll make sure to check on you from now on when I visit. What're your children's names?" he asked.

She beamed him a happy smile as she stepped forward and held out her hand. He took it gently, and they shook hands. "Sing and Song. No... sadly they don't sing very well at all, but they had screamed and cried something fierce when they had been babies," Clair said.

Vim smirked and nodded. "Singsong. Introduce me to them next time," he said.

"I will!" She blinked watery eyes as she nodded and stepped back... as if staring at her hero.

Well... maybe he was.

After a few moments she turned and looked at me and smiled. "I'm Renn," I introduced myself. I simply waved at her, since I was sitting down.

"Yes. I saw you with Sofia the other day, learning the ropes. Will you be staying here or...?" she tilted her head at me.

So she was a member. At least, in a way.

"Not likely. I'll be back though," I said.

I ignored Vim's look as she nodded, and then looked one last time at Vim. "Thank you again Vim... I know it probably doesn't mean much, and you probably don't even remember... but I really mean it. I promise I'll continue earning the life you earned me," she said to him.

Vim looked into her eyes, but only nodded. She nodded back, and then with one last nod to me she turned back around and headed back towards the bank. This time walking with a little more surety in her step as she did.

Once she was far enough away, I glanced at Vim.

"That was beautiful," I told him.

"Yet no tears in your eyes," he said.

"Weird huh?" I agreed, and rubbed my eyes. As I did, sure enough, a little bit of wetness was left on my hands.

Staring at the slight bit of gleam on my finger and hands, I smiled at them. Maybe I was maturing a little... something like that would have shocked me far more than it had not too long ago.

Or... maybe I was just being overwhelmed, by all the drama recently.

Lamp and her people. Vim leaving and coming back. The embassy... the many new friends, and city... the stalker...

I sighed at myself. Yes. A lot has happened, and was still happening.

"I don't remember, by the way," he then said.

"Hm?" I looked up at Vim.

He nodded to the hallway that led to the bank. "Clair. I don't remember saving her."

"Oh. Huh... really? It had to have been one of the last times you were here. She wasn't that old," I said. Maybe mid thirties?

"Yet I don't. Sofia probably knows, however," Vim said.

"I see..."

How odd. Vim changed people's lives so easily, and because of how easily he did it... he barely noticed when he did.

It was like he some kind of giant. So big and massive, that even a single footstep could change the world.

The thought made me frown, but I found it very interesting. It was such an apt way to describe him. A surprisingly good way.

It wasn't just his strength either. He did it with not just his strength, but even simple actions... or words. He changed people's fates, their entire lives, with a whisper. Or at least, he could.

"Now what are you thinking?" Vim asked me.

"That you're like a giant," I said honestly.

"A... a giant?" Vim frowned at me.

I nodded. "A giant."

"I see... well I'm not very tall. I'm barely any taller than you are, Renn," he said.

"I know. It's weird. You're not much taller, yet when I think of you I feel as if you're huge. Sometimes I feel like I have to really strain my neck to look at you," I said.

"Well, you are sitting on the floor," Vim suggested for a reason to explain it.

Smiling at him, I nodded. "I am huh!"

"You are. Why are you sitting there, Renn?"

Leaning back, I smiled up at my friend. Merit looked down at me, and I was surprised... or well not really... that she wasn't much taller than me while I sat and leaned back as I was.

In fact...

Sitting back up straight, I smiled and did my best to not let the realization that I was still taller than she was while sitting down to not show on my face.

"You should know by now that she's odd," Vim said to Merit.

"Of course I do. But really... Get up Renn, the floor's dirty here," Merit said.

"It's not that bad," I said and glanced at the rug I sat on. It was worn down and a little darker in color than the rest... thanks to the dirt and grime, but it wasn't that bad honestly. Nowhere near as bad as it really could have been, or should be. It was probably not too old. A year or so maybe?

Merit sighed and shook her head.

"You tell her," Vim said.

"Why don't you?" Merit asked.

Vim gestured at me, as if just by looking at me Merit could discern the reason for his inability to do so.

She gestured at me too, in a very similar fashion.

"Rude," I said.

The two smiled, and I enjoyed the sight of it. Usually Merit was glaring or frowning at Vim, so it was nice to see her smiling near Vim in such a way.

"Everything's fine by the way. I just spoke to Brom and Reatti. All's well on all fronts," Merit told Vim.

"So it is," Vim said.

Merit stepped closer, and her finger she poked me in the shoulder. "You were supposed to get him food," she said firmly. Or well, as firmly as her voice would allow.

"He said he isn't hungry," I said.

"I'm not," Vim said.

"Just make him slop. Go find the oldest fruit you can, mash it up with dried leaves and old dirt and pour stale water in it too. That'll be enough for him," Merit said and nodded, crossing her arms and seeming pleased with her idea.

"Pickle that and let it ferment for a few hundred years and that'd be a tasty treat," Vim said, also nodding and crossing his arms.

Merit's eyebrows met as she frowned at him. Her frown quickly turned into a glare, just because she could do it.

"Do you like fruit drinks Merit? I'm in the mood for one," I offered her a chance to permit me to go to the kitchens in the society houses to procure said drinks.

"Actually I don't... but I'll have some wine while you have your juice," Merit said, smiling at me.

"A fair deal. What about you Vim? Not hungry, but surely a drink?" I asked him.

I expected him to either smirk and agree, or wave me off... but instead...

"Vim?" I said his name with a little bit of worry as I stared at the man who had a sudden look of confusion.

Then he turned his head, looking behind him.

Then Vim stood.

I sat up straight, and my ears also became firm as I realized something was wrong.

Merit turned, and both Vim and Merit looked towards the Society Housing. Down the hall past the stool, and... slightly...

Studying them as they both stared upward, I tried my best to hear or sense whatever it was they did.

I heard far off voices. Echoes of people. I could even hear clanks and banging from the depot, although it was muddled greatly thanks to the distance. I could smell not just paper and ink, but the weird smell of the coins and money from the bank. I could smell people. Humans. Our kind. Merit. Food being cooked and prepared elsewhere... a baby not far from us, probably at the entrance lobby.

Yet I couldn't hear, smell, or see anything wrong. Nothing to warrant the two of them acting the way they were.

Then without a word, Vim darted down the hallway. Running away so quickly, I actually flinched at the sudden burst of movement.

In a blink he was gone, rounding a hallway.

Hurriedly standing, I hesitated. What did I do? What do we do? Tell others? Follow after him?

"She's here." Merit turned around, hurrying behind us. Likely back to Gerald's office.

Chapter 149: Stalkers, Predators, Hunters, and Vim

Finally.

Coming to a stop before the stairwell, I stared up the dark staircase at the door to the roof. The lamps within the stairwell, and around it, were unlit. This area wasn't frequented often, especially not by humans. It was the same door Renn and I used often to lead to the roof, where we sparred.

I studied the iron door at the top of the stairwell. It was dark and dim, thanks to the iron it was made of... but also because of its age. It wasn't as heavy as the ones that sealed the houses the society members lived within, but it was still not something a normal human could easily mess with.

It also only opened outward, and couldn't be opened right now... since there was a metal bar latched firmly across it. It was locked and sealed, with the bar sliding into steel support beams on either side of the door's frame.

The thing clunked again, as whoever was outside tugged a little firmer on it. I could hear her. Just beyond the door. She was mumbling to herself, and her feet were scraping the rooftop tiles, likely because she was trying to find her footing as to force the door open.

Only reason she hadn't popped it open yet was because she was trying to not make much noise. She was trying to break in quietly, without being noticed. Likely might have accomplished it, had she been a little more...

I stepped forward, quietly stepping onto the first stair step. Before I took another step upward, I hesitated.

If she had been more than she was... no one would have heard her break in.

Yet we had. Merit had too. Though she might have only noticed because I had done so, and thus alerted her to pay attention.

Whoever it was... was definitely a predator... so...

So why were they seemingly so clumsy? And why was she trying to break in so quietly too?

Predators who hunted were rarely this careful. They were usually too proud, too confident in their own prowess.

Taking a small breath, to smell her... I realized I smelled someone else.

Liina. She was nearby. Not in the hallway, but close. Maybe she was coming here, because she had heard something.

Not good.

Discarding all of my worry, and confusion, I rushed forward.

Leaping up the stairs, I bounded up the steps and didn't stop. In fact, right before I reached the door... I increased my momentum. I leapt forward, with even more force, and rammed the door.

Slouching forward a bit, I rammed the door with my shoulder. I hit the door, and the metal bar that held it firmly in place, and then I heard the entire door pop off its hinges and door frame.

The door shot outward, out into the afternoon day. It flew outward with such force; it cracked and slammed into the wall it had been attached to. It made loud sounds as it bounced off the wall, and broke off the rest of the way and skidded away onto the ceiling nearby.

I ignored the door though, as I stared at the one flying backward.

The door hadn't hit just the wall and floor. It had hit her too.

A loud scream of pain and shock filled the air, and my ears, as I watched a bundle of cloth flap wildly as it rolled along the rooftop. Arms and legs sprawled outward in all directions as the bundle thumped and skidded, all the way to the other side of the roof... impacting one of the larger planters. One that housed a tall skinny tree. Probably some kind of mangrove.

The woman released a weird sound as her helpless flailing body impacted the planter. It broke, which was a slight surprise. That thing hadn't been made of wood, but brick. It crumbled around her, as both brick dust and the soil poured onto her...

Then she went still.

Stepping out onto the roof, I surveyed the rooftop real quick. I glanced left and right, above me and behind.

There was no one else here. The garden was empty. The roof, empty... the door I had just come from was now several feet away, and a part of the wall and doorframe had broken off.

I flinched at the sight of the now missing door. I'll need to fix that, and soon. Leaving that door so open while there were enemies nearby wasn't the best thing to do.

A tiny mistake.

One I'd rectify shortly.

Looking back to the woman who I had slammed the door into; I was a little surprised to find her still lying there.

I had honestly expected her to at least get to her feet while I had looked around, for others... yet she hadn't moved at all.

Frowning at her, I wondered if she was still in shock. I had indeed put some oomph into that impact... and being hit by that iron door probably hadn't felt good at all. Plus she had rolled quite a ways and...

"Did I kill her?" I whispered at myself, and almost thought I had... until she let loose a very tiny groan.

A groan of pure pain. One that told me her lungs were struggling to inhale properly. She wheezed more than anything else.

Seems I'd done more damage than I had thought I would have.

Stepping towards her slowly, I studied the bundle of mess wrapped around her. She had many layers of old, rotted and worn, jackets and cloaks... but even beneath those was a mess. She looked like she had fur, and a thicker body than a woman should have. Not just a matter of fat, either. Her hips and waist was...

Yes. She had several non-human features. Her feet were far too big. Her legs thin, but her waist and hips were wide. It looked like her top half was more human, and her bottom half more inhuman. I could see clumps of mangled hair and fur too, mostly on an exposed forearm.

Taking a deep breath, I smelled the stink of the one who had hunted Renn.

She didn't just stink like a predator, but something else. Dirt. Grime. Gunk. Did she roll around in a cistern before coming here? Smelled like it. Though the stink might be from her clothes. She had wrapped her entire body in those rags, as if to hide her non-human features from sight. It was ineffective though, the extra layers only made her large feet and other parts more noticeable. Those rags were probably found in the trash, thus the smell.

"You have some nerve hunting those I protect," I told her as I approached.

Her exposed forearm shifted, and I noticed her feet tuck into herself. She was trying to gather enough strength as to get up. Yet was failing.

As she moved, clumps of dirt from the planter she had broken shifted... and then so too did the tree that had been planted within it. It made a small cracking noise, and then promptly fell upon her.

I focused my attention on her as the plant landed upon her. When the thin stalk and leaves hit her, she barely registered it. She twitched just a bit, but not by much. Not enough to concern me.

She wasn't faking it. She was injured. Hurt. Out of it, maybe even.

If that door's impact had done as much damage as it seemed, then she was likely similar to Renn and Brandy in terms of strength.

Though maybe not Renn. I knew her physical strength, but not how well she handled damage just yet.

Merit would not have been knocked out, but Brandy would have been.

"Gwuhh..." she groaned, and I nodded as I stepped up to her. I stepped close enough that some of the dirt that had collapsed onto her crunched under my feet, thanks to it having rolled off her earlier.

Her head shifted a little, and I waited a few moments... expecting a sudden attack.

Yet none came.

Bending down, I grabbed a hand-full of the slimy cloaks and jackets. Around the section of her shoulders. She shifted, but not by much... I hefted her upward, raising her to my eye level.

The tree rolled off her. As did the dirt. A few scraps of cloth and a half torn jacket also slid off her shoulder, and with as I raised her up... her hood fell off her head.

As I squeezed her clothes tighter upon seeing her face, she blinked and realized what was happening. Her orange eyes went wide, and then she screamed at the sight of me.

Her first instinct was to smack me. More a slap than anything else, she whacked me upside the head with what had felt like a thick fur paw. Her pupils narrowed, once she realized her blow had not fazed me.

She screamed at me, and her two paw-like hands grabbed my forearm. I felt her try to squeeze and gouge me with her nails, but I ignored that attempt too.

The moment she realized that wasn't going to work either, she sent out one of her huge feet.

Her kick landed squarely in the center of my chest. And it had been quite a kick too. My whole body jolted from the blow, and some of the cloth and cloaks I held in my grip tore as she tried to jump off and away from me, using the kick to do so.

I held her firm all the same.

For a tiny moment she fought with all her strength. Making noises and growls as she tried to free herself from my grip, most likely thinking that her kick would have been enough to get me to release her... but...

After a few solid seconds she hesitated, and her eyes became even wider as she looked down at me.

"I'm not one to flinch," I told her.

Her human face, adorned by fur all around her head, snarled at me as she then screamed and tried to kick me again. This time she sent out a flurry of kicks, one after another. Some hit my chest, others my face, but they all had one goal in mind.

To free herself.

Holding her firm, I paid keen attention to the way the clothes and scraps of leather held her in my grip. They were tearing and ripping... but she wasn't intentionally trying to make them do so. In fact she seemed to be in just as much a panic over her clothes ripping as she did my hold on her.

She could free herself from me, if she just slipped out of her jackets and coats. Yet she didn't.

Was she incapable of thinking that far ahead, or was there a reason behind it?

As she flailed around, trying to free herself, I studied Renn's stalker.

She was likely some kind of badger. She had rounded short ears on top of her head. Bear looking ones, not human. Her left hand was more human than her right, but both had fur and pads on her palms. She had thick and sharp nails, which were cutting my shirt but not my skin. Her huge feet were wrapped tightly in cloth, but I could see the paws there all the same. She had claws, but they weren't extended. Either she couldn't force out her claws, or wasn't really trying to hurt me.

"Why are you hunting her?" I asked the stalker.

This stalker was definitely a predator. And even more so a genuine non-human. There weren't many alive like her anymore, though it was odd how she seemed a little deformed. To have some parts human, and others not was normal... but such a thing was usually synced with the rest. Why was one hand human and the other not? That was an oddity.

She ignored my question as she continued to struggle.

"You'll answer me," I told her. I needed to find out what I could, before I killed her.

"No!" she screamed a real word finally, and the sound of it almost made me release her.

I didn't, though, and instead sent out my own blow.

Hitting her with my free fist, I felt my balled up fist connect with her stomach. One that felt oddly thin and small, although hard of muscle.

Her eyes bugged out a little, and she let loose a weird sounding cough, and went limp. Suddenly her grip on my forearm became negligible, barely noticeable, and she became heavier. Her clothes that had been ripping and falling off thanks to her thrashing became taught thanks to her going limp.

Shaking her a little, I stared into the now blank expression of the girl. She was about to throw up, but I ignored it as I studied her closer. She had a human face, but fangs and thick teeth. She had an under-bite thanks to her fangs, and she had fur all around her face and head, mixing with her human hair. It was black and brown, and spotted with white lines.

I didn't recognize her colors or face. If I did know one of her ancestors, I couldn't think of it off the top of my head.

It was moments like this that I wished for Renn's memory. Even if it meant I'd have to remember the bad stuff in such perfect detail.

Yet...

She wasn't old at all.

Probably younger than Renn. Maybe even by more than half.

"Let her go!"

Shifting, I quickly turned to look at the young voice that had just screamed at me.

Finding a small girl, who I also didn't recognize, I frowned at her.

She too was covered in those mismatched dirty clothes. Scraps. Where were they getting those old clothes? Some of those colors and designs were dozens of years old.

Yet her clothes weren't what bothered me.

Another.

More.

More danger. More enemies. More hunters.

More threats to those who I cherished and protected.

The small girl stepped forward, likely to say something else... but I didn't wait to hear it.

With a step towards her, I hefted the girl I still held who was now slobbering up blood and tossed her.

"Wha!" the smaller girl screamed in shock, and shuffled for a few seconds as she tried to comprehend what was happening. Before she could wrap her head around the situation, she was hit by the bundle of rags I had just thrown.

The two went rolling along the roof, and for a few moments the young girl cried out in pain and shock.

She sounded young. Too young. Even for our kind.

Either they were as young as they looked, or they were like Merit.

But...

Taking a small breath, I stopped myself from starting to care. I forced my own interest and worry for these predators down, since I couldn't allow such emotions and thoughts to enter my head.

They were enemies right now. Nothing more. Their appearance. Their traits... their truths, meant nothing.

They were the enemies of the Society. My enemies.

And enemies were meant to be eliminated, no matter the cost.

I stepped towards the bundle of dirty clothes, as the girl tried to unravel herself. Seemed the one I had tossed had gone completely still, but the one who had caught her with her whole body was fine. She was incoherently yelling for the other to get up, to wake up and...

Motion drew my eyes to the left. Back towards the door. At first my heart thumped, since it had looked like someone had rushed into the stairwell into the Society... but it had been the opposite.

Merit hurried out onto the roof, and with a huff looked around. She took in the surroundings, with her small but keen eyes.

Good. With her in front of that door, I'd not need to worry about anyone sneaking past me. Plus her running up that stairwell and onto the roof told me no one had done so already.

"Pulti! Pulti please wake up!" the girl screamed hopelessly, and it took a lot for me to not hesitate because of her screams.

She was screaming from the soul. From the heart. She wasn't just panicking, she was genuinely concerned.

That was not the scream of an enemy.

The young girl was crying, heaving even, as she shook the one I had thrown upon her. She was still somewhat stuck beneath her, by the looks of it. Her right leg was still under the other.

And...

I slowed my approach towards her, and realized she had feathers.

Her face was more human than the other had been. This one even had human ears... but behind those ears, and all over her head where her hair should be... were feathers.

Dull reds, mixed with light browns and tipped white. Feathers in abundance.

A bird. Like Lilly. Like Rapti, and Gerald. Like Crane.

"How rare," I whispered. Birds were so fragile. So delicate. That throw I had just done, that impact upon he catching her friend, could have killed her.

"Run away with her Fly!"

Turning my head, I frowned as my hand shot upward, open palmed. But not to grab the neck of the man rushing me, but instead to grab the sword he had swung down onto my head.

Catching the sword, the man's eyes went wide as I took in a deep breath.

I'd remember this man's smell. The smell of blood and organs. He had killed recently. He was lucky that I didn't recognize the smell of death upon him.

"What...!" the man groaned as he tried to pull free the sword I had just caught. I held it firmly in my grip, keeping it still. I held it by the middle of the blade, and held it firmly enough that it only wavered and shook a little as he tried to pull it free.

The sword was cheap. Made of bronze... yet it wasn't just sharp, it had been used. Some of the scent of blood came from it, not him.

Yet still I held it.

He groaned and his face quickly turned to one of absolute terror... as he realized he simply did not have the strength to pry the sword free of my grip.

Which was the truth. He was weak. Too weak for a predator... yet he smelled of death, which made no sense.

"What are you!" he shouted in fear.

To answer him, I squeezed my grip tighter... and tighter... Until the blade cracked. Until he released it in shock, and stepped away.

Keeping hold of the sword while he gaped in alarm, I squeezed the sword even harder.

Then it shattered.

As the cheap bronze sword shattered into dozens of pieces I held the man's gaze.

"I'm the protector."

Chapter 150: A Protector's Burden

Stepping out onto the roof, I paused behind Merit to take in the scene.

Off to our left, a young girl. Sobbing as she held a lifeless bundle of clothes. In front of us, near one of the large garden planters, was Vim. He was standing still, and had his back to us... because he was facing down a tall and lanky man.

A man who had just swung a sword at Vim. A sword Vim had caught, bare-handed, and broken with ease with his grip.

Another man was hurrying up behind the lanky one, and he also had a sword... but he looked unwilling to use it. He was staring at the sobbing girl to our left, with wide and concerned eyes.

"Fly!" the man shouted as he hurried up next to the lanky man.

Fly...

Looking to my left, I flinched as the sobbing girl tried to lift the bundle of clothes. She looked completely traumatized. Her face was a wreck, and the pretty feathers all over her head were ruffled and sticking upward.

"This isn't good..." Merit whispered.

I stepped forward, out of instinct, to head to the sobbing girl.

When I was about to round Merit, I had to come to a stop. Merit's small arm was blocking me. She held her arm out, to stop me. She didn't say anything but she did shake her head.

"But..." I whispered.

"Fly! Go help her get away, now!" the man with the sword shouted loudly, desperately, at the lanky man. The lanky man startled, and with a quick look around he nodded as he understood.

The lanky man rounded Vim cautiously... and surprisingly Vim didn't stop him. Vim kept still, watching the man as he hurried over to Fly and the collapsed girl who had been stalking me.

"Get up! Come on!" the man's shout sounded strained. As if in pain... yet he had run up right as I exited out onto the roof. Surely Vim hadn't hurt him yet?

"Shoot..." Merit mumbled, and I turned to see what was wrong.

The man who had ran up, with the sword, was now attacking Vim.

Vim sidestepped a swing, and for a few moments I held my breath as I watched Vim dodge the sword swings. Although the man was attacking Vim with what appeared to be his full strength and attention, Vim was effortlessly stepping out of the way of each attack. The man's sword swooshed and he grunted each time he missed.

"Damn!" the man cursed as he stepped closer to Vim, to try and stab Vim in the chest.

Vim didn't side-step, but he did not let the blade pierce his chest. He sent out a foot. A heavy, hard thud resounded throughout the air as Vim kicked the man. His foot landed directly on the man's hands, right where he held the sword.

A weird crunch filled the air, and then the man's sword flew off into the sky. Before the sword even landed, clanging harmlessly against the roof's tile, the man had glanced down at his now mangled hands and took a deep breath.

Then he released that breath, with a scream of pain and shock.

"Go! Grab him!" the young girl screamed, and I pulled my eyes away from the man as he wordlessly screamed while staring at his hands. They were already bruising and bleeding. Vim had crushed them with his kick.

The young girl was nearly impossible to see. She and the man had put my stalker, and the bundle of jackets she wore, onto the young girl's back and shoulders. She carried her effortlessly, telling me she had our strength. The strength of those not human.

She turned and hurried away, running away. As she did the man ran over to the one Vim had kicked. He grabbed his friend by the shirt, and dragged him away.

They all ran away, hurrying as fast as they could to the farthest edge of the roof. Heading towards the direction of the port and sea. Although they ran away with inhuman urgency... they hadn't ran so fast that Vim couldn't have stopped them.

While I watched them run off, I waited for the shock. The impact. The surprise... from Vim.

Yet none came.

Vim didn't stop them as I watched the young girl jump off the roof, jumping high into the sky... I watched as she and the woman she carried disappeared, falling to the street below. It was only a few seconds later that the two men followed. The man with the broken hands had snapped out of his shock enough to escape.

Once they were all out of sight... I finally looked back at Vim.

He was standing there, staring into the distance... seemingly...

Was he hurt? Surely not... he looked fine... and he had dodged those blows effortlessly. He had crushed that sword with ease, just as easily as he had crushed that man's hands.

Gulping at the suddenly quiet rooftop, I heard my heartbeat thumping in my ears. It reminded me I was still wearing my hat. I reached up to take it off, as to hear better.

Looking around, I focused to make sure no one else was around. My nose wasn't trustworthy right now... there was a bunch of weird smells. And not just the scents of those people, but there was now also blood... and rust... and dirt. Wet dirt.

A planter was broke not far from where Vim stood. How had that broken? One of the tall thin trees that had been in it was also broken, it and its leaves were scattered around it... It looked as if someone had torn it apart on purpose.

Merit sighed and stepped forward, away from me. I went to follow her, but did so slowly... since I could now hear the sounds of footsteps behind me. Someone was coming up the stairs.

Thanks to the sound of footsteps, I was able to remind myself to put my hat back on. Just in case a human came to see what the commotion had been.

Vim had made a lot of noise, breaking that door...

Pausing a moment, as Merit walked up to Vim, I stared at the broken door nearby. It had completely broken off the hinges, and the metal bar that was used to lock it was nowhere to be found. Had it flown off somewhere? The metal door was also dented, and bent oddly.

Had that been Vim or them? Something told me it had been Vim. Could I even do that? That hadn't been one of the steel doors, but it was still a metal one. And thick. The door was thicker than my forearm.

"Thank you, Vim."

My head darted to Merit and Vim. My eyes went wide as I watched Merit reach out and grab Vim's hand. He seemed to ignore her as she smiled gently up at him.

She looked small enough, young enough, to be his daughter... yet such a thought was ridiculous.

"I should have stopped them..." Vim said softly.

Merit shook her head, and her gentle smile became even softer somehow. She squeezed his hand, and I watched as his own hand started to curl a little. As if to accept her hand and her emotions. Her hand looked tiny in his.

"Thank you. For pitying them. For holding back your wrath, even if it was justified," Merit said to him.

I stepped forward, to join their conversation. To ask questions, and to support Merit. I wasn't entirely sure what had happened, or was happening... but I had a feeling it was something I could support.

He had spared them. He hadn't killed them, even though that should have been his job.

Before I could gather enough courage to open my mouth and speak, two people exited the stairwell.

Brom and Reatti stepped out onto the roof, their spears pointed and ready. They looked around hurriedly, scanning the rooftop together. I noticed how flawlessly they each took positions near the door, supporting one another.

They've done this before.

"Vim?" Reatti's voice was hard. Somehow it sounded scared, even though she didn't look it.

"They're gone. They ran away. Two of them were wounded," Merit said as she walked past me. She smiled up at me with that same gentle look as she went to Brom and Reatti, to tell them what had transpired.

As Merit went to tell them what happened, I went to Vim.

"Vim...?" I addressed him as I got closer. He looked tired. Exhausted. Yet he looked fine... even his hand, that he had used to grab the sword, looked unhurt.

"They had only wanted to save her. From me."

Blinking at his words... I realized he was staring at something. Intensely.

Looking to where he had been focused upon, I noticed the spot.

The place where my stalker had been, where the young girl had been sobbing as she tried to lift her up.

I hadn't seen what had happened before that. The girl had already been sobbing, and Vim had already been getting attacked, when I arrived. Merit had wanted to tell Gerald and the rest what was happening first, before letting us follow after Vim.

Now I wished I hadn't obeyed Merit, and had followed Vim from the beginning.

While staring at the spot, I noticed something.

Hurrying over to it, I bent down to grab the thing before the wind blew it away.

Grabbing the feather, I hesitated as I noticed the blotches of blood all around where it had been... and in fact, upon it.

The only reason the feather hadn't blown off the roof from the wind already, was because it had gotten stuck in a small pool of thick blood.

I gulped as I stared at the little red feather. It was dull in color... but yet I could see the beauty within it. It was about as long as my hand, and felt impossibly light.

Vim sighed, and I looked up to find him standing next to me.

For a small moment I stared into the sad eyes of the protector. Then, with great care, I handed him the bloodstained feather.

He took it carefully, holding it between his thumb and finger.

"She had been a child, I think," Vim said as he stared at it.

My eyes blurred as I realized what he meant.

He didn't just mean the one who had been sobbing. The girl with feathers. He meant the one he had hurt. My stalker.

I burnt the image of the Societies Protector's face into my mind. Into my heart.

It was a face wrought with grief and shame. Pure shame.

He had been protecting us. Protecting me... yet...

Yet why did he look as if he had just made one of the biggest mistakes of his life?

Likely because we hadn't actually needed protection.

Not in that way.

They had ran. In fear. In terror. I had seen it myself. Merit had seen it. Vim had seen it.

It had been why he hadn't pursued them. It was why Merit hadn't done anything either... why she had said what she had...

"Did you..." I whispered, but wasn't able to finish my question. Out of fear of seeing him cry.

After all, I knew he could. I had seen it before. Back in Ruvindale.

Vim gulped quietly, and then nodded.

He did. He might have killed her.

"I might have killed her," Vim admitted softly, quietly, almost so quietly it had just been to himself.

His words made my watery eyes drip, and then he handed me back the feather.

I accepted it as if it was as precious as his heart. I held it gingerly, with both hands... so I'd not disturb or break it.

Vim turned, slowly, and then headed for the stairs. While he did so Brandy arrived, with Herra.

As he walked away... I noticed no one tried to stop him. He walked past Merit and the siblings. He passed Brandy and Herra, who were hurrying to the others to find out what had happened.

Vim was strangely ignored as he headed back into the building. As he stepped into the stairwell... I noticed his shoulders slouch a little. As if he was about to sigh.

With his head hung low, the Societies Protector had done his job... yet at the same time, failed it entirely.