

Non Human 151

Chapter 151: A Painting He Remembers. A Bath She Desires.

Renn's room smelled like her.

I sat on one of the two chairs that her room had. The one that was used for the desk. The only other chair in the room was off in a corner, near the bed. It had a nightgown loosely draped over it.

The moonlight illuminated the room... a little too much for my liking. Thanks to the large windows, and the fact that she hadn't closed the drapes at all. Maybe she liked to stare out the window as she fell asleep.

Today had been a rough day. In more ways than one. And... my original plan had been to sneak in here and start the bath. The idea had been to get in and wait for Renn, but... well...

Shifting, I caused shadows to dance in the room. They bothered me, since they reminded me of how bright the moon was tonight.

Yet... the moonlight right now was something I was a little thankful for. It let me appreciate Renn's handiwork better.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes to not just spend a moment enjoying her scent... but to also calm myself.

I had come here to reward her. To give her what I had promised, since she had fulfilled my request in turn. And honestly... to relax a little. I was frustrated, and although wanted to be alone... knew better than to do so. And right now, Renn was the one I wanted to be not alone with.

Yet...

Opening my eyes, I glared at the reason I had chosen to sit on the chair in the middle of her room, instead of starting the bath.

I should have known this would happen.

I should have known this day wasn't done with making me feel horrible.

Renn had painted the thing I had asked her to. She had done it flawlessly too.

My memory was of course, not as perfect as hers. So I wasn't entirely sure if it really was an actual replica as the one I now remembered seeing at the Sleepy Artist... but there it was.

A small village. With fields of wheat and wooden houses with thatch roofs.

Looming over the village was a large Epoch Cross. It looked far too big to be real, but it was obviously symbolic more than literal. It loomed over everything in the picture, imposingly. The sun was setting in the painting, and had been painted in such a way that the dusk and burnt red sky from the setting sun made the cross look almost as if it was on fire.

The meaning was obvious. It represented the cleansing fire of the Epoch Laws. The laws where those undeserving and unwilling to bend the knee were burnt at the cross.

I couldn't recognize the village at all... but luckily it seemed like it wasn't too concerning for me. The village, and the scene, didn't have anything in it that I needed to panic over just yet.

It could be the past, or the future... but neither mattered much right now.

What mattered, instead of that painting which was resting over against the wall... finished and done... was instead the one now on the easel before me.

The half finished painting was strangely more concerning than this afternoon's events.

The painting of my old friend and his daughter.

Rungle and Stumble.

Renn had only finished about half the painting so far... Stumble was the only one finished in totality. Rungle who was mostly in the background of the painting wasn't even finished enough to notice. But I knew it was him. And not just because I'd recognize that scarred hand from anywhere.

Stumble had been sitting on his lap while this had been painted. On his knee, laughing giddily.

I took another deep breath, and this time I almost couldn't smell Renn as I did so.

She had drawn them perfectly. Nearly exactly as I had remembered them.

Stumble's little round ears. Rungle's gnarled hands.

Why... why was she painting them? How? Out of all the things she could have painted... she was painting my friends, and in the exact same way as I had seen them painted before.

Why?

But no. I knew why.

Renn was able to remember things to an excruciating detail... to the point of being able to replicate such an old painting with such perfect accuracy.

Did she have any idea what she had done? What was she was doing...?

I blinked watery eyes, and hoped she'd not come back any time soon.

I wanted to sit here for a little while longer.

Which was funny, since when I had first sat down I had wanted her to return immediately. To go and find her.

To grab her. To shake her. To yell at her. To ask her who she thought she was.

Opening the door to her room and finding Stumble smiling at me had shocked me.

I had not been expecting it at all. Especially since my mind had been so numb thanks to the events on the roof earlier.

How long had it been since I had been so shocked that I stumbled?

I smiled at my own thoughts. Stumble had made me stumble. She would have laughed at that. I could hear her giggling even now.

With my smile, a single tear fell onto my arm. I ignored it as I studied the smiling girl. She was smiling in the painting, and her smile made me remember the moment. The joke that Celine had said to make her smile like that. The huge smile on Rungle's face as I added to that joke with one of my own. My joke had been a... bad one. So bad that Stumble had looked at me with a weird look, and then had looked at her father as to find out why he was laughing so much. She hadn't understood my joke, but had wanted to. So she could share in her father's joy.

I missed them.

To think I had burnt their picture so callously. So thoughtlessly.

All of them. How many had been in that storage room...?

Hundreds. Hundreds of paintings, of hundreds of people... most of whom I'll never see again.

How many had Renn seen? How many could she replace? How many could she paint before her memory started to fail her?

Even if she could replace them all... Did it matter?

They were gone. And always would be.

Because I had burnt them. Because I had failed them.

Just like the woman this afternoon. Just like the two men. Just like that little bird girl.

I blinked and for a tiny moment I was back on the roof. Listening to the desperate cries of the girl. Hearing the stunned groan of the man as he stared at his now useless hands. Staring into the eyes of the lanky man, who saw death and only death before him.

A non-human... was staring at me as if I was a monster.

Me.

The man who protects them from the real monsters.

The door opened, and the sound of it made me blink. I was now back in Renn's room.

I remained seated, and still, as the door paused mid-open. I heard Renn's breath catch in her throat as she stopped. Luckily, I heard she was alone. I couldn't even hear any voices coming from down the hallway. Knowing the rest, they were all still together downstairs debating with one another. Trying to decide what to do. What to allow me to do.

That debate, those votes, had been why I had left and come here.

Why I had ran away, to find comfort in the oddest of places.

Luckily Renn had been alone. Me being in her room, alone, could be explained away... but not the painting I sat in front of.

The painting of the Epoch Cross could be, but not one of Stumble and Rungle.

Renn took a tiny breath, and for a small moment I waited for her to say something... then she stopped herself. After a moment she stepped into the room, and then quietly closed the door behind her.

Such a kind woman.

While staring at the painting, I thought of her expression this afternoon... and all through the night as she had listened to the Society in Lumen debate and argue. Over if they should release me upon those who attacked me, or try and save the members from my wrath.

She had looked like how I felt.

Renn stepped around me... walking slowly, yet confidently. She headed for the desk and put something down upon it. It sounded like wood... maybe a bowl or cup? I couldn't smell food or drink, but that wasn't a surprise. The room smelled strongly of paint, yet the only thing I could smell right now was her.

After she emptied her hands Renn turned to look at me. She stared at me for a moment, and then more moments passed... and she continued her silence.

Did she want me to say something first?

More moments turned into minutes... then even more... and just right as I was about to take a breath as to say something, the room got brighter.

She had lit the large lamp on her desk.

The smell of a small wick and match filled the room, momentarily blotting out her scent. I hated that.

Thanks to the extra light, my watery eyes became more apparent. To me... and likely her. I blinked a few times, to clear them.

Renn hesitated, and I knew it was because she had seen the tears that had fallen. Likely glistening in the lamplight.

"Rungle and Stumble," I told her, unashamed over the tears.

Renn went still... then once she realized I wasn't going to continue just yet, she went to untying her hat.

Why had she left it on all this time? We had all been in the houses since after the incident. She could have removed it a long time ago.

As she took it off, I heard the sound of her hair and the fur on her ears tear and pull. She pulled the pins out of her hair with the kind of force that I knew a human woman would have sniveled or flinched from. Yet she paid the pulled out hair no mind... even though she should. Her hair and ears were beautiful. She should treasure them more.

Once she put her hat away, onto a small knob on the large dresser next to her other hats... I nodded.

"He was a good man. A good friend. A wonderful husband and father. Stumble was... a joy. Her mother had died during her birth, yet her sacrifice had been worth it. Stumble had been the personification of all that is good in this world," I told her about them.

I had wept on finding their corpses. Especially when I had seen the way Rungle had tried to shield his daughter from the chaos that had fallen upon them. The way he had held her close, through it all. Burying them had been one of the hardest things I had done. They had been some of the first that I had genuinely cared for. They had been the first I had actually wept over.

They had been one of the first I had lost. The first I had failed so blatantly, and horribly.

"I had wept when I found them dead," I told her as the scene played out in my mind. Again. For the first time in years.

Renn gulped, and I blinked again. This time my eyes cleared up. I was a little proud of myself for being able to keep them dry.

"Should... Should I have not painted them?" she weakly asked me.

"I don't know," I answered honestly.

Her clothes rustled as she grabbed her arm. I looked away from the painting for the first time since she had entered, and I found her holding herself. She had teary eyes, as if she had taken up the mantle of crying for me since I had stepped down from it. She looked... scared. Hurt. She was looking at the floor, away from me. As if she was afraid to even look at me.

"Yet even if you should not have... I'm glad you had. Thank you, Renn, for letting me see my friends again," I said.

She looked up at me as a single tear fell from her eye. It hid its journey down her face, since her loose hair hid it. It was getting long... she needed a haircut. Yet I liked how her hair fell around her face like that.

"Hm..." She nodded at me.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed. "I had honestly planned to sneak in here... to get in your bath. To give you your reward, and to distract me from my own thoughts," I revealed to her my plan.

Renn blinked and shifted, and actually reached out to grab the nearby desk for support. She held herself up as if she had suddenly gone weak in the knees.

"What stopped you?" She asked with a whisper.

I nodded to the painting.

"Ah..." she nodded. That made sense to her.

A weird moment of quiet awkwardness filled the air, but I ignored it. Especially since Renn was doing the same thing.

Looking away from the painting, I gestured to the one against the wall. Near the bathroom door.

She smiled and nodded at it, seemingly proud.

Smiling back at her, I looked back at the painting. "Thank you for the paintings, Renn," I said.

"Ah... yes... Did this one help you? Do you recognize it?" she asked as she stepped over to the painting of the village. She knelt down before it, to get a better look. She blocked the painting from my sight as she did... and I noticed the way her clothes hugged her body. Had she always looked so... well...

I looked away from her, and had to force my eyes from looking back at her. "I do. Kind of. I'll need to think about it some more, but honestly it's not as bad as I had thought it had been. Thank you for painting it, I had been worried about it," I said.

Why did I like the way I could see her tail beneath her blouse? It made no sense. It shouldn't be that sexy.

"Hm..." I heard her reach out and touch the painting. Her finger tapped the dried paints a little loudly. Was she scrapping it? It sounded as if she was touching something she herself hadn't created. As if it wasn't her painting.

After a few moments she stood back up, and stepped around the easel in front of me as to stare at the unfinished one. I let my eyes wander back to her, as if it was somehow safe again to look.

"How is it, by the way?" she asked.

"Your art? Phenomenal. I didn't realize you'd be this good. It's almost too good," I said.

She smiled gently and nodded. "Nory taught me a lot," she said.

"I see." That Nory again.

To be jealous of not just a human... but a woman on top of it was insulting. Yet here I was. Very jealous.

Damn you Nory.

While Renn studied her work, I noticed the way her tail slithered in the air.

Hm? When had she pulled it out of her dress?

I stopped myself from gulping and realized I probably should get out of here. What was wrong with me? Being attracted to her was one thing, but why her tail too? Why her ears?

I needed to get out of here before I made a horrible mistake.

"Has anyone else seen these paintings?" I asked her.

"Brandy and Merit both saw the village one. Both asked about the cross, but I told them that I had just been painting what I had seen at the sanctuary. Where the Clothed Woman lives. Neither has seen this one yet," she said.

"That's well done. Try not to let anyone else see this one, please," I asked her.

She nodded. "Okay."

Renn crossed her arms and held her chin as she studied the painting with a judgmental eye. She was tapping her chin with a finger, and I noticed the fingernail. It was a little longer than it had been lately.

Maybe thanks to the recent hectic few days she had stopped cutting them short, or was trying out a new length.

Realizing I was once again ogling her, I squinted my eyes and looked away.

What was I doing? Why was I so entranced by her? I'd blame the events earlier, but the reality was it had been getting worse long before that. It was why I had accepted Yin's descendant's request so readily. To get away from her for awhile.

We've been together too long, maybe. Yet I knew that wasn't the real reason either. After all I had spent years with others before and never felt this way. Never had this happen with them... even with the ones, like the few here, who tried to initiate stuff.

Shouldn't have come into her room. Should have stayed at the meeting. I needed to leave.

I stretched and readied to get up. "Well, suppose we can continue this later..." I said, trying my best to escape.

"You said you were going to get in my bath," she said softly.

"Hm... I did. Why would I say that?" I asked.

"Well... because you're going to?" she grumbled as she finally looked away from the painting. She glared at me, with her crossed arms.

How did she look so good even when angry?

"I see, so you're as delusional as you are beautiful," I said.

Her face contorted, and her fist clenched. As she squeezed her fist, I noticed the way some of her fingers shifted... Was she making a fist? As to hit me?

"Why a bath Renn?" I asked her before she could convince herself to do so.

She immediately un-clenched her fist, and opened and closed her hand. "Uhm..."

Unable to resist, I chuckled at her. "Doubting yourself?" I asked her.

Renn's ears twitched and her tail actually puffed up a little. Yet her blushing face, adorned by a smile, told me that she was far from angry or upset. "Well, suddenly yes," she said honestly.

"Me too," I admitted.

She gulped, and while she stared at me I tried to think of a way out of here... Or at least, how I could get out of here without really hurting her feelings while also keeping my dignity intact.

I sighed. "Sorry," I said.

"Not going to get in then? It feels good you know. It's even big enough that we don't have to touch, if that is your worry," She offered.

"Did the Society reach a vote?" I asked her.

Renn's ears twitched wildly for a moment. She glared at me, and I knew it was because she had not wanted to think about anything else right now. She wanted to focus on us.

"No. They plan to meet in the morning, to let everyone ponder and consider what to do," she finally said. As she spoke she seemed to calm down a little. Likely because she realized it was actually more important than what was happening here and now.

"What was the general census so far?" I asked.

"To give them a chance. To not let you pursue them until we know more. They... well... everyone thinks that they might not have been hunting me, but instead had simply been trying to reach out. To talk to me, since they might have thought I was the strongest," Renn said.

I nodded. Yes.

That had been my thoughts too.

They had come in a group. They had brought swords... but...

They had not planned to use them originally.

Those two men had only jumped out after I had attacked the girl. They had only attacked me to draw my attention. To keep me away from the girls as they escaped.

I had not been an enemy to conquer and eat, but one to flee from.

"I attacked one of my own," I whispered.

Renn took inhaled a sharp breath and shook her head. "Vim... you couldn't have known," she said.

"I should have. I shouldn't have broken open that door so violently. I should have given her the chance to speak," I said.

Renn's tail went stiff, and I enjoyed watching the hairs upon it perk up. "Possibly Vim... but that's not your job. Your job is to protect us."

"Protect the non-humans, Renn. That includes them, too," I told her.

Renn blinked, and I knew the reason she didn't immediately reply was because she couldn't. She knew the truth, just as I did.

She could recite that little white book after all.

"The worst part is even if we give them a chance... odds are it's now too late. I have drawn blood. It's war now. I likely will now have to slaughter them all, even the hapless, all because I had been impatient. All because I had allowed my concern for you to override my common sense," I whispered.

Renn startled, and stepped forward. "Me?"

Shit.

I shook my head, firmly. Enough to make it clear. "I worried for you Renn. She had been stalking you. But that's not the entire reason I had broken that door. I was frustrated with waiting, and missing her all those other times and..." I stopped lying to her and myself, and as I did I noticed her pupils. Those beautiful glistening pools enlarged as she realized it too.

After a long... awkward moment... I nodded in defeat.

"I did not like the idea of you being hunted," I admitted quietly.

Renn frowned, but thankfully didn't seem to get too upset. A long moment passed, and I expected her to yell at me. To scream... maybe even hit me again.

Yet instead, she ended up smiling at me.

"You're quite a man, Vim... to admit that so purely," she whispered.

"I've been a man for a very long time, so yea... I got that down I think," I said.

Renn scoffed a laugh, and nodded. "Right?"

As she laughed, I couldn't help but smile. Her laugh washed away any shame I had, and somehow even made me feel... relieved. As if now I knew everything would be alright.

While she laughed I noticed something I hadn't before.

Her sword was resting up against the bed. Near a nightstand. It had something... lacy on it.

The pair of panties on the sword was understandable, to a point... but there was also a pair on top of the bed's pillar. The one nearest to us.

I pointed up at it, and wondered how that had happened.

Her eyes went up, to find the thing I was pointing at.

"Huh... Oh... uhh... Well, I can explain that," Surprisingly her blush didn't get any darker as she stared at the bed's post.

"Do try," I said.

She groaned and covered her face. "Sometimes I sleep naked," she said.

"Never do with me," I complained.

"Obviously!" she shouted between her fingers.

Chuckling at her, I nodded. Did that mean she just... tossed clothes around when she hopped into bed? Would explain the nightgown on the chair. It hadn't been laid down gently, after all. Yet really? She'd have to climb up onto the bed and reach for the one hanging off the bed's frame.

Renn kept her face hidden by her hands as she stood there, her tail twitching wildly behind her.

"Damn," I whispered.

Her ears flickered, and she lowered her hands. She tilted her head at me as I wondered what I was going to do.

"Vim?" she asked. She looked worried for me. She had no idea why, but she should worry. Especially for me.

What was I going to do with her? What was I going to do with myself?

"How are the girls?" I asked.

"The eastern girls? They're good. I think... Lamp came and took the rest to the embassy today. She plans to come back in a few days, she wants to stay here with us," she said, growing somber.

"Why the frown?" I asked her.

"I had forgotten all about them. In the chaos," she said.

"That's understandable Renn, it's been hectic," I said.

She shook her head. "No. It's not. They deserve better."

Nodding at her, I wondered if she realized that was one of the reasons I was so attracted to her.

Did she not realize how rare such a trait was?

I didn't like hearing her suddenly sad. Why I had brought them up?

You know why Vim. To change the mood before it got dangerous.

Damn me.

For a long... long moment we were silent. She stood there in front of me, near the painting of my friend and his daughter. I wished she had finished his section. Him staring at me might have kept me under control.

I found her beautiful. Which was bad. I wasn't supposed to be attracted to anyone.

I found her lovely too, which was even worse. I wasn't supposed to favor any singular person.

Beauty I could ignore... but her personality was a different matter. It made her far more dangerous than she should be.

Her tail twitched as she stared at me, seemingly enjoying the moment. She looked as if she'd be willing to stand there and stare at me all night long.

She's done that before. She's sat on the bed, staring at me through the night. The first time she did that was back in Ruvindale... when Lomi had that first nightmare. Renn had sat at the edge of the bed, staring at us for hours.

I had thought her strange then. Now I knew it was just...

Now I found it appealing.

Now I found it to be a compliment.

Now I wanted to do the same to her.

"Renn," I said her name, and she twitched. Her ears fluttered as she nodded. "Can I... open my heart to you?" I asked her.

"Of course, Vim."

"You terrify me," I said.

Her eyes widened, and her shoulders started to droop.

"Out of the hundreds of women that have tried to join me over the years, you're the only one I can't seem to justify tossing aside," I told her.

She blinked her wide eyes.

"I either need to abandon you forcefully, to stop myself from becoming too entangled with you... or I need to take you to that bed right now and get it out of my system. Honestly I don't know what to do," I said. Renn gulped, and her tail lowered. It lowered nearly to the floor. Taking a deep breath, I sighed out her scent. "I don't want to abandon you. I enjoy your company. And I don't want you to just be another woman I bedded either, so..." I added, and wasn't sure what to else to say.

Renn said nothing as I sat back against the chair. It creaked against my weight. It was made for a human, not me.

"I came in here planning to get in that bath, and see where it took us. I thought about it the whole trip back. While sailing that ship. All the things I wanted to say, and the teasing and the sex. Then you walked up and hit me. Which put a dent in that plan. Then I came in here, because today had hurt and I hadn't wanted to be alone... and then saw that," I said with a look at the painting of my friend and his daughter. My words hung in the room, and they felt heavy even to me.

"What about my feelings?" she then asked. Looking at her, I was a little surprised to see... although a blushed face, not a tear in her eyes. They were glaring at me though.

I nodded. "I'd like to hear them," I said.

"I want to stay with you. I want to help you. I want to continue this journey we have... I want to see the world with you. I want to experience the joys, and the sorrows. I want to laugh and smile with you, and cry and weep alongside you too. I want you and me to become people who trust each other. I want to be someone who you can ask for help concerning anything, anytime, anywhere. I want you and me to spend hundreds of years together, always," she spoke purely, and it made her voice sound lovely.

"If I allow that, I'll fall in love with you," I argued.

"I love you," she said without missing a beat.

I flinched. I hadn't wanted to hear those words at all.

"Don't look away!" she said as she stepped towards me.

Looking back up at her, I nodded. "I know you do," I said.

"We're old enough to know. We're not children, Vim. Even if you look at me like I am sometimes," she said.

"You're not a child, Renn. I know that."

"Then why can't you just..." she hesitated.

"What? Kiss you? Display my affection openly? Sleep with you every night?" I shook my head as I stood up. She shied away, but only a single step. She held her ground as I waved my hand gently through the air. "I'm the Societies protector, Renn! I am not allowed to show such things to a singular person. I'm not allowed to favor one over another. I'm not allowed to let anyone into my heart to that level," I said.

"Says who?" she asked.

"Me!" I shouted.

Renn's eyes shivered, but remained clear. Beautifully clear. They looked great in the moonlight... especially with such emotion surrounding them.

"Haven't you noticed? They already think you're special to me. They already question it. They all can see it already. The consequence of knowing me for hundreds of years is that they notice something as obvious as my affection. They see you adorned in my leather." I pointed at the wardrobe nearby. Some of the leather Lellip and I had made for her hung from one of its open cabinets. "Armed with my weapons," I pointed to the sword against her bed... then finally pointed at the painting right next to us. "Fulfilling requests! And then you walk right up and hit me! Brazenly! Without a worry of any repercussions! In front of Brandy of all people! They're not stupid Renn. They're foolish, they're impotent, they're stuck in their ways but they're not stupid. They're not blind... they see the way we look at one another," I said. It felt good to say this all aloud, but with every word I spoke I started to hate myself even more.

I shouldn't have come here. I shouldn't have said anything.

I should have found a way to hate her.

She held my gaze, and I praised her for not breaking. For not crying. She didn't even flinch as I basically yelled at her.

"They're also not animals, Vim," she then said.

"What...?"

"They're not base animals. They understand emotion. They understand relationships, and they even fall in love! Do you not realize they'll not hate you just because you love me?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "They won't hate me, but they'll start to doubt me. They'll start to question," I said.

She nodded. "Will he protect me as fiercely now that she's there? Will he choose her over me? Will he ignore me, to stay with her?" Renn easily spoke the terrors of the situation.

I stepped away from her, and hated how smoothly she had voiced my concerns. How quickly it had become apparent, and...

And I hated how she smiled even through it all.

"I find it adorable that you don't believe yourself able to choose them over me. It tells me just how deeply you can love," she said.

"Renn..." I groaned as I stepped away from her, to start to pace.

"I only spoke the truth," she said simply.

"If only that was all it was."

Renn let me pace, and did so while smiling at me. She seemed to be in a far better place, emotionally, than I was right now.

Which was hilarious, since I was so much older than her.

I wanted to blame the events on the roof earlier, but there was no point.

This had been a long time coming.

"You know nothing about me," I said.

"I can learn."

"Nothing..." I whispered again.

"You can teach me."

Eventually I ended up coming to a stop, and I looked over at her. She was patiently waiting for me to say my next complaint. To bring up my next roadblock, that she'd happily strike down.

"I shouldn't have come in here," I said.

"I'm glad you did. And I'm glad we're having this conversation, too. Even if my heart feels like it's going to break out of my chest," she said.

"You getting sweaty too?" I asked her.

She laughed and nodded. "Yeah."

"Me too," I said.

"Hm... you're not taking this as well as me, it seems," she said.

"How could I?" I asked.

"You're supposed to be the stoic one, Vim. The stable one. The pillar," she said.

"I am."

"Not right now... Though maybe you are... you're emotional, but not breaking down. Not yelling. Still able to reason with me," she said as she thought about it.

"Do you have any idea how old I am?" I asked her.

"Tell me," she said.

I gulped, and feared her voice. It made me want to answer her. I had almost done so.

"I'll never tell anyone, Vim. Anything you tell me, I'll keep secret. Until I die," she promised.

"That's not enough. Not for me," I said.

"Then what is?" she asked.

Stepping over to her bed, I slowly sat down at the edge of it. It was... much softer than the one in my own room. I sunk into it.

Renn stepped around, and pulled the chair I had been sitting on earlier and placed it in front of me. She sat down onto it, and I watched as she primly sat up straight... smiling happily at me.

"You're enjoying this," I cursed at her.

"Of course I am. This is the first time you've ever opened your heart so wide for me. I'm going to remember this moment my whole life," she said.

"Great."

"It is."

I sighed and put my head into my hand. I should go back to that ship. Sail away. Run away.

But I didn't run. Vim never ran. The protector couldn't run.

Last time I had the whole world had upended.

"If we do this... You'll not have an easy life," I whispered.

"My life wasn't an easy one before you came into it Vim. At least with you it's enjoyable too," she said.

"You'll end up dying. A horrible death," I warned.

"Such a thing happens to most, I'd assume."

I shook my head. She didn't understand. But how could she? I hadn't shown her. I hadn't let her see the truth yet. I hadn't taken her to the places that were terrifying. I hadn't let her see a Monarch. I hadn't forced her to bury an entire town of dead friends and loved ones.

"You'll come to hate yourself. Your life. The Society. Even me," I said.

"That's up to me to find out, Vim."

I nodded. That was true.

"See? You believe in free will so strongly... yet seem to not let yourself enjoy it," she said. "Just like now... you let the Society, them, decide if you kill those people or not. Even though you know deep down that they aren't a real threat. Even though you had chosen to not kill them already," she added.

"I gave my will away, Renn. You should have read that in the contract," I said.

"The white book? There had been nothing in that which said such a thing," she noted.

"It was there. In its own way," I said.

"Then you and I read two very different books," she said.

"Maybe."

We sat in silence for a moment, and I sighed again. My heart wasn't pounding anymore, but I was now exhausted. I felt as if I had just fought in one of the old wars.

"You look tired," she said.

"I am."

"There's a bed beneath you," she offered.

My heart hesitated for a tiny moment, since she had sounded honestly sincere.

"Now that was terrifying," I said.

She smirked and giggled at me.

"What do you want to try and do, Renn?" I asked her.

"Right now? Well..." she went red in the face again.

"Our relationship," I reminded her.

"Ah... well... as far as I'm concerned, you and I will now begin to actually make it. If that's... okay with you," she said.

"Make it?" I asked. Did she actually think I'd take her to bed now? Sure I had mentioned it, and wanted to still, but I was not in the mood anymore. Plus I worried if I did that right now, here today, I'd lose all interest in her.

If we went at it all night and the next morning I rolled over and saw her the same way I did all the rest... I'd hate myself. More than I already did.

"I figure over the course of years... right? You seem to want me to prove to you that I can be trusted. That I can earn my place beside you. I wish I was able to do so right here and now but... I can't. But if you give me years... I'm not sure how many, but I think I can do it," she spoke quickly, and excitedly. As if she had been thinking about this answer for a long time.

"You really plan on trying, don't you?" I asked her.

"Of course I do. Honestly, I had wondered if just pushing you down and... well... mounting you, was the right move... but I think now, after tonight, that would probably just do the opposite of what I want. So I'll not do that," she said.

"Thanks," I said, and meant it. Mounting me. Really? She really was archaic in certain ways.

She smiled and nodded, completely proud of herself.

I clasped my hands and leaned forward, to look at her closer. She leaned forward as well, as to let me.

As I stared into her eyes her smile broadened. She seemed... full of confidence. As if she knew she was flawless. Perfect. The most beautiful woman on the planet... and then even beyond.

She wasn't... but...

Yet all the same, she was. At least to me.

"You sure, Renn?" I asked her.

She nodded. "I am."

"I'm a pain in the ass," I said.

"Trust me, I know," she said.

Nodding, I decided to stop asking. At least for now. I could change her mind later.

There was something else I needed to do right now, after all. Something more important... Something I had planned to do before I had even stepped foot into this room.

"Well?" she asked and blinked at me.

"You still want that bath?" I asked.

"Of course I do," she said as if it was obvious.

What the hell.

Chapter 152: A Bath.

Well, I got what I wanted...

The steam from the hot water was still filling the room. It was just thick enough that I hoped Vim couldn't really see the blushing on my face, or where my eyes were wandering.

Granted Vim didn't seem to care at all. He was leaning back, resting against the edge of the bath and staring up at the ceiling. The ceiling tiles were decorated, but not too special... Before those panels he had been staring at the foggy mirror nearby. Ever since we got in he's been staring at everything except me.

I'd be insulted, if not for the fact that I now understood him a little better.

It wasn't that I wasn't attractive to him... it was the simple fact that he didn't want to let himself be so. To admit it.

Such a thing was cute, in its own way.

"We built the rooms with these baths, for those who were a little different. Only for the whole city to change and become human thru and through. Now these baths are only used by those like us," Vim said as he stared upward.

Oh? Was that why these baths were so big? "When you first built this place, were the members here like that?" I asked.

He nodded. "Most of them. Time changes."

Time did change things... but something told me he wouldn't. No matter how hard time tried to change Vim, he'd be the same forever.

I shifted a little, and the splashing noises I made as I did so made me more conscious of myself. My heart thumped a little too loudly, the kind of loudly that I knew Vim could hear. Especially in this room that echoed so well.

Yet still I couldn't help but smile as I fidgeted. I was more submerged than he was. He was leaning against the side of the bath's railing in such a way that most of his upper body was exposed. I on the other hand was doing all I could to scrunch down. My shoulders were just barely above the water's surface... and that was changing quickly. The tub was still filling up. Once it finished, only my head and neck would be exposed.

Not that the water actually hid anything, of course.

"The pipes in this building probably need to be replaced soon," Vim then said.

"The pipes?"

He nodded, and with a flick of the finger he splashed and pointed to one of the spigots pouring out water.

"They're made of a type of copper... so probably will be fine for a few more decades, but I'll definitely need to get on that soon," Vim said with a sigh.

"Copper?" I asked. I couldn't help it, I shifted and crawled and swam over to the pouring water. I didn't touch it, since it was hot, but I did stare at the little spigot. There did seem to be a copper colored pipe hidden within the small designed spigot.

"Copper lasts longer than most other things. But they don't last forever, of course," Vim explained.

"Why not use your steel?" I asked.

"Steel is actually pretty good for running water. But it's extremely difficult to forge, and shape... especially in such quantities. There are miles of pipes in this building. Plus steel still has its own problems. A cheaper, easier to acquire and use metal is best for such a use," Vim said.

"Oh?" I glanced at him, and had to look away real quick. He was looking at me finally.

Smiling at myself as I sat back, a little away from the spigot... I felt silly. Why was I embarrassed? Why was I more troubled than he was? It felt kind of good to act so childish. "I thought copper was one of the lesser metals," I said.

Vim sighed as he lifted a hand to rest his head against it. "Says who?"

"Nebl. He said it was flimsy."

He smiled at me. "I see. Copper is very useful... but you need to use it correctly. Each metal has its uses, and has things that it's better at than others. Just like people," Vim said.

"Hm... what am I better at than everyone else then?" I asked him.

"Leading me astray, for one."

My ears flicked, and some water droplets made noises as they did so.

"Remember how you asked me to study this place? When we first got here?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Of course. Figured I'd ask you about it after we left," he said.

"Can I start answering now?" I asked.

Vim gestured for me to go ahead.

The water in the bath started to reach its full capacity, but it still needed a tiny bit more. I shifted a little, and tried to cross my arms in front of me a little, as to try and hide my breasts. "This place is amazing, but I can see all the problems," I said.

He stayed silent, staring at me and waiting for me to continue.

I sighed and nodded. "You have Brandy and Gerald going different directions. One wants to grow the company into something bigger, the other isn't sure what he wants to do," I explained.

"You don't believe Gerald has plans?" he asked.

His question made me doubt my own conclusion. But it was too late now to tell him otherwise. "I don't believe so. I think he just wants to keep the Society safe, and make as much money as he can without causing issues," I said.

Vim's eyes held my own, and I realized the tub was full. I reached over to turn the little knob, to stop the hot water from pouring out. As I moved, some of the water splashed out of the bath. Once I was done I leaned back to my original spot... since although the bath was big enough that Vim and I could sit apart, I had gotten a little close to his feet as to shut off the spigot.

"Why do you think Brandy wants the company to grow so much?" he asked me.

"Not sure. Maybe she's just bored? I haven't seen the vault yet, but Sofia said it's practically full. Even though you deliver a cart load of currency every so often to Telmik," I said.

"Sofia told you that?"

I nodded. As I did the water rippled. Since there wasn't any more water being poured into the bath, the water had gone a little still. The steam was still thick, at least.

"If you didn't want this place to become so... prominent, why did you build it?" I asked him.

"My wants are not what decide, Renn. You should know that by now," he said.

I nodded. I did. Yet... "Yet why not still make a choice? Why let them know you can build something like this to this level? Why not..." I shrugged, since I really wasn't sure how to phrase it.

"Who says I don't?" he asked me. Vim sighed as he shifted. As he did, it took a lot for me to not let my eyes linger downward. I kept my attention on his face as he gestured at the bathroom around us. "This is nothing. Yet... I also believe in giving our members what they want. Even if what they want is wrong. Why do you think I'm in the bath with you right now?" he finished.

"You just said you liked me," I said, a little upset with him.

"You know what I mean. I think us doing this is dangerous. In more ways than one. Yet here we are," he said.

"Love isn't dangerous, Vim," I said gently.

"It's the most dangerous thing to exist, Renn."

I shook my head, and my hair floated around. My hair was getting rather long. In-between my legs my tail twitched, floating just under the water's surface. "Maybe you think such a thing, because you don't need to fear the physical," I wondered.

"Excuse me?" he frowned at me.

I nodded. "I mean... you don't fear swords. Or spears. Or a mountain collapsing upon you. Time. Predators. Men. Knights... you don't fear pain, or death, so maybe emotions are your weakness," I explained my thoughts.

Vim smirked at me, and then scoffed and flicked some water at me. "Emotions," he said.

"Everyone has a weakness, Vim," I said.

"We do. Yes. Not to change the conversation too much, but I'd like to know what else you think of this place. Outside of Brandy and Gerald's schemes and plans," he said.

"I'll permit a small hold on that topic, for now," I said with a smile. He nodded, accepting it. "This place is wonderful, but I feel like there's some kind of... missing piece. Most of the members here seem to just be repeating the same day, again and again. Their jobs are simple. Repetitive. Yet they have no desire to do anything else," I said.

"Not everyone desires the grand adventure, Renn. In fact most of our kind have long since finished those journeys. This is their end, not their beginnings," he said.

I nodded. "I understand that. I don't know Merit's full story, but I get that feeling from her. She must have lived a wondrous life. Yet... am I wrong? Other than Brandy and Gerald, no one else is really doing anything too extravagant. They're all pieces to the puzzle, yes, and are all important. Sofia for example nearly runs the whole bank... yet she's not really trying to fill those coffers. She just wants to keep it running smoothly," I told him my thoughts.

"Every cog, no matter how small, is important," he nodded.

"Cog?" I asked.

"A part of a machine. A single piece of a whole."

"Machine..." I whispered, and wondered what he meant.

Vim waved the word away, his finger tips plunking into the bathwater as he did so. "Most of our kind doesn't desire more than a simple life, Renn. And don't tell me that you do, when you smile so beautifully while enjoying the day to day life that you've been doing. I've seen you with them," he said.

"You do stare at me a lot," I teased him.

His smirk flinched, but didn't die.

"And you're right... I'm not saying I, or anyone else, wants chaos or for life to be too eventful... I'm just saying that other than Brandy and Gerald, the rest of our people here don't seem to care if we grow as a company or not. They're just living their lives," I said.

"You mentioned you felt something was missing?" he asked.

"Yes. I feel like... well... look at these rooms? There are a lot. More than we'd ever need, I think. Why are there so many? And why do I sometimes smell scents I don't recognize from any of the other members? Also who lights the lamps and refills them? I've asked around and no one seems to know?" I asked him.

"The lamps don't use oil, Renn. And at the time of building this place, most of these rooms had been needed. A little before Gerald took over... there was a small disagreement. About half of those who had lived here left, choosing a different path than those here," Vim said.

"Oh...? Something like that actually happened?" I asked. And the lamps didn't use oil? How were they burning then?

"It did. Most of the women that were here at the time went north, to the Bell Church or past it. The rest went south. The camels especially. You'll meet them soon, unless..." Vim paused, and frowned.

"Hm?" I shifted, and wondered what he was looking at. My breasts? My stomach? It was hard to tell exactly where he was looking, thanks to the way I was kind of slouching and...

"I'm supposed to pick up a package soon. Almost forgot about it," he said as he remembered.

I let a small relieved sigh escape as I nodded. "The package for Brandy right? I thought it was still a few weeks away."

"A few days from now, I suspect," he said.

My tail twitched, splashing the surface a little.

"And you're surprisingly fit. Weren't you a little pudgier when we met?" he then asked me.

"I knew you were staring at me," I groaned.

"You're the one who wanted to bathe together! That's like giving me permission to look!" he argued.

"Well... that's true..." I grumbled. After all, I'd been staring too.

Vim smiled at me, and leaned forward a little, as if to stare at me better. I felt my ears go stiff, and I held my breath for a second as I waited for whatever he was going to say or do.

"Why a bath Renn? I thought maybe you hadn't seen it as something so personal, but look at you. All curled up, trying to hide... blushing like mad," he said. Although he had a smirk on his face, he spoke gently. Passionately. He wasn't teasing me... he was genuine in his question and with his words.

My blush deepened, and I wished the steam was thicker... but I knew he could probably see through it even if it had been. But at least if it had, I would have been able to pretend he couldn't see the blood rushing to my face.

"Well... Originally it was to see you naked," I told him the truth.

"Me? Not very impressive, huh," he said with a smirk as he leaned back.

I smiled at him and shook my head. "Not like that! I mean... I wanted to see if I could tell what you were. To see your non-human traits," I said.

"Ah..." Vim's smile softened a little, as if I had just poured a bunch of cold water into our still hot bath.

I gulped and nodded. "That was the reason originally. Then you started smirking oddly when I brought it up, and I liked that smile on your face so..."

As my voice echoed a little in our little room, I flinched as I realized how embarrassing the words I had just said were.

Jeez did I have no shame?

"And thus no traits," Vim though ignored what I had said; although I noticed the way he smiled at me. It was the smile I liked to see... which meant he knew exactly what I meant. That wasn't good. If he was able to call up that smirk on command then what hope did I have?

"It is weird Vim... Everyone has at least one. Even Brom and Reatti, as human as they are, have traits. Those black nails, for one," I said.

He nodded... but said nothing.

"Why don't you have any, Vim? You're not a human," I said.

"Who says I don't?" he asked me.

I was about to point at him, to gesture at the obvious human body he so proudly displayed before me... but...

That was true... wasn't it?

"Are you saying you do have a non-human trait?" I asked as I scanned his body again.

My eyes ran up and down him as he chuckled. "Maybe," he said.

Frowning at the way he had said it, I wondered if he was now just teasing me. "Why's it so serious a secret? You're so open about so much else," I said.

Vim's smile died a little, and he glanced to his left, to the bathroom door. It was shut firmly. Had he heard something? I tilted my ears towards the door, and the bedroom.

No. I couldn't hear anything. Not even beyond the bedroom, and out into the hallway.

"It goes back to the same thing about us, Renn," Vim said softly.

"Us? You mean..." my tail coiled a little as I understood.

He nodded. "For the same reason. The Society can't know I cherish someone... because they'll doubt my loyalty. They'll doubt my dependability. If any of them knew what I was, truly, the same thing would happen. They'd doubt me," he said.

"So... are you something that would raise doubt?" I asked.

"That's not the point. I can, could, be anything. It doesn't matter what I was... someone, one of our members, will find fault in it. Think of it from a prey's perspective. Everyone is hunted by something. If I

was known as a creature, there would be other creatures out there that would doubt and hate me simply because I was that creature. By not letting anyone know... well..." he shrugged, as if it was obvious.

And obvious it was.

"Why didn't you just say that?" I asked weakly.

"It should have been obvious, Renn," he said gently.

It should have been. Yes.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the steam.

He was right. If Vim's heritage was revealed... no matter what he was. Prey or Predator... the result would be the same. There would be some who would doubt him, and others who would hate him. All because of his bloodline.

"Is that why Liina hates me?" I asked him.

"Liina doesn't hate you. She fears you. Fear is hard to overcome, Renn."

Fear? Me? "Am I scary?" I asked him.

"To some. To me, too, by the way."

Smiling at his expected answer, I nodded again. Yes. I guess so. Even if it made no sense.

"Time will either overcome that fear, Renn, or nothing will. It's instinctual. Liina and you might be able to become friends in the near future, or even a thousand years from now unable to talk to one another. It's just how it is."

"I wish it wasn't like that," I said.

"Humans are the same. In their own way," he said.

Were they? Honestly?

"Remember what I said earlier? About keeping secrets? I'll not tell anyone, you know?" I offered him a chance to tell me.

He slowly shook his head.

A little hurt, I decided it was okay. Baby steps. Small progress.

I had hundreds of years to earn him. I shouldn't expect too much at once.

Just the fact he had admitted he possibly had, or could have, emotions for me was more than enough for now.

Plus our little bath...

"One day you'll trust me more than anyone else, Vim," I told him.

Vim went still... somehow making even the water drops; falling from his finger tips from all the splashing he had been doing, not make ripples even as they fell to the water's surface.

My eyes studied the droplets that fell... somehow into the water's surface, making sound, yet seemingly invisible. As if they weren't really falling at all.

How was that possible...?

"I hope not, Renn. Because that would be the day a lot of people die," he whispered.

My hands clenched into fists beneath the water, and I was half tempted to stand up and ask what the heck that was supposed to mean... but I didn't. And not just because I would have been embarrassed to stand up before him, fully naked.

"Is that what it would take, Vim? Really?" I asked him.

He blinked, and must have realized what he had said. Had he said it without thinking?

He looked away from me... to the water. With a few moments of thought, he gestured with a half hearted shrug. "Maybe."

Maybe...

"You're a hard man to love, Vim," I said softly.

"I know," he whispered.

"Am I?" I asked him.

Vim looked back up at me and frowned. "You are. But only because of what I am. Otherwise it'd be instinctual, I think."

I gulped, and I knew I was blushing again.

He noticed, of course, and smiled at me. That smile that made me only blush even deeper.

"Careful Renn," he warned.

"Hm...?" I wasn't sure what to say to that.

"You tread a dangerous path. In fact..." He stopped talking, and frowned.

"In fact?"

Vim studied me for a moment, and then tilted his head. "Have you ever been in love before Renn?" he asked me.

Oh.

"Well... I think so," I said.

"Think so?"

"I loved Lujic and Ginny," I told him.

"The human children," he said.

I nodded.

"As a woman?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh. No... I think I felt like a mother. Or an older sibling, maybe," I said.

"I meant the other kind of love, Renn," he said.

"I know. I also loved Nory," I said.

He nodded. "I know you did."

"Though that isn't what you mean either, I guess..." I said.

"It's closer," he agreed.

I nodded. It had been. I had genuinely loved Nory. If she hadn't been human, but one of us... I'd likely still be with her.

"What about you?" I asked him.

"Do you really want to hear that answer?" he asked me back.

That response made me stumble, but I still gathered myself enough to nod a yes.

Vim smiled gently at me and nodded. "That's my problem Renn. I love all of our kind. Yet I hate them, all the same. But... well... I can think of a few people who I cherished. But to tell you about that, would reveal things about myself that I can't allow. Before I joined the Society... I did love someone. Or well, several someones. A family. A group. A nation. I dedicated my everything to them," he spoke softly, as if afraid to let his voice echo.

"Like you do now? With the Society?" I asked.

"Eerily similar. Hopefully the results aren't the same. Hopefully the results aren't as depressing," he said with a shrug.

Great.

"Does that mean I really don't have to compete with any women? Or at least your memories of them?" I asked him.

"There was no competition, Renn... you kind of just walked in and made yourself at home. Hardly fair, if you ask me," he said.

I grumbled at his smooth words, even though they made me so happy to hear them.

Silence followed my grumble, and for some reason... I was okay with it. So too it seemed, was Vim.

The two of us sat quietly, staring at each other. The warm water would hopefully remain so for some time, to let us both enjoy the moment.

Such a moment was precious.

It had been a hard earned moment, after all.

Chapter 153: A Shock

The chair creaked a little as I leaned back. I had to be careful. It was actually old, and weathered. It'd break if I let my full weight lean onto the chair's backrest.

I was getting a little tired of sitting here. And not just because I couldn't get Renn's body out of my mind.

"They're our people, Vim," Brandy told me.

"They are," I accepted that fact.

"They did attack him, however. Merit witnessed it. As did Renn. So this may still end... regrettably," Lawrence said.

"Their attacks were of no danger to me," I once again brought up that fact to the three of them... but I really hadn't needed to.

These three knew that. They knew it well. Out of everyone here in Lumen, Merit, Brandy, and Lawrence knew what I was capable of best.

All three of them had witnessed it themselves. Back during that Monarch incident in the south.

"Although that's the truth, you can't ignore the fact that they still attacked you Vim. It means they're willing to kill. They had no way of knowing they couldn't harm you, which means they had attacked with the intent to kill. That's not a good mindset for our kind," Merit said.

We were sitting alone, in one of the empty rooms in the Societies Houses. No one else was around. Which was probably why Merit's tone sounded so hard and serious. She wasn't afraid to remind me of how she used to be.

"Only for you, Merit. A few of our other members becoming more lethal would be a good thing," I said.

Merit glared at me from her large chair, and I looked away from her as to look at Brandy and Lawrence. Their chairs were like mine, more reasonable.

"You believe they hadn't been trying to attack you, originally... but that doesn't mean they meant no ill will. What if instead of killing Renn, they had wanted to kidnap her? Or something like it? We must take that into account," Lawrence argued.

Brandy nodded, agreeing.

I leaned back again, and had to stop. Damn thing almost broke more.

Stupid chair. I glanced around the room, at the other chairs and couches. Maybe I should just swap mine...

"If we allow Vim to chase them, to hunt them, he'd likely find them... but what if his encroachment into their territory only further escalates the violence?" Brandy asked.

"Vim's not so bloodthirsty he'd just start attacking them, Brandy," Lawrence said to her.

She nodded. "I know but still. Now they'll be on guard. React harshly. As we would, if our positions were reversed," Brandy said.

"We would, Lawrence. I'd attack him on sight had our situations been reversed," Merit took Brandy's side.

Lawrence sighed, but nodded. He couldn't really keep arguing that point. He knew they were right.

"I say we let them have the first move. Let one of them return again. If they come baring fangs, then we let Vim do his thing. If not, however..." Brandy suggested.

"I'm more than willing to try any and all methods to find an amicable solution," I suggested.

Merit ignored me. "I agree, Brandy. What do you think, Lawrence?"

He nodded, also ignoring me. "I agree. If they really are our brothers and sisters, we must give them refuge."

"If that is the will of the Society," I said simply.

The three nodded, and Brandy stood. She patted me on the shoulder as she walked past, leaving the room.

Lawrence sighed as he too stood. "Far too many votes lately. I enjoy your visits Vim, but prefer it when they're quiet ones," he said as he too patted my shoulder and walked past me.

As he left, I glanced at Merit. She was still sitting there. Would she try to pat my shoulder as they had? She'd find it difficult, and not just because of her height, so I was looking forward to her attempt at it.

"What?" she asked with an annoyed tone.

"What yourself?" I asked back.

She huffed, and glanced behind me. She watched as Lawrence left the room. Once he was gone, she looked around... as if to make sure we were really alone. We were of course.

Merit then hopped off her chair, only to grab it and drag it closer to me. Once it was almost touching my knee, she clambered back onto the large chair and scooted closer to me.

"Hm?" I waited for her to tell me what was going on.

"Did you sleep with her?" she asked me.

I blinked. "The Stalker girl? No... I might have killed her though," I said.

"Vim this isn't the time to be like that," Merit growled at me.

"No, Merit. I'm not that stupid. If you must know, I simply took a bath with her. That was it," I said. So it had been Merit who had walked near the bedroom door.

"That was it?" she asked, not believing me.

"Her entire reason for wanting to bathe with me was to see if I had any non-human traits, Merit. She wanted to see me naked, so she could find out what I am. You should have seen her disappointed face," I said.

Merit sighed, and leaned away from me. "You're such a blind idiot," she complained.

Blind? "I have great eyesight," I said.

Merit ignored my poor attempt at playing the fool, and she scratched her head. Her thick locks of hair sounded oddly heavy as she did. "Probably best you didn't... I'm worried for her mental state. Renn's blaming herself for all this ruckus," Merit said.

"Still is," I said. Part of the reason I had accepted that bath was for that very reason. To distract her, if even for a few moments.

"Then maybe you should sleep with her?" Merit suggested.

"Why don't you go sleep with her? If you're that concerned with who shares her bed," I said to her.

"Hmph," Merit huffed at me.

Staring at her as she looked away from me, upset, I wondered what her problem was.

Did she care for Renn that much already? And Merit thought Renn was depressed? Over the recent events? She had blamed herself, to a degree... but it honestly hadn't been that bad.

"This is all happening because I like her, isn't it, Vim? My friends always die," she then said softly.

"Says you Merit? Do you not recognize who you're sitting next to?" I asked her, speaking just as softly.

She sighed. "We're all a bunch of curses... slowly poisoning the things we love."

I didn't like the fact I was agreeing with her. "Slowly? Feels real fast to me."

Merit groaned as she leaned back. She leaned against the large chair's backrest... which made her look very uncomfortable. She was so small she was almost able to lie down on her back on the chair itself.

"Usually you show up, and then leave again. Then show up and leave again... All the while with nothing really happening. Why all the drama now? Why all of a sudden?" she asked me.

"I've been wondering that myself," I said honestly. It was odd.

"Is it her? Is she a Saint, Vim?" Merit sat up quickly, as if realizing it was possible.

"If she was, do you really think the Chronicler would have let her out of her sight? She'd have been locked into the Cathedral had she been a Saint," I said.

"That's true..." Merit mumbled.

"Fate has just... decided to be busy lately," I said. Sadly I could hear in my own voice that it was clear I didn't believe what I had said at all.

"Fate," she fe'ed at me.

Still...

Maybe Merit was onto something.

Renn was unique. Maybe not entirely, on her own. She was strong, but not so strong that it was a shock. She was wise, but not so smart that it made others feel uneasy around her.

And she was strangely affectionate. Not just she herself, but the world around her. People liked her. She had made even Merit her friend. Someone who had vowed years ago to never befriend anyone ever again.

Then of course... there was me.

She was attracting even me.

Maybe that was why I was attracted to her. Maybe fate was messing with her, and thus my...

No. I couldn't blame my feelings on that. It wasn't just fair to Renn and myself, but it was an insult too.

After all I couldn't, and wasn't, affected by fate.

But that didn't mean she was immune too.

"My life has been a little odd lately, since she's shown up," I admitted.

"Oh?" Merit seemed willing to hear more details, but I wasn't in the mood to tell them.

"What's your idea on why they targeted Renn?" I asked Merit.

She blinked, and seemed oddly upset that I had changed topics... but allowed it all the same. "Likely exactly what everyone's been saying? She's a real predator, Vim. Her scent alone makes her stand out. Which by the way, was why I suggested you sleep with her. Maybe if you two do the nasty you'll erase her scent, allowing her to stay safe from such things from now on," Merit said.

Although Merit had a weird smile as she spoke, I couldn't help but take her words to heart.

Was that possible?

"Jeez Vim! Don't actually consider it!" Merit reached over to thump me. Her small hand wacked me on the arm, and a tiny static shock passed between us.

"Was just wondering if it was possible," I said honestly.

"Is it...?" she asked.

"Might be. I've never cared to notice if I eliminate the smell of those I have sex with," I said.

She sighed, shaking her head.

It was a thought, at least.

"I just worry," she mumbled.

"I agree with you... but everyone's forgetting something," I said.

"What? That you're too old to get it up anymore? I bet it'd work again if I zapped you a bunch," A wild smile planted itself on her face as she lifted up a hand, letting her electricity dance across her fingertips. It sparked and zapped as it did.

"I'll remember that offer for when I really do get too old, and need help. But no... I mean everyone's forgetting how rare those like Renn are," I said.

Merit frowned at me. She wasn't sure what I meant.

"Who's the last real predator you've met?" I asked her.

"Other than Renn...? Well..." Merit went into thought, and it took her longer than I figured it would have before she remembered. "I guess in the south, Vim. The one who brought that Monarch. The rest I've known, or knew about, thanks to the Society," she said.

I nodded. "That's what I thought. And that was what? Two hundred years ago?" I asked.

"Almost three now," she whispered, as her eyes went dull. She was remembering the event.

Reaching out to tap her on the knee, to keep her from ignoring me, I nodded. "Exactly, Merit. Those on the roof earlier yesterday... One of them had been young. The bird girl. With the feathers," I said.

She nodded. "I noticed. Probably only a few dozen years old at best," she said.

"Right? What if they had all been that young?" I asked her.

Merit frowned, and then her frown deepened as she realized what I meant.

"Renn's the first real predator they've ever met. Which is why they haven't even noticed any of us. Her scent is so strong, so pure, they don't even realize we're like them," she understood quickly.

I nodded. "I bet that's the truth. I'm not sure what they mean by master, but it's likely just an older member. Someone like us," I said.

She nodded too. "I agree. Most of the new generation doesn't realize that those like themselves exist. Renn hadn't even realized how many of us existed until she met us. She thought there were only a few of us in all the world."

"Right?" I nodded some more.

"They had looked young. Even for our kind," she said.

"Says you?"

"How many are like me, Vim? Those like me aren't born anymore," she said.

That was true... I'd not be able to tease her about that. She had sounded so sad because of it.

"Don't you let her suffer, Vim. If you let this or anything else ruin her, I swear I'll do everything I can to kill you. I won't succeed, but I know I'll be able to annoy you enough to make you regret it," Merit said.

I smiled softly at her. "She's not the one you should be worrying about, Merit."

Merit blinked, and little sparks danced around her... and I knew why.

She was shocked.

Shocked I'd admit it.

Which oddly didn't shock me at all.

Chapter 154: A Stillness, Begotten

"Thank you, young lady," the older woman happily put her receipt away and nodded at me.

"Thank you as well, Miss Hurtzler. Please come again!" I waved her goodbye as she left my window.

Watching her go, I wondered what she was going to buy. She had withdrawn quite a sum. Nearly a thousand coins. It took me and two others to carry all her coins over. She had wanted smaller value coins, thus why she had wanted so many.

Two men were carrying her coins for her. Workers for her business, it seemed. They walked behind her slowly, since she herself walked so.

Glancing down at our copy of her receipt, I wondered how often people like her withdrew and spent such wealth. She had withdrawn nearly ten times more than that golden coin I had gotten on my first day working at the bank.

Sofia, when I had gone to get her verification stamp upon Hurtzler's request, had told me that only a small portion of our clients had such funds in their accounts here.

The oddness of how humans and their markets worked was a good distraction for me. I was growing rather... restless, and I knew it was visible to everyone. Not just Vim and those who knew me better.

It's been a week since those non-human's had shown themselves on the roof. A week since I had bathed with Vim.

And still yet nothing had happened.

At first I had been... expectant. I had barely been able to sleep for the first few nights, since I had expected something to happen. Yet nothing had.

And not only had nothing happened yet... everyone seemed far too calm about it. No one seemed worried, or even wanted to talk about it. Everyone was just... basically back to normal. Working, or doing whatever they wanted to do. Most didn't even talk about them anymore, unless prompted to.

Honestly people seemed... too happy. Too excited.

Everyone seemed to think that we'd soon be getting new members, possibly. And that made them excited. Happy. Hopeful.

But at the same time they knew it could become something dangerous and horrible... and as such knew better than to do anything but wait for the results. Though that might just be because they expected Vim to handle it.

Putting the copy of the receipt away, into a folder that would eventually need to be taken back to Sofia's office... I looked up when someone walked up to my window.

I hadn't called anyone over yet, and there hadn't been many people in line either... so...

The young woman looked... normal for this area... but not really someone who would frequent the bank. At least, not someone who did so as a customer. She looked more like one of the human women who worked behind the counters, as I was doing, than someone who had money in an account here.

"Welcome to Animalia Bank! How can I help you?" I greeted her calmly as she glanced around.

"Hello... I was uh... told to give you this," the woman said, a little hesitatingly.

I frowned as she placed something onto the counter, a little before the glass window.

A familiar feather.

I gulped at the sight of it. It matched, almost perfectly, the one that was now in my room. On my desk.

"What?" I asked her as I reached under the glass panel to grab it.

"I'm not sure... I was given a coin to give it to you. A boyfriend, maybe?" the woman giggled as she smiled, creating a story that fit her own fantasy.

Before I could say or do anything else the woman turned and hurried out, seemingly happy to accomplish her task.

Glancing down at the feather in my hand, I confirmed it was the same one as what I had found on the roof. It felt and looked the same... though the one in my room had been stained with blood, so it had been not as...

No. This one had blood on it too. Just not on the feather parts itself, but instead at the stem. A small stain of black...

Rubbing my thumb along the point, I sighed at the stain it left behind. It hurt her that badly to pull them out like this?

Stepping around the counter, I ignored the other human workers and headed for the door. It, thanks to being the middle of the day, was wide open. I paused before the door and looked out. To the street, and the city just beyond it.

I scanned the street first, which was silly. They'd not show themselves so blatantly... after scanning the rooftops, I finally found her.

Standing at just the edge of an alley, a small hooded figure.

It was her.

Glancing around, I noticed that no other society members were nearby. The few women and men, employees of the guild, staring at me were doing so lazily. None seemed bothered by me.

Should I get Vim?

Yes. I should.

But...

But what if she ran away because of it?

Standing right before the door, I glanced down at the little slots where the bank's doors latched and locked when closed. There were little thumb sized holes in the brick, where bars of metal slipped into.

If I stepped beyond those, outside of the building... not only would Vim become upset with me, so would everyone else.

They had voted for us to stay inside. To wait. To see what they'd do.

But something told me that she had done this on purpose. As to not confront Vim.

Gulping, I looked up at the girl. She had retreated into the alley a little deeper, but was still there. Waiting. Watching me.

With her feather in my hand I stepped out onto the sidewalk, and then I quickly crossed the street.

If something happened I'd just run back with all my might, to Vim.

I'd not go into the alley.

Just needed to talk to her...

Reaching the other side of the street, I slowed and hesitated as I glanced around. There were a few people walking around, but most of the people here were in carriages or on carts. Not many walked around here. Slowly approaching the alleyway, I studied the buildings. Warehouses. Closed ones. Ones the Animalia Guild owned, but rarely used.

Taking a deep breath as I stepped up to the edge of the alley, I nodded at her. "Hello," I said to her.

She flinched at my voice, and I tried to smell for more than just her. I could smell her... and the stink of humans, and old wood and waste. Likely from the warehouses... but there was another scent too. One I didn't recognize and I knew it was one of her friends.

The girl was wrapped in the same cloaks and jackets that she had been last time. Her entire body was covered in them... obviously being used to hide her non-human features. The problem though, was that it was a nice day today. It was warm, and there was little wind.

She looked out of place, all bundled up like that.

"Hello..." the girl finally whispered at me. I had barely heard her.

My heart heavily beat in my chest, and I realized this really was happening.

"You don't need to leave the alley, but please get a little closer?" I asked her. I didn't want to go into the alley. I could now smell someone else nearby. I could only smell one other unique scent, but odds are there were more.

The girl shook her head, and even took a step backwards away from me.

I frowned at her and wondered if that was what she wanted. For me to enter the alley, so they could hurt me or worse.

"My name is Renn... Please, don't run away. Let's talk a moment," I said to her.

The girl shifted, and I noticed the way the layers of jackets and cloth moved. She had moved her arms oddly. Maybe she had crossed her arms?

Wait...

That woman. The one who had given me this feather... she had said it was possibly from my boyfriend.

Which meant the feather hadn't been given by the girl, but...

"If you hurt me, that man you met last time... Vim. He'll show up. And this time he won't stop," I warned her. Although I needed to say it, I did so carefully and without trying to sound too threatening.

The small girl groaned. A tiny little whimper of a sound filled the alleyway... then she gulped.

Before I could say anything more, noise drew my eyes to the building next to her. To her right... and...

I frowned as I watched an arm pop out from a hole under the building. Then another. After a few moments a lanky man pulled himself out from what looked like a broken gutter or basement window. He went to standing next to the young girl, staring at me with a rather confrontational look.

Great. I knew I had smelled another... but the scary thing was it wasn't him. He stunk horribly. There was still another scent nearby. A third, at least.

And why had he crawled out of that hole?

"Who are you?" the man asked me.

Before answering him, I noted the tone in his voice.

He was scared.

"As I said, I'm Renn."

"What are you?" the girl asked me. Her voice was light. Pure. Yet it shook. She was just as scared as he was.

"I'm a Jaguar," I told them.

The two shifted, and glanced at one another. As the girl looked up at the tall, lanky, man I was able to see her feathers hidden beneath her heavy hood. Some looked far bigger than the one I held.

"What's that?" the man asked me.

"A large cat," I said. At least, so everyone was telling me. I'd not seen one myself.

"A cat?" they both said at the same time.

I blinked at their reactions, and felt a little foolish. Why did it feel like I was talking to children?

"What do you want from us?" I asked them.

They both glanced at one another again, and then the man nodded. She looked back at me, and pointed at the sky. "Can we meet later? At night?" she asked me.

"Where?" I asked.

"Your roof. Away from humans."

I nodded. That was reasonable.

"Tonight," the man said.

"Please... don't bring anyone else..." the girl spoke softly, but seriously. Once she nodded, and I nodded back, she turned to leave with the man.

"Wait!" I stepped forward, dared to.

They both startled, but turned slowly and looked at me.

"How is she?" I asked.

For a long moment, I waited for their answer... and thought maybe they hadn't understood me.

"Pulti is dying," she said blankly.

He nodded, and then they both turned to go again. They hurried away down the alleyway, turning right into another alley not far from here.

Watching them go, I sighed and wanted to groan.

Dying.

Of course she is.

I turned around, and was about to hurry back across the street... until I ran into a man who was as unyielding as time.

"Oh... Hey Vim," I smiled up at him, as he glared down at me.

Chapter 155: A Bloody Feather, Again

Renn smiled up at me sheepishly, and I realized once again that she was going to be far more trouble for me than should be possible. And that trouble wouldn't just be because my affection for her gave her more freedom than I allowed others.

"Sorry," she apologized to me.

"No... you're not," I said as I glanced down the alleyway. The third one, one that had not been amongst their group last time, was just now hurrying away. They had crawled down the wall, from the roof, near the other alleyway the two others had run into. Renn likely might not have even seen them.

But now I had a better idea on how I had not found them before, when hunting.

That lanky man had crawled out of one of the sewer vents. How he had fit through was a genuine question, but it at least answered other things. It told me they likely hid under the city. In the massive sewers beneath us. In the buried city, from the previous era.

"Did you hear everything?" Renn asked me, not seeming to care that I was upset with her.

"Yes. Come on... you're breaking the rules by being out here, and the rest will want to know what happened. They'll be waiting for you," I said with a gesture to the bank. I knew by now everyone would be there, waiting for us to return.

Renn glanced by me, blinking at the bank across the street. She smiled as she stared at it, she must have seen one of our members staring at us from within.

"Right!" she nodded, and was about to round me as to hurry across the street... but she stopped. I glanced down at her as she grabbed my left hand, and put something in it.

Holding the small feather gently, she nodded, content, and then hurried back to the company bank.

Watching her go, I paid attention to her as she stepped into the bank and began talking to Reatti and Merit. Both had been standing there, waiting for her.

Before they stepped too far into the building, the doors begun to close. Not to completely shut down the bank, just to make it a little more difficult for anyone to sneak in. Brom and Brandy were in the middle of shutting the many large bank doors. I knew if I walked around the corner, I'd see that the main lobby's doors were closed already as well.

Looking back down the alley, I made sure they were gone before I lifted the small feather Renn had given me.

Examining it, I knew it was the same one. From the same girl. The one on the roof, who had screamed her heart out at the girl I had hurt.

Or well... killed.

She wasn't dead yet, but they had said she was dying.

"Pulti," I whispered her name, and devoted it to my memory.

It's been some time since I've killed one of my own.

The little feather was pretty. It looked to be a tail feather. It was longer and straighter than the one Renn had in her room. And although this one's barbs were undamaged and unstained... its calamus wasn't. The feather's tip was a little sharper than it should be, and was a dark black in color.

A message from one Non-Human to another. One of the oldest methods to exist. It was one of the surest ones. After all, no human could produce such a thing. No human had feathers, or claws, or scales, as to use in such a way.

It was a message I'd not seen used in years. Lately we've all used genuine letters.

Though usually one didn't harm themselves too badly as to send that message. This one might not have been too painful, but it had drawn blood. The blood of a young girl.

It had hurt her to remove it.

Yet she had been willing to, as to draw Renn's attention.

Although such pain wasn't that big a deal for our kind, especially since we healed so quickly...

It was still a testament to their desire. Their need.

Yet what was it they desired?

What did they want? And why did they want it from Renn and no one else?

"Quite a predicament."

Turning to Brandy, I nodded to her. "Yes. It is. But not one I'm too unfamiliar with," I said.

"That's the truth... Again with their fascination with Renn," Brandy said as she stared at the feather in my hand.

"There's a reason for it. It might not be as important as everyone thinks, though. Maybe Renn smiled at one of them, or something, when she was out and about," I said. She'd do that.

"Maybe. What are we going to do about tonight?" she asked.

"Meet them," I said simply. Why wouldn't we?

"We'll need to vote again..." Brandy sighed as she shook her head.

"Go do so, then," I said.

"What will you do about their requirement? About showing up alone?" Brandy asked.

"Ignore it. They aren't alone, after all," I said.

Brandy shook her head. "Something tells me she'll show up alone."

"Possibly. But it matters not. I'm good at hiding," I said.

Brandy smirked at me. "So you are... but the rest of us might not agree with you. What if they vote to keep you at a distance?" Brandy asked.

My eyes hardened a little, and I did my best to not break the tiny feather between my fingers. "Careful, Brandy," I warned her.

She blinked, and stepped back. A single step.

The bookkeeper held my gaze, and then she sighed and nodded... and then smiled. "All right. Fine. I'll make sure no one tries to force it. But they will want to at least give them the shot. To give Renn the chance to talk to them," she said.

"That I can agree with. I promise you, I'll not interfere in the possible chance at getting new members. I vow it, as I always have," I said.

She nodded. "I know... alright. I'll go try my best. Don't get angry at me if they still vote in a way you don't like Vim!" she said as she hurried across the street.

I huffed at her and glanced back down the alleyway. It was empty, of course. Yet a part of me had hoped it wouldn't have been.

What was I going to do with her?

Running out here alone. Without even telling anyone.

I twirled the little feather between my thumb and fingers, and sighed. Why was I always attracted to the free-spirited ones? Was it because I myself lived under chains?

Or was it the fact that I simply liked how she'd risk my ire, and that of others, to do what she thought was right?

Just like with Amber. She had chosen to accept the banishment, and the ire of those she had tried to make family... all for the tiny chance to save a human. A human she had only known for a few months, at that.

Such a choice was unheard of amongst our kind. And not just because most hated humans. It meant she, unlike so many, had firm beliefs and a personal moral compass. One that didn't really fit in with the rest of the Society.

But that was her choice. Her right, as an individual.

Free will.

"Free will," I said softly.

It was, after all.

She was proof that I had earned it. That my actions, taken and done so far in the past that no one remembered, had been worth it. I had won.

We were as free as the humans now.

But that freedom came with dangers.

Turning around to head back inside, to hear how the conversation and votes were going... I hoped this didn't end badly. It would be so easy for it to do so. It could happen so fast that it'd be able to shock even me.

I'd not let that happen. I needed to not let it happen.

If I lost Renn, after deciding to give her a chance...

Or even worse, if we lost others... and Renn began to blame herself... to see herself as a curse, or one who brought misfortune...

Either would result in me losing the woman I was starting to love.

Crushing the feather in my hands, I tore and crushed it so much it became unrecognizable. Dropping it to the sidewalk as I opened the door to the bank, I entered the Animalia Company building... and vowed to protect them all.

Even from those who deserved my protection too.

Once inside I noticed none of our members were around. There were only a few customers, and they were all being handled by our human employees.

Walking into the bank, I headed for the large hallway which would lead me deeper into the building. But as I walked, I decided to check on the rest of the building before heading to the Society Housing.

It'd take them time to talk and debate, before they begin voting. I'd use that time to make sure everyone was fine, or at least the building was.

Just because those three had ran away, and promised to return at night... didn't mean there weren't others. There was a chance that they had been a simple distraction, nothing more.

As I walked the hallways, checking on the different departments and parts of the building... I wondered what to think of Renn's stalkers.

A young girl. A lanky man. The third had looked to be a woman as well.

Three new members. An oddity. Lately those who we find, or find us, are like Renn. Alone. Lost.

Not in groups... let alone in a group so different.

That lanky man had not been a bird. The one who climbed down from the roof had looked to have a tail, as well.

And then of course Pulti. The woman I had fatally injured. She had been some kind of larger animal. She had paws for feet, and one of her hands had been more paw than hand too.

Even if they were all predators, which was slightly possible, I doubted it. The girl although maybe a bird of prey, didn't smell like a predator. The one I had hurt had, however.

Plus there was definitely more of them. They had mentioned a master to Renn...

A pack, possibly. Such a thing was seen as normal, thanks to the many places in the Society like here in Lumen where multiple people and types live together... but it was far rarer than anyone realized anymore.

It's been decades since I'd encountered a group of non-humans, who weren't part of the Society.

Where had they come from? Where had they been? Surely not here. I didn't frequent Lumen often, but I've been coming here every half dozen years or so for the last few hundred years. I'd have smelled or encountered them by now, if they had been here the whole time.

Right...?

As I opened the door to check on the depot, I started to doubt myself a little... even if it was foolish to do so.

Well, it wasn't.

But I was getting tired of doubting myself. I'd been doing it a lot lately, and it was starting to become very annoying.

I'd blame Renn, but she'd just smirk at me if I told her she made me doubt myself.

While making sure the depot was fine, and still running smoothly... I decided the company was fine. It was time I went to the houses, to hear how the voting and conversations were going.

Hopefully they hadn't voted to do something too stupid.

And especially more so, hopefully Renn hasn't realized yet that she could call a vote herself...

I knew eventually she'd realize she could do so... and also realize that she could probably convince most of the Society to vote in her favor. People liked her. Even those who didn't want anything to do with her, like Liina, seemed to agree with Renn on many things.

Renn taking over the Society with pure charisma was a scary thought. Who knew what she'd want to do.

I shivered at the idea... yet smiled at it all the same.

Chapter 156: Fly

The night was a little cold, but there wasn't much wind.

The sun had gone down about an hour ago, and I've been sitting alone since it had sunk behind the mountains that loomed over Lumen.

I sat alone on the rooftop... or at least, I was alone to a degree. I knew Vim was nearby, but had no idea where he was. Only that he was close enough that he could protect me if I needed such a thing.

Glancing at the nearest door, I knew that Reatti and Merit were behind it. Maybe not directly behind the door, so they wouldn't be smelled by whoever came, but close enough to run out to help me if I needed it.

Across from me, far enough to keep me safe but close enough that we could have our eventual conversation... was another chair. It was empty of course, but I hoped soon it'd be where one of the other non-humans would be sitting. I was growing rather anxious, waiting here for them.

This was as exciting as it was worrisome.

All of the Society had voted rather quickly to indulge in this meeting on the rooftop... but to my surprise they had also quickly voted to ensure my safety right after.

They wanted Vim nearby, just in case. They had been willing to even endanger the prospect of this meeting if needed, too.

I was a little surprised at how... protective... some of our members actually were. Although it made me smile, and happy, to know everyone cared about me that much... I knew it wasn't entirely just because it was me as an individual.

They would have been as protective over any of our members. Not just me myself.

Merit was a kind person. She seemed prickly, yet was one of my fiercest defenders it seemed.

A small breeze rolled along the rooftop, and I heard the nearby garden thanks to it. The bushes and trees bristled and shifted in the wind.

Would they show up soon or much later? I didn't mind waiting, even if it got cold that was fine... but I really wanted to meet them and talk to them in depth.

What kind of conversation would we have? What would the results be? Will they become my friends or my enemies? Would this moment be something I'd remember for the rest of my life? Would this night be something I'd always be able to be proud of, or something I would always regret?

My smile grew a little, and I hoped Vim didn't find me too weird. Sitting here alone, smiling oddly...

But I couldn't help myself. This was not just amazing, it was...

Well...

"Exactly something I wanted to do," I whispered.

After all it was. I wanted to be like Vim. And this was something he did often.

During our voting several members, Lawrence especially, had made it clear that this was something Vim was used to. They had called it a moment of first contact.

First contact. With another member. Another Non-Human.

People who weren't part of the Society.

Like me, back in the beginning.

Yet...

I tried to think of Vim's expressions of the last week. Especially so of back when they had first shown up, and attacked Vim.

Even though they had been stalking me, and endangering the Society... and even though they had literally attacked him too... He had still stopped his pursuit of them. He had stopped attacking them, and had only defended himself... because he had immediately considered them members of the Society. Once he realized who and what they were.

Vim had done that with me too, back when we first met. In the Sleepy Artist.

He had studied me for only a few moments, and then smiled and nodded.

He had accepted me at that moment, without question. From that moment forward, he had chosen to protect me. From anything and everything.

I wonder how he did that. How had he decided so quickly, and devoted himself so purely to that decision?

I wanted to be that way too.

A shadow moved, and I left my thoughts as I stared hard at the approaching figure.

Going still on the seat, I watched as a familiar shape approached. She was short, and covered in layers of worn down jackets and clothes.

The girl slowly walked up towards me, and stopped right next to the empty chair. She stared at it, for a long moment, and I wondered if she would sit or not.

While she studied the chair, I studied her feet.

She had not wrapped her feet this time. Or well... maybe not feet.

The girl had talons. Her feet were like a birds. She had four large talons, and each had a pointy black nail. Her feet reminded me of a hawk's.

After a moment of staring at the chair she looked around and lifted her head. She sniffed the air in an odd fashion, and I realized she was trying to tell if I was alone or not.

"I asked you to come alone," she then said.

"I'm alone on the roof. There are others nearby, yes... but not here. We're alone here," I told her calmly. It was the truth, and also fulfilled her request.

"So you are..." she mumbled, and then glanced behind her. As she did I worried that she was debating running away again, but instead she sighed and shook her head. "They're not far behind me either. Even though I told them I'd come alone," she said.

The way the girl spoke told me that whoever she spoke of... she saw them as people she loved. Friends. Comrades.

"Would you sit with me?" I asked her, gesturing to the chair.

She glanced at me, then back at the chair.

"Who was that man?" she asked while staring at the chair.

"Which one...?"

"The one who killed Pulti," she said.

Her tone told me that her death had not only been recent... but painful. And not just painful for her.

Our kind could endure a lot of damage. But we still died. And thanks to how resilient we were... dying was sometimes gruesome.

Vim had probably hurt this Pulti in such a way that she had suffered. A slow death. Cruel to her... and those who had likely watched it.

"I'm sorry she died," I told her.

The girl gulped at me. She nodded. "It's fine... It would have happened soon anyway. It was why she had volunteered to meet you first," she said.

Anyway? Volunteered?

She sighed and stepped forward, as to sit onto the chair. As she sat carefully, ruffling around under her layers of clothing, I tried to understand what she meant.

Pulti would have died anyway? Was that what she meant? Why would she say that? Had she been old? Sickly?

"That man... his name is Vim. He's the protector," I said gently.

As the girl got situated on the chair, I noticed the way her legs curled a little. Her talon-like feet curled beneath the chair, hanging just a bit above the floor. They curled inward a little oddly. She seemed to have an extra joint on her legs, to let her do so. A second knee, it seemed.

A bird indeed.

"The protector?" she asked me.

I nodded. "He protects all of us."

"All...? Wait... how many of you are there?" she asked as she tilted her head. As she did, her hood fell backward. Revealing not just her face but all of her feathers. They weren't as puffed up as I remembered them being, but of course back then she had been rather... distressed.

Although not as distressed... I could see fear in her eyes. Little black eyes, without any white within, somehow gleamed in the dark. And not just in a way that animal eyes did. It was as if her black eyes were a different type of black entirely. They looked like little orbs, and they were shivering.

She looked scared. Afraid. Unsure. Worried.

Yet she still sat with me. Still spoke to me. Still dared to try.

How wonderful.

"You don't know?" I asked. So it was true that she, and the rest of them, didn't know there was more here than just me and Vim.

"There are more than two of you?" she asked.

Two. Interesting. Had she not mentioned that I wasn't alone? That meant she had smelled someone else than me. Yet... she shouldn't really know about more of us than Vim. She obviously didn't seem to realize that there were several of us here.

Did she think that Merit, or Reatti's scent, were Vim's? It was a likely possibility. Merit had been on the roof with me, both times they had come. It'd be interesting to know if she thought Vim smelled like Merit. Merit's smell was like a sun baked rock. It somehow fit Vim, but at the same time it didn't. For her to be able to smell either of them, with them behind a heavily sealed door and likely down several steps of stairs from here was a testament to her nose's ability.

"Yes. There are. But until I know more about you, and those you're with, I can't tell you how many of us there are," I told her.

As the girl stared at me, the wind picked up a little. As the breeze blew by, the girl's feathers perked up... becoming puffier.

"We came to you for help," she said.

"Help?" I tilted my head, and I noticed her eyes dance upward. To my ears.

"We had hoped to lure you to the master... but no matter how many times Pulti showed herself in front of you, you never chased her... But I suppose that's our fault. You can talk after all," she said.

My tail twitched as I did my best to understand what she was saying. I suddenly had a lot of questions... but was afraid to ask certain ones, even though I knew I needed to ask them.

"My name is Renn," I told her, deciding to start there.

She blinked at me. "Fly."

"Fly... It's a pleasure to meet you," I greeted her.

A long moment passed as she studied me, and then finally she nodded.

"If you wanted my help why didn't you just ask for it?" I asked her.

"Right... We should have. But we thought you were just like the master, so..." she shrugged a little sadly, as if just as disappointed as I was that they had not done so.

This master again. And they wanted to lure me to them? Why? For what purpose?

I was about to ask, but the girl suddenly shot upward, off her chair. I was about to stand and ask what had happened and what was wrong... but the source of her discomfort became apparent as Vim stepped up next to me.

Fly nearly knocked her chair over as she grabbed the back of the chair for support, and tried to hide herself behind it. Her feathers were now as puffed up and enlarged as I remembered them to be last time.

"Vim!" I started to complain. She looked like she was about to fly away!

"You!" she shouted, and I noticed the scared voice. She was terrified of him.

For good reason. Couldn't blame her... but...

"What would luring Renn to your master accomplish, young bird?" Vim asked her.

"We..." she looked around, as if expecting more people to show up. But no one had. The door to the Society building remained closed.

Where had Vim even popped up from? Behind me was the large open space where we usually sparred. Fly had only jumped and startled upon seeing him, as he stepped up next to my chair...

Fly stared at Vim as she stepped even farther behind the chair... as to glare at Vim and I from between the bars connecting the chair and its backrest together.

"We had hoped you two would fight each other," she barely whispered.

Fight?

Frowning at her, I wondered if maybe I had misheard her. But... I hadn't. She had whispered, but there had not been any wind or any other sounds. Plus I wasn't wearing a hat.

They wanted me to fight their master? Why? That made no sense at all...

"I see. Did your master order you to bring her to them?" Vim asked calmly, seemingly unbothered by her words.

She shook her head quickly.

That made even less sense.

"Vim...?" I whispered his name, as to let him know I couldn't understand what was happening. He only glanced at me, then back at her.

"Before you run away, Fly... know this," Vim raised his voice a little, which made her startle and step back away from the chair.

Wait, no!

"You are able to join our Society. A place and people that will accept you as you are. The Society offers acceptance, safety, protection, and most importantly a place to belong. A purpose. Go back and tell the others that you and they are officially invited to join our Society," Vim spoke calmly, and with a very gentle smile. He spoke, and looked, so strangely comfortable as he spoke that I knew even she could tell he meant his words... and had said them often. It nearly sounded rehearsed, yet it obviously wasn't.

Fly's feathers seemed to become denser, lowering a little, as she studied Vim. Her clothes, although still thick, became thinner thanks to it. She probably had feathers all over her body.

"So we're to feed another? What's the point in that?" she asked.

My blood went cold, as if a freezing chill had just blew past.

"The Society demands no sacrifice," Vim said.

Fly squinted her eyes at him, and it was clear she didn't believe him. She was doubting all of this.

Before I or Vim could say more she shook her head, and then turned away. Her talons made scraping sounds as she ran away, heading for the other side of the roof.

I stood quickly, to chase after her, but Vim grabbed me by the arm.

"Vim!" I shouted at him and was about to try and tug my arm free, but there was no point anymore. She was already near the ledge of the roof.

"I understand what's happening now Renn... or at least, a good idea of it. Let her go," he said gently. He looked a little hurt.

His hand slowly released me and I stepped forward, to hurry and shout at Fly... but once I looked back at her, I found her in the air. She had jumped off the roof. A blink of an eye later she fell to the street, out of sight.

"What do you mean?" I asked him as I stepped away from him.

"They're owned. By another," he said plainly.

"Owned..." I understood what he meant, to a point. They called that individual their master. Yet...

He nodded. "Their master likely demands payment. Sacrifice. They demand to be fed, likely," Vim explained.

Fed...

I shook my head, as my stomach knotted in understanding.

Vim nodded again, even softer. "A sad reality Renn. Although they are a fragment, a lost type of our people... they're actually the standard. It's just been so long since we've met any like them that it had become a surprise. Most of the older ancestors had demanded such things from those they ruled. A tax in not coin or fealty, but blood," Vim said.

Groaning at the very obvious reality before us, I felt sick. Sick and weak.

Sacrifice. To sacrifice oneself, and others, to the one who ruled them.

"They wanted me to fight their master? The one who demands to be fed?" I asked.

He sighed and nodded. "They can't hope to fight whoever it is themselves, so came to you. One who likely smells like a strong predator to their noses. It's interesting... She had smelled another on the roof. I wonder who she had smelled?" Vim crossed his arms as he thought about it.

Right. She had. I had thought that was interesting too.

"Never mind that, Vim... tell me, what do we do? She said Pulti would have been dead anyway, even if you hadn't killed her so..." I stepped towards him, to point at the chair across from us. Where that little bird girl had sat.

She had been so scared. So afraid. Yet had sat with me. With us.

And that meant... that meant that this Pulti had done the same. She had likely been the same.

She had tried to incur my wrath, as to lure me to their master. To let us fight one another. To free them.

I closed my eyes at the horrible situation, and wondered if I should sit back down. It felt like the world was spinning.

"We explain what happened to the rest, Renn. I'm the protector... but until they actually pose a threat I cannot do anything without permission. You know that," Vim said.

Nodding, I did. I knew that well. I was trying to accept it still, and I was trying to also accept abiding by the same rules. So that I could be like him.

"If you killed Pulti... Then..."

"Another must be sacrificed. Yes. Killing one has killed another. I now have two unwarranted deaths on my hands," Vim said smoothly.

This time I hadn't thought about sitting, I did so. I leaned forward as I sat down, and felt the bile rising in my stomach and throat. I didn't puke, nor did I think I would... but I was definitely...

"Deep breaths Renn. Although this is bad... it's not the worst path fate could have led us. If what she says is true, then our real enemy is their master. That means we might be able to spare the rest of them," Vim said.

I nodded, though for some reason didn't feel that much better.

A heavy hand placed itself on my back, and I shifted as Vim patted me gently. "It's not your fault Renn."

"Yes it is. They came to me. I should have been better," I said.

"They never gave you a chance Renn... The only time they might have possibly done so, was ruined by me."

He might be right, since he had hurt... Killed Pulti.

But... I still felt responsible.

"My grandparents had been the same. They had demanded to be fed too," I whispered.

Vim's hand on my back twitched just enough that I was able to notice.

I kept my head low, and my eyes filled with tears as I imagined Fly's face. The young girl's expression hadn't been one of desperation... just fear. Yet also not.

She's been born into such a world. Where her life meant nothing, and she believed she'd be an eventual meal for another.

I had been the same, back in my youth.

I hadn't known it was wrong. I hadn't realized there was possibly more to life. I couldn't have known, because no one else around me knew either.

It wasn't until I ran into that witch before I had learned the truth and...

"Don't break, Renn. If you wish to help them, as I'm sure the rest of the Society will desire as well, then you must be strong. You must stand tall," Vim spoke gently, with a slightly hushed voice... as if he was worried Merit or someone could hear him through the door.

I gulped and nodded. Yes. He was right.

We needed to save them.

"Alright..." I stood, and stared up at Vim as he nodded back at me.

"We protect our people, Renn. Even from our own," he said.

Shivering a little, I nodded. Yes. That had been in that little white book too. I hadn't thought much about it then, but...

"We protect," I agreed.

Chapter 157: A Cookie For a Desk

"One Lumen Mark please, and I'll get it sent to the mailing office immediately," I smiled at the old human couple as I finished writing the address on their letter.

"Of course," the white haired woman already had her single coin ready. She reached out with shaky fingers to put the single Lumen Mark into my hand.

"Thank you! I'll make sure it gets into the post today! Thank you so much for trusting the Animalia Guild with your letter!"

The two smiled and nodded, then turned to go. They took one another's hand, walking away slowly as they talked to each other. About me.

Looking down at my hands, to the letter and coin they held, I wondered where their son was. Some kind of fort in the north, near some lakes... but how far was it? And why did they need soldiers there?

They looked so old that I hoped this letter would reach him before they passed... and...

Blinking at the realization that this letter might be the last thing their son ever receives from them, and their last words, I realized I didn't like this job anymore.

No matter.

Turning away from the counter, since no one else was in line, I hurried to the back room where all of the mail and packages were stored. Most of those working the counters were women, but the moment I

entered the back room the workers became mostly men. And it wasn't just because they had to carry heavy packages occasionally... it was also because they wore swords.

They protected the mail as much as they carried it from here, to the depot, where they were put on carriages and delivered all over the place.

"Where to?" the man who stood in the center of the room held his hand out for it as I handed it off. He had stopped messing with the piles of letters on the two tables near him as I approached.

"Fort Blister, in the northern lakes by—" I started to tell him but he nodded before I could finish.

"Hey Trav! Hurry and take this out to Benny before he runs off!" the man shouted loudly, making me flinch. Even with my hat on his voice hurt.

"Yes boss!" Trav, a young man who was shorter and skinnier than me hurried over to grab the letter. He spun on a heel and hurried out of the room, into the back hallways where only employees were allowed. He headed for the depot.

"Thanks Grum," I told the mailroom boss.

The man nodded and turned back to the tables near him. To return to sorting mail.

I watched the busy room for a moment, and then decided to turn and leave before I got yelled at. Grum had snarled at me earlier when I first started working this morning, since I had watched the hustle and bustle of the mailroom in a daze.

He had thought I had been in the way, and had not been very happy with me at all. He had even threatened to fire me, too.

Several of the clerk girls, who worked at the counter just outside the mailroom, weren't talking to me now because of it. Their whispers told me they thought I'd not last the day. They didn't want to be fired with me, and lose their jobs.

They weren't ignoring me out of malice, but purely out of concern for their own jobs.

Leaving the mail room, I slowly walked along the long counter that flanked it. There were nearly a dozen women standing and sitting before the counter, but only a few had customers before them.

It seemed a little odd to have so many workers at the counter, but I knew it was not done on accident. Sometimes it became so busy that they wished there were dozens more here to help.

This place, like the bank, had its ups and downs.

It seemed only the depot area really stayed busy all day long.

The Mail Center was interesting... especially since I had not expected there to be so much mail, since it was supposedly expensive. Yet the Animalia Guild didn't charge a lot to deliver simple letters. Packages and goods? We charged a lot... but letters and messages were another matter.

The Animalia Guild only charged one single coin. A single Lumen Mark, here in Lumen, to deliver a letter. To anywhere our couriers went.

From what I had heard from others, the other guilds who dealt with letters and such charged a lot more than a single Lumen Mark.

It made sense to charge a lot. It took people, or carts, weeks or months to get to some of the locations we delivered the letters to. That wasn't cheap. Nor easy.

Reatti who had brought me here this morning had told me it was a way to make more money. It let us control the flow of information throughout the lands, while forcing everyone everywhere to get used to utilizing our services and no one else's.

Seemed like something that Vim would have thought of. To lose money as to make more money later.

Although it felt like there was more to it than I knew, or understood... I couldn't really complain about it.

After all our cheap prices let those like the elderly folks I had just helped able to afford sending out letters.

Walking up to the section of the counter that I had been working at, I sighed as I glanced around. There was no one to help. The few customers were all being helped already, and there was a good dozen or so women waiting to help the next in line.

It'd be some time before I had another customer and...

Noticing Wynn walking by, I watched as he headed into the hallway. He was carrying a small box, oblivious to my being behind the counter.

Watching him go, I wondered if maybe he knew where Vim was. I hadn't seen Vim since last night. And that had been for only a few moments. He had been busy talking to some humans and...

Tapping my desk, I realized I was getting upset. And not just because I was bored thanks to the lack of customers.

Working here at the mail center was something I didn't seem to enjoy... yet I should. I should like it here. It was interesting. Fun. Different.

Yet I felt annoyed. And the reason was obvious.

Another week had passed since our vote... and Fly had still not returned.

No one else seemed really bothered or concerned yet, but I was starting to get very worried.

What if the poor girl had gotten hurt? Or worse? What if she went back and her supposed master had...

I shook my head, to ignore the thoughts as I watched a new customer walk in. I smiled and waved at the woman... but she ignored me and walked up to another's counter. One closer to the door.

Sighing, I realized it was my fault. I had taken up position at the farthest side of the counter, away from the main entrance. The only people who came up to me for assistance were those who didn't want to wait in line near the front...

Glancing around, I decided to just go. It was near the time I'd be taking my break anyway...

Walking around the counter, and out into the lobby, I headed for the hallway. The one that Wynn had just headed down.

My high heels made noises as I walked down the hallway towards the main lobby. I tried to smell the air, without drawing attention since humans were walking around, but could only smell the stink of people and the city.

I couldn't smell anything that I cared to smell.

Which was odd... Wynn had just been in this hallway, why hadn't I smelled him too?

Surely he wasn't like Vim who was without a scent?

Rounding a corner, I frowned at the sight of Wynn and Reatti. The two were talking near the exit of the hallway, which led to the lobby.

As I approached, I recognized Wynn's scent and Reatti's. Although both of their scents were a little... too strong for my taste, I was still glad to smell them. It had worried me that Wynn had suddenly become like Vim.

"Oh Renn! Is it your break time?" Reatti asked as I approached. Wynn turned to nod in greeting as well, and I noted he no longer carried the small box he had earlier. Reatti didn't have it either though... wonder what it had been.

"Something like that," I said.

"The Mail Room is hectic but I can't handle the smell," Wynn said.

Reatti nodded. "It's a weird smell."

"It's the paper isn't it?" I asked.

They both nodded. "There's a small village not far from here that makes the paper for us. Not sure what kind of tree they use, but it definitely leaves an impression," Reatti said.

"Tree?" I asked.

"They make the paper out of trees," Wynn explained.

"How?" I asked. A tree? Really?

"Ask Vim?" Wynn shrugged and frowned, as if it was obvious.

Vim. Of course.

"So is it a..." I glanced around, and noticed the few humans nearby. This wasn't the place to talk about it.

"No. It's a human village," Reatti said softly.

Oh?

Wynn nodded. "Strange isn't it? But Vim is like that sometimes," Wynn seemed to think my surprise had been one of uncomfortable worry or something.

"Oh shush... Renn, your scarred human should be back later tonight. Heard Vim and Brandy talking about it earlier," Reatti then said.

"Wait? Lamp?" I perked up at that. Really? She was coming back already? Sure it had been a week or so, but I had expected Lamp to stay there for a month or two... maybe forever, even.

"Lamp. Yes, that one," Reatti nodded, recognizing the name.

She must not care much for humans. Even the ones we were going to let into the Society.

"I'll be leaving now... Don't blame me for it, but I don't like the idea much even if she fits the criteria," Wynn said with a sigh as he turned to go.

"Oh...?" I watched him go alongside Reatti. She just shrugged as I glanced at her.

"He voted yes, but that doesn't mean he has to really like it," she told me after a moment.

"Right..." I nodded. That was true... but then why vote yes to letting Lamp join the Society?

"I'll go back on patrol... If you see my brother step on his foot for me!" Reatti decided to step away too, heading down the hallway to follow Wynn.

"Sure..." I waved goodbye as she stepped away. She hummed happily as her spear bounced on her shoulder as she walked away.

She and Brom seemed to love those spears... it was still a little sad to see the silvery items in their hands... but it also made me happy to see how pleased they were with them. I liked them, but they loved them. Far beyond anything I could.

Leaving the hallway and entering the lobby, I glanced around for any other members... or at least a source of entertainment to distract me from the strange sense of unease I was trying to run from.

Oddly, I found it. In a form I hadn't expected.

Walking over to the group of desks, situated on the right next to the large stairwell that led to the balcony on the second floor, which led to Gerald's office, I approached one of the desks in the middle.

There were eight women sitting at the desks, and in the middle of them... with his feet up on the desk, with a plate of cookies on his lap, was Vim.

He was reading some kind of book, one that for some reason felt familiar... yet I couldn't focus on it enough as to remember where I had seen it before. My eyes wouldn't, couldn't, leave Vim himself.

Vim had a small smile as he read the book, while slowly chewing a cookie he had just tossed into his mouth. He was rubbing his right hand against his pants, as to clean his fingers of crumbs.

Glancing around, I did my best to ignore the stares of the women around us... or well, Vim. The eight of them were wearing the dress and colors of the bookkeeping and auditing department. Lawrence's and Brandy's department.

"Who did you steal this desk from?" I asked Vim as I stared past his feet and legs to see the papers and folders on the desk's surface. He wasn't harming or bothering the papers, but there were a few that looked pushed aside thanks to his feet. Some looked half written and finished. Whoever he had bothered had been in the middle of writing a report.

"One of them," Vim shrugged to those around him, not taking his eyes of the book in his hands.

"You're mean," I said. Had he forced a poor girl away from her job? Would she get in trouble?

"I gave her a cookie in exchange," Vim defended himself as he picked up one of those cookies.

"Those are the common ones they make for the morning lunch rooms," I said plainly. They were small, and rather tasteless.

"A fair trade," Vim nodded.

Glancing around, I quickly found the woman he had chosen to torment. She was sitting across the room, at the front entrance guidance desk. Where Reatti usually sat when not on patrol. She was in the middle of eating a cookie, which told me he had probably given her a whole plate full.

"He also gave her three Marks... Wish he had chosen to take mine instead," a woman behind Vim mumbled.

Looking at her as she sighed and went back to writing on a paper, I smiled gently at her. She sounded genuinely envious.

Maybe they were just used to Vim's antics...

Several of the other women around us nodded in agreement, and as they did they began lightly talking amongst themselves. Not about Vim and I, but rather the cookies. They were complaining that they were actually a little untasty. They wanted to know why better snacks weren't provided.

I agreed with them, but at the same time felt a little bad. Hopefully I didn't give them the idea as to complain...

"Worried?" Vim then asked quietly.

I nodded and glanced around. None of them seemed to even realize he had spoken.

"Don't be. I feel much better now," he said.

"Only you would feel better finding out there is... someone..." I went quiet, and wished I had found him elsewhere. Somewhere more private. I wanted to talk about things I couldn't.

"What's happening is something I've encountered many times. There's no need to worry now. I could handle it in a few hours, if I was allowed to," Vim said.

Staring at him as he tossed another cookie into his mouth... I wondered how many times he actually had encountered other groups of Non-Humans like this.

Probably many, many, times. Yet...

Yet he did look a little too comfortable and unbothered. Shouldn't he at least worry about Fly or the rest? What if they were eaten or sacrificed?

"I heard Lamp's supposed to be back tonight," I said.

He nodded. "Yes. When she gets here you'll have to go with Brandy and the rest to take her to her new home. She'll be given a position too," Vim said.

Stepping around the desk a little, as to look over Vim's shoulder and read the book he was reading... I frowned as I stared at the language.

"What's that?" I asked.

"An old book. One Lawrence remembered earlier," Vim said.

Lawrence had? I noticed an odd silence and looked up.

The women were staring at us now, interested as well.

I stared at them for a moment until they looked away, and seemed to try to pretend go back to being busy. Yet they weren't. They were now listening intently. No one was talking anymore.

"Unlike you, we normal people need to refresh our memory every so often. I've read this thing dozens of times, yet can't remember how it ends," Vim said.

"Oh?" So it was an actual book? A story? Not some ledger or...

I leaned forward, to try and study the odd writing. It looked like it had been written not along the width of the page, but alongside it. They had written at an angle, it seemed... which made the words somehow blend with each other. It looked like a mess. It made me feel as if even if I could read the language, I'd not be able to understand it just because of the placement of the words.

"Was it written sideways?" I asked.

"From top to bottom. Then bottom to upward," Vim ran a finger lazily up and down the page, showing me how it worked.

"Hm... is that a better way to do it?" I asked. It seemed interesting. I had never even considered that there was other ways to write words. Different symbols, sure, but to use them differently too?

"For this language, I suppose. The hard ones are the ones that use anagrams as their grammar structure. All it does is make words mean hundreds of different things, so nearly impossible to really know what the author meant," Vim said.

"What's an amagrama?" I asked.

Vim smirked at me, and then lowered his book a little. As if to focus on me.

"Shouldn't you be at work?" he asked.

Oh? Did he not want to teach me? I thought maybe he did, since he had been so willing to tell me about it.

"I think so... but it's slow at the Mail Center," I said.

"Hm... a good excuse if any," he said.

I frowned at him, especially since it was obvious that he so clearly understood my real meaning.

He knew I had wandered off, not because I was bored, but because I was worried.

"Upset with me?" I asked him.

He shrugged and grabbed a cookie, but instead of eating it he spun it in his fingers as if it was a toy. "You need not worry, Renn. Focus on your tasks, and Lamp, and worry when it's time to do so," he said.

"Is that how you do it? You just put it aside until it's time?" I asked him.

"Well..." The cookie stopped spinning, and I noticed the way his thumb rubbed it. He seemed to have forgotten it was a cookie in his hand, and not a pen or something inedible.

Smiling at him, I remembered the conversation he and I had on the Sleepy Artist's balcony. The one long ago, back when we had first met. Before he and Lomi had left, and Amber had died.

"It's your job. But, Vim, that's the point," I said to him.

He blinked, and studied me for a long moment... and I wondered if he even remembered that conversation. The one where he had told me not to worry, since he would do so for me.

He didn't say anything, and then he held the small cookie out. It honestly didn't look too appetizing... even if he was seemingly willing to feed me himself. Especially since now parts of it had fallen off, littering his lap, thanks to his spinning and messing with it.

A broken cookie. A cookie that I had no desire for, since they really were tasteless. They were bland things. Every morning there were fresh plates of them in the breakfast lounges for the employees, and by the end of the day they were always tossing most of those plates away. Uneaten and untouched.

A poor gift...

Yet still I bent forward a little, and opened my mouth.

Vim carefully placed the tiny thing into my mouth.

"You do look delicious, but you're no cookie," he said with a smirk.

The cookie crunched, and I blushed at him as the women around us went still. They all looked up from their desks, to look at me.

Suddenly I had their full attention again, and Vim looked far too amused over that fact...

So I turned and hurried away.

I could barely hear Vim's soft chuckling as the women giggled and began to gossip about us as I left the main lobby, running away.

He really was mean, sometimes.

Especially since that nasty cookie now tasted delightful.

Chapter 158: Tosh

The company was quiet now. The hallway lanterns had been put out, the shades and windows closed. Most hallways were dark enough that I knew most humans wouldn't be able to traverse without knowing them by heart.

Such silence was common, when so late at night... but there was a strange feeling to the quiet air. Off in the distance I could still hear murmurs, whispers, and footsteps... Some I knew were legitimate, from one of the human workers who worked during the night shift, or one of the guards. A few were from members of the Society, like Brom who I had seen not too long ago as he patrolled. But sometimes I heard sounds that made me turn to see their source, only to find nothing there. Or to round a corner, expecting to see someone opening or closing a door... and not only was there no one doing such a thing, there was no door to be found either.

If Renn was walking with me she'd probably tell me it was ghosts or something. Although I'd not enjoy that conversation with her, a part of me somewhat longed to see her worried expression and her voice when on edge.

"Ghosts," I scoffed at the idea.

Over a thousand years I've been walking this planet, and not once had I ever encountered such a thing.

If the souls of those slain could remain and linger, if anyone could encounter them... it'd be me. Even if I discounted the ones I'd slain with my own hands, I've known those who were powerful. Who were unique. Who were beyond the normal.

If even the gods couldn't keep their souls here, why did anyone think the lesser souls could?

"Pointless," I tried to dismiss the thoughts as I glanced out a window. I was on the second floor, near the bank area. I was just walking around, without purpose... waiting. As I had been for days.

Right as I approached a corner, I slowed a little as I heard the sound of high heels just beyond the corner. Footsteps that had not been in the hall before were there now. They sounded as if they were walking my way.

The click and clacks of the shoes reminded me of the one's they made the banker girls wear. Like the ones Renn had been wearing lately.

If not for the lack of her scent, and the fact that the footsteps weren't hers at all, I'd think it was her.

They were walking far too apart to be Renn's. And the pace was wrong. Renn had a better rhythm to her steps, even when in a hurry...

Rounding the corner, I wasn't too surprised to find the hallway empty... and for the footsteps to echo away, disappearing as if they hadn't been there in the first place.

As I headed down the hallway, I wondered what to think of the sounds. If it was just the sound of voices, or maybe even the doors and stuff opening and closing, I'd just blame the wind. The wind sneaking into crevices and half-open windows... but footsteps?

Rounding a corner, I smiled at my thoughts.

"The answer, of course..." I slowed a little, until I found the reason for the sounds.

Pausing before one of the small vents, ones that weren't really used anymore, I sighed as I understood the source of the sounds.

I was hearing the echoes of someone somewhere else in the building, maybe even in the Societies Housing. Yet when I was a hallway or two away from one of the vents, my hearing picked it up even stronger. Amplifying it, since my instincts and senses went into overdrive upon hearing them.

My astute senses were working against me.

A common issue, regrettably.

I wonder if Renn suffered the same? She did sometimes see or hear something that I noticed made her tilt her head in confusion, only for her a moment later to smile and return her focus to whatever she had been doing earlier.

She seemed to rely entirely on her cat ears, yet could hear from her human ones. Hearing from multiple sources was probably confusing. Probably why her human ones weren't as good, she likely instinctively ignored them and made them worse over time by doing so.

"Why am I focusing on her so much?" I whispered at myself as I rounded another corner and headed for a stairwell.

I knew why, of course, but that didn't mean I wanted to admit it.

Climbing the stairs to the third floor, I slowed as I reached the top of the stairwell... finding Tosh there.

He was standing right at the entrance of the stairwell, looking down at me as I approached.

The normally sullen man seemed odd, since he was smiling at me.

"Tosh, is all well?" I asked him as I paused a few steps from the top of the stairs. There was enough room to climb to the next floor, and stand next to him, but it'd be a close brush of the shoulders. And Tosh was... not someone I wanted to bother too deeply by bumping into, even if I did so carefully. The poor man was fragile. The kind of fragile that made me not want to startle him even to that degree.

"I'm lost, Vim."

My eyes focused on the man, and the whisper he had barely spoken. His thin voice echoed down the stairwell and into my ears... sounding eerily similar to the ghostly whispers I had been pondering earlier.

"You're not lost, Tosh. You're here. With me. With friends," I said to him gently.

My old friend shook his head, and his hair danced a little as he did so. He needed a haircut, but had needed that haircut for the last hundred years. Unlike Renn, most of our kind weren't able to grow their hair quickly.

Shifting a little, I wondered what to say to him. I had known him for a long time, and even more so had known those like him more than I'd like to admit.

They were broken. Deep within. In ways that could not be understood, by anyone.

Broken to such a degree that they went dozens, in Tosh's case, hundreds of years between speaking aloud.

"Can I help you find your way?" I asked as his eyes focused onto my own. The held mine, telling me that Tosh was genuinely looking at me. For the first time in hundreds of years.

"You always do know the way," he whispered with a nod.

I felt a small chill as I nodded and stepped up another step, towards him. I waited a moment until he blinked before stepping up the next step.

Approaching him carefully, I smiled gently at my old friend as I reached the top of the stairwell. Tosh stepped back a single step, a little haphazardly, and I took my place next to him.

The hallway we now stood in was empty. Dark. Cold. Yet... I cared not about the company or anything else at the moment. I would almost not even care to notice if Fly or her master broke in right now.

Tosh was asking for my help.

For the first time since he had retreated into himself, so long ago.

I could only imagine what had spurred his sudden willingness to speak to me. But I'd worry and think about that later. Right now I simply needed to be here. For him. For whatever he needed.

"Where did you get lost, Tosh?" I asked him.

Tosh blinked and frowned. "Somewhere hot..." he whispered.

Hot. The desert. The Monarch. With Merit.

Not too surprising, but it still was. After all that hadn't made him go silent and hide within himself. It had been the events after that which had made him break.

"Well it's cool and damp here," I said.

He took a small breath, and his frown turned into realization. He blinked in a way that told me he understood. He knew what I meant.

"The sea," he said as he smelled the air.

"The sea. Want to go see it?" I asked.

"Is it frozen?" he asked.

"We can freeze it if you wish," I said.

A tiny smirk curled itself on his face. "Still dramatic, are you?"

I smiled back at my old friend and nodded. "I try to be, sometimes."

Tosh shifted, and I reached out to grab the man on the shoulder. His thin shoulder was but a fragment of his former self, but it was still him. Still my friend. He flinched a little upon my grip, but didn't shy away. Didn't ignore me. His eyes didn't go dull and instead focused on me.

"It's nice to see you again, Tosh," I said to him.

He frowned and nodded. "It's... been awhile," he agreed.

Yes. It has.

Tosh reached up with his hand and scratched his chin, and I could see the man scanning his memories. Looking for something.

"I'm... I..." his eyes narrowed, and I realized something hurt him. Something inside. Either a memory or the attempt to pull one to the surface had pained him.

"Take it slow, Tosh. Slow and easy, like how you used to polish those stones," I reminded him of his old hobby.

"Ah... Hm..." Tosh nodded, as if he understood what I meant completely.

Did he though? I hoped he did. But...

"I feel short... did you grow taller?" Tosh then asked.

Chuckling at him, I stepped forward to wrap my arm around his shoulder. To guide him down the hall, towards the Societies Houses. To one of the kitchens.

"You shrunk, instead, I think!" I said.

"Shrunk...?" Tosh frowned as he glanced down at himself.

Could he tell he had become scrawny? Lifeless? Decrepit almost?

Probably not. Not yet. But he would.

Leading Tosh down the hallway, I guided him slowly. We walked carefully, and I held him as if we were both tired soldiers helping each other stand and walk after a long battle.

That's probably how he felt, so it was only proper.

"I'm lost, still, I think," he whispered.

"You are. But it's okay. We'll find our way, together," I said.

"You're never lost, Vim."

I smiled and nodded, even though I didn't agree at all.

Why did they all always think I always knew the way? That I always knew what to do or say?

It was so far from the truth it hurt.

But for him, right now... it was what I had to be. The hero. The protector. Vim, the immortal, the unyielding and unflinching.

Tosh needed the man who he grew up reading about. The one he heard stories and legends of. The man he feared, hated, and then revered.

"I met your wife," Tosh whispered as we neared the Societies Door.

My feet almost stumbled, but I somehow kept myself steady... and Tosh in his lost mind didn't notice my near stumble.

"Huh?"

He nodded. "The cat. She's kind... where did you lose her this time?" he asked me.

Studying my friend who seemed to have mistaken some memories, and put new ones together with old ones... I wondered what to say.

"Renn?" I asked him. I couldn't think of any other woman, a cat at least, that he could be thinking about. Wife? Really?

He nodded and smiled. "Yes. Her. The one who punched you," he said.

Interesting.

"She's around here somewhere," I said.

"Ah... good. Don't lose her, Vim. You don't get lost, but we do. We do..." he whispered and blinked a few times.

I opened the door for him, and let him step into the Societies Housing. I shut the door behind me, and made sure to quickly take him by the shoulder again. I didn't want him to fade back into his mind. Progress was progress, but sometimes one needed to... push a little.

If I let him delve back into his mind, it would be okay. No one would blame him, or me... but I wanted him free from that cage. Even if it meant I had to force his mind to stay awake, here and now, by stretching the truth a little.

"Would you like to meet her?" I asked him.

Tosh blinked, and his eyes became clearer as he glanced at me. "Renn...? You'd let me tease you so willingly?" he asked me.

For you? Yes. I would. "Sure? She's probably looking for me anyway," I said.

He scoffed and shook his head. "So confident... even with women."

"Says you? I remember you trying to woo that dancer, Tosh. Stripping naked in front of the king and all those churchmen!" I smiled at the memory. It was a good one.

Tosh didn't even need to ponder it for a moment. He remembered it instantly, and broke out into a hearty laugh.

As we walked closer to the stairwell, as to descend to the first floor, I knew that many had heard Tosh's laugh. How could they not? It had been so guttural, so deep, so pure.

It had probably even awoken some of those sleeping.

But who cared?

It's been over a hundred years since I had heard this man's laughter. I'd dare anyone to complain at the sound of it.

"You're right! She hated me!" Tosh laughed as he remembered.

"She did! Stabbed you, too!"

He nodded quickly as we reached the new stairwell, and began to descend it. Right as we stepped down, I heard a few doors open. Some nearby and others elsewhere.

Would them approaching to talk to Tosh help him or hurt him?

We'd probably find out soon.

Hopefully it'd not cause any issues, or make him retreat back into himself.

Tosh snickered as we descended the stairwell, and I smiled at my old friend.

Welcome back, Tosh.

Hopefully this time you'll stay awhile.

Chapter 159: A Man's Friend, Found Again

The whole of the Society had gathered again. It was starting to become a common event, it seemed at least lately, but now it was not to vote or because there was danger.

It was instead to celebrate.

"Just once!" Merit shouted in complaint, and huffed as the rest of the group laughed at her disgruntled expression... yet I could tell that Merit wasn't upset at all. She was all smiles as Tosh laughed and nodded.

The man who had been so quiet, so... inward, was now everything but. He sat at a table, surrounded by everyone in the Society. He had a drink in his hand, as most did, and was happily talking and remembering long forgotten memories with them all.

Honestly it made me feel a little out of place. I, unlike the rest of those here, had no memories with Tosh... but it seemed I wasn't the only one. A few, like Brom and his sister Reatti, didn't either. There were some who, like me, had only known Tosh when he had been a quiet, emotionless man.

The oddest thing was that even those who I had thought had been old, like Brom and Reatti, hadn't known him either. Maybe it was just that they had not arrived here until far after he had.

"Vim did! He nearly threw up!" Tosh pointed at Vim and caused most of the room to break out into laughter. Vim, who sat next to Tosh, smiled gently as he became the center of the laughter, or rather the source.

Although laughter, and reason for it, was very interesting and lovely... My eyes weren't drawn to those who were laughing, or even Tosh... No, I couldn't tear my eyes from Vim.

He sat there quietly, as he had been for some time. It was as if Vim wanted everyone else to talk and interact with Tosh, as much as possible. He only spoke up when addressed, or when it was too silent for too long.

Vim looked... happy. Genuinely happy. He seemed glad his friend was talking again, and sincerely seemed thankful.

The protector I was seeing was a new one. One I'd not seen before.

He looked almost... human. And not just because he looked like one. He had a smile like humans sometimes got. The kind of smile that looked... foolish, almost. Innocent.

It was a good look for him.

"You ran away then! Took us a week to find you!" Brandy barely got her words out in-between her laughter, she bent over the table she sat at and began to hysterically laugh at whatever memory she was both retelling and remembering.

"Who can blame me for running! Vim had been furious!" Tosh tried to defend himself, but started laughing too.

Vim glanced around, and I noticed the way he seemed to study those around him. He was here, and a part of the conversation, but was also... somewhat separated. Distanced. As if on purpose.

When his eyes finally fell upon me, I felt my ears stand up a little. His smile softened a little, which made my face grow hot. Luckily everyone was far too busy laughing and talking to even notice.

With one final glance around, Vim nodded to himself. Content.

Vim stood slowly, and before Tosh or anyone really noticed he was slipping away Wynn slid into his seat. He filled Tosh's jug, pouring his own cups contents into it. "Night's still young Tosh!" Wynn said.

"It is!" Tosh agreed, but I knew it wasn't true. In only a few hours the sun would be rising.

Did no one realize? Or did no one care?

Not that it really mattered, I suppose.

Though... something told me they were doing it on purpose. They wanted Tosh to talk and remember memories, for as long as possible. To ensure he'd not retreat into himself again.

It seemed... a little forceful, but it was well intentioned.

And more so, it seemed to be genuinely working.

Tosh was all smiles, and his eyes weren't just clear they were focused. He looked into people's eyes as he spoke, and did so confidently. Surely.

Vim patted Tosh on the shoulder, and then stepped around him. He walked in-between the many chairs that had been gathered around Tosh and the table he sat at, and snuck away.

Putting my own cup down, I glanced around. I was sitting alone, a little bit away from the group... I had not sat so far away that I hadn't been a part of it, but I was far enough away that I knew I'd be able to get away without being noticed.

Standing up slowly, I smiled at Merit who glanced at me. She smirked at me, and I nodded gently at her as I stepped away from the group and went to follow Vim out of the room.

She was far more astute than she seemed. I had barely made a sound, and Merit had to turn around a little to see me. For her to have heard me stand up amidst the laughter and noisy talking was rather surprising.

Leaving the room, I followed Vim out into the hallway.

"Going to the bathroom?" I asked him as I picked up my pace to reach him. He was nearly half way down the hall already.

Vim paused a moment and glanced back at me. He frowned at me. "Hm?"

Reaching him, I smiled up at him and gestured back to the room we had just left. "Are you... done? Already?" I asked him.

"For now, yes," he nodded.

I see.

Vim stared at me for a moment, and then looked behind me. Back down the hallway.

"I've known him for nearly four hundred years," he whispered.

"So I heard," I nodded. I've been listening to Tosh and the stories about him, and those he remembered, for the last few hours after all.

"Yet this is the first time in nearly half that, that I've heard his voice," Vim said.

"Ah..." I nodded. Yes. I figured as much, thanks to how everyone had acted.

I had been with a few others when we had heard his laughter, a few hours ago. The laughter had been loud, and strange. I had not recognized the voice after all... I had thought maybe Fly's master, or one of her comrades, had broken in... but Merit and the others I had been with had instead only stood up and smiled at the laugh.

They had recognized it instantly.

Most had watery eyes when they hurried down to the kitchens, as Vim made his friend some food and poured him a drink.

"Walk with me," Vim whispered, tapping me on the arm as he turned.

Nodding, I followed Vim down the hallway. He guided me to a stairwell, and ascended to the next floor.

A part of me hoped he'd go up another, to lead us back to our rooms... or well, my own, but he didn't. He just walked slowly, seemingly walking without a destination in mind.

Down below, I could just barely make out the loud voices and laughter. It was... good to hear it, even if it made me realize how...

Well...

"What's wrong?" Vim asked me. He had glanced at me as I got lost in thought.

"I just... realized how... well... You all have known each other for... a long time. I'm jealous," I said.

"Hm... Well, you'll have time Renn. Hundreds of years, if you're lucky," he said.

"How old is Tosh?" I asked.

"Almost four hundred years I suppose."

Four hundred years. And he had known Vim even from a young age.

Was Vim really that much older than me?

I mean... he must be. But it was so...

"After a few hundred years Renn, a few more mean nothing. Don't think too much of it," he said.

"Easy for you to say..."

"It is," he nodded.

Sighing at him as we rounded a corner, I realized we had walked in a circle. We were about to come up to the stairwell we had just climbed up from.

"I'm glad your friend is... uh..." I wasn't sure how to phrase it.

"Healed? Not yet. But it's a start. A good start. I had not ever expected him to speak again, honestly," Vim said.

I noticed he spoke softly, and not because he worried Tosh or anyone else would hear him.

"Can I ask what... or how it happened? What did you do? To break him out of that..." I gestured blindly, since I wasn't sure what to call it. He had been so withdrawn, within himself, it was like he had been dead almost.

"No idea. I had been walking and simply found him. It could have been anything, Renn. Something he saw. Something he heard. Something he smelled, or felt. We'll likely never know," Vim said.

Passing the stairwell we had walked up I listened to the chatter down below. They were still going at it.

Still...

My sister. My oldest sister, rather. She had been like Tosh near the end. When I had found her... and...

"How often does... someone return to themselves?" I asked, thinking of Glennessa.

"So rarely that it's considered a plain miracle," Vim said.

"I see," I whispered.

We walked in silence for a moment, and I tried to study the doors we passed as we walked. It was hard, since now my mind couldn't stop thinking about my sister.

"Renn."

I blinked and looked up. I had been staring at the floor, it seemed.

Vim was to my right, heading upward. Up stairs.

Nodding I went to follow him upward.

Would we be going to our rooms now?

"Who had you been thinking about?" Vim asked as we ascended the stairwell.

I gulped. "My oldest sister."

"You mentioned you had a few," Vim said as we walked out onto the third floor.

I nodded. "Two. Two sisters. Three brothers," I said.

Vim nodded back at me, and stood next to me... waiting for me to tell him about them.

Could I though?

I wanted to.

I really did.

But what if it made him...

"I had no siblings. Though I've known many that I would call brother or sister, I never had any thanks to blood alone," Vim told me.

Staring at him, I realized he was... trying to be gentle with me. He must have noticed my discomfort, and worry.

"I'm not broken like Tosh, Vim," I said to him.

"No. But I'd like to be gentle with you all the same," he said back.

Oh?

That was surprising, yet... not...

"Did I look that fragile?" I asked.

"You have tears in your eyes, Renn," Vim said gently.

Blinking, I reached up to check.

Sure enough, I did. Wiping my eyes, left a slight glimmer of wetness on my hand.

"I see," I whispered.

"I have noticed you grow... somber, when you think of them. But you cried a little down there too, with Tosh, so it's hard for me to tell if you're just sentimental or if it's more serious," Vim said.

"I only cried once, when everyone else did while hugging Tosh," I argued. That moment when everyone hurried into the room, to see and speak to Tosh after hearing him laugh had been... well...

It had been wonderful. Enough to make me cry. But there shouldn't be any harm or shame in it, since I had not been the only one to cry. Most had.

Vim gently nodded with a smile, as if willing to accept my defence.

"Plus, Vim, you were probably the only one who didn't cry... Why are you so emotionless sometimes?" I asked him. I knew he could cry, after all. I had seen it before.

His smile slowly died, and I felt bad for teasing him as the protector of the society suddenly lost all expression.

Staring at him, I hesitated. He suddenly looked... well...

He now looked just like I had dubbed him. Emotionless.

Should I apologize?

"If I broke, Renn, so too would have Tosh," Vim then said.

"Broke...?" I whispered my question as he nodded.

"Tosh remembers me as the man who faced those monsters. The horrible nightmares. The man who didn't flinch, even when he should have. I didn't want to make him question those memories, just yet," Vim said.

"Ah..."

Vim took a deep breath, and without warning...

Staring at the single, small tear as it slid out of his right eye... Vim nodded. "I'm glad my friend is okay," he said.

Watching that tear as it slowly ran down his cheek, I nodded. "Me too," I whispered, as my own eyes began to water again. Fiercer than before, even.

Vim reached out his hand, and while staring at his watery eyes I took it with my own.

Holding his hand, I smiled at the man who looked... reassured.

"Later I'll introduce you to my friend. For some reason he thinks you're my wife, so please play along for me," Vim said.

"Wait what?"

Chapter 160: Lamp's Return

Tosh's... awakening, as one might call it, was still the talk of the Society.

It was a little worrisome, but not because they found it so amazing and wonderful... since it was a wonderful thing. Rather the issue was simply because they were allowing the wonderful miracle to override their recent worries and the last few days' events.

Most of the society seemed to have forgotten that there's a potential enemy right beyond their front door. Waiting. Planning. Possibly sharpening their claws.

Though I couldn't blame them. Tosh coming back from the recess of his mind was a miracle. And in truth, most of them don't even see Fly and her people as enemies... they're hoping they become fellow members. Most in their own way already see them as members. Members of the society who, like they had been in the past, were being abused by a tyrant.

People who needed to be saved and forgiven, not hated and killed.

Hopefully those beliefs and hopes weren't misplaced.

Rounding a corner, I noticed how empty the hallway was. It was later in the day, but it was a little strange... I wasn't too far from the main lobby area. Though I was on the third floor. One not really frequented much, especially not by the human employees.

"Vim!"

I turned to watch Renn hurry around a corner, running up to me with a huge smile. Not far behind her, hurrying but not running, was the eastern human. Lamp.

Lamp had returned this morning, and she'd been sticking to Renn ever since. It was actually a little bothersome... If the two became too close with one another, it'd be a pain when it came time for them to separate.

Plus... Renn had once mentioned she was tired of burying those she loved. Humans, particularly.

Hopefully she'll not weep too much.

I slowed to a stop as Renn reached me in the middle of the hallway. I kept a small eye on Lamp as she slowed in her approach... as if intentionally doing all she could to give us some space. It was ridiculous, since she couldn't understand this language anyway.

"Lamp's going to work under Brandy for a few years," Renn said, speaking quickly.

"Well, not a surprise. There's only a few here who she can even converse with," I said.

Renn nodded. "They're going to make her some kind of auditor? One that keeps an eye on all the different branches?" Renn seemed to find it interesting, but didn't seem to understand what that meant.

"They intend to teach her this language, and make her write reports and such in her own language, yes. A useful tactic," I said as I nodded.

She frowned and glanced back at Lamp, who was now stepping up to us. She smiled and nodded at me, but remained silent. She must think we were talking about something important.

Well, to Renn it probably was important.

"Are your people safe, Lamp?" I asked Lamp.

She nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Vim. Several wanted to return with me but... we don't want to intrude too quickly. I hope to prove myself as to earn their right to come here too," Lamp said.

I heard the rehearsed words, but could also see and hear the honesty in them.

"I'm sure it won't take long."

Renn smiled as she watched the two of us talk. The happy grin on her face told me she really enjoyed what was happening... though something told me it was a little simpler than just her being happy over Lamp being accepted into the society. She had that weird grin on her face whenever she watched and listened to Lamp and I speak to one another.

Lamp turned to Renn and smiled at her. "Will you tell her how much I love her?" Lamp asked me.

"No."

Lamp turned, and for a tiny moment looked aghast... but then burst out into laughter.

Renn perked up as Lamp tried to cover her face as she laughed excitedly. Although I had been only a little serious, as she laughed I began to regret not being completely so.

That laugh was so pure and lovely that I could see why Renn found her attractive.

"What'd you say to her?" Renn asked with a smirk.

"I put her in her place," I said.

Renn's smirk died as Lamp got her laughing under control, she began to snicker and mumble under her breath about how much she adored us.

"Don't be mean to her," Renn's smirk grew again as she studied Lamp, but I could hear the serious tone in her voice as she spoke to me.

"She was the one being mean to me," I said with a sigh.

Renn obviously didn't believe it as Lamp sighed and wiped her eye. "I wish I could talk to her," Lamp said.

"You will be able to in time," I said.

"Would you teach her my language? I bet she'd learn it quickly," Lamp said.

"So you can woe her and steal her from me? Not going to happen," I said.

Lamp nearly broke out into laughter again, but this time kept it to just a few giggles. "Right! Wouldn't want that!"

Renn's smirk grew into a large smile as she watched Lamp giggle away. "She's beautiful when she laughs," Renn said.

I groaned.

"What?" Renn looked at me.

"I don't share," I told her.

"Share... are you saying you're claiming her?" Renn asked, her smile disappearing.

"Of all ways to take those words, that's how you do so?" I asked her.

"Ah... well..." Renn's face became a little red, and I realized she had understood what I meant from the beginning. She had simply been trying to play it off with a joke.

"Is she your wife, Vim? I asked Brandy and she just laughed and told me to go away," Lamp asked.

Great.

"Let me ask her," I said.

Renn glanced at Lamp, likely expecting a response from her since I had just said something... but after a moment she finally looked back at me.

"Lamp wants to know if you're my wife," I said.

Renn blinked and frowned, then looked at Lamp. "Not yet."

Lamp glanced at me.

"She said not yet," I said.

Lamp's scar curled as she smiled. "I see."

She really did, didn't she?

"What'd you tell her?" Renn asked, interested.

"Exactly what you told me," I said honestly.

Renn studied me for a moment, and I could tell she believed me but there was still a part of her that didn't.

"Why's she frowning now?" Lamp asked as she pointed at Renn's face.

"She thinks I didn't tell you the truth of her words. Or maybe thinks I'm teasing her, or you," I said.

"Are you?" Lamp asked.

"Don't think so..." I said with a shrug.

Lamp seemed to find that amusing, and Renn's smile returned as she watched the two of us talk. "I like how calmly you talk to her, Vim. You talk to her like you do our members," Renn said.

"She's a member, Renn. Even if human," I said.

"I know... but not everyone treats the human members as kindly. I just..." Renn shrugged as she spoke.

I nodded, understanding what she meant. If she had any idea how rare it was for predators to act the way she did, then... Well... no...

She probably does know how rare it is now. She might full well comprehend it now.

I shouldn't look at her as someone so innocent and without experience anymore. Even if she acted like such an individual often.

"Vim, would you tell her I'd like to walk around on my own?" Lamp asked.

"Your own?" I asked her.

She nodded. "This is my new home... When we were here, we weren't really allowed to walk around and see it... So..."

Not the oddest request... but it was still odd, thanks to it being her first real day here. Though maybe that was the point. She wanted to get her bearings.

"Renn, Lamp would like to walk around on her own. She's probably excited and wants to see her new home," I said to Renn.

"Oh? Was I not doing a good job of showing her around?" Renn asked.

"Doubtful. She's been with you all day Renn. Let her walk around a bit," I said.

Renn didn't seem too happy with the idea but she looked at Lamp and nodded.

"She says it's okay?" Lamp asked.

"She's upset you don't want to keep walking around with her, but yes it's okay," I told her.

"Aww... I didn't mean it that way!" Lamp's face contorted into a pained expression as she looked at Renn.

"What'd you say to her!" Renn immediately went to Lamp's defense, and stepped closer to her. She grabbed Lamp's hand, and glared at me with a look that told me she'd fight me if she had to.

"She didn't mean anything mean about it Renn. She enjoys your company," I told her.

"Oh..." Renn and Lamp stared at each other and smiled, as if they understood one another.

I sighed at the sight of them and wondered if maybe I should just teach Renn her language. Lamp will eventually learn this one, thanks to Brandy and the rest, but Renn was smart. She'd probably learn it a lot faster if I actually spent the time to teach her it. Not to mention once I taught her enough, her and Lamp could at least communicate to a point.

"She's so precious," Lamp whispered to me as Renn held her hands.

She was. But I didn't like hearing others say it. Least of all someone who was staring at her as if she was some long-lost lover.

Where did that affection stem from? It had started not long after Brandy and I had brought them back here. For Lamp to have grown so attached to Renn, even with their language barrier...

An odd movement in the air drew my eyes away from the two women and behind me, but I saw nothing and no one. This hallway wasn't too far from the main hallways and hubs, but it had been relatively quiet and empty the last few hours... Yet...

"Vim?" Renn noticed me studying the empty hallway.

"Hm..." I frowned and wondered which way I should walk. I had felt something, but wasn't sure what it had been.

"What is it?" Lamp noticed the way Renn was looking around.

I was about to answer, to tell Lamp to head back to the main lobby... but a small figure rounded the corner down the hallway, from where Renn and Lamp had come from.

"Vim!" Merit had not shouted, yet her voice had been loud all the same. Both Lamp and Renn turned to look behind them, back down the hall.

Renn's hat shifted as her ears perked beneath it.

"They're here," I said.