

Non Human 161

Chapter 161: A Feather, A Wagon, and a Child

I'd think the scene before me was one of the cutest things I'd ever seen if not for the very worried, terror-marred, expression on Fly's face.

She was hiding behind some crates, ones bigger than her, and was peering at me from behind them. She kept looking around, worriedly, and flinched occasionally from the loud sounds and bangs here in the depot.

We were hidden behind some wagons and stacks of barrels and crates. The only reason I had found her was because she had waved me over and whispered as to guide me.

How had she even snuck in here? The only bay doors to the depot that were open were currently very busy. Lines of wagons and carts were stacked and packed in front of each one.

"Did he follow you?" Fly worriedly asked as I got closer.

"Vim? He knows you're here Fly, but I don't think he's too nearby," I said honestly.

She cowed a little, and hid behind the crate a little more.

The poor girl was shivering even though it wasn't that cold... and even if it had been cold, it wouldn't have mattered to her. Not only was she inhuman like myself, she was also covered in those many layers of dirty clothes and jackets. She was probably hot if anything.

"How have you been Fly? I was starting to worry about you," I stepped closer to her, as to peer a little around the crate.

I found Fly back against another crate... kneeling as she hid herself to her best of her ability. There was no reason for her to act so terrified... there was no way anyone could see us here, surrounded by crates and wagons. Nor hear us, thanks to the loud banging and yelling of all the workers.

"Scared. I'm sorry," Fly whispered.

"Scared of who? Vim?" I asked.

Her nod told me yes, but the way her eyes hesitated told me there was more to it than just her fear of Vim.

"You were worried about me?" Fly asked softly.

"Of course I was. It's been several days," I said.

I stepped into the crevice between the large crates... and knelt down too. As I kneeled down into the small section she was hiding in, Fly seemed to study me.

In-between the crates, the world became a little quieter. Yet it was still a little noisy. Men shouting. Wagon wheels rolling along stone. Boxes and barrels being banged around. Horses' hooves and their neighs.

"The Master ate Pulti," Fly whispered.

My jaw clenched, and I slowly leaned to the side. My shoulder hit the crate I was kneeling against, and I closed my eyes. Taking a deep breath, I wondered what to think.

"She was already dead. She didn't feel it," Fly said. Although her voice didn't have much emotion in her tone, I could still hear her worry. Worry for not just herself, but me.

"I see..." I opened my eyes and watched the way she nodded, seemingly glad I understood her.

She died from Vim's wounds... and had been eaten all the same.

I knew Vim had likely heard her words, but I kind of wish he hadn't.

"She was my friend," Fly whispered.

I nodded, and didn't know what else to say or do. What could I say? She looked about ready to break.

"Is he your friend?" Fly then asked.

"Vim...? Yes... I cherish him. Probably in a similar way you cherished Pulti," I said.

Fly blinked at me, and then leaned forward a little. "You can be friends, even though you're both...?" She stopped talking as she gestured at me.

"Both what?" I frowned as I glanced down at myself. I was wearing the Animalia Guild's office dress... and it did look a little silly, since I was crouched down in such an odd way. It wasn't made for this kind of movement.

Fly opened her mouth to tell me, to explain what she meant... but instead went silent. Her tense shoulders softened a little, and she actually smiled at me. In a way only an estranged child could.

Did she mean predators? At the moment I really couldn't think of what else she was trying to imply.

"Would you come? To talk?" Fly then asked.

"We can talk here, Fly. We can go inside," I said with a small point behind me.

Fly shivered and quickly shook her head. As she did her hood fell off her head, revealing her feathers. "I can't! If I go in there I'll never come out!"

"Fly, I promise you that wouldn't happen. You'll not be harmed," I said.

"You can't make that promise for him," she whispered and shook her head again. Her feathers folded downward.

"For who? Vim? Yes I can, Fly. Vim invited you into the Society, Fly, he will not harm you. If anything he'll protect you," I said gently.

Fly's eyes narrowed. "What's a society?"

"The Society is a group of people who support one another. There are many of us, all over the place. This is just one of our locations. You could belong to it too, if you'd allow it," I explained.

As I told her about the Society, I realized something amazing.

I was inviting someone into the society. Me. Someone who not long ago had been trying to earn her place in it.

"Who's your master? Is it you? Or him?" Fly asked.

Although I wanted to frown, I smiled instead. "No one, Fly. We're all equal in the society. Each member is allowed a vote, and no one singular vote is worth more than any other," I said.

"Vote?" her feathers softened a little, raising back up. Did she not understand the word?

"Each member is allowed to vote on what happens in the society. For instance we all voted if we'd accept you, Fly. Everyone voted yes," I said.

"What did he vote for...?" Fly asked softly.

"Vim? Vim is the protector. He doesn't vote," I said, speaking carefully.

"So he's the master, then," she nodded, as if she confirmed it.

"No. He protects us. He's a guardian. What happened on the roof that night, Fly, was a horrible mistake. He had simply been protecting us, he would not have harmed Pulti so badly had he known your circumstances," I said.

Fly's eyes became blurry. They flickered as they became watery, while she stared into my own.

I did my best to not join her in crying as I nodded. "I swear it, Fly," I furthered.

"Our master doesn't protect us," she whispered.

I gulped and nodded. "I figured..."

"The others. They want to meet you. Talk to you," Fly then said.

I nodded. "I'd like to meet them too. Can they come here?" I asked her.

Fly shook her head quickly. "Too scared. Too different."

Different? Did she mean in appearance or something else?

"Why not on the roof? At night?" I suggested.

Another shake of the head of feathers.

"Where do you want me to go Fly?" I asked her.

"Underground. To the sewers."

I took a small breath and stopped myself from shaking my head and telling her no. I needed to. I even kind of felt like I wanted to... but...

"What about your Master, Fly? Are you still trying to make me fight him?" I asked her.

Fly frowned at me. "No. They're worried you'll get eaten. At least you can talk," she said.

At least I can talk? "At least I can talk?"

"Master can't talk."

I blinked at that, and tried to imagine what that meant. Did they not talk because they can't, couldn't, or wouldn't?

Or did she mean not talking as in literal speech, but instead reason. Maybe they simply cannot reason with their master.

Before I could find the next words to speak, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

Turning just enough to see what it was, I hurriedly looked away from Vim.

He was sitting on the top of the crate that Fly was curled up next to. How he had gotten up there without either of us hearing him was astounding, but he had done it. He had a strange look on his face, but I didn't have the time to study it... since I worried she'd notice him if I stared up at him.

His leg was even hanging over the crate a little, his foot only a few inches from where Fly's feathers would be if she stood up fully.

Vim was either very confident she'd not notice him, or didn't care if she did.

"I'm willing to meet your friends, Fly... but I need to know I'll be safe," I told her gently. Hopefully Vim would at least let me say that.

Fly's watery eyes stared long and hard at me... and she looked almost as if she was surprised. Her feathers had softened again, with them rising upward. They made odd noises as they brushed against her hood and jackets.

"Safe?" she whispered.

I nodded. "You want me to be safe, right Fly? I want you to be safe," I said to her gently.

"But you're..."

"I'm?" I asked, since she had gone silent.

Fly then shivered and shook her head. "I'll come back tonight... I'm not supposed to be out during the day," she hurriedly said.

"Wait," I started to stand, but couldn't do it in time. Fly actually stood, and hurried past me. I felt her thick coats and jackets brush against me and the crate nearby as she squeezed between me.

Hurriedly standing, I turned to grab her. To stop her... but I was too slow. She hurried between two of the wagons, running out of sight.

I stepped forward, to hurry and follow her, but there was no point. By the time I reached the wagons, to stare in-between them, I could only watch as Fly ran out of the depot. She had pulled her hood up over her head again, and ran out of the depot without caring about the workers and employees who stared at her as she ran by.

Sighing, I wondered if maybe she had sensed Vim. Why else would she have run away so promptly?

Stepping up next to me, Vim hummed lightly. "A child. That's all she is."

I nodded. "Seems so. She reminds me of Lomi," I said.

"It is interesting to hear that her master does not talk. Maybe it's an older ancestor? One not human at all," Vim wondered.

Studying him, I wondered how he hid himself so well. He must have been right next to me the whole time... waiting... watching.

Protecting.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked him.

"The Society wants to give them a chance to be accepted. Fly especially, being so young. We need to give them that chance. We must endure and be patient, and even risk ourselves as needed, as to grant them that opportunity... But neither will I, or them, let you go to their lair alone. Many of those here would be willing to sacrifice themselves to save them, but they will not let you do such a thing," Vim said calmly.

"No we will not."

I turned, and found Merit sitting on a wagon. She smirked at me, her arms crossed.

How long had she been there? She was sitting in plain view... Fly would have seen her, at least when she had been peering around the crates earlier...

Vim nodded. "It's too bad she's so scared of me," Vim said.

"That's neither a surprise, nor new. Plus that makes her wise, far beyond her years," Merit said.

Vim sighed.

"Did I do anything wrong, Merit?" I asked her, since Vim likely wouldn't tell me.

"No. You did fine. You probably feel like you should have pushed her a little, but the truth is this must be taken slowly. Carefully. Gently. Too strong of a push, if we try to coerce her to join she'll just end up running away. But I will say this; I'll not let you go into their lair alone. I'll only let you go if Vim and I go with you," Merit said.

I smiled at the small woman's strange protectiveness of me.

Vim stepped over to a nearby barrel. He leaned against it, and the way he did so made him look like many of the workers here in the depot. He was resting up against it like most of them did when they were on break. "Chances are the older members are too inhuman to come up here safely. Even at night," Vim said.

"Indeed. Fly might be one of the more human ones. The man who attacked you, Vim... he had scales," Merit mentioned.

Had he? I hadn't noticed. Vim though nodded.

"She's traumatized. Afraid. Scared. Yet although in a pack, seems to feel as if she's alone," Vim said as he described his thoughts on Fly.

"You killed her friend, Vim. She's just scared," I said.

His eyes glanced at me in a way that told me I had hurt him with my words, but they had been the truth.

Merit giggled. "Painful when it comes from you. He hadn't even flinched when Fly had said it," she said.

"It hurt then too. But I needed to focus, just in case," Vim defended himself.

Merit scoffed and waved him away, some sparks flew out of her fingers as she did so.

Vim glared at her for a moment, then huffed and looked away from her.

I smiled at the two of them, and the origin of their little spat.

So even Merit could see that my words had such a deep impact upon him. So it wasn't just me.

Though Merit was probably just teasing him, I knew the reason that teasing worked so well was because of how much truth it was born from.

"Nevertheless, they'll not be able to stay here. Not for long," Merit said, changing the subject.

I nodded. Too inhuman for this place, which was full of humans.

"The villages will be fine. We'll separate those that need to be, and send the younger ones to Tor's village," Vim said.

"Tor," Merit scowled as she said his name with an odd tone. Did she not like Tor?

"I expect several to not agree to become members. Remember the Peaks, Merit," Vim said.

Merit's scowl softened, becoming a sad expression... after a long moment she nodded.

"The peaks?" I asked.

"A disgusting moment of failure, Renn. Don't desire to know its story, let it be forgotten," Merit whispered.

"Ah..." I nodded.

"Not everyone chooses the Society, Renn. Most didn't," Vim said gently.

"Oh..." I glanced at him as I realized what he meant.

He nodded. "I expect several to choose their Master over us. Even if the rest of the society doesn't, or won't willingly, agree. It is normal. Expected. They'll choose their tyrant over us, be it because of fear or respect it doesn't matter. Some choose their oppressors, even while under the heel of a boot," Vim explained.

"Won't they choose us once we remove that boot?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"They won't Renn. He's right. Most don't," Merit said softly.

Glancing between the two, and their sad expressions... I realized they were being serious. Both of them.

I wanted to argue with them, but knew better. Not only were both of them older than me, they were far more experienced in this than I was.

Plus...

I had my own experience with such a thing before too.

My own family had been the same, after all.

"I hope we can save enough," I whispered.

Especially since I hadn't been able to save any last time.

Chapter 162: Invitations, Again.

With crossed arms, I sat patiently. Waiting. Pondering.

Renn sat a few feet away, in her own chair. She was fidgeting, and kept glancing around. Although seemingly worried, she still had a small smile on her face. She was enjoying this.

"You don't think she won't come right?" Renn asked.

The empty chair across from us, the one that Fly would eventually be sitting on, looked out of place on this roof. It shouldn't... there were a few tables and patio sets up here... but for some reason it did.

"Because I'm here you mean?" I asked her.

I heard Renn's ears and clothes bristled as she nodded quickly.

"Possibly. But by now she knows I'm always around you, even if she can't sense me. Plus she needs to learn that I am trustworthy and not a threat... at least, not one if she abides by the rules," I said.

"But what if it's too early still? She's so timid..." Renn worried.

"I've done this before, Renn. Fly is not the first timid creature I've dealt with," I said.

"Hm..." She seemed to understand that, yet still didn't wish to voice her agreement.

Glancing at her, I wondered if maybe she was right. Women did have a certain intuition for this kind of stuff...

Renn smiled gently at me, yet said nothing.

"I'm the protector, Renn. What kind of protector hides away in shadows?" I asked her.

"A gentle one," she said.

Sighing at her, I shook my head and looked away from that weird smile on her face.

"This usually happens only in a few ways," I said.

"Hm?"

"Either it takes years, slowly building trust... Or it happens quickly. Out of necessity. Or because of results. Those here won't let this take years... not when it might cost Fly and the rest of her peoples their lives. Who knows how often their supposed master demands sacrifices," I said.

"Ah... that's true... How often do they normally eat one another?" Renn asked.

"The act of eating another of our kind isn't for sustenance, Renn. It's to enforce dominance. They'll do it as often as they need to, as to keep hold of their crown," I said.

Renn didn't seem to like that answer, but honestly neither did I.

"So we need to do this as quickly as possible... to save as many as we can," Renn whispered.

"Obviously."

"If she accepts, will you go and kill their master Vim?" Renn asked.

"Only if they threaten our people, Renn. If Fly accepts she does become our member, and thus is entitled to my protection... but that doesn't mean the rest of them are. They all, individually, must agree to join the Society. Just like your Eastern Girls," I said.

"True... Lamp does want the rest of them to join her," Renn said.

"In time."

A light wind blew, and I noticed the change in the air.

The ocean breeze, mixed with burning wood and charcoal from the chimneys all around us, had a new scent.

"She's here," I said quietly.

Staring past the empty chair, I watched as a small hooded figure climbed up over the ledge of the roof's banisters. Renn shifted in her chair, and I heard her tail brush against her chair's legs as she grew excited.

We both watched quietly as Fly slowly fell from the banister, to the roof. She seemed to stumble almost, but steadily got to her feet and began walking towards us.

Renn's happily swaying tail came to a stop as she realized it too.

"Vim..." Renn groaned as we watched the young girl limp towards us.

Frowning at the sight... Fly was favoring her right leg; I noticed the faint smell of blood. She was hurt.

Renn stood from her chair, but I remained seated as Fly walked up to the empty chair. From beneath her heavy hood of dozens of jackets and cloaks, I could see the glistening of her eyes. She was studying me. Yet the fear in her eyes was mixed with concern and hope.

A good sign, even if diluted by tears.

"Fly..." Renn whispered a greeting as Fly went to take a seat.

She sat with a small huff of a sigh, and then pulled back her hood. As she revealed her head, and the many feathers that covered it, I chose to study Renn instead of the young bird's very bruised face.

Renn stepped forward, with an expression contorted in pain and anger.

"You're hurt...!" Renn groaned.

Fly nodded. "I'm fine... I was just punished," she said.

"Why?" Renn was about to step forward again, but I was glad she didn't. Fly didn't seem too worried about Renn approaching, but the last thing I needed was for Renn to startle the young girl.

"Because I came out during the day?" Fly answered Renn in such a way that told the truth rather clearly.

Renn's anger died down as her quick mind comprehended not just Fly's words... but her placid expression hidden behind the bruises and black eyes.

"Sit down Renn," I said.

Renn jolted with a startle, and glanced back at me. As she did her anger returned thrice fold, now directed at me... as if I had been the one to beat the poor girl. "Vim..."

"Sit. She was punished for breaking a rule. She endured and paid. It's said and done," I said.

Fly nodded, and did so in a way that told me she was glad to hear that I understood.

Of course I did. Most of our Society was still just as basic as that.

Rules were enforced with fists and claws... nothing else. Only someone as humane as Renn found such a thing odd.

"Guh..." Renn grumbled but upon seeing Fly's nod, she decided to let it be. She returned to her seat, but not without glaring at me a little more.

"Did your master punish you?" I asked Fly.

Fly startled at my question, her feathers rising up as they became stiff. "The older ones. They have to do it... or else the others will think it's safe too," Fly said.

"No, Fly, they don't..." Renn whispered.

Fly glanced at her but didn't say anything.

While the two studied each other, sharing concern and emotion for one another, I studied the young bird.

She had been beaten... rather harshly. Odds were her right leg was broken. The left side of her face was swollen, and dried blood still stained her bottom lip.

A beating... because she had gone out during the day.

She had risked her community. Endangered them.

Yet was it just because she had gone out during the day, or because she had come to see us?

Maybe the rest of them hadn't agreed to entertain meeting us anymore. Maybe her master had decided to declare us enemies.

"Where are your parents Fly?" Renn broke the silence with a gentle question.

"I don't know," she answered, with nearly as much gentleness in her voice.

"When did you last see them?" Renn asked further.

Fly shrugged. "I didn't. Pulti and the rest raised me," Fly said.

Her answer made Renn hesitate, for more reasons than one. Renn glanced at me out of the side of her gaze, and I ignored that horrified expression of pain on her face.

We killed her mother.

I killed her.

"How many of you are there, Fly?" I asked her.

Fly shifted on her seat, and I noticed the way her feathers lowered and hugged her body closer. "How many of you are there?" Fly asked back.

Smiling at her rebuttal, I nodded. "Quite a few of us," I said.

She frowned, and then glanced at Renn... as if to confirm I hadn't been lying.

Renn of course nodded. "There are," she said.

"There's... I don't know. I think there's a lot more underneath than I know. I know there's at least twenty six, at least... not including the master... And Pulti..." Fly spoke quietly as she became thoughtful.

Twenty six... And possibly more? All this time? Beneath our very feet.

"How could you not know about those underground with you, Fly?" Renn asked.

"I don't go that deep. I can't handle the smell."

Smell...?

Surely she didn't just mean the scent of the sewers. The first few floors should be the worst...

Renn and I stayed silent as Fly seemed to get lost in thought. She scratched the side of her head, and I heard the sound of her feathers ruffling as she did so.

"I stay on the first floor... right below the one beneath the city. I can go down a floor or two, if I have to, but I hate it. And I don't go any farther. Master and the older ones live near the bottom, I guess," Fly then explained.

The bottom.

Renn glanced at me, and I wondered if maybe they had hidden in the old capital. The one from era's past.

"You mean the city beneath, don't you?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Pulti said it's bigger than this one up here."

It was. But I hadn't known that it wasn't flooded. How had the sea not absorbed it?

"Was Pulti like you, Fly? Did she live on your floor with you?" I asked her.

She quickly shook her head. "I live alone on the first floor. Most live a few floors below me; those are the ones I know about mostly..." Fly said.

Interesting.

"Does your master come up here, Fly?" Renn asked.

Fly frowned and shook her head. "No?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Why would it?" Fly asked me.

It.

A master that she called a thing, not by name or sex.

Odds were it wasn't human at all. Inhuman. An older ancestor.

"Why are you alone tonight Fly? Usually you're followed by others," I asked her.

"Ah... they're scared. Of you. Of master finding out. Plus..." Fly hesitated, and looked away. To her hands. She was twirling her thumbs together, making her look all the more younger.

"Plus?" Renn leaned forward, as if she was struggling to hear Fly's whispers. But I knew she could hear her as well as I could. The city was quiet, there was little wind, and we were alone.

"Plus I don't like what they're saying. They want you to fight the master... I thought that would be good too, but now..." Fly spoke calmly, unaware how serious her statement was.

"They want her to fight your master, but not me?" I asked her.

Fly's eyes shot upward, to me... and the realization of how strange her words were dawned upon her.

"Huh... Wait... Right...?" Fly frowned as she tried to understand it.

"Does your master know about us yet?" I asked Fly, while she was still trying to wrap her head around her thoughts.

"Huh? Why would it?" Fly's frown deepened at me.

So it was more beast than not. She said it couldn't talk. Probably can't reason either.

A mere beast.

That was good and bad. It meant it wouldn't outright attack the Society, but that also meant it couldn't be reasoned with.

It would only understand what it knows. And that was the brutality of strength.

"Fly... do you want to see our home?" Renn then asked.

"Huh! Your home...?" Fly looked at Renn, but then glanced back at me. Odds are she was probably still wondering why I wasn't the one they wanted to fight their master. She knew I was strong, thanks to what had happened... and now was worried about me, for more reasons than the ones before.

Renn nodded and smiled at her gently. "I'd like to show you what we mean by Society, Fly," Renn said.

The young girl didn't seem too excited over the idea... but she didn't outright deny it as she had done before. She pondered it for a moment, and then glanced to her right. To the door nearby.

I had fixed it... and had not repaired it with the same door I had broken. Yet she still looked at it as if it had just hit her friend, Pulti.

"In there...?" she whispered.

"Only if you would like to see it, Fly. I promise it doesn't stink that badly," Renn said.

The weary girl smiled a little, finding Renn's statement humorous.

"I give you my word no one will harm you, Fly. I'll protect you. Even from them, if I must," I promised her.

She turned to look at me, and her eyes went wide.

"Why...?" she whispered.

"We want you to see what our Society looks like, Fly... so you can understand who and what we are," Renn explained.

"Will... will you eat me?" Fly asked worriedly.

"No, Fly. No one will eat you. You're safe here. No one here are your enemies," Renn said gently.

"And I can prove it," I said.

"How?" Fly asked.

I stood, and walked over to her.

Fly shot to her feet, but did so while still on the chair. It wobbled radically as she stood up onto it, and grabbed the back of the chair's backrest. She looked at me with utter fear as I approached.

Smiling gently at her, I slowed in my approach... and came to a stop right in front of her.

Fly shivered, her feathers were ruffled, and I could hear her tiny heart in her chest. It was thumping so wildly you'd think she had two hearts. Maybe she did.

Holding my hand out to her, I nodded gently at the young girl.

"It's alright. I once had a friend like you, young bird. She had pretty feathers too," I said to the scared girl.

Fly's face scrunched up, and her feathers slowly lowered... becoming softer. Her thick clothes shuffled as the feathers beneath them settled down.

I held her gaze. I waited. I ignored Renn's absolute silence as she held her breath in apprehension.

Then...

Slowly taking my hand, with a very human hand, I gently nodded to the young girl as her small hand grabbed my own.

Turning a little, I gestured for Fly to follow me to the door. The one that Renn was hurrying to, as to open it for us.

Without a word Fly hopped off the chair... and followed Renn and I into the Society.

Hand in hand.

Chapter 163: To Be Welcomed

Once again Vim was doing something incredible.

I walked a little behind him and Fly, watching them silently. Vim was walking slowly, and held Fly's hand with a gentle surety. The type that would almost make one see a father, or older brother... A man who cherished the one next to him.

A protector.

How did he do that for someone he didn't know? How did he so purely exude that aura of a guardian for her... even when she wasn't a member just yet?

Did he look like this with me? With the others? Somehow I was sure he did, and should... but...

"What are those?" Fly asked as she stopped walking. She pointed upward, to one of the colorful lamps.

"A lamp... To illuminate the hallway as to see better," Vim explained calmly.

"It burns but doesn't," Fly said as she looked away from the lamp and to Vim.

I watched as Vim turned to study the young girl. I felt my ears twitch as I watched the man who rarely showed too much vivid emotion suddenly get rather concerned.

I stepped forward, as to find out why Vim looked like he did, but there was no reason to.

Vim knelt down a little, causing Fly to step backward. Their hands still remained connected, so she wasn't able to get too far away... but her arm was now outstretched and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"You're very observant. How did you notice?" Vim asked her.

"Huh...? Well... I don't smell anything burning..." Fly glanced around, to me and then to the lanterns again.

"I see... Here, let me show you," Vim reached over, and the girl yelped as he lifted her up by the waist.

Fly struggled for a small moment, her feathers making odd sounds as her many layers of coats fluttered. "Wait..." she complained, but Vim ignored her.

Her struggling ceased as Vim lifted her up high enough to let her see the lantern up close. She went still as she stared down, into the opening of the top of the lamp.

I stepped forward, and watched in awe as I watched utter shock and bewilderment covered her face.

What did she see?

"How...?" She whispered.

"A forgotten secret. Kind of like us," Vim said.

Tearing my eyes away from Fly's face as she reached over to touch the lamp, I looked at Vim. He was holding her up with a strange smile on his face. A smile of...

Happiness? Was that what that expression meant? It was gentle. Yet there was a smirk in there too and...

"Like us..." Fly whispered.

He let her study it for a few moments longer, and then finally lowered her back to the ground.

When her feet returned to the ground, I was half tempted to step up for my turn. I now wanted to see inside them too.

Yet I couldn't... since Fly grabbed his hand again and nodded.

Vim nodded back but before returning to walking down the hallway he glanced at me. He gave me a smile, one similar to the one he had just given her.

I gulped at the sight of it, and then watched as Vim and Fly turned as to head deeper into the Society Housing.

I wanted to grumble a complaint, but knew better than to actually do so.

While I waited for Vim and Fly to gain a little more distance between us, I glanced up at the lantern that Fly had studied.

It was weird. I had noticed such a thing before too... but I hadn't realized they were so special.

She had noticed immediately. By smell alone...

Closing my eyes, I took a small breath.

I smelled the Society. This building. It smelled of cold stone.

There was the hint of metal too... the gold and silver kind. From the bank, and those who worked within it.

Then there was the scent of food, of course... and burning wood and coal...

I could smell the others too. Some of our members, like Merit, had unique scents. Ones I'd never smelled before coming here. They were noticeable because of how unique they were, and I knew I'd forever be able to recognize them anywhere.

Yet not the smell of burning oil or a candle.

Opening my eyes, I glared at the lantern.

How had I not noticed before? Sure there were lots of smells here, and some stronger than others... but the lack of oil or a candle burning should have been something I noticed earlier than now.

Deciding to put the thoughts away, I went to follow Vim and Fly, they were getting ready to round a corner and into one of the main hallways of bedrooms.

They rounded the corner first, thanks to the distance I had allowed to grow between us.

As I rounded the corner, I found the two standing still again.

They were standing before a door. An open one. With shadows dancing from the flickering lights within.

Fly was staring wide-eyed into the room, and my heart thumped as my own eyes began to blur.

Taking a small breath I stood patiently, in silence, as did the whole world... as Fly studied the bedroom, and what was within it.

After a very long moment, Fly glanced at Vim, who smiled and nodded... and then the two stepped forward. Heading deeper.

I hurried a little to see into the room. What had caught her eye in such a way and...?

Pausing before the room, I hesitated as I stared at Wynn.

He was sitting on a chair, in the center of the room... smiling gently.

He nodded at me, but said nothing else... nor did he stand from his seat.

I was about to say something, but before I could I turned and saw a similar scene.

Fly and Vim were in front of another door... Was that Sofia's room?

Gulping, I impatiently waited for Fly to nod and Vim guide her to the next room.

Reaching Sofia's room, sure enough, I found Sofia sitting on a chair in the center of the room... sitting at just the right angle for anyone looking into the room to see her.

She smiled and tilted her head at me, as if surprised to see me.

Sofia's room, unlike Wynn's, was cluttered. It was full of plants and trees... and...

"She's adorable, isn't she?" Sofia whispered to me. Just barely audible, even to my own ears.

I gulped and nodded... but wasn't able to trust my own voice just yet. I was still in the hallway after all, Vim and Fly might hear me.

Looking down the hall, I studied Fly who was now staring into another room. One that made her frown oddly, yet not in fear or worry. Whose room was it?

They were letting her meet them. In a way that was as non-threatening as possible...

Feeling a little overwhelmed, I went to follow in Vim's shadow. To keep with them. To burn this moment into my memories and heart, forever.

Would he take her to every room? To meet every single one of us? What of Lamp, who now lived on the first floor?

And how did everyone know? No one had said anything. No one had even known if we would have been able to get her inside the building or not...

While I followed the two, my eyes watered and I grew strangely somber as I watched Fly stare into everyone's rooms.

Everyone sat in their rooms, on chairs. Sitting quietly, and patiently.

Fly held Vim's hand as they walked. They walked in silence. No one said anything to her. No one left their rooms as she walked around the hallways, and up and down stairs.

It was... strangely peaceful. Yet different.

Everyone had been noisy when I had arrived. They had wanted to meet me. They had sat with me, smiled and asked me questions.

For her though they were being as passive and gentle as possible.

Was it because she was completely new to the Society? After all although I was in a way new, I had arrived hand in hand with Vim.

She was not just a new member; she was also someone who needed to be saved.

Maybe this was the more natural way to introduce someone to the society...

When I had found the Sleepy Artist it had been a somber moment too... but they had sat with me and asked questions. Lughes had even gone straight to painting me.

Heading downstairs to the ground floor, where the kitchens and sitting rooms were located... I took a moment to stand on the stairs alone as Vim took Fly to one of the eating areas.

I used the moment alone to wipe my face clean of tears. Neither Vim nor Fly had glanced back at me in a while, but I didn't want either of them seeing my tear stained face.

Vim would understand... but Fly might not. And I didn't want her doubting any of us just because I was crying.

Especially since the tears were because I had found the moment beautiful, not horrible.

Once I was sure my face was presentable I left the stairwell and went to follow Vim and Fly. The two were had turned into the largest eatery area, the one next to the largest kitchen and pantries.

"Food...?" Fly whispered a question as Vim took her to one of the tables.

He gestured for her to take a seat, and although she stepped forward... she had to come to a stop.

She hadn't let go of his hand.

She glanced at their hands, then up at him.

"It'll be hard to eat with one hand, you know," he said gently.

She frowned, and then I noticed her fingers twitch a little... until they let go.

Their hands separated, and Vim nodded and stepped away, to step around the table as to sit across from her.

Wasn't he going to go make her food...?

Right before I looked towards the kitchens, as to head in there, I paused.

Fly hadn't sat yet.

She was standing next to the chair, the one she was about to use... and was...

Staring at her hand.

I frowned and wondered what had happened. Surely Vim hadn't hurt her? I knew from when I myself had held his hand that Vim was able to be gentle... and odds were Vim had been as careful as possible with her.

After a moment she took a small breath and then went to sit down.

Smiling gently at her, I glanced to Vim who was watching her climb into her seat. It was a little tall... he should have taken her to one of the shorter tables.

Before I could turn away, as to head into the kitchen to make her something to eat, Vim gestured for me to sit down.

I glared at him for a moment, but he nodded and gestured for me to sit once again. In the chair right next to Fly.

Hm...

Glancing at the kitchen, I realized there was likely someone in it. I could just barely hear them, thanks to the fact that my ears were now pointed towards them.

Ah. Vim had known already.

I nodded and went to sit.

Fly stared at me as I sat down next to her.

"You won't cook me, right?" Fly asked me.

I couldn't help it, I smiled at her. "Why am I the one you think will eat you? I've never liked plucking feathers off my food," I told her.

Fly's face at first contorted into worry and shock... but then she broke out into a huge smile and broke out into laughter.

Her laugh was pure, and sounded as young as she looked. The young bird's feathers danced on her head, seemingly going up and down as she laughed.

"Now that's a hearty laugh! Good enough to fill a stomach, without a meal, I'm sure!" Brandy exited from the kitchen, and her abrupt appearance and loud voice quickly silenced Fly's laughing.

Fly went still, going wide-eyed as Brandy approached our table. She was carrying two bowls, both steaming. Merit emerged a moment later from behind her, carrying cups and spoons.

As Brandy and Merit placed the stuff they carried onto the table we sat at, I realized they hadn't brought anything out for Vim. Maybe it was on purpose.

"Now there's plenty more! Need to eat right to keep your feathers shiny you know!" Brandy laughed as she stepped away, heading back to the kitchens. Merit placed one last spoon next to me, smiled at me gently, then turned and left too.

Fly didn't even breathe as she stared at Brandy and Merit, watching them go.

"Should be tasty, Fly. Merit is surprisingly good at making soups," Vim leaned forward across the table a little, as to look into the bowls sitting before the two of us.

The young bird shifted in her chair as she glanced at me, to Vim, then to the bowls.

"Soup..." she whispered.

"Do you not like soup?" I asked her as I studied the way she stared at the dark red liquid within her bowl. It was some kind of meaty soup.

Fly shook her head quickly. "No! I do...!" Fly gulped and glanced past me, to the kitchens. To where Brandy and Merit could be heard making light talk from beyond the walls.

"That was Brandy and Merit," Vim introduced them.

"The small one was Merit," I said. Usually I'd tease Brandy by saying she had been the loud one, but...

Fly frowned and then looked at me. "Are... are they all like me?" Fly asked me gently.

"We are," I nodded gently at her.

"Renn's a cat. Brandy, the loud one just now, is an otter. The tiny speck of a woman is Merit, a fish," Vim explained.

I pointed at the top of my head, as my ears flicked. She smiled a little as she stared at the pair of ears on my head.

After she stared at my ears for a moment, she turned to look at Vim with watery eyes.

He sat in silence for a moment, and I was about to speak up but he beat me to it.

"I'm a protector," was all he said.

Fly frowned in a way that told me she didn't fully understand him. She maybe thought he was speaking about an actual animal of some kind, based off the way she tilted her head.

"And a mighty damn good one!" Brandy returned, startling Fly. Brandy and Merit didn't even bother with acknowledging the way Fly nearly jumped out of her chair as they both came over to sit down with us.

They carried more bowls and drinks, for themselves. Brandy and Merit sat on either side of Vim, taking their places at the table.

"He's a Vim. Be thankful there's only one of him," Merit said as she hopped onto her chair.

"A Vim..." Fly whispered.

"Hey now, get to eating! It'll get cold if you don't hurry," Brandy tapped her own bowl with her spoon, to usher Fly into action.

The bird startled and looked down before her, to the bowl and utensils.

She gulped, and right as she reached out for her own spoon... she hesitated. With a small look around, we all watched as her feathers ruffled and then lowered as to hug her body closer.

"What's wrong? Need some spices? I told her she didn't put enough pepper in it," Merit asked her.

"You won't eat me...?" Fly asked once more.

"Ha!" Brandy chuckled, but didn't answer her.

"We're all friends here, Fly. We protect and love one another. No one here eats anyone else, nor ever will," I told her.

Fly's eyes widened as she stared into my own... and my own eyes began to blur as I noticed her own grow more watery.

"Speak for yourself, Renn. I'd be absolutely delicious you know!" Brandy teased.

I turned to glare at her, and say something, but Merit laughed and nodded. "I'd be all bones!" she said.

Smiling at the two, I grinned at Fly who was now looking around in awe. "And I'd probably cry. Whether I was the one eating or being eaten, all I'd do is sob," I said honestly.

Fly smiled as Merit and Brandy giggled, and then...

Fly glanced at Vim, waiting for him to say something.

He nodded, and laid his head on a balled fist... seemingly suddenly tired.

"No point, Fly. None of them would be tasty, trust me," was all he said.

Although Fly seemed uneasy, she still smiled and nodded... and then went to eating.

Chapter 164: Lumen's Society

The Society was now worried. Genuine fear could be heard in their voices. Concern was blatant on their expressions as they debated with one another. Even Tosh, the man who had gone inward and become unresponsive was sitting upright and attentive. He had not spoken, but his eyes were hard and wandering around. He knew what was going on around him, for likely the first time in decades.

A stark contrast to the conversation and general demeanor during our last few voting sessions.

"Is this master here? In Lumen? How long has such a predator been here, amongst these walls? Why have none of us sensed them? Why has no one noticed? We've been living within the territory of such a monster? This whole time?" Herra asked the group.

"Vim, please, you have to save them. To be eaten by our own..." Magdalena shook her head, tears in her eyes. She was nearly begging me. If I didn't say something they'd vote to send me out there right now, no matter the cost.

Her request hadn't been the first, after all. Most had the same desire. Most were thinking the same thing.

They no longer feared for their own selves, but for the innocent ones suffering under that predator's rule.

I could not blame them for wanting to help them. After all, most of the ones here had similar pasts. Merit especially. Yet for as much as they pitied Fly and the rest of her people, I wasn't willing to rush out to face their supposed master on the battlefield just yet.

If I did so I might have to go through Fly and the other innocent ones first, as to get to their master. Since they would only see me as another threat. And in my experience, people chose the evil they knew and understood over the one they didn't.

So I could not let the Society vote in such a way that forced my hand.

I couldn't allow that. Not yet.

Standing slowly, I ignored Renn's hard gaze. She had sat next to me, which had drawn eyes, but luckily no one had said anything. People were too concerned over the real issue; they had no time to tease myself or Renn about how she was acting... and how I was allowing her to do so. Right now all anyone cared about were the, supposed, poor souls living under tyranny.

"I will help them. If and when I can. But as you all know, and a few here even remember from their own experiences during similar scenarios, I cannot force them into the Society. Until this master of theirs actually threatens us, or until Fly or one of the others accept the invitation to join the Society, I cannot help them. I will not force my will, or any of your wills, upon anyone if they don't wish it," I told them.

Although I had spoken calmly, and smoothly, I noticed several who had listened flinch... as if I had shouted or yelled.

The ones who had were those who could remember the results of my belief in free-will. Several here had lost friends and family because of it.

Most here had known those who had done so. They had not only known those who denied the Societies invitation, but had watched the result of it too.

They had chosen to deny my invitation. They had chosen to side against the Society.

They chose to become the enemies of the Society, instead.

Those here still remembered. They remembered choosing the Society. Choosing to join us, and to stop bowing to the old lords they had served like slaves. Their friends and family who had chosen not to join the Society... well...

They lost. Just like the lords they had bowed to.

"But Vim..." Renn started to say something, but Brandy shook her head and stood up from her nearby seat.

"He's correct, Renn. That is his role. It is why we chose him as our protector. He's the Societies Protector, not theirs. It is our job to convince them to join us and to place them under his protection," Brandy said, and sat back down.

Many nodded in agreement, even though they scowled as they did so.

"But they're potential members right? Isn't that why you stopped pursuing them the other day Vim? Because you saw them as members already?" Renn argued. Her ears had perked up a little, matching her fiery tone. She was genuinely upset at me.

"Right now they're not, Renn. They have the potential to become our allies, maybe even our friends. But at the same time, right now, they also have the potential to be our end. They have as much chance as choosing us as they do choosing to feed us to their master. Anyone in their position would do so, to stave off their own demise," Lawrence said as he read a book. It looked like a ledger. A very old one. One too old to be important or needing his attention at the moment... which meant he was looking for something. Had he possibly remembered something? If he found something important he'd let me know, so I decided to let it be for now.

"Ah..." Renn opened her mouth to argue with him, but seemed unable to find the words. Her face scrunched up, and her ears lowered and curled a little, as if suddenly hurt.

"I'd like to avoid giving them the opportunity in feeding any of us to this master," Wynn said.

"Well duh?" Liina said.

"Vim's stopped me from being eaten before, I have no fear of such a thing happening. He'll not let it happen this time either. I do, however, fear this predator eating those poor individuals out of anger or fear. If this master of theirs realizes that Vim is here; and knows him or can judge his strength this master like many before could devour, and kill those they can't, and run," Reatti said from beside her brother.

Brom nodded. "My sister's right. He killed that Pulti, a tragic loss... but she had survived long enough to be taken back. Then of course he also damaged the hands of the other man. Any predator that sees that will know that Vim is strong," he said.

"A tragic loss indeed... Why, Vim, did you hit her so harshly? Usually you make a point to not put such force into your first confrontations with such individuals," Gerald asked me.

I nodded. "Pulti's death was a heavy price to pay for my ignorance. I... had both assumed her to be stronger than she was, and was also upset. They had been intruding closer and closer, like a hunter does when sneaking up on unsuspecting prey... So I acted harshly and quickly. Yet, that is no excuse. I have no true excuses; the results should have been avoided. Yet they hadn't been," I admitted.

Although everyone's eyes were upon me, not a one was looking at me with anger or accusation. In fact I tried my best to not see, or feel, the looks of genuine pity on their faces.

Renn's was the worse, somehow. It made me wish she had gotten angry with me instead. Why would she hit me over those human eastern women, and not over the death of one of our own kind? Especially so when I had brought the eastern girls back alive?

"A terrible truth, but the reality is they thought Renn was like their master. What we must consider is that they were willing to draw Renn into battle with them, intentionally. We must question their morality to do such a thing," Pierre said quickly, standing and sitting back down while still talking.

"They're desperate for freedom," Sofia said.

"A poor excuse, all the same. Many of us here had joined the Society as to save ourselves from such oppressors. Did any of us try to sacrifice a member while doing so?" Herra stood as she spoke, and even smirked a little. "I mean really? How could we let someone in whose first act was so violent? To our own people no less?"

Herra slowly sat after sharing her opinion, and she glanced around as she tried to figure out why no one was looking at her. Eventually her eyes fell upon my own, and she tilted her head at me.

She had made the whole room go silent, and didn't know why.

"A harsh statement, Herra," Merit whispered, her head hung low. The tiny woman, who had sat near Sofia in the corner, looked far away now... sunken into her chair as if to hide.

The room became a little colder, and Herra flinched.

She had forgotten. Typical Herra, but all of us knew it had not been done intentionally.

Yet intentionally or not... Merit's heart had just been broken quite splendidly and harshly.

Renn glanced around, and I hoped she didn't ask for an explanation. It might cost Renn her friendship with Merit if she did.

Raising a hand, I gestured with a small wave. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Merit blink a soft thank you at me as I drew the room's attention. "You're all right to question their motives, and reasons... but before you label them outcast, please give me the chance to correct it. I have a heavy burden of sin weighing upon my shoulders, for killing that poor girl. Who are we to know that she hadn't been sneaking in to come to me for help? For any of us? We cannot judge them. Not yet. I cannot, and should

not, try to sway your votes or opinions but I do have the right to ask you to let me right my own wrongs. I wronged them. Give me the chance to correct that. Give me the chance to let them try. To prove themselves," I reasoned.

The room stayed quiet after I spoke, but the coldness in the room had faded away.

"Vim does not ask for such requests often. Plus, I don't believe it is entirely fair to judge Fly and her companions so quickly. After all, if Merit, Renn and the rest's opinion on Fly is accurate and she is as young as the say... it is very likely the rest are young as well. If those young children have only ever known this master, and no other predator or any other, then it is clear as to why they would have assumed Renn be the same way. After all she mentioned they had not realized Renn could talk. A curious statement," Jasna half stood, and nodded once she was finished. She sat back down next to Liina, who nodded quickly to agree with her friend.

I nodded, agreeing as well. Jasna had spoken well, especially as one who absolutely despised predators.

"An interesting note, indeed. I must ask, Vim, were you able to smell this supposed master upon any of them?" Lawrence asked me. He looked up from his book as he did, which told me how serious his question was.

"No. Not at all. I'm not entirely sure why... but I have a suspicion towards an answer," I said.

"Please give it," he gestured for me to do so.

"I believe they live in the sewers," I said.

Everyone glanced at each other, and I watched as everyone pondered my words... and a few even whispered to another.

"That would make sense."

"It would explain why none of us had ever smelled them."

"The old capital is below us," Brandy nodded.

"The old capital?" Renn asked.

"Lumen was built from the small vestiges of the remnants of a giant capital. The earth shook, sending the mountains nearby upward and the rest of the lands downward. Making the oceans we see out our windows today," Gerald explained.

"The Capital of Provinces. Be glad it's gone. It had been a terrible place," Brandy said.

Only a few others nodded in agreement. Those who didn't hadn't been alive back then, or hadn't been around this area so hadn't known it.

"It would explain even Vim not noticing them. He walks the city whenever he visits. If they're down there... that would explain it well," Magdalena said.

"And if they demand to be fed... well... This city's population is ever changing and growing. With all the foreigners lately too, it'd be easy for them to hunt whenever needed," Gerald said.

"Countless human deaths," Wynn shook his head, disgusted over the idea.

I tapped the table I had been sitting at, drawing eyes to me. "The vote I ask of all of you is for permission to save Fly, and the rest, if the opportunity presents itself to me. As far as I can tell, this master planned to eat Pulti, the girl I killed... If she hadn't been eaten before her death, or after, then that means another must be sacrificed. I'd like to avoid that if possible," I asked the group around me.

"Why eat us when they have so many humans to eat?" Renn asked.

Glancing at her, as to answer her, I found there was no need. Merit was taking a deep breath as to inform her. "Control. Eating your own is to keep the rest in line. To assert dominance and enforce your rule. We do not fear time, and are strong... imprisonment and brutality isn't that big a deal... but we fear the instinctual terror of being eaten alive. It's terrifying," Merit said.

Only Renn stared at Merit as she spoke. The rest were looked elsewhere. Mostly at me.

Merit was looking down at her hands, which were still. She looked lost in thought... and was so soft spoken it made her look strange. She looked like a young child, and no child would sit like she was now. Looking like someone broken and depressed.

"I see," Renn whispered.

"If we can save them from such a cruel fate, then of course we should do so. However... I suggest we do not let our broken hearts allow us to endanger our home. We must steel our hearts, if necessary, and allow Vim to do what he must," Lawrence stood and said.

"Always the cold man, aren't you Lawrence?" Sofia asked him.

"I have the scars to prove that pity isn't safe. I only am alive today thanks to Vim's capabilities. I've tried to save those who rejected the Society... I'll always try to save our people, of course, but I'll never again lose friends and family recklessly again," he said calmly.

"Then what do you suggest? To wait and see?" Brandy asked him.

He nodded. "Yes. Once more, I suggest we wait. It won't be long now. Either this master of theirs will come to confront us, or will run and hide. Or this Fly will return, to ask for help or resume a conversation. If we pursue them, into these sewers as example, all we do is force the point. If we send Vim into the sewers we do so under the flag of war. History can attest to that," Lawrence said.

"And if the master eats Fly or the rest?" Jasna asked.

"A necessary risk. I believe if we send Vim to the sewers, blood will be all that he returns to us with. Blood and empty eyes," Lawrence nodded with a huff, and sat back down. He was done giving his opinion.

Merit stood, but did so by standing on her chair. For the first time in a long time, the room looked at her. Watery eyes could be seen, but there were no stains on her cheeks... and no sparks in her hair.

"I believe we should send Vim into the sewers. Vim will be in no hurry to confront them after his accident on the roof. He will be gentle, far more so than he should be even. Vim can be very good at negotiations and explaining the situation. Many here can attest to that," she said.

She remained standing, waiting for anyone to argue with her.

"Would you send him alone?" Renn asked her.

The Society looked at her, and Merit nodded. "Yes, Renn. Anyone else who would go would only put themselves in danger. Plus those like us, like you and me, are needed here. To defend those who cannot defend themselves," Merit explained.

Renn frowned but nodded, seemingly agreeing with her.

"Lawrence's idea isn't the best, but it is better than sending Vim into the sewers right away. What if Vim kills this master, by forcing the predator in defending not just their territory but their authority? After killing the master, the rest might simply scatter. Running away, in hopes of freedom and not being put under another predator's thumb... namely Vim's. Vim could withhold his might, but not against the master. He'd find them. Confront them. The master would step in, and then would die. Before the blood even dried Fly and the rest would run for the hills. Never to be seen again," Gerald argued.

Renn glanced at me as Gerald spoke, but I ignored the questions on her face.

"Better they flee and live alone, free and safe... then we let them all get eaten while we sit here twiddling our thumbs," Merit argued back.

Gerald lightly shrugged, not seemingly willing to argue his point further.

"Are we disagreeing to holding our position, or are we simply debating the process in which we confront these people?" Brandy asked everyone.

"I will not vote to send Vim to the sewers. Not yet," Liina said.

Quickly several others nodded and agreed, and as they did so it became obvious that Merit's idea had no chance to be accepted.

Merit sighed and nodded, and sat back down. She sunk back into herself, and Sofia who sat next to her reached over to pat her knee in support.

"I'd be willing to send Vim in," Renn said.

"You were willing to sacrifice yourself the other night. Your vote counts, of course, but I wish it didn't right now," Wynn said.

Renn glared at the man with broken horns, and a few people chuckled as they nodded. It seemed most agreed with him.

Brandy stood up once more, and glanced around at everyone. After she intentionally looked into everyone's eyes, she finally looked at me.

"Those who wish to place a spear into Vim's hands, raise your hand."

No one did. Renn fidgeted as she looked around us, at everyone sitting in the room.

"Those who wish to send Vim or a representative to the sewers in hopes of starting a dialogue?" Brandy asked for another vote.

Only Merit and Renn raised their hands.

Merit noticed Renn's hand, and smiled gently at her.

"And those who vote to wait for them? To give them the first chance? To see if they'll try to officially ask for help, or attack us?" Brandy asked.

The only people who didn't raise their hands were Merit, Renn, and Tosh.

And me of course.

"Then so it shall be. We shall wait and see what they do next," I said.

Brandy nodded. "For the Society."

Everyone stood, except Renn. Her tail spasmed as she hurriedly looked around, watching as everyone stood up.

"For the Society," they all said in unison.

Renn hurried to stand as everyone started to leave the room. Most left in silence, but a few went to talking amongst themselves. Brom and his sister went to whispering as they headed out the room to the north. Sofia started to ask Merit what she wanted to eat as they left to the south.

Once Renn was standing, she groaned and I noticed the way her ears drooped and her tail lowered nearly to the floor.

"For the Society, Renn," I told her.

She blinked and looked up at me, and then smiled. She beamed a huge, toothy, grin.

"For the Society, Vim."

Chapter 165: A Bruised Feather, A Flushed Grin

The young bird had a huge smile on her face as she held the newly sewed robe up, to study it.

She wasn't alone. Renn, Merit, and Reatti were with her. Telling her about the clothes they had prepared for her. How they had picked clothes that she could easily put on and take off, ones that wouldn't hurt or break her large feathers.

The three women were being gentle with the young girl, whose smile was still inflamed and black and blue. It had only been a few days since her beating, but its healing seemed to be slow.

Fly although had many non-human characteristics... was as fragile as the human that hid beneath her feathers. She was not just young, but small and weak. Meek.

Her bruises made everyone, even I, more protective of her.

"Try it on!" Reatti happily went to help her undress from her thick jackets and cloaks... which made the young bird quickly oblige. I turned away, as to stare at the nearby door and wall.

I knew the girl had enough feathers covering her body, which meant she couldn't be truly naked even if she wanted to... but I still tried to respect her as she went to putting on her new clothes.

As she put the robe on, Lawrence walked in. He glanced at them in a way that told me it was safe to look too. Sure enough she was dressed again... although now instead of the layers of mismatched patterns and leather, she now wore something of a large sundress robe. It looked baggy on her and uncomfortable... but she had a huge smile on her face, and her feathers were puffed up a little in excitement.

She was enjoying this moment, greatly.

"That's a wonderful smile, considering it's only been a couple days," Lawrence said gently as he walked over to me. He sat down to my left as he studied Fly and the rest.

"It is going well, yes. She showed up before the sun fell below the horizon this time too, which means she can't wait to get here," I said softly. We were probably close enough that Fly and the others could hear us, but we were speaking lowly enough that as long as the girls continued to talk loudly and laugh while doing so, we'd be fine.

"Then she should be joining soon. Good. Very good," Lawrence nodded, pleased.

"Possibly... right now she's just happy because she's realized that we'll not eat her. We'll see if that calm friendship can become the relationship of family," I said.

"A daunting task, when one only knows danger in their life. To become such friends only because she doesn't fear being eaten... It's been a long time since I've met someone like that," he whispered. "Has she mentioned what her master is yet?" he then asked after a moment.

"No. All I've heard, or Renn or the rest have been able to deduce, is that the master is big. Massive. And always hungry. I'm actually more concerned right now with those she calls elders. The older ones," I said.

"Yes... Not only are they the types to brutally abuse such a lovely little girl, they're also willing to capture and feed their own kind to this master of theirs. Not ones we would welcome openly, for sure," Lawrence said.

"A hard decision, when some of our older members lived such lifestyles too," I said gently, as to remind him.

Lawrence shifted a shoulder, and I knew it was not because he had forgotten... but simply because it hurt to be reminded.

"They had the opportunity to prove themselves. Something tells me these ones will not get such a luxury, nor will accept it when given," Lawrence finally said.

"We shall see," I said.

"Well, you will. I doubt any of us will," Lawrence said with a sigh.

I nodded as we watched Fly fidget as Merit and Renn helped put pants on her. Thanks to her large talons for feet, putting pants on normally was not possible. At least not without great effort, and inconvenience... so instead they had made pants that could be pulled on and off thanks to utilizing

buttons. It was a pain, since they had to fasten dozens of buttons running up and down the sides of her legs and waist, but it let her wear pants normally.

Before they got both legs buttoned up, Fly began to shed tears. She didn't make a noise, but her crying made the three women go silent too.

They all stood around Fly as she stared down at her pants, which were now firmly fastened and buttoned. Thanks to her feathers on her legs and thighs, her pants looked a little puffy... but odds were they were the first pair of pants she's ever worn.

Renn patted Fly on the back, and Merit and Reatti reached out to do the same. Though Reatti gently laid her hand on Fly's shoulder, and Merit stretched upward as far as she could as to rub Fly's head.

"What a sight," Lawrence whispered as we took it in.

It was. Especially Renn's expression. How come she looked more emotionally bothered than Fly and the rest?

"Renn thinks we'll have to go meet the others before they'll entertain coming here and talking to us. Renn doesn't think Fly is telling them she's coming here," I said softly.

"Out of fear or greed?" Lawrence asked.

I nodded, glad he had the same thoughts as me. Renn simply believed it was because she didn't want anyone to get angry at her, but I knew better. Lawrence knew better.

Those like her would not tell anyone else about the wonderful thing they found, as to keep it from themselves.

As to keep it from being stolen from them.

Fly was young enough, and weak enough, it'd be very likely and understandable for her to worry that this place... here... Us... could be stolen from her. Either by her fellows coming in and killing us, or simply taking her place.

"Either way I'm unsure if I should allow it. There's definitely more than one predator down there, based off the things Fly says. I'm not sure if I'm willing to risk Renn in such a way," I said.

"Indeed... should Merit go with you instead? She seems to be getting along with her too," Lawrence suggested with a wave at Merit. She was laughing and holding Fly's hands as Renn and Reatti adjusted Fly's robe around her arms.

"I'd rather go alone... but I don't think that'd work. Fly is still weary around me. She's only that happy with Renn and the rest," I said.

"That's not a surprise, Vim. You're a man," Lawrence tried to reason it away.

"A man who killed her best friend. Her family."

Lawrence glanced at me, and I ignored his sad look as I studied the young bird. She was so happy to be wearing... somewhat normal clothes. She was now walking around, enjoying the feeling of the robes and pants.

"Most children prefer women, Vim. It's not just what you did," Lawrence then said.

"Most children do," I agreed, letting him try to console me.

It didn't work, but I didn't mind letting him think it did.

"Has she gotten any more injuries? Her face is still swollen," Lawrence asked as Fly went to the table where dozens of other clothes laid. Other sets, in case the one she was wearing hadn't worked or fit.

"Not that I'm aware. She got that one beating a few days ago and nothing new since. As you figured earlier, I don't think she's telling them about us. She's not telling them about her coming here. There's no reason for them to beat her yet," I said.

Lawrence was about to say something, but Merit suddenly walked over. Renn and Reatti were holding up more clothes for Fly, to pick the next set to try on.

"Oh mighty Merit, tell me your wisdom," Lawrence said as Merit got close enough.

"Shush you. Go read a ledger," Merit grumbled and scowled at him, not willing to play along with his teasing.

Lawrence smirked and nodded, unbothered.

Merit then turned to me and nodded. "She's willing to take Renn down to the sewers, where they live. But just her. She thinks if more than Renn goes, they'll think we're trying to invade or conquer them," Merit said.

I frowned and realized Merit had been listening into our conversation this whole time.

Hopefully Fly hadn't been.

"I'll not let her go alone. If at all," I said simply.

"I agree, and I've explained that to her. But she's young Vim. She's probably only fourteen or fifteen years old, based off what I can surmise. She arrived with her parents on a boat during a massive hail storm that almost sunk a boat, and was taken into the sewers then they disappeared shortly after," Merit said.

"Ah... the hail storm that took out most of the windows and ports. Yes. That was ten or so years ago," Lawrence nodded, seemingly making perfect sense of what Merit said.

Merit nodded. "Plus she fears those she calls the older ones. The ones who feed their master. To her they are the law. The rulers. The kings," Merit said.

"Very animalistic," Lawrence said.

"Too animalistic. She's... very..." Merit stopped talking and glanced behind her, at Fly. She was now trying on another robe. She had undressed. I glanced away as her body of feathers came into view.

Didn't it itch to have so many feathers all over?

"You can't fault her for it. She's not had the luxury of living with humans. Humans to her are the enemy. Those who only bring pain or suffering. She's simply living her life by the rules she understands, nothing more. Don't judge her too harshly. She deserves some pity," I said.

"You need not tell me that Vim, I just..." Merit said gently, and then went quiet as she stared at the young girl.

Young indeed. Fifteen or so? She looked it. Barely. Her feathers that covered most of her body made her seem a little bigger and older than she was. Plus her legs and feet were more bird-like than not. Talons and a thin ankle and leg. It made her seem a little taller than she would be, had her feet been more human in form.

Lawrence sighed. "She'll need to go elsewhere, regrettably. Although she could live here, inside the houses, for a time... she'll eventually need to go somewhere more suitable," Lawrence said.

Merit nodded. "The bell church would work for her, being a child and a girl, but her fellows won't be able to go there. Some were men, after all," Merit said.

"I'd send those to Tor's village," I said.

"Tor's?" Lawrence sounded as if he didn't agree.

I nodded as I watched Renn go to unbutton and undress her own shirt... as to put one of the other ones on, as to join Fly in trying on clothes.

Sighing as Lawrence looked away, I watched as Renn took off her over shirt. She wore an undershirt, which was a good thing... but...

"Oh...?" Merit grinned as she watched as Renn put another robe on. One meant for a traveling nun. It was thick and loose fit on her.

"You're reading too into it," I said firmly.

"A bold statement, when you have no idea what I'm reading," Merit said as she glanced at me.

Sadly I knew full well.

"What are we reading?" Lawrence looked back, and frowned. Nothing seemed out of place now.

"Oh... just Renn's choice of undergarments," Merit said with a smirk.

Lawrence frowned. "What? I looked away. Was she not wearing anything?" he asked, confused.

"In fact the opposite! And it's much better. She was wearing something very... interesting..." Merit giggled as Reatti looked over towards us, and without saying anything pointed at Renn with a thumb and nodded to us with a weird smile. Telling Merit, and us men, that she had seen it and noticed it too.

I groaned as I lowered my head and rubbed my eyes. Suddenly I was tired.

"What? What happened? Why'd I miss it while trying to be a gentleman?" Lawrence complained.

"Sorry Vim. If only I had noticed it, I'd might be willing to keep it a secret but Reatti saw it too," Merit said.

"You'd sound convincing if you weren't smirking so brazenly," I complained.

She nodded as her smirk grew stronger. Then she turned to Lawrence and gestured at Renn and the rest. "Renn was wearing one of Vim's shirts. Underneath her own. Using it as an undergarment," Merit explained.

I kept rubbing my eyes, unwilling to see Lawrence's shocked expression as he hurriedly glanced at me.

"You're kidding!" Lawrence said, a little loudly.

"No... she's not..." I whined.

"Really..." Lawrence whispered in awe, and I knew he was now studying Renn more intently. More seriously.

She was now worth remembering. In his own perspective, at least.

Merit giggled, very happy all of a sudden. More than she had been, at least.

"She's so odd. Why wear your shirt? It doesn't smell like you, so..." Merit crossed her arms as she tried to make sense of it.

"Just let it be..." I begged for mercy.

"Did... did I not notice you two claiming one another? I had thought she'd been acting weird around him, but I thought that was just typical Vim stuff. Is she actually his Merit? Really?" Lawrence asked, sounding doubtful.

"She's trying to be, I think. I don't think he's accepted it yet," Merit answered honestly.

"Ah... interesting. Poor girl," Lawrence sighed and nodded.

Oh...?

I glanced at my friend between my fingers, and noticed the way he closed his eyes and shifted. He looked genuinely upset. Bothered. Saddened.

"Don't discount her yet, Lawrence. He won't admit it but she's making good headway into his heart," Merit teased me.

"I'd believe you, Merit, if I didn't know that Vim's heart hasn't beat in over a thousand years," Lawrence said.

"It pulses," I argued.

"Does it?" Merit asked.

Maybe.

Sometimes.

Occasionally.

"Hm... she's waving you over, Merit," Lawrence gestured to let Merit know that Renn was calling her over.

"So she is. I'm going to go tease her about it. I bet she'll blush and go deep red in the face! Look forward to it Vim, consider it a present from me to you," Merit said as she stepped away.

"Yea... sure..." I did my best to not smile and nod, since I didn't want her to know I actually was looking forward to it.

I liked the way Renn got so vivid in her emotions. I liked how readily they appeared, and how deeply they showed themselves.

Before she stepped away too far, Merit then paused and looked at me. Merit's smile died, and suddenly Lawrence sat up a little straighter... obviously worried.

It wasn't often the Merit of old showed herself so blatantly.

I raised an eyebrow as Merit scowled at me, in a way that she hadn't done in years.

"Kill their master, Vim. I'm in no mood to eat someone who eats others. Don't make me do it," she said with a cold tone.

I nodded; glad to be off the previous subject... but also in complete agreement.

Fly's master needed to die.

For not just Fly and her people...

But to protect my own.

After all, one day... it'll run out of food... and will then emerge from the sewers in search of more.

And I'd not allow that.

Never.

Merit went back to the girls, and said something as she approached. I hadn't heard her, thanks to my thoughts... but I was able to see the results.

Reatti burst out into a laugh, startling Fly... and Renn went deep red in the face.

Renn hurriedly glanced at me, and her eyes went wide, and her ears fluttered as if she had a horrible itch.

"You're kidding me..." Lawrence whispered, watching what was happening.

"Sadly, no. She isn't," I groaned as Renn swiftly looked away, and lifted another set of robes. To try and change the topic, and distract everyone.

Merit and the rest seemingly were kind enough to let her change the topic... but before Renn could get her flushing face under control, Fly asked a question that made everyone laugh.

"You wear his underwear...?" Fly asked, worriedly. She obviously found it horribly strange.

Renn hid her face with the robes, as even Lawrence chuckled at Fly's statement.

Great.

Chapter 166: To Scheme... Only to Soar

Reatti was up on a small box, trying to grab something from the top of a shelf. Whatever she was grabbing at, was making clanking noises similar to what glass bottles do.

"You're a cat too?" Fly asked Reatti. She was standing next to the box Reatti was standing upon, and looking up at her with her wide eyes.

"I'm a meerkat..." Reatti said as she finally found whatever she had been looking for.

"So a cat!" Fly argued as Reatti turned and sighed. She hopped off the box, and Fly stepped up closer to her to stare at the thing in her hands.

I drew closer too, since it was something I'd never seen before.

She held a glass orb in both hands, and it was full of stuff. Some kind of liquid maybe... it had something within it, swirling and...

"What's that?" Fly asked in wonder, completely forgetting about trying to figure out if Reatti was a cat or not.

"A snow globe! Watch!" Reatti sounded happy as she then violently shook the orb. I worried for it, since I knew she was rather strong. Surely it wouldn't break...?

After a few moments of shaking it, Reatti stopped and then held it out to Fly. She drew closer, but didn't reach out to grab it. Instead she just stared into it with eyes of wonder.

"It's snowing inside," she whispered.

It was. How did it do that? "Wouldn't the snow melt in the water?" I asked Reatti.

"Oh... Uh... I don't know if it's actual snow, Renn..." Reatti smirked at me as she spoke.

Not snow. Something else, but it looked like snow...

Within the orb, was what looked to be a small castle. It was a gray color, and was surrounded by trees and mountains.

"Are there people inside?" Fly asked.

"I hope not!" Reatti laughed.

Although Reatti laughed at her own joke, Fly instead furrowed her brow and began to worry.

"It's a toy, I think, Fly," I said gently.

"Mhm..." Fly nodded, but didn't seem too convinced.

I couldn't blame her, honestly. It was so detailed... and thanks to the way the little white flakes swirled it looked...

"Don't drop it," Reatti offered it to fly, and I changed my focus of attention from the wondrous orb to the girl who now held it.

Fly clutched it as if it was a treasure, and honestly it probably was. Why had it been hidden away in this bleak storage room? And why in a box that no one remembered or recognized?

It should be on a shelf, displayed for all to see.

"It's pretty..." Fly whispered as she stared into it.

I found myself smiling at the young girl, who was transfixed as she watched the white flakes swirl inside the orb. They were starting to settle, which somehow made it more real looking.

"Who made it?" I asked Reatti with a small whisper. I wasn't worried over Fly hearing me, but I didn't want to outright disturb her fascination with the thing.

"No idea. Probably something Vim made, or brought," Reatti said with a shrug.

Frowning at Reatti, I wondered why everyone seemed to answer my questions in such a way. Why was it always Vim?

Was it just because he traveled so much? Or was so old?

It was starting to become a little obvious he knew far more than he told anyone.

"If you think that's neat, wait till you see this. It makes noises and..." Reatti turned to grab something else, but Fly's eyes shot upward.

"Um!" She stepped forward, quickly, and the small storage room got a little cramped as her feathers puffed up a little.

"Hm?" I smiled gently at the young girl who was now very obviously worried. She had just been so happy... what had happened?

"What... what time is it?" Fly asked, glancing around. Likely for a window.

"Ah... well..." I realized it hadn't worked.

Glancing at Reatti, she smiled and sighed. "Well... It's probably an hour or so from sunrise, Fly, I'd think," Reatti answered truthfully.

Fly's eyes went wide in shock, and then she hurriedly looked down at the orb in her hands. The snow within the orb had settled.

"Then... I need to leave..." Fly said sadly.

I coughed lightly and reached a hand out as to get Fly's attention. She looked away from the orb, to me. "You could stay the day here, Fly. If you'd like," I said.

Fly quickly shook her head. "I can't! They'll..." She quickly stopped talking, as she realized she was about to reveal something she shouldn't. With a small flinch she stepped forward, to hand Reatti back the orb of fake snow.

Reatti took it gently, and with a sad smile nodded to Fly. "Alright. Renn will escort you back to the roof then," Reatti said.

I nodded as Fly looked at me, and her sad expression softened a little.

She was sad she had to leave, but happy we understood. Happy we'd let her.

Offering my hand, I waited for her to take it... but she stopped as she looked down at herself.

"Uh... I'll need my clothes back," she said.

"Hm?"

"If I wear these... they'll notice..." she whispered.

Ah.

Yes. We had a few hours ago given her new clothes. Ones made intentionally for her.

Made by Magdalena surprisingly. She had done a very good job too. The pants Fly wore had dozens of little buttons that allowed her to put them on without having to stick her large talon feet through them.

"Well... let's go get them then," I offered her.

Fly nodded, and finally took my outstretched hand.

"Goodnight Fly. See you tomorrow," Reatti said, staying in the storage room. I knew she didn't need to stay behind, but was doing so on purpose.

"Ah... goodnight Reatti. Thank you for showing me that little world," Fly said.

Reatti smiled and nodded as we left the room.

"It was pretty, wasn't it?" I agreed with her.

"It was," she nodded in agreement.

With her hand in my own, I guided her back down to the bottom floor. To where I knew I'd find the tables, likely still covered in clothes.

"You sure you don't want to just wear what you have on? You can still wear the large cloaks, too, you know," I suggest to her.

She shook her head, which made some of her feathers sound odd thanks to the movement.

"Okay..." I said softly, accepting her determination.

As we walked downstairs, and into the hallway, I wondered where Vim was. Maybe he could convince her to stay.

Entering the room where we had tried on clothes, Fly came to a stop and made an odd noise as her hand tightened around my own.

Vim glanced at us, looking up from the book he was reading.

I smiled at him as Fly glared at him.

"Time to leave, is it?" he asked us.

Fly went still, her feathers bristling a little... and then she calmed down as she nodded to him.

"Hm... Better change quickly. The sun will be up soon," Vim then said.

Fly startled, and then hurriedly ran off to the group of tables littered with clothes.

Watching her for a moment, I hurried over once I realized she was struggling to get her new clothes off. The buttons were giving her trouble, likely since she wasn't used to them.

As I helped her undo the buttons on the pants, and get free of them, I glanced over at Vim. He was still in the room, but was now focused on the book again. Just like last time, earlier today, he looked away when she or I were changing.

Kind of him, but strange all the same. He hadn't bothered to care before. Maybe it was because it was her, and not me, and we weren't alone.

"Did... did they wash my clothes?" Fly asked as she stopped right as she was about to pick one of the patchwork shirts she had been wearing.

As I folded up her now discarded clothes, I studied the pile of neatly folded... well...

Honestly her clothes weren't clothes at all. They were just tanned patches of leather, or rotten cloth, which were haphazardly sewn together.

But it was precisely because of how worn down and dirty they were, that it was easy to tell someone had taken the time to fix them up.

Blue thread was very obviously new. Sewn in many locations, with new patches of cloth and leather... to fill holes and support the spots about to become holes.

"Uhm... I guess someone did..." I said. Honestly I had not known who had done it. Surely not Vim? Although he had left us alone the last few hours, it had only been for a short time. He occasionally checked in, and never went far. It was likely he had been listening to us earlier too, and had headed down here once he realized we'd be coming back.

Fly hesitated as she ran her hand along one of the newly patched shirts. I noticed the way the cloth stuck to her hand and made noises as she touched it. It wasn't just because her hands were full of calluses, but because of how rough the cloth was.

It wasn't cloth suited for a shirt. Not even the shirt of someone very poor. It was the cloth used for a rag, or maybe a sack.

"You know how to sew?" Fly asked softly.

"Honestly no. I'm horrible at it... not sure why," I told her.

"Really?" She looked up at me and smiled in a way that told me she was oddly happy to hear it.

I nodded. "Yea... I try sometimes, but..." I shrugged, since I wasn't really sure why I was so bad at it. I mean... it wasn't like it was that difficult to sew simple things. Me being bad at sewing something fancy I'd understand, but I wasn't even able to patch holes as someone had done for her clothes.

"Pulti was the best at it. She made my clothes," Fly said as she grabbed the shirt off the table, as to get dressed.

As she dressed herself, I felt as if the room became much colder.

It took a lot of focus to keep my eyes from watering as Fly put one layer of clothes onto the other.

There were nearly half a dozen, with two large cloaks that went on top of the shirts.

It let her hide her feathers and features, but it also made her look... a little out of place.

She had just looked like one of us. In a way. Although she hadn't been wearing one of our uniforms, she had been wearing our colors.

She had looked like a happy little girl.

Now she looked like an outsider again. A homeless bird... without a nest to call home.

With a small huff she reached into one of her large hoods, as to adjust some of her feathers.

"Did you enjoy your visit today, Fly?"

Fly startled, and her heavy cloaks and thick leather shirts fluttered as she spun, and stepped away quickly. She came to a stop, since she backed up into the table, and she glared up at Vim.

His face told me he wasn't bothered at all by her shock or the fear and hate in her eyes.

For a long moment... there was silence... then she nodded. "I did," she said.

"Hm..." Vim nodded back.

Smiling at the two, I wondered what to think of their relationship.

She was terrified of him... but knew now, deep down, he wasn't going to hurt her. She even knew he was... regretful. She knew he was sorry for what happened to her friend.

Yet she couldn't deny the very obvious and instinctual fear she had towards him.

Glancing at Vim, and his calm smile... I wondered if this was that normal for him. Maybe most of our members were like Fly, in one way or another.

Maybe this was how most of them start.

Scared of him.

"Can I leave now?" Fly asked Vim.

I shifted a little, and wondered why she was asking him for permission, even though she had earlier said she was going to leave so confidently.

Vim's answer was to hold his hand out.

She stared at it for a moment, and then took it gently. Once they were holding hands, Vim turned as to guide her to the roof. To let her leave.

I followed them out of the room, silently, and wondered why she was able to hold his hand so comfortably.

She feared him. Hated him, to a point.

Yet she held his hand as if he was a dear friend.

As we headed for the stairs, I noticed we were walking a little slowly...

Studying Vim for a moment, I realized it wasn't him.

It was Fly.

She was walking unhurriedly. As if lost in thought.

Yet she wasn't... she was staring up at Vim.

"Are you old?" Fly asked him.

"I am," Vim answered.

"You don't look very old," she said as they reached the stairs.

Fly stepped up a step, but Vim remained for a moment. Fly paused a few steps up, noticing thanks to their connected hands that he wasn't following.

"You're so young, I'd think most people should look old to you," Vim said to her.

Fly smiled childishly. "Not really! There're lots of old people! Like... well..." she seemed to get lost in thought for a moment as she pondered her statement.

"I suppose most of us here do look young. A few don't look too young, though. Pierre for instance," Vim stepped up the stairs.

"The mouse? He's not that old either... I'm talking about the ones with no hair, or their hair and fur are all white," Fly said as they headed upstairs.

I frowned. No one here was like that.

"Ah... yes. Some do get like that, I suppose," Vim said.

"So then you're not that old yet," Fly said.

"Hm... Honestly I should be..."

"Are you old too, Renn?" Fly asked me.

I startled a little at the sudden inclusion into their conversation. Usually when Fly and Vim walked and talked, Fly ignored most everything else.

"I'm not as old as Vim, no... but I'm not that young either. I should be over two hundred years old," I told her.

"Two..." Fly paused and turned, to stare down at me. Fly and Vim were about to round the stairwell, so I wasn't able to see Vim's face as Fly studied my own.

I nodded to her. "I'm sure that I'm at least that old... but I'm not entirely sure my actual age. I might even be much older, for all I know," I said.

"Hm..." Fly frowned, and seemed to want to ask a question... but didn't.

What was wrong?

"The Society allows those like us to live as long as we do, Fly. Thanks to how we protect each other," Vim said gently. For some reason since I couldn't see his face, I found myself hearing a strange... tender tone. One that I'd not usually hear from him.

Fly looked away from me, and then to Vim. Her eyes were very pretty as they became large, as if ensorcelled.

I see. She was shocked to hear how old we were, not because of our looks... but simple truth.

Studying the young bird, who was staring at Vim in awe... I realized she was simply flabbergasted.

She didn't think those like us could live as long as we did. Because it was too hard. Too dangerous.

Because her master didn't allow anyone to.

Fly was silent the rest of the way up the stairs, and out onto the roof. I stayed near the door, leaving it open, as I watched her and Vim stand next to each other on the roof... she wouldn't let go of his hand.

"You never ask me to stay," Fly whispered.

Vim didn't glance down at her. He was staring out into the distance, at something only he saw.

"They all do, but you don't," she continued.

"They just... want you happy, Fly," Vim said.

Fly nodded, and I shifted on my heel.

"They actually worry for me. To the point they'll even try to keep me from realizing how late it is," Fly said softly.

Ah. So we had been caught.

"A scheme, but one with heart," Vim said.

Fly nodded again, and I noticed the way her hand tightened on his.

I gulped, and wondered if this was it. Would she ask? Finally? After almost a week?

"Do you not have a heart for me too?" Fly asked him.

Vim finally looked away from the sky, and to the little bird next to him.

I was just barely able to see his face and the expression on it... and although it was fascinating, and lovely... it was her expression I found myself burning into my memories.

"What my heart values, young bird... is for you to be free. I want you to spread your wings, and soar. Fly, fly. Fly anywhere you want, for any reason you desire. My only hope is when your wings grow weary; the place you perch and rest is here. Under the Societies branches," Vim told her.

The young girl's eyes began to leak, and then her face scrunched up. She looked down, away from Vim's kindhearted expression, and her face went red. A deep red.

This was it!

I stepped forward, and felt oddly calm even though I was holding my breath. Even though I was shaking in apprehension!

"I'll be back!" she then shouted, and with a regretful tug... she pulled her hand free of his and ran off. To the edge of the roof.

Watching her go, I released a pent up breath as I watched her leap off the roof... running away.

"Hm..." Vim nodded, and turned around... to head back into the building.

Groaning, I wiped my eyes and went to follow him.

"One step at a time, Renn," Vim said.

"Each step is so hard, though."

"That's what makes the effort so worth it, Renn. The steps are hard, and the burden heavy, precisely because what we're trying to get to is so precious," Vim said.

Closing the door behind Vim, I locked the door and groaned again.

"Why are so good at smooth talking?" I complained.

Vim chuckled as we headed downstairs. "Funny. Most say the opposite."

"Sure they do," I mumbled.

Vim nodded. "They do. You just deeply value what I say, Renn... so you..." he stopped talking, and I realized it was my turn to go red in the face.

"Maybe if you didn't say such embarrassing things she'd have asked the question just now," I said, trying to deflect what he was implying. Even if it was true, I didn't want to say it aloud.

"Hm... possibly. It's hard to choose what to say and when... especially when each word and action is so valuable. One wrong move and we lose her. Yet who is to know if hesitation is what costs us her?" Vim asked.

"Don't make me worry more than I already am, please," I begged him as we reached the third floor.

He nodded, and sighed. "She's smarter than her age," he said.

"Hm... although childish, she's inquisitive, yes," I agreed.

"What's your plan for tomorrow?" he asked me.

Yes. Today's plan had failed. We had thought if we distracted her enough until sunrise, she'd just... stay here...

Then stay again. And again. Forever.

A strange method, but one that Reatti and the rest seemed intent on trying. It seemed to have worked for others, before.

There was nothing to say it wouldn't work down the road. Be it tomorrow, or even many moons from now... but no one wanted to risk waiting that long.

We were worried about her. Since it was obvious she was hiding her visits here to us.

That meant if the others, either those elders she spoke of or her master, noticed and caught her... well...

Then...

"We plan to show her something precious," I said, as I tried not to think of that poor little girl being eaten.

He frowned at me, and I smiled in return. "Something so precious, she'll have no choice but to accept."

It should work... since it had worked for me.

Chapter 167: Sally

"Vim, can I steal you for a moment?" Herra asked.

Herra was holding a pamphlet of some kind, and gesturing for me to follow her out of Gerald's office.

"Hm." I nodded as I stood from the couch. Gerald went back to his work as I left the office, following Herra down the hallway towards the center of the building.

As I followed Herra, I listened to the soft downpour outside. The world wasn't that dark, but it was wet. It had been raining since right after sunrise, and would probably keep raining even days from now.

A part of me worried it meant Fly wouldn't show up tonight, but if anything it should make it easier for her to get here without being noticed.

Following Herra, we passed the main crossroad and entered the hallway that led to the Society Houses deeper within the building.

While we walked, I realized Herra was being unnaturally quiet. She wasn't like Reatti, but she usually did everything she could to talk and stare at me when we were near one another. Right now... she was just...

Glancing down at the bundle of papers in her hand, I realized they were letters.

Hm...

While we entered the houses, and I closed the metal door behind us, we encountered Jasna who was about to leave.

"Herra. Vim," she greeted us as we passed one another.

"Jasna. Heading to the docks?" Herra asked.

"Going to pick up Liina. It's her last day today you know!" Jasna happily said.

"Oh? Who's next?" I asked.

"Not sure? I'm just glad she's finally done!" Jasna laughed as she left.

As we headed downstairs, I wondered how long Liina had been the dock authority.

"How long has Liina been the port authority?" I asked Herra, since I wanted to know for some reason.

Herra tilted her head as we reached the bottom floor. "Hm... maybe a couple years now?" Herra said.

I see. That would explain Jasna's frustration. The two were inseparably attached to one another. And if Liina had been the port authority that long, she was probably rather...

"Do you know who the next one is?" I asked.

"I think it's Pierre. He likes the docks," Herra said.

I nodded. He did. For whatever reason. So much so that he had to be forced to have someone else work it occasionally, so the humans wouldn't notice Pierre's lack of aging.

Entering one of the smaller rooms, one with only a few chairs and a small table... not even a fireplace, I took a seat as Herra did the same.

"Well?" I asked her.

She nodded as she placed the half dozen papers and the pamphlet onto the table in front of me.

Reaching out, I slid a few closer to read some of the contents.

Letters from her family.

I stopped reading once I realized most of the contents were personal.

"They want me to go home for awhile," Herra said gently.

"I see. That is part of your family's agreement, Herra. You're to return occasionally. When was the last time?" I asked her.

"Well..." she shifted on her chair and sighed. "Almost ten years ago."

"It's not like your family is that far away. A few weeks is all," I said.

In fact if she hurried she could get home in ten or so days. Especially if she used the Societies ships and used the nearby river that went south.

"My younger sister has given birth. They want me to meet my nephew," Herra said.

Oh? I glanced at the letters again, and wondered which sister it had been. "Lerra?" I asked. She was the oldest.

Herra shook her head. "Lerra doesn't like men, Vim. Serra married a human, remember? You were there when they met," Herra sounded upset I forgot.

"Oh. Right..." I nodded, and did my best to not let her realize I hadn't remembered.

She married a human? One that she met while I was present?

Surely not that little boy...

"Yes. That little boy you fished out of the sand. He's grown up now, Vim," Herra smirked as she read my thoughts.

"I see..." I did my best to not let her read how odd that was to me.

He likely was an adult by now... but to have married someone you had met when they were just a young boy... He hadn't even been five or six years old if I remembered correctly, when I had saved him from the desert.

Sighing a little, I realized then what was actually wrong.

"I see..." I mumbled, as I realized why the armadillo family was requesting their eldest daughter back.

They wanted her to see her new family member, before they grew old and died.

And likely her sister too, since our female members...

"Don't cry Vim, all you'll do is make me angry," Herra whispered.

I smiled at Herra's upset face, and nodded. "Sorry. I... I should be happy for you, for them, yet..."

"That's why I don't want to go back, Vim."

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I leaned back in my chair.

I see. She doesn't want to go back, since she too was upset.

"I understand your reasoning, Herra... but if you don't... and in a few years... Well... you'll regret it. The anger, the hate, the sadness you'll experience and feel upon going now, is nothing compared to the hate and sorrow you'll endure for hundreds of years after they're gone," I warned her.

Herra's eyes squinted at me, and I noticed the layer of tears within them.

"You said the same thing my mother did..." she whispered as she stared at the letters on the table.

"She's a wise woman. I've never liked negotiating with her," I said honestly.

Herra smiled and nodded. "I enjoy listening to her debate you. I'd go back if just for that," she said.

Shifting a little, I stared at the armadillo before me. She was a little hunched up, since she was depressed... but there was a tinge of happiness on her face. A tiny smile. Likely from something she was remembering, from the past.

"I of course cannot leave until the mess with Fly and her people has been handled. And there's also something I need to handle for Brandy, which I'm not entirely sure yet what I need to do. However, if you're willing to wait a little and if I can, I'll be more than happy to escort you home Herra," I told her.

She nodded, glad to hear it. "Thank you."

"Will I need to drag you?" I asked her.

"You might. Thus why I asked you," she said with a small smile.

"Been awhile since I've had to do that. When was the last time?" I asked her.

"Thirty or so years ago. When I had to meet my mother at Telmik."

Ah. Right. That was when Merit had been traveling with me too.

"Plan to leave the moment we can. But I expect the issue with Fly to take some time. Maybe even months," I told her.

She nodded. "Of that I've no doubt. Would you like to read the report from my mother?" Herra gestured to the letters on the table.

"Is there something in it needing my attention?" I asked. I hated reading people's personal stuff.

"Nothing that important. Just offering it, before I give it to Gerald," she said.

"Then it's fine. What's the name of your new family member, by the way?" I asked, as she reached out to gather up the letters.

Herra hesitated a moment, then smiled. "They named him Arm. I guess he's a stocky boy," she said.

"Oh? What's this? Renn will get jealous you know," Merit entered the small room, smirking as she did so.

"Let her!" Herra huffed defiantly as she gathered up her letters.

Merit chuckled as she walked up to our table. She was too short to see upon it of course, yet she still tried to stand on the tip of her toes to see what Herra was gathering up. "Letters?" Merit asked.

"From my family," Herra said.

"Ah... figured. Smells like sand. I hate that place," Merit grumbled.

"I've always enjoyed the desert," I said.

"You would! You fit right in amongst that barren wasteland," Merit said, crossing her arms and nodding.

"I hate the desert," Herra groaned.

"You hate going home. That's not the same," I said.

"Well... That's true..." Herra mumbled as she admitted it.

"Don't be afraid to proclaim your hate proudly, Herra! I support you!" Merit happily cheered her on.

"Right!" Herra nodded confidently.

Standing from the table, I stepped away as Herra and Merit went to talking about their shared hatred of the desert, and its inhabitants.

Leaving the small room, I paused upon finding Tosh. He was leaning up against the wall, and smiling at me.

Although his smirk was mischievous, which meant he was probably thinking something rude... I couldn't help but smile back at my friend.

It was good to see emotions upon him.

"Feeling alright Tosh?" I asked as I approached.

Had he been with Merit? They must have been walking together. Yet he hadn't entered afterward...

Maybe because of Herra, and the conversation we had been having. Tosh was gentle like that.

Tosh stepped away from the wall, and took his place at my side as we walked down the hall. I had no real destination in mind, so I figured I'd just walk until a purpose for myself presented itself.

"I've been fine. Honestly, they won't let me work so I've been getting bored," Tosh said.

"Hm... Don't grow upset with them, they're just worried for you," I said.

"You're the one who said I should put my mind and body to work, when I got hurt that one time. Why not this time?" he asked.

"I believe you should. But I'm not the law here, Tosh. They are. Or well, you are too... I guess..." I said.

He chuckled as he nodded.

As he did I studied his frame. He was definitely thinner than I remembered him. And not just by a small amount either.

Yes. Just like Nebl. Although Tosh's body itself wasn't... as bad as Nebl's in terms of degradation... In a way Tosh's issue was more serious.

His mind had been broken. His soul.

That was not something one fixed easily.

"Just give it time Tosh. I'm sure they'll let you work soon, as long as you rest properly," I said.

He sighed and nodded. "Your little bird friend should be showing up soon, I bet. It's getting very dark," Tosh said as we rounded a corner.

"Hm... Hopefully it won't be much longer. I have things I need to do, and it's time I moved on," I said.

"Think she'll actually join?" Tosh asked.

I nodded as I thought of her expression last night.

There was little doubt she'd ask to join soon, based off the way she had nearly wept at my words... but the issue was if she could do it before she got hurt or eaten by her fellows.

The worst part was I couldn't actually force it. I couldn't do what was needed to ensure she remained safe until she made the decision.

Not unless her master, or the rest of them, decided to attack us themselves at least.

"You've always been odd about your rules, Vim," Tosh said gently.

"I have to be, Tosh... otherwise I'd be just as much a tyrant as her master," I said.

"I wasn't complaining... just stating a fact," he said.

Patting Tosh on the back, I nodded. I knew he had not said such a thing with any ill will.

"Actually... while I got a moment with you, alone, can I ask a question?" Tosh asked.

I paused, to let him nod and lower his voice a little.

"Where's Sally, Vim?" Tosh asked quietly.

Ah...

A long moment passed as my friend studied me... and then begun to worry upon seeing my thoughts on my face.

"Sally is dead, Tosh," I answered him honestly.

Tosh at first must not have registered what I said, for he started to smirk... to say a joke, about the woman he considered a sister, but then stopped.

I nodded, gently. "She died not too long ago. She gave her life for the Society. For its members. She... she died proudly," I said.

My friend's eyes wavered, and it took everything I had to stand firm.

Please. Please don't let this break him again.

It could. So easily.

To be told of the death of Sally. The woman who although wasn't related to him by blood, was at least someone he considered family.

A sister. A friend.

It could break him easily. It broke so many others, so easily... and Tosh was far from firm right now. Far from strong.

Yet I had to answer.

I had to.

Since I knew no one else would.

That was undoubtedly why he had asked. He had probably been looking for her, and no one would tell him.

I couldn't blame anyone for keeping it a secret, out of fear of letting him return to his mind broken state... but...

I nodded again. "Sally is gone. As are many others, Tosh. You've... been absent, a long time," I said.

"Uh..." Tosh shifted, and then my friend lost his ability to stay standing upright. I kept myself from catching him, since there was no point.

He fell to the ground, landing on his rear. He fell backward in a way that resulted in him sitting up against the wall... slumping and with his mouth agape.

Taking a small, steady, breath... I too stepped over to the wall and slid down, as to sit next to my friend whose heart just broke.

"Dead...?" Tosh whispered.

"Dead. She's buried at the Bell Church's cemetery."

Tosh groaned, and curled up a little. My friend begun to cry as he covered his face with his hands. He was trying to keep himself together... and failing. Miserably.

"She married a human. A man named Monroe," I said.

"Huh..." He took a deep breath, and then looked up. At me. "I know him."

I nodded. "You probably remember him. Even if you were broken most of the time, he actually... just recently passed away," I said.

What timing. To think the poor man could have met Monroe, and actually spoken with him about Sally... just a few days ago.

Was that possibly what had brought Tosh out of his mind?

Maybe he had connected it somehow. Mindlessly realizing it... maybe...

"Please tell me this is all a dream, Vim," Tosh begged me.

"A nightmare, if it was," I said. At least for him.

Yet...

Glancing at my friend, and his tear stained face, I watched him sob.

Moments like this were nightmares for me too.

Yet, again, I must endure them.

Reaching over, I grabbed my friend by the shoulder. His thin body felt weak, and cold.

I firmly held on, as he trembled and cried.

"Sally..." he wept.

Chapter 168 - Rooms

Fly had returned, and this time had done so nearly two hours before the sun set.

This was the earliest she had shown up, to visit in this way at least. She had visited midday before, in the beginning... But I wasn't sure if those meetings should count like these ones did.

She was sitting with Merit and Sofia, eating. Usually I'd be with them, since she seemed to grow anxious when I wasn't around... but I wanted her to grow accustomed to trusting our other members, not just me.

After all... eventually, I'd be gone.

Though it wasn't like I had abandoned her, entirely. I was just... watching from a distance.

"She shows up brazenly, puts on our clothes, and eats our food... A bird indeed," Vim said lightly.

"Don't be mean to her," I glanced at the man I was sitting next to, who was staring at Fly with an odd expression.

He looked... upset. But there should be no reason to be. His arms were crossed, and he was sitting up straight... an odd look. One that I hadn't seen in awhile, from him. The last time was probably when he had been sitting on that chair, in the hallways, back when we had all been waiting for Fly and her people to show themselves again for the first real time. When he had hurt... or rather, killed, Fly's friend Pulti.

"Why are you so upset, Vim?" I dared to ask.

Vim blinked, and then glanced at me. "Am I?" he asked himself more than me.

I nodded.

He took a small breath and then glanced down, as to ponder something. "Maybe I am..."

"You are... did something happen?" I asked.

He had been like this since before Fly showed up, so I knew it wasn't her. And even if it had started after her... I wasn't sure what Fly could possibly have done to make him like this. She was a child who was much purer than one could imagine. She... was a child. One who was basking in the glow of our Society, and the safety it allowed.

"Ha!" Merit laughed, drawing my eyes from the Societies Protector. Merit was laughing at Sofia who had fumbled with her fork, dropping it into her drink.

Fly was smiling, and was even trying to help Sofia clean up the small mess she was making as she fished her fork out of her cup.

"I almost broke my friend today," Vim then said.

Looking away from the young bird, who was laughing, I frowned and tried to figure out what he meant.

He nodded. "Tosh almost broke today. I'm worried he might still do so, if we're not careful," he said.

"What'd you do?" I asked. Why? What had happened? When had this happened?

"He asked where Sally was... And like usual I'm unable to do anything but tell the honest truth to those I should be more careful with," Vim said.

Sally...

"The woman who sacrificed herself for the humans. For this place," I said. I had heard her story.

He nodded. "They weren't related, but might as well have been. Tosh saw Sally as a sister. Someone precious," he said.

Looking away from Vim's pained expression; I frowned and wondered what to say.

So he had emerged from the corners of his broken mind... and then realized someone precious to him was no longer around him. And then it was Vim who had to break the bad news.

Vim sighed, and leaned back a little... seemingly calming down a bit.

"Is she the reason that... Tosh did what he did? Gone so... dead?" I asked.

"No. Tosh endured something horrible. He failed, and others failed him... It all happened so fast and so harshly that he hadn't been able to mentally withstand it. Before you judge him, others who had suffered the same chose to end their lives. At least he kept on living," Vim said.

"I wasn't trying to judge him... but..." I hesitated, since I wasn't sure if I should say it aloud.

"But?" Vim's eyes focused on me, but he hadn't turned his head. His odd glare as he stared at me out of the corner of his eye made me feel uneasy.

Great. Another test. I shouldn't have said anything... Especially since now I knew I had no choice but to say it.

"She was alive after too right? Sally?" I asked him.

He nodded.

"Then he wasted their time together. Tosh had been sunken within himself for over a hundred years, Merit said. That means he could have had all those years with her and the rest... had he not..." I stopped talking, as Vim's eyes became dull.

A cold shiver ran down my back, and through my tail, and I hurriedly looked away from the man who had just likely found me wanting.

Uh oh.

Tosh was his friend.

And... Vim...

He was a firm believer in free will and...

Vim took a small breath, and shifted a little again. "Well... you're not wrong. Even if it hurts to hear it," Vim whispered.

Although a little glad Vim hadn't grown upset with me... It was a little worrisome to hear how honest his hurt feelings were.

"You don't disagree?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I don't."

"I figured you'd grow upset with me," I said.

"Why would I?" he asked.

My ears fluttered a moment, and I had to look away from him again since it was embarrassing that my emotions were always so visible in front of him. If not on my face... then elsewhere.

"He's your friend... and I figured you'd say it wasn't fair to judge someone without knowing, or experiencing, something similar," I said.

"Ah... well... Who am I to know you haven't gone through similar tragedies? Or can't comprehend them? You're wiser than most, so you can probably at least have an idea of such... desperation... even if you haven't endured it yourself," Vim said.

"Is that a part of your belief system? To not judge people too harshly?" I asked. Now that I thought about it, Vim did seem to not judge people too harshly. Or at least, our own people.

Vim chuckled, drawing my eyes to him again. "Funny. I usually judge people far too harshly, and need to remind myself not to," he said.

"Oh... Really?"

He nodded. "You think he should have been strong enough to not delve into his mind for safety, don't you? You think he ran. And by him running, he is the reason he lost precious time with those he loves," Vim said.

My tail twitched and wanted to wrap around my leg, but thanks to the bench we were sitting on it really wasn't feasible. My tail was angled a little too oddly. "Well... Yes... I suppose so. I won't go so far as to say that Sally might be alive today if he had not... well... done what he did... but I can't help but think it," I said honestly.

"Hm... Is that because you have the same harsh judgmental criticism for yourself, Renn?" Vim asked me.

I gulped, and although held Vim's soft gaze... wish I didn't. I wanted to look away. To leave.

To run.

"Yes," I answered honestly.

Vim softly smiled, and then nodded as he looked away. "The reason I... try not to judge anyone Renn, is because of how often I've failed myself. If you had any idea how many lives have slipped through my fingers, as I held them tightly... Well..." Vim stopped talking as he stared at Fly and the rest, they were about done eating.

"Are you including those at the Sleepy Artist in that statement?" I asked him.

"I am."

Of course he was.

It upset me to hear he so seriously thought so, even if I already knew full well that he did.

After a few moments Vim elbowed me lightly in the arm, as to get my attention. "Hm?"

"You think you have more blame than me, don't you?" he asked me.

"We've talked about this before. Yes. I do," I told him firmly.

Vim studied me for a moment, and then looked away. "Some societies say the king holds most the blame. Others lay the fault at the feet of their god. Some blame the mothers, for failing to raise their children properly. Then of course, there are those who blame fate or nature..." Vim spoke gently, but seriously.

"Anyone but themselves, after all," I said with a nod.

Vim chuckled and nodded, glad I understood his point.

"I told you, Vim... I want to endure with you. That means enduring the blame, and fault, too," I said softly.

"I know. You make the different me's inside debate something fierce," he said with a sigh.

"Different 'you's'?" I asked, wondering what he meant.

He nodded. "The protector says no one can do what I do. Not because they're not capable, but because that's my job. You can't take my job, that's mine. I earned it. I paid the dues... Yet the man in me, the one who believes in free will, says that anyone can be anything. He wants to tell you to stand proud, and do what your heart feels it must. I usually don't listen to the man in me, but he's the one who is attracted to you. So he's rather vocal right now," Vim said.

Smiling at the man who was talking about something very... odd, I studied the way he frowned as he pondered something. As if he was right now listening to those two parts of him debating as we spoke.

"Just two? I figured you were a man of many types, you know?" I teased him.

"Ah... you've found out one of my fatal flaws. I'm lucky to have two, you know? For a long time I was nothing but the protector. I didn't allow..." Vim slowly went quiet, and I was about to tease and prod him to continue, but realized why before I could.

Stepping into the room, from the door not far from where we sat, Brandy scanned the room before walking over to us.

"Well, she sure looks like she's making herself at home at least," Brandy said as she sat next to me on the bench. As she did, I noticed the way the bench shifted a little.

Was Brandy heavier than she looked?

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" I asked. Merit and Sofia sounded like they were telling Fly a story. Although I could hear what they were saying, I wasn't giving it my full attention. I caught only a few words here and there. Instead the thing I noticed the most, was the fact that they had Fly's full and undivided attention.

"It is. Why aren't you over there, by the way?" Brandy asked.

"I want her to get used to hanging out with others without me," I said.

"Ah..." Brandy nodded, but didn't say anything else. Maybe she didn't agree with that idea.

"Renn doesn't like how Fly thinks that we're rulers of some kind," Vim said.

Brandy chuckled as she patted my thigh. "It's cute, though!" she said.

"It's a bad precedent," I argued.

"Yet one that you won't be able to change her mind of, until she lives as a member of the Society. It could take her decades, Renn. Most can't even comprehend a community that isn't ruled by force, or a single individual," Brandy said.

Vim nodded.

"I know... I just..." I grumbled as I shrugged.

I knew full well. After all my own family had been the same way. But...

Fly began to clap at something Sofia had said, and the three of us watched in silence as the little bird happily sat up farther on her seat. She was so transfixed in whatever she was hearing that she barely realized she was about to knock over her cup. It might be empty by now, though.

"Well, by the looks of that it won't be long at all. Good. I'm glad," Brandy whispered.

"I thought that last night too," I said.

"Oh? Good to hear. Is she at least considering it, Vim?" Brandy asked Vim. Since I was sitting between them, Brandy had turned to speak to him from behind my head. As she spoke, my ears twitched a little thanks to her being close enough that the hair on my ears could feel her breath.

"She is. Renn wasn't joking. She almost made the decision last night. As long as nothing... drastic happens, she'll ask to join soon. Good thing too, I got things to do," Vim said.

I glanced at Vim, and wondered what he meant.

"You do. I expect it to arrive tomorrow, maybe the next day at latest," Brandy said.

Oh. Right. She had something for him to do. A package or something...

Glancing at Brandy, I noted the way she smirked at me.

"You don't get to know what it is, Renn. Sorry," Brandy said apologetically.

"Ah..." I nodded, and did my best to not feel too hurt by it.

"Don't tease her. She likely will be coming with me anyway, since I can't seem to convince her otherwise," Vim said.

Brandy snickered. "That's only because he isn't trying hard enough, huh?" she asked me as she reached over to wrap her arm around me. Her arm coiled around my shoulder, to pull me into her as if I was child.

"He has tried rather hard, actually," I defended him.

"Ha!" Brandy snorted, and I closed an eye as she laughed and shook me alongside her own body. I could feel her chuckles and laughs from deep within her, and it made me smile. They were real, which was obvious, but feeling them was a little different than hearing or seeing.

"It's just something I need taken to the north. Though... I guess you'll be going south first, won't you?" Brandy asked.

South?

I glanced over Brandy's arm, to Vim as he nodded. "Herra has to go home. I'll head northward after dropping her off," he said.

Herra? Home?

"How am I missing all the important stuff?" I asked.

"You're not. Yet, at least," Vim said.

Brandy nodded... which I felt and didn't see. "And they say I keep secrets."

"Vim does have a lot of secrets..." I sighed.

"He does!" Brandy agreed.

Vim sighed, but before I could say more some movement caught my attention.

Fly was stepping away from the table, and waving goodbye to Merit and Sofia.

"Oh? It's not that late yet is it?" Brandy asked as we watched Fly head towards us.

No. It wasn't. It should still be a few hours before Fly wanted to leave...

Although Fly approached with a smile, it slowly morphed into worried confusion as she drew near... and I knew why.

I was being held oddly by Brandy, after all.

"Everything okay Fly?" I asked her.

"I... I think so? Are you okay?" she asked me.

"Does she look uncomfortable Vim?" Brandy asked about me.

"It's the weird smile. She's enjoying herself, but is trying to hide it so it looks weird," Vim said.

"Gah!" I realized what he meant, and did my best to fix the awkward grin on my face.

I tried and failed.

Brandy laughed as she let me go, which was a little regretful.

She hadn't needed to.

I glared at Vim, the cause of Brandy's release, and then looked at Fly. Her happy smile had returned, and she was studying Brandy.

"Can I see your room Vim?" Fly then asked after a moment.

"My room...?" Vim's voice told me he had not expected the request at all. Especially since she was still staring at Brandy.

"Why his, young bird?" Brandy asked before I could.

Fly shifted, and then glanced at me. "I uh... I've seen her room... and everyone else's too," she said with a point at me.

I nodded. She had. The first day she had been here she had seen everyone's rooms, and everyone else. My own she had seen a day later, since she had asked to see it.

Yet...

Why the fascination with seeing his room? Mine I understood, to a point... but...

"I don't have a real room, Fly. But I can show you the one I'm staying in now if you'd like," Vim said.

She nodded quickly.

Vim stood, and I noticed that Fly didn't flinch or back away as he did so. She stared up at him, but didn't shiver or cower.

She was making progress.

I stood to join them, as did Brandy.

While we stood, Fly held out her hand to Vim.

I couldn't help it; I knew the weird grin that Vim had just teased me about returned to my face as I watched Vim take her hand as to lead her out of the dining area and to the hallway.

Staying behind a little, alongside Brandy, I watched as Vim and Fly left. Heading down the hallway.

"She thinks he's the ruler," Brandy whispered.

"Huh?" I turned to find out what she meant.

She nodded and sighed. "She wants to see his room to see if he lives like a king. She still doubts us," Brandy whispered lightly, and then went to follow after them.

I groaned as I realized she was completely correct.

Well... If that was the case then there was no better way to prove he wasn't than Vim's quarters.

Turning to wave to Merit and Sofia, who both waved back with gentle smiles... I wondered if they knew as well. That Fly was still judging us. Testing us.

Oplar had put one and two together so quickly. As if she'd experienced it before. As if she had known Fly's reservations before even Fly had found them.

Vim had seemed to calmly comprehend and understand swiftly too. Odds are they all had known and expected Fly's actions.

Of course they did. They were far more used to this than I was and...

As I left the dining area as well, I remembered that Vim had mentioned before that Sofia was a mother.

She had many children, although none were here.

Sighing softly, I followed Brandy who followed Vim and Fly to the stairs and up to the third floor.

Everyone had a story, didn't they?

Members broken. Lost members. Missing members.

This place seemed so happy and full of life... but the reality was it was rather solemn.

It was as if the entire place was barely hanging together. Like the patchwork clothes that Fly wore. Barely held together at all.

Hopefully Fly wouldn't notice the truth too quickly.

Upon reaching Vim's room, I noticed that Brandy stayed back a little as Vim opened the door to let her in. I approached however, to join in their conversation.

"This is it?" Fly asked softly, as she stood at the door and stared into the bland room.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Vim defended it.

"It's across from mine, too," I said happily.

Fly's feathers shifted, and she glanced behind her. Past me. To the door to my own room.

"Oh. Right..." she nodded, and seemed to figure that made perfect sense.

I smiled at the way the young girl nodded. For some reason it made me very happy that she'd find my statement to be an answer to her confused questions from Vim's lackluster room.

Brandy snickered, but I ignored her.

"Vim travels, Fly. He doesn't spend too long in one place, so he doesn't have a permanent room here," I explained the situation to her.

Most of us had already done so, of course... but she seemed to not really believe it yet.

"Where do you travel to?" she asked Vim.

"All over the place. I visit all of our members, to check on them," he said.

"Is there that many?" she asked further.

He nodded. "A lot more than you'd think, yes."

Fly hummed as she walked into Vim's room. I stayed near the door, watching her as she studied the lone bed and the things upon it.

"Weapons?" she asked.

Our swords, the bow and some arrows, and a few other small items were on the bed. Pouches and leather pieces, mostly.

"Swords. They're blunt. The bow is for hunting, though we've not needed to do so lately," Vim said.

"Blunt?" Fly said the word oddly, which made me realize she didn't understand what he meant.

"They're not sharp, Fly. On purpose. You can touch the edge, to see for yourself," I said.

She glanced at me for a moment, then after realizing I was being sincere she reached out to do so. She seemed to struggle in pulling it out of its sheath, so Vim stepped forward to help her. After a moment she was able to touch the edge of the blade, confirming it was blunt.

"What's the point if it's not sharp?" she asked once she was done touching it.

"To train. I've been teaching Renn how to wield a sword," Vim said.

Fly's face contorted into unease as she stared up at Vim... and then it morphed a little into worry as she turned to look at me.

I nodded. "I'm not good at it, though," I said honestly.

The young bird's worried look softened a little as she frowned. "Why?" she asked.

"Well... I'm not sure. I think I'm just not experienced enough, and," I started to reason it and gestured with my hands, but she shook her head to stop me.

"Why are you learning how to kill?" she asked.

"Oh... well..." I lowered my hands, and wasn't entirely sure what to say to her.

"She's in training, Fly. To become like Vim," Brandy rejoined the conversation, which made Fly jump a little as Brandy stepped around the door, to stand next to me.

"Training..." Fly whispered.

I nodded, even though Vim was glaring at us.

"Aren't you strong enough already?" Fly asked me.

Brandy chuckled as I smiled down at the young bird, who was staring at me with a rather... sad look. Was she pitying me?

"Turns out no, I'm not..." I said honestly.

She hummed a moment, and then glanced back at Vim... then looked once more at the rest of the room.

"You really aren't the leader, are you?" Fly asked him.

Vim smiled and shook his head. "No. Far from it."

"Your room is nice though," Fly said to me.

Oh. Great.

"It is. But honestly I think your room is a little better. I like all the open space, and the windows up top," I said.

Fly nodded, and then slowly stopped.

"Huh?"

Smiling at her, I held my hand out to her... just as Vim usually did.

"Let's go see your room, Fly," I said.

Brandy and Vim watched intently as Fly stared at me, then looked down at my hand... and then without a word, she took it.

Chapter 169 - The Cost To Join

It was time for her to go, but she hadn't moved or said a word in about an hour.

The young bird was sitting on her bed. It was a larger bed, and covered in decorative pillows. She was sitting amidst the pillows and staring up at the large circular window that took up most of the room's roof.

We were on the third floor still near Merit's room. It was a room that was as far from the doors as possible, but not isolated like Renn's and mine were.

It was also one of the few two story rooms available. In the corner of the room, was a small staircase that led to the second floor. A little balcony that had shelves and a place to sit and read was up there. It was also a place one could sit and stare out the large circular window up in the roof, thanks to its angle.

Glancing up at the dark window, and the rain softly pattering upon it... I wondered if I should say anything or not.

Fly needed to go now. Even if the storm would keep most of the light from daybreak at bay, it was still dangerous for her. The city would start to get busy soon, even during the storm. No matter the weather, jobs still needed to get done.

Looking away from the window, I glanced at Renn who was sitting up against the bed. She was reading a small book, sitting on the floor and resting up onto the bed. She had been reading aloud, to Fly, but the young girl wasn't paying attention.

She was lost in her mind, staring at the room around her.

Brandy had left not too long ago, after witnessing the young bird fall to her knees and sob upon realizing that we were being serious.

This was her room. Or at least, it could be. It should be.

Could be...

Studying the young bird's eyes, and the film of tears upon them... I knew it was time.

Time not just for her to go, but to make a decision.

Standing up, I noticed that she failed to notice my approach. Renn however, did. Her ears twitched, and her tail rose up off the ground as I walked up to the bed.

"Fly," I got the young girl's attention. Gently.

The bird blinked, and a tiny tear ran down the side of her face... disappearing into the feathers beneath her chin and on her neck.

After a small moment she turned to look at me. She shuffled a little, moving herself as she did so. She must have realized she'd been sitting motionless for some time.

"Sunrise isn't far off, little one," I warned her.

She blinked a few more times, and I ignored Renn's glare as she closed her book.

Fly shivered a little, and then looked down. To the bed she was sitting upon.

Little hands reached out to touch the soft blanket beneath her. It was fluffy, probably too much for her in all honesty.

"Already...?" she whispered the question.

I nodded. "Already."

Fly looked around the room... and I could see the worry in her eyes.

Worry that this room was but a dream. That she'd lose it, if she left it.

That it wasn't real.

The look on her face told me she was wiser than her age. Even if she acted innocently sometimes, her life had not been kind enough to keep her from maturing quickly.

She knew that what she was doing was dangerous. She knew our Society was unique, and not something she could enjoy forever... at least not without paying the price.

Yet had anyone actually told her the price yet?

"You could live here, Fly," I told her.

Fly's eyes left a nearby dresser to stare at me.

I nodded gently at her. "You could belong here," I added.

"How?" she barely got the question out.

Renn's ears perked up, and I stepped forward.

"Little Fly... Let me tell you what must be given," I started.

Fly's eyes widened, but she didn't shy away. Instead she nodded, and even crawled a little closer to me.

I kept myself from smiling at the girl, who was so obviously willing to hear what it took. To pay the debt, if able.

"You must abandon them," I told her.

Fly stopped inching towards me, and went still.

"Your master, who demands sacrifice. The elders who feed your master. Your friends who choose them over us. Your fellows who threaten us. You must abandon them all, if they won't do the same," I said.

Renn went just as still as Fly did. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Renn's apprehensive expression. She was worried. She likely didn't think I had chosen the right time.

Funny, since I felt this was the perfect time.

"Abandon..." Fly whispered.

I nodded. "Your master and those who serve them. They do not belong to the Society. They do not have the right to enter it, the way they are. Anyone who would sacrifice our own kind, let alone feed upon them, is everything our Society is against. The Society was made, created, to protect those who are weak. To protect the ones who suffered under such monsters. To save them. If you wish, you can join Fly... but to do so means we become your family, not them. And if they do not do the same, then they become enemies. Not just ours, but yours as well," I explained.

Fly gulped... and after a moment looked over to Renn. Renn sat up straighter, and I notice the way the book made noises as she gripped it tightly. She was unsure of herself, almost more than Fly was.

"Am I the only one allowed to join?" Fly asked her as she reached over to grab a small pillow. She held it close, as if in support.

Renn, although hesitating, didn't miss a beat. "No, Fly. Any of your people can join, but they have to do the same. They have to stop eating each other. Stop killing each other. They have to abide by our rules, not theirs," Renn said.

Fly shifted again, to look at me. "Most won't do that, Vim," she said to me.

"Right now, Fly... you're the only one I care about," I said, getting her back on track.

The young bird's eyes began to water, and she looked down to her hands. They were tightly grabbing a pillow.

"Why did you show me this room?" she cried.

Renn stood, and was about to climb up onto the bed, but I held my hand out to stop her. She glared at me, but I ignored her and kept my eyes on the crying bird.

"Usually, Fly... we'd not pressure you. We'd let you decide at your leisure... but today, here at this moment, the world isn't kind enough for such a mercy. Your master is dangerous. Each time you leave, could be the last time we ever see you. So we have to ask. We have to ask..." I said.

Fly took a deep breath, and I noticed the snot. She cried like a little child.

Well, she was one in a sense.

"We want you safe, Fly," Renn whispered.

"If I stay here... no one will be safe," Fly said between small huffs. She was getting her crying under control.

Renn frowned, not understanding her.

I did, though.

"Don't worry about us, Fly. Do not let your choice, your life... your happiness, be decided by someone else," I said.

Fly looked up, and I was glad she was looking at me and not Renn. Renn would probably break too, and start crying with her had she looked elsewhere.

"They'll come. If I don't go back," Fly said.

"Let them," I said.

She shook her head.

"Do you want to stay Fly?" Renn asked.

Fly shivered as she nodded.

Ah...

Stepping forward, I knelt down. Going to my knees, as if to pray against the bed... I reached out to grab the little girl's hands.

They were a little wet. Her tears had been falling upon them... but they were warm. And she held me back, as I held her gently.

"What is stopping you, little bird? Make this your nest. Everyone here will welcome you," I said.

"They know I come here," Fly whispered.

I nodded. "I'm sure they do," I said. I had figured they did.

"They didn't. Not until yesterday," Fly said.

Renn frowned as I kept my smile. "Will they not let you stay here with us Fly?" I asked her.

"No. They still want you to feed the master, so they won't get eaten instead," Fly said.

"Is there no one else who would be willing to join, Fly?" Renn asked.

I expected Fly to shake her head, and was surprised when she actually blinked and nodded. "There are."

"Why don't they come too then?" I asked her.

"Scared," Fly whispered.

Of course they were.

Either of us, or their own people. Likely the very ones that Fly was scared of.

The room was silent for a moment. Other than Fly's sniffing. She wasn't crying anymore, but the remnants were still there. She needed to blow her nose...

As I looked around for something to use, if not my own shirt, I found Renn holding a small rag.

Where had she gotten it?

I nodded, and lifted Fly's hands a little to get her attention. "Blow your nose... then we'll go to the roof," I said to her.

Fly nodded as she thankfully took the rag from Renn.

Standing as Fly blew her nose; I decided to follow her home tonight.

I wasn't sure yet if I'd... enter her home with her or not, but I needed to know where it was. I couldn't afford to not know, just in case she stopped showing up and I needed to find her.

She didn't realize it... and neither did Renn, likely...

But Fly was now a member of our Society.

She had nodded, after all.

"Feel better?" Renn asked after Fly finished. The young bird nodded, and then smiled at Renn.

"Let's go, Fly, before the sun rises," I said.

"Stop rushing her," Renn complained.

"Mhm, I need to get back before she wakes up," Fly said as she clambered off the bed.

"Who?" Renn asked for me.

"The one who checks if I..." Fly hesitated, and then glanced over at me. "She makes sure I'm still there," she finished.

"Then best to hurry," I said, ignoring Renn's worried look.

Fly nodded as she walked over to take my hand.

Accepting the little hand into my own, I gestured for Renn to follow us. She would have anyway, but I needed her to close the door behind me when I went to follow Fly in a moment.

Heading out of the room, I allowed the young girl to take a moment to stare into the room. She took a small breath, the kind that was a sigh but almost ended up becoming a sob.

"You can come back tomorrow night," I told her.

She nodded.

Stepping away, I guided the bird to the nearest stairwell. It was close by, since we were already on the third floor.

"Did you like your room, Fly?" Renn asked as she followed us down the hall.

"Mhm..." Fly nodded.

"Better than mine," I said.

Fly's hand tightened within my own, and she looked up at me with a weird look.

"What? It's the truth," I said.

She then scrunched up her face as she laughed at me. "It is!"

Smiling at her, we ascended the stairs... and I opened the door to the roof for her. Her laughing died as the world got a little loud, since it was still raining.

It hadn't sounded like such a downpour while inside, but it must have been this whole time. Not only was it a little loud, there were large puddles all over the roof.

"The sewers are going to be flooded," Fly said.

"Of that I'm sure," I said.

We stood right outside the door, underneath the small canopy that extended a little past the door. We weren't standing in the rain, but I was able to reach out into the rain.

"I'll ask the others if they'll join," Fly then said.

I kept my eyes on the rain, and nodded. "Do so carefully, Fly," I warned her.

She nodded as she lifted her hood to cover her head. The patchwork was visible even in the stormy night.

"Will you accept them? There's... a few," she asked.

"As long as they obey the rules. You should know them by now," I said.

"I think so..." she said.

"I'd start small, Fly. Maybe... bring one more? Someone you can trust? Bring them here with you tonight," I offered her a strategy.

Fly shifted on a heel, as to look up at me. Her eyes were a little bright in the dark. They were reflective, a little more than most of our kinds.

"I'll try," she said.

I nodded. She nodded back.

She then turned, to look down the stairs at Renn. "I'll see you tonight Renn," Fly said.

"Goodnight Fly. Be safe," Renn said.

Fly nodded, and then with a soft smile up at me... she let go of my hand and stepped out into the rain.

Watching her go, I took note of the place she ran to. The same spot as all the other times. She was going to leap off the roof, and head towards the port.

"I really thought this was the night," Renn complained as she stepped up to the door.

"It was, Renn. She's decided to join us, but not before trying to save those she cares for," I said.

Renn nodded with a huff. "I got that much, Vim... but it worries me that she thinks staying here would endanger us," she said.

"Of course it would, Renn. If she stays here they'll think we kidnapped her. Or ate her. They'll not listen to reason..." I said as we both watched Fly jump off the roof.

"If they did we wouldn't have..." Renn stopped talking as I stepped forward. "Vim?" she asked worriedly.

"I'm going to follow her. Close the door behind me, and let Brandy know what I'm doing. I'll be back," I said quickly as I hurried away from the door.

"Wait...! Vim!" Renn shouted after me, but I didn't stop to explain. Fly was quick. I lost her once before, I'd not do so again.

Running into the rain, I ignored the puddles I splashed through as I went to the ledge that Fly had jumped off from. I hopped up onto the top of the lifted ledge, and quickly scanned the surroundings.

There. Running into one of the nearby alleyways. A dark blotch, moving quickly yet lowly.

Leaping from the roof, I ignored the rush of air as I fell to the street below.

Luckily it was storming. Although early in the morning, by now there would be at least a few people walking around. Thanks to the heavy rain there wasn't even a knight patrol to worry about.

Landing on the sidewalk, I skidded a little thanks to the layer of water. Once I got my footing back, I rushed forward to follow after Fly.

It didn't take long for me to catch up to her enough that I needed to slow down again.

Following Fly carefully, I made sure to stay just far enough behind her that she'd not notice me if she was to look around for me. She hadn't looked behind her yet, but I knew eventually she would. At the very least she would when she neared her home, or the entrance to it.

While I shadowed her through alley after alley, I realized we were heading to the north of the port. It actually made sense, in a way... the old sewer outlets, the main ones, spewed out right near there. They were now probably only pouring rainwater anymore, however.

Fly ran quickly, and surely. She had her route down to muscle memory... and likely not just because of all the nights she's visited us. Maybe this was a route that many of her people took and used, when out about in town.

Once we were near the main road near the port, Fly started to slow down... and began to look around. At one point, at a crossroads, she actually stopped and looked up into the sky... as if to smell for something.

Likely was. It was a good thing I had no scent.

"Astute little lady," I whispered as I peered around a corner, watching her stare down another alleyway. She had hesitated a moment, and hid behind a small barrel to stare down the alley.

She could sense that I was watching her. To a degree. Yet wasn't able to realize it was me, or where I was.

Maybe it was because she was a bird? Lilly had good senses too.

Once Fly was sure no one was following her she headed deeper down the alley. She now slowed to a brisk walking pace, which made it difficult for me. Especially since the alley she entered was rather big, and lacked anything to hide behind. It didn't have much junk at all, which was strange.

I decided to climb up to the roof. Using exposed bricks, and a windowsill for handles and footfalls, I quickly climbed up to the second story. The roof, like most here in Lumen, was flattened to let people utilize it. It made the roof wet, and full of puddles, but it also allowed me to calmly follow Fly down the alley without being noticed.

Glancing around, to memorize the area, I realized we really were where the large pipes exited the sidewall. The port itself was only a few blocks away to the south.

Fly rounded a corner, and headed down a new alley. One that was small and...

Studying her as she fumbled with a door to a large warehouse looking building, I watched Fly enter the door and shut it behind her carefully.

Hopping over to the roof of the building across, I walked over to the edge of the roof and knelt down as to hide amongst the shadows. Staring down at the brick building she had entered, I realized it was an older warehouse. Likely one of the first made back when this section of city had been developing.

The warehouse looked decrepit, and unused. There weren't any windows, likely thanks to it being so close to the sea.

Somewhere within that building was likely their entrance, or one of them, to their hideout.

I was about to hop off the roof, to open the door and peer into it, but stopped when I heard a small splash behind me.

Turning a little, I frowned at the silhouette in the darkness.

Stepping away from the chimney that they had likely been leaning up against for hours, I studied the broad shouldered man.

Staying kneeled, the man smirked in the dark as he stepped towards me.

Between the pointy ears, sharp teeth, and red eyes I didn't need to question who or what he was.

"So you're one of us? Don't look'it," He said.

His voice told me more than his appearance. His accent was from the north. Far north, beyond the mountains.

"One of you?" I asked the man, playing dumb.

"Don't lie to me!" He swiped his arm through the air, slicing rain. He snarled as he stepped closer to me again. "Playing with her are you? You must be a weird one. Feathers don't feel good," he said.

My eye twitched... and I stood.

Before I could calm myself enough to say something to him, the man spat at me and growled.

"I'll not share. Not a pound of meat, or a single woman. Even the ugly ones! You'll get none of it! Leave before I kill you," the man pointed at me as he gave me an order.

"You don't look like you want to let me leave," I said as I glanced around. Were there more?

I couldn't sense any others... but that didn't mean there weren't. After all, I hadn't noticed him.

"I'd rather you didn't," he said.

Of course he did.

"Are you their master?" I asked hopefully.

His smirk gave me the answer before his words did. "Ha! Me? Want me to feed you to the master? Is that what you want? Haha!" he seemed to find that hilarious. He wanted to step forward again, to confront me... but kept himself still. He was laughing too much.

While he laughed at himself, I heard the familiar chuckle and groans that mixed together. Making him sound...

His eyes were darting back and forth, as if I wasn't alone and another person was standing nearby. Yet there wasn't.

His smirk was tilted oddly, and not because of his facial structure. He was also trying to frown at the same time.

Laughing, while groaning as if in pain.

Insane.

The insanity of cannibalism.

It's been a long time since I've seen it, but like always it was obvious.

Our kind especially fell to it. Humans did too, but not as harshly.

"I pity you... But I pity those who you make suffer more," I said to him.

"Pfa!" He lost most his smile, even though it returned as he stepped towards me. He pointed at me again. "I'll have to teach that spoiled bird a lesson aft—" His voice was lost to the rain as I slammed into him.

Hitting him square in the chest, I pulled my punch the moment I felt his sternum and cavity collapse beneath my fist.

Crunching the tile roof beneath me, I watched as the man's body went flying towards the sea.

Glancing behind me, I saw the crumbling hole near the ledge. Where I had just been standing.

I had rushed forward too quickly. I broke the roof. That wasn't good... odds were if there was anyone in this building I stood upon, they were about to come out and see what was going on.

"Wha!" the man finally found his voice as he flew out of sight, landing in the street nearby.

Stepping over the broken tiles, I walked over to the edge of the roof. I couldn't see the man. My impact had sent him past even the next building.

Jumping to the next roof, I hurried over to the next ledge. This time I was able to find the man.

He was sprawled on the ground, near the street's curb. He was moving... but slowly... and shaking his head, as if in a daze.

Likely was.

Jumping off the roof, I landed a little ways from the man. He was groaning, and trying to mutter something but didn't seem able to form a coherent word.

Had he hit his head? There was a splotch of darkness in his hair...

Yes. As I drew closer, I was able to smell the blood. He had likely hit his head upon hitting the street. The cobblestone had not been gentle with him.

Of course, neither had I.

Good.

"I'm glad I waited until she said yes," I said as I stepped over to him.

I bent over to grab the man by the shirt. As I gripped his clothes, and hefted him, I realized he was wearing normal clothing.

Clean clothes. Fine clothes. They were even in fashion, with recent designs and colors.

Nothing like the patchwork dregs that Fly wore.

The man was heavier than he looked, and shifted a little but didn't or wasn't able to fight me off as I dragged him behind me and headed for the sea.

His shoes made noisy sounds as I dragged him behind me. The sound of the fine leather scraping the cobblestone told me once again the difference between him and Fly.

Granted, thanks to her talons, she'd not be able to wear normal shoes... but...

"I hate the disparity of the weak," I said to him.

He groaned. He was able to hear me, and conscious enough to register it. But nothing more.

"Nothing infuriates me more. The strong are supposed to protect the weak. Why does everyone always get it backwards?" I asked him, and the world.

How come all those I meet are like him? Like their master.

Even the ones who I considered better, like Tor, were only that way out of necessity.

Rounding a small office looking building, I dragged the man towards the sea wall. A large block of stone that blocked the large waves of the sea from pouring into the city. I wasn't gentle as I stepped up onto the stairwell, his head banged against the edge of the stone as I did so.

He twitched in pain, but didn't do much more. I took a deep breath of the ocean spray as I walked towards the edge of the sea wall.

We were far enough now from the main city, that even if someone walked by they'd probably not notice us. Especially so since it was still storming, and the sun had yet to actually rise.

Glancing down at the man I was holding, I stared at the line of glistening dark liquid running down his head, and dripping off his nose.

Shuffling him a little, I reached out and grabbed him by the neck. Lifting him before me, I studied the man who limply hung in front of me. He was a little taller than me, but I held him up at enough of an angle to keep his feet off the ground.

Stepping up to the edge of the sea wall, I held the man out over the raging ocean.

Squeezing his throat, I felt the broken bones within his neck.

Seems more than his skull had been damaged from the impact. But did his neck break on the fall, or from my initial blow that sent him flying?

Would explain why he couldn't talk, even though his eyes were dizzily looking around. He was still alive.

Must have been rather strong... even for one of our kind. Such damage was fatal for most.

"You can hate me. You can blame me. For not finding you before you fell into such depravity," I said to him.

His eyelids twitched, as he tried to blink.

It was too bad he had broken so thoroughly. I'd not be able to get any information out of him like this... but at the same time, maybe it was for the best.

I reached out to turn his head a little. His head fell back with an odd angle, showing that he was internally decapitated. Yet it wasn't the state of his spinal column I was interested in. Instead I studied the lines of scales running along his neck.

They were similarly colored to his skin, but slightly reflective. Some kind of lizard maybe.

A large wave splashed up the sea wall, dousing me and the man I held. A human might have been pushed over by the force of the wave, but I remained standing. The wave though had pushed the man's head forward, rolling his chin along my wrist thanks to the way I held his neck.

"You'd probably live for days before dying. Consider this a mercy," I told him.

He took a breath, likely to argue or yell... but couldn't. The breath entered his lungs and then left it, doing nothing more than creating a strange wheezing sound.

Tightening my grip, I watched as the man's head rolled along the force of my squeeze. It wasn't moving because he was resisting, it was moving because I was crushing everything it was connected to.

As I finished destroying everything in his throat, and crushing close his air pipe, I hoped this wasn't one of the ones Fly had planned to invite to the Society.

Once I was sure he was dead, and wouldn't heal from the damage, I released the man.

His limp body fell into the raging sea and disappeared. I watched the waves splash up against the wall for a moment, and noticed the body for a few moments. It was thrashed up against the wall... and then pulled down into the depths.

Not far from here, a little northward about two city blocks, along the sea wall was a set of pipes. They were half submerged, from the ocean swell.

Eventually, after the storm ended, the body would probably wash ashore nearby. But by then his body should be degraded enough that no humans could identify him, or his traits.

And even if it wasn't, a strange body washing ashore from the sea was typical. Typical stories told around bars and by sailors.

Never given much credit, if any at all.

With a sigh I turned and headed back towards the nearby street.

A quick glance showed no one watching or nearby. Yet that didn't mean someone wasn't watching from a window from one of the many buildings around here.

Stepping down the sea wall, to the cobblestone street, I took a deep breath of cold ocean air. I couldn't smell the man's blood anymore, even though I knew some of it had dripped nearby.

I was soaked now, and not just because of the rain. I knew the ocean salt would ruin the clothes I wore, but it was a small price to pay.

"Always a cost," I said as I headed back towards the Animalia Corporation building.

I had wanted to peak into the warehouse, but decided to do it another time.

If I entered now and heard or saw others like that man...

Likely I'd not hesitate killing them either.

Pausing before the warehouse that Fly had entered, I searched for any sign. A mark, or maybe a tell that this building was or led to their home.

Nothing was obvious... but it was also dark, and stormy. Maybe during a clear day something would stand out.

"Don't go in, Vim. Give them a chance," I told myself.

Spending a little longer than I should have before the building, I finally convinced myself to step away and head back.

The sun started brightening the dark clouds right as I returned to the company building, and I found Renn and Merit waiting for me.

Chapter 170 - To Sit Out

Handing Vim the towel, I wondered if maybe he had swam in the ocean or something. Not only had his clothes been heavily soaked... I could just faintly smell the sea from them. Which was weird. He usually didn't smell at all, but maybe it took time for new scents upon him to disappear.

If so, how long did it take? Minutes? Hours? Definitely not days...

Though maybe the reason I could smell the sea from them was because they were no longer on his person. They were now piled up in the corner, near the basket where dirty clothes usually went. Maybe he had simply taken them off in time.

"Was it one of the ones who came before?" Merit asked.

Vim shook his head as he covered it with the towel I had just given him. He scrubbed his hair dry, and I used the moment to glance down at his mostly naked body.

He looked fine. Unhurt. He was still wearing underwear, which was loose and baggy, but most of his body was visible. He didn't look injured at all.

"No... He had scales, and inhuman teeth but I didn't really spend long talking to him," Vim said.

"Hm... Fly definitely doesn't eat people. I wonder if that's one of the reasons she lives away from the rest of them," Merit said.

"Is it that easy to tell? When someone eats our own kind?" I asked.

Vim stopped drying his hair and rested the towel on his neck and shoulders. "It is. But it's not something that happens instantly. It takes... well... a few years probably, usually," Vim said.

Merit nodded. "I've eaten our kind before, Renn. But I've done so only a few times, and spread out over hundreds of years," she said softly.

I wasn't sure what to say to that, or the strange look of pain on her face.

No. That wasn't pain.

That was shame.

"Does... is it the number then? Or the frequency?" I asked, doing my best to not judge her too harshly. Especially since I could to a certain degree understand how it could, and probably did, happen.

"It's different for everyone. Predators succumb faster, surprisingly. Or maybe not, if you think about it," Vim said.

Oh? "We do?" I asked.

He nodded as he stood from the bench, I stepped back to let him... even though he wasn't entirely naked it was still a little odd to be so close to him when he looked it.

I stood near Merit as we watched Vim head to the small shelf that had new clothes for him. We were in a small shower room, near the depot. A place not really used by our kind, but it was late enough that no one else was nearby. And Vim and Merit strangely enough hadn't wanted anyone else to bother them during this conversation just yet.

I'd find it concerning, if not for the fact that Brandy had come to see Vim when he got back and heard the story. She left a little after he had gotten into the shower to clean himself.

They weren't trying to keep it a secret... they just didn't want others to grow concerned or worried just yet.

"It's disappointing to hear, but it was expected Renn," Merit said. Glancing down at her as Vim got dressed, she nodded at me. "Most of our kind are like that. Lost to themselves. Either stuck in their archaic ways... or too stupid to live any other way. I expect only a few to join our society alongside Fly. And those who do will likely be women and children," Merit added.

"The man made it very clear he saw her as a possession. Typical for predators," Vim said.

Although disappointing, I knew they were right. After all, my own family had been the same way. My brothers...

"Will... since you killed that man, will that cause issues? For Fly?" I asked.

"If they're even able to prove he's dead, and that it was me... it might," Vim admitted as he put on the last piece of clothes I had gotten for him, loose pants.

I hadn't gotten him any shoes or socks, since I hadn't known where to get them. In fact the shirt and pants he was wearing now were just the typical worker clothes we used here in the Society. Nothing fancy... although it was a little neat to know that I was able to eyeball what would fit him comfortably and what wouldn't.

"Pants are a little loose," I said as I studied the way they shifted as he headed for the shower's exit.

Merit and I followed him, but had to pause since he did too. "Hm..." he nodded as he checked them, but didn't seem to mind.

"Was he strong Vim?" Merit asked after we returned to leaving the showers.

"The man...? Hm... he survived a blow to the chest... but he went inert when his head hit the street stones from the fall. He survived a broken neck, but even if I hadn't finished him off he likely would have succumbed to the damage later," Vim said.

"Inert?" I asked about the word I didn't really understand.

"Likely limp. Or wasn't able to move. Probably a severe concussion if he hit his head," Merit explained.

Ah. That made sense.

"He uses odd words sometimes," I said.

Merit was focused elsewhere so only absentmindedly nodded at me before asking her next question.

"Was he older?"

"Old enough... A grown man, in appearance at least," Vim said.

"And he really threatened to hurt Fly?" I asked again.

We rounded a corner, and headed into one of the main hallways. Leading back to the center of the building. "He did. In a way only male predators do, too," Vim said.

"Typical," Merit mumbled.

Was it? My brothers had been that way too, but...

I wanted to groan, since they really had been. They had been just as, if not worse and...

"Renn?" Merit got my attention, and I realized we were standing before a stairwell. Merit and Vim were about half way up, and staring down at me.

Woops.

"Sorry," I hurried to follow them, and did my best to toss aside any thoughts about my family. I've been thinking about them a lot lately, and it was really upsetting.

Merit studied me with a worried look, but Vim turned to continue forward. He was probably used to me doing that by now.

"Most of our kind died by the hands of such men, Renn. Either eaten, or abused to death thanks to their brutality. Don't doubt Vim's assessment of the man. He's one of a handful in all of history who has dealt with as many as he has," Merit said as she went to climbing the stairs next to me.

I did my best to nod and smile to Merit, who was obviously trying to comfort me. She was worried I was upset.

But why would I be? I knew Vim was...

Well...

Glancing at the Societies Protector, I knew without being told that Vim didn't hesitate. I had been told of it. I had seen it. I knew of it.

I was being taught to replicate it.

You eliminate any and all threats to the Society. As fast as possible. Without hesitation.

Even if you would find yourself doubting your choices and actions later. You simply did what you must.

"Vim's also underselling the insanity, Renn. I'm rather surprised you've never encountered it. Though maybe that's thanks to the last wars," Merit said.

"It's the humans, Merit. They've also gotten better at killing monsters," Vim said as we reached the second floor.

Merit hesitated, which made me pause too. Was she okay?

The small white haired girl glared at Vim... she was almost snarling at him. "And who taught them that I wonder?" she said.

My heart thumped, and I turned quickly... to find that Vim had stopped walking.

He was facing away from us still, since we had been following him... and although dressed in the Animalia clothing, he looked suddenly out of place.

An uneasy silence filled the hallway, and I shifted to study Merit. Unluckily I was wearing my hat, since even though it was late there were still humans here. The night guards especially, even though I hadn't seen one for awhile. I'd have liked to hear her heartbeat, she looked upset... so it was probably beating quickly.

"Merit...?" I did my best to calmly speak, since the silence had continued to harden.

She ignored me for a moment, and then blinked and turned to look at me. Her expression softened quite a bit, and then she smiled. "Sorry... Just a small issue between us. Come, come," Merit extended her hand, and although I took it... I was a little unsure of what to say or think about it.

Vim returned to walking, seemingly willing to act as if Merit had never said anything.

Was that one of the reason Merit didn't like Vim? Had he taught humans how to kill our own kind?

Honestly I wasn't sure if it was really needed. After all, although stronger than humans... most of us weren't so by much. Like Fly. She was as weak as a normal human girl.

Plus to be honest, all our strength means nothing if we had to face enough humans at once.

But...

Walking hand and hand with Merit, I thought of those wolves Vim and I had met before. Those Vim called ancestors. Monarchs.

Those used to be what most of our kind were like. My own grandparents had been more beast than man.

Maybe it was those she was speaking of.

"Don't fret too much about it, Renn. I can hate him, but still respect him. Plus it won't stop me from loving you, no matter how close you get to him," Merit said to me.

Slowing our pace, I stared down at the worried Merit. She was...

"It's okay, Merit. I'm just... learning. I feel like there's so much I don't know," I said.

"Hear that Vim? She might come to hate you if she learns enough," Merit said, raising her voice.

Vim nodded, but kept his back to us. "I warned her about that," he said.

"He did..." I grumbled.

Merit chuckled, and leaned closer to me as she wrapped her arms around my own. "That's a relationship for you. To love someone even when you hate certain parts about them. I think it'd be weird if you didn't have a few things you didn't like about one another, in my opinion," Merit said.

"That's lovely, Merit," I said.

She shrugged, but looked away to hide the happy smile my words had given her.

Reaching the Societies Housing door, Vim opened it and held it open to let us in first.

We walked through the door, and Merit glared mischievously up at Vim as we did so. "Jealous?" she asked.

"Hmph," Vim smirked at us, which made me blush a little. Merit laughed as Vim closed the door behind us.

Before I could say anything, Merit released my arm and hand and stepped away quickly. "I'll go join Brandy. They're probably holding a meeting still, by the sounds of it," Merit said as she tapped her foot on the floor... as if to gesture to the floors beneath us.

Were they? I reached up to take my hat off, as to try and hear better.

"That's where we're headed, Merit," Vim said as he stepped up next to me.

"No it isn't," Merit said simply.

"It isn't?" I asked. What does she mean?

"You're going to sit this one out, Vim," Merit said gently.

"I am?" Vim asked.

She nodded. "For now."

Glancing at Vim, and the slight frown on his face... I realized he too wasn't sure why Merit was saying this.

With my hat off I could hear them now. I couldn't hear what was being said, but odds were the entire society was below.

"What is it Merit?" Vim asked her.

Merit's smile softened, and she nodded. "You never smell of death, Vim. Even if you wade in blood, as I've seen you do, the stench of it never clings to you. Yet..." Merit's voice softened as she spoke and she began to talk softer and softer, until she stopped speaking entirely.

"Ah..." I realized what she meant as Vim sighed.

"Fine. I'll pick a room nearby and wait for the verdict," Vim said.

Glancing at Vim, I was a little surprised to see he was annoyed but not upset or sad. Maybe he was just used to it.

"Thank you Vim," Merit said gently. Based off her tone and the expression on her face, you wouldn't think she had just snarled at him a few moments ago. She looked like she loved him, right now and here.

Vim nodded and stepped forward, walking past Merit as to head for the stairs. Likely to go and do exactly what he said he'd do. Sit and wait, alone, until the Society made a decision.

Which could take some time. Most of the voting I'd seen so far has taken hours occasionally.

Merit watched him walk away, heading down the hallway towards the stairwell in sight. "Why don't you go sit with him, Renn?" Merit asked me.

"Don't I get a vote too?" I asked.

"You do... You do... But you want to become like him, right?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Then one day you won't get one. I hadn't said anything until now, but..." Merit shifted, and I could tell she was worried. Worried maybe that she had said the wrong thing, at the wrong time.

"I see. I hadn't thought of it that way... But you're right," I said. She was after all.

I wanted to be like Vim. I wanted to stay with him.

That meant, eventually...

Or well, maybe even now.

"For reference, how would you vote if it came to it?" Merit asked.

"I'm assuming you mean if we should let Vim finish the job?" I asked.

She smirked as she nodded. "Basically. Fly's invitation has already been accepted and acknowledged. By all counts she's basically a member already. So the only things to vote on now, is to either let Vim go slay the rest of those unfit for our Society, or to bound his claws and let fate play its course," Merit said.

"I'd rather save Fly and the rest as fast as possible. I'd likely vote to let Vim do what he must, in this case... but I'd probably ask for some kind of assurance. Maybe have you and I go with him, to make sure nothing drastic happens," I said.

Vim disappeared into the stairwell as we talked.

"You're a gentle one, Renn... But it's probably a mute point. They'll not vote on such a thing just yet. For now they'll just likely vote on securing the building, and being on alert like last time," Merit said with a sigh.

"Would Vim's presence right now really cause that much grief, Merit?" I asked her.

Merit hesitated a moment, and then nodded. "It would, Renn. I myself don't disagree with Vim's actions, nor would I stop him from doing it again. I know full well the depravity and ruthlessness of our kind, when they get like that. I personally don't believe in any kind of mercy for those individuals. However... many of our members here right now are younger. They don't remember the wars. They weren't involved in them. They'll want to offer mercy, first. They won't understand. So Vim's quick judgment will be seen as something negative. It will scare a few. Worry others. And his presence, especially while he sits in the room next to them, as they debate and talk about it could cause... unease. It might also even sway opinions. Since some will not speak out, worried that their words and concerns would anger him," Merit explained.

"Ah..." I nodded. I had actually kind of noticed that before. Some of the meetings last time, like the one after Vim had killed Pulti. There were a few members who had... been oddly silent. Yet their faces and eyes had been alight with emotions.

Had they been silent out of fear or worry for Vim?

"You don't have to go sit with him, Renn. I was just..." Merit shrugged, and looked down at our feet. The way she shyly smiled made her look even younger, somehow.

"Hm..." Was she worried for Vim, maybe?

When he had found out that he had killed Pulti... he had grown a little sullen. He had regretted his actions.

It was why he had been weak enough to get in the bath with me.

Yet... He didn't look like that now. Merit's words had bothered him, but not his actions earlier. While explaining the situation, and telling us about the man he had killed and tossed into the sea...

He hadn't been bothered at all.

In Vim's perspective, his actions had been entirely justifiable. They had been just. Right. The only choice.

"I'll sit with him... but I'll probably come check on you guys after a bit, if that's okay. I won't vote, Merit, but I honestly like hearing everyone debate and talk to one another during these moments. Some of you have very... interesting perspectives," I said.

"Interesting? Really Renn? You're a strange one," Merit said with a smile as she nodded.

"What? You do. Some of you are a lot older; others wiser... and some have outlooks far different than mine. It's neat to hear the different beliefs," I said as we both began heading towards the stairs.

"Neat," Merit huffed at the word and obviously didn't agree.

Smiling down at my friend, I wondered if she realized I found her to be one of the oddest.

She was... quick to decisions, like Vim. And although I wasn't entirely sure if she was a predator or not yet, she had the mindset of one. She was quick to vote for violence, or harsh decisions. Yet at the same time, she obviously had great... sorrow within her. Regrets, shame, worry.

Merit was a bundle of complex emotions, which made her so fascinating.

As we headed downstairs, the sound of everyone talking with one another became louder and louder. Right now Reatti was the loudest, trying to argue something someone said earlier.

Reaching the bottom floor, I was about to say something to Merit before we parted ways... but I wasn't able as I came to a stop, and stared into one of the smaller rooms. One with only a few tables and chairs.

Vim was sitting with Lamp.

"Oh? Now that's a wonderful expression Renn," Merit whispered.

Vim turned to glance at me, but I turned away to look at Merit before he could see whatever was on my face.

"Was it that bad?" I asked Merit worriedly.

"Not really. You were just shocked. Worried she'll steal him from you?" Merit teased me.

"Shush..." I didn't want to say yes.

Merit giggled, and then waved into the room at Vim and Lamp. "Alright, have fun. I surely won't be..." Merit said as she sighed and headed down the hall, to the loud room.

Sighing I entered the room to join Vim and Lamp. As I did Lamp's face exploded into a huge smile, she nearly jumped out of her chair to give me a hug.

Accepting the woman's hug, I shyly smiled at Vim as he studied me with a smile of his own.

This was why I'm worried, Merit.

I loved Lamp. Yet I loved Vim too.

Which was why I could understand the two of them loving each other as well... since after all, I did.

"Hey Lamp," I greeted her as we separated, and she smirked at me and said something in her language.

"She asked if you've eaten yet. That's what she's doing, having breakfast," Vim said as he gestured to the table. Sure enough there were a few plates before her.

"I haven't... Is it that early already?" I asked. Breakfast? Really?

"Yes. It is. Sit with her, I'll go get you some food," Vim stood from the table, and I grumbled as Lamp pulled me towards it.

Passing Vim as he left the room, I sat next to Lamp at the table. She seemed to be eating some kind of bread toast with eggs.

Lamp said something to me as she picked up her fork as to go back to eating.

I nodded at her as Lamp continued to talk to me, even though I didn't understand a word... I knew she was likely just telling me about her day, or maybe teasing me about Vim.

It was interesting that Vim would choose to sit with her, though maybe not... He might have thought I would have gone with Merit to the meeting, so chose to sit with her as to not be bored.

Though... she was a full-fledged member now. So it wasn't too surprising that Vim would be kind to her.

Smiling at the scarred woman as she spoke between bites, I waited for my own food... and for Vim to return.