

## Non Human 171

### Chapter 171 A Well To Ponder

The old ladder made some discomforting sounds as I descended. The type of sounds that echoed horribly in the stone basement. The kind that not only told me that the ladder could break at any moment... but most would have shivered from the sound alone.

Ignoring its protest as I descended farther into the old well shaft was easy, but ignoring the stale air was hard. It was the kind of stagnant air that shouldn't be breathed in. The type that poisoned and killed.

"Just don't breathe then," I scoffed at myself as I finally reached the floor of the basement. The ground was dry, thankfully. The storm had been pouring many inches of rain, daily, and had been for the whole week. It wouldn't have surprised me to find it slightly flooded.

Yet it was dry. The air was stagnant, but not damp.

Stepping away from the ladder, I scanned the darkness and the stone walls that it hid. The circular well shaft extended outward, opening into a large room... I knew from memory, even though I hadn't been down here in decades, that the door to the right of me led to a long hallway. One that led far out of the city to the mountain nearby.

That wasn't the door I wanted to check right now, however.

A thicker, stone door, lay opposite of the wooden one that led to the mountains. This one was old, older than the Animalia building that had been built atop of it. The white stone was a little too bright in the darkness.

Glancing up the ladder, I was glad to see the dark well empty.

Renn had obeyed my request and stayed behind.

Good thing too, since the air was definitely toxic. My head was tingling, even though I was only breathing once every few minutes.

Renn was not human, of course, and far stronger than most of our kind... yet I wasn't sure yet to what lengths I could push her. Even our kind couldn't survive a lack of oxygen. In fact, most of our kind were more vulnerable to the lack of it than not. Even those whose bloodlines aided them in such things, like mountain animals or birds, suffered when entering such places. Likely thanks to the purity of the air, or lack thereof... And last thing I needed was for her to become deathly ill right now. Between Fly and Lamp, she had duties that required her to be...

Pausing before the stone door, I sighed as I realized I was using a foolish excuse to justify coddling her.

Putting my hands onto the stone door I shifted a little and began to push. At first nothing happened, but then the stone gave way and began to skid along the dark normal stone the door was built into. Pushing the stone door inward, it begun opened sideways and spun on the steel pillar within its center.

The moment enough of the stone door separated from the stone wall, the toxic air rushed into the new hole, expelling itself. It whistled and roared for a moment as most of the stagnant air rushed out of the basement well, and into the new section. Even my eyes couldn't see where the air was flowing into, it was pitch black beyond the door's opening.

Before the air settled I stepped through the opening and into the darkness.

My clothes rustled as the rest of the air rushed past. The stone hallway became a little loud as the air became wind, and many things began to stir. Dust. My clothes. My hair. Cobwebs. Pockets in the stones, and cracks, created whistling sounds...

The orchestra of sound quickly subsided as I stepped forward, heading deeper. By the time I left the white stone door behind, the air had settled enough to quite the place down.

As I rounded a corner, and headed deeper into the darkness... I reached out to place my right hand on the stone wall I was walking next to. Not for guidance, since I knew this hallway led only one direction and to one location, but simply to reminisce.

Beneath a tiny layer of dust, and other grime, the familiar feeling of the white stone began to scrape loudly against my calloused hand.

The sound, the feeling of the smooth stone that somehow felt rough... Here, in this darkness, deep below the earth and away from everyone and everything...

It gave me the strange feeling of peace, somehow. It made me close my eyes, not that they were much use down here anyway, so I could once again walk the halls of those looming palaces and fortresses.

"A lifetime forgotten," I whispered as I reached another corner. This one turned left, a little abruptly. As if the hallway had been an afterthought.

Well, it kind of had been...

My memories teased me sometimes. Every so often, instead of seeing Lumen or the Animalia Company building... I saw the white fortress of the sun. One that shone, even during the night... and not just because of all the lamps and lights adorning it.

Yet those memories were me simply embellishing, even in my own mind.

The fortress here had been small. Barely able to hold a dozen men. A simple outlook outpost, for the army.

One I visited often, just to get away from the rest... yet not one that had much importance. Especially since this lake hadn't been here at that time, and this whole land had been owned by...

Reaching the end of the hallway, I sighed out the nasty tasting air and stepped up to the ledge.

The darkness deepened as I stared out into the huge alcove. And my eyes blurred and fuzzed as they kept adjusting, then re-adjusting as I looked elsewhere. Some things were nearby, yet others were far away.

This hallway ended at a hole. One on the top of the ancient city, or well the dome that now surrounds it. Dome of earth and stone.

Little remained of the buried city. I could remember this scene from hundreds of years ago. Back then most of the buildings had still been standing, at least relatively. I could still make out the markets, the garrisons, and the hospital... the husbandry center...

Yet now I could only just make out the outlines of buildings. I couldn't even remember where was what anymore. Surely that building there had been the main garrison? Usually they were in the center...

Shaking my head, as to try and clear my blurry eyes, I remembered the air was poisonous. I couldn't succumb to it, of course... but while I continued to breathe it in it would affect me. Even if just a little.

Putting a hand on the wall, near the edge where the hallway ended... I looked down past the ledge. The submerged city far beneath the drop was probably a hundred or so feet down. And that was if I landed on one of the building's. If I missed them, or went through the roofs because of decay... well...

"Two hundred maybe?" I wondered. It was quite a drop. One that could actually hurt me too if I wasn't careful.

So it was a good thing I had no plans to go down there.

There was no need to anyway.

Scanning the large alcove, I tried to find any source of life. A fire maybe. Or reflections of some kind, like from eyes or metal...

Yet I couldn't see anything. Other than the faint glow of water far below, from the sea and rain.

Lowering to the edge, I sat down upon it. To sit and wait. To watch. To listen, and if I could to hear and smell.

Though the odds of me being able to smell anything other than the stale toxic air was unlikely. No matter how long I sat and my body acclimated to the environment.

Coughing the thick air, I groaned as I realized I'd ache for a few days after this.

I was resilient. In more ways than one... but this body still suffered. It endured, but with a price.

This poison wouldn't kill me, or bedridden me, but it'll make me feel sore. Part of the process of my body's adaption.

While sitting on the ledge, the air from the hallway had a slight... push. As if the wind in the hallway was trying all it could to push me off the ledge. It couldn't of course. The breeze was barely noticeable. Just enough to be there, but nothing more.

Studying the dark buried city... I sat and waited.

And waited.

Moments passed. Then minutes. And then after some time, I noticed I was breathing normally now.

Taking a deep breath, I knew it wasn't because the air had suddenly become clean. My body had simply adjusted.

Which meant I'd been down here for an hour or so, already.

Scratching my jaw, I glanced around for any signs of life in the decaying city.

Still nothing. No fires. No lights. No noises, other than odd echoes of water or wind.

Every so often I could see the glistening of things in the air. Falling from the dark ceiling, to the city below. I knew it was just rainfall. Pooled water was seeping through the cracks up top, or the sewers, and falling down here.

Rain becoming rain again.

Which was odd. This city usually didn't get much rain. Or well, the city that was buried here beneath Lumen.

Lumen got rain.

That one hadn't, back then.

In fact most of the time when I had come here back then, it had been hot. Sweltering hot... My soldiers used to complain about their armor burning their skin and...

The thought amused me long enough that I barely noticed it when my mind had gone blank.

Blinking the numbness out of my mind, I huffed and slowly stood.

My body no longer tingled from numbness when sitting for extended periods, but I still felt as if it should. I groaned little, as if my back actually hurt as I got up and stepped away from the ledge.

"Stupid," I laughed at my own foolishness, and wondered why I did that sometimes. As if on habit, as if my mind was replicating the feeling my body no longer remembered.

Renn would laugh at me too if I told her.

Pausing, I glanced one last time out to the buried city. A few moments passed of me thinking of those memories again. Then, my purpose of being down here.

Fly and her people didn't live down here. At least, not visibly. Either they lived in darkness, or lived beyond the city itself. Maybe they really did keep themselves to just the sewers?

Or maybe I shouldn't just expect to be able to see or hear proof of their presences simply by staring out for a few hours onto the city.

Not that it mattered even if I had.

The Society had once again voted to wait. To wait and see what Fly and her people do.

After all, Fly had not actually agreed to join the Society just yet. Everyone expected her to, and would accept it the moment she asked... no matter who the question was flung upon, but until then...

Heading back to the old well shaft, I took my time in closing the white stone door. Mostly to make sure it was securely latched and in place.

Not so much in worry over someone sneaking in from the buried city, thanks to that hallway being so high up and away from anything. It'd be... very difficult to climb to that hole. Likely no one could even see it in the darkness, even if they wanted to.

Rather just in case someone from the Society snuck down here on accident. Don't want them running down that dark hallway, half confused thanks to the noxious air and not realizing the hallway abruptly ended as it did.

Once the door was locked back in place, I returned to the shoddy ladder. It's main support beams were made of metal, but the rungs were wood... for some reason. Had I made it like this? I couldn't remember.

It had to of been me. After all who else would have messed with it?

Why had I used wood? It was why...

Poking one of the lower rungs, one I'd not be needing, I watched in dismay as the thing crumbled from just light tap.

Wonderful.

Shaking my head at myself, I went to climbing the ladder.

As I ascended, I did my best to not notice how half the rungs I tried to use shifted or succumbed to my weight.

Had they been this bad while I was coming down?

Nearly at the top, I had to firmly grab the side rails as the rung my right foot on gave way completely.

The piece that broke off banged against the ladder and well walls, all the way to the bottom. I sighed as I realized that I'd have to fix this, and likely soon. Just in case it was needed again one day.

Not a pleasant venture. Not only would I have to deconstruct the ladder, I'd have to dispose of it too. It was as toxic as the air. If I tossed it out and some poor soul tried to use it as firewood, it'd just get them killed. Knowing my luck it'd take out a whole city block.

"Typical," I complained as I returned to climbing, reaching the top with a little more haste. Not out of worry, but simple annoyance. The more I broke the more I'd be rushed to fix it.

Pushing up on the well's cover, I heard muffled voices as the world got bright again. My eyes quickly adjusted to the brightness, and I clambered up out of the hole.

Before even addressing Renn, who was hurrying into the room, I quickly turned around to reseal the hole. The toxic air wasn't as bad up here, and also thanks to my ventilating the well a little by opening the door, but I didn't need anyone getting a lungful of the stuff.

Sliding the circular metal cover over the hole, I pushed it into its slot. It slid in easily, but it wasn't until I pushed a little harder that it clinked into position. It locked in place, to where I knew no one would be able to open it without great force. Unless they knew how to open it, after all.

After locking it in place, I took a deep breath of fresh air for the first time since I had entered... and immediately began to cough.

“Vim?” Renn’s worry was loud in my ears as I bent over to heave and cough. For a good few moments, I couldn’t do anything but cough... but luckily nothing was coming out. No gunk. No tar. No blood. Not even phlegm.

Renn’s hand patted my back as I slowly stopped coughing, and I glanced at the cat’s worried expression. “I’m fine. Just give me a moment,” I said with a wheeze, and although was able to say it... I immediately went back to hacking after.

“Don’t sound okay,” she said.

I nodded. I didn’t. I sounded like I was coughing up a lung.

Well, in a certain sense I was.

My lungs had started adapting to the toxic air.

Yet now I was breaching fresh air.

Going from one toxin to another.

Walking out of the little room, I made sure to turn off the light before doing so. Renn was the one who closed the door for me, since I was still coughing.

“How long?” I asked between the softening coughs.

“You were down there for? About six hours I think,” she said.

That long?

She nodded at me, even though I hadn't said my question aloud. “Did you find what you were looking for?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No,” I coughed.

Renn gave me a worried expression again, but I knew it wasn't because of my coughing. It was starting to subside after all. Rather she was worried I had wasted my time and effort.

Patting her on the back, I took a deep breath and started to walk down the hall. Back towards the main section of the building. There was no need for me to hurry anywhere, of course, but I wanted to get moving. To get my body used to the air again.

“Sure you’re alright?” Renn asked as she stayed with me.

“I’ll be fine. Just takes a bit,” I said.

“I’ve never heard you cough before. Like that at least,” she said.

She hadn’t? I tried to parse my memories for a time when I had coughed. Surely once or twice?

Renn giggled as I slowed my pace, to let her walk beside me comfortably. “You really furrow your brow when you cough. As if you’re pissed off,” she said as she pointed at her forehead.

“Well... I’m coughing,” I said, and then coughed again.

“Definitely are... Why are you coughing so much anyway?” she asked.

“I told you. The air down there is bad,” I said. A passing window told me the storm was still here. And still pouring... yet gently. How long would it last? Feels like it’s been raining since I got back from the ship.

“It’s that bad? Then why did you think they could be down there?” Renn asked.

“The place that well overlooks isn’t as bad. It’s the buried city, from before this one. It’s habitable... at least more than the well,” I said.

Rounding a corner, I coughed again and then took a deep breath to hold it in for a moment.

“Nothing’s happened while you were gone. Other than Sofia getting in an argument with a customer,” Renn said.

Letting my deep breath out, slowly, I glanced at Renn and frowned for her.

She smirked at me. “He was being a jerk I guess. Also I like that expression, how are you able to make your eyebrow go so pointy?” she asked as she reached up to her own as to try and mimic me.

Coughing one last time, I shook my head at her.

Chapter 172 Brandy’s Request

The captain’s office had finally become his own.

Glancing around the small room, made smaller by all the furniture packed in here, I looked for any hint of Hector.

His colors were gone. The rugs, the tarp on the center table and the even the blinds were now blue and white. Matching the Animalia Company colors. Same as the sails and flags outside. Hector's furniture had been replaced. There was more in here now, and most seemed more modern. His smell was gone, replaced by some kind of burning incense. An unlit bowl of ashes was on the desk, but I knew it'd still be warm. It had been lit a little before I had arrived.

Glancing up at the ceiling, right above the desk, I tried to find the nicks in the wood. From when Hector had tried to nail some rope to the ceiling.

They were gone. Repaired. Though it looked like most of the ceiling had been redone. Maybe it had started to leak.

Hector was gone. All trace of him missing.

Not really a surprise... Hector had been gone for years. Yet...

"Here you go," Kevin huffed as he stood up, lifting a small black wooden box. The little latch clanked as he put it down onto the desk in front of me.

"This is it?" I asked as I stepped closer as to open the little wooden box.

Rather, chest. It opened silently, which was surprising since the latch was squeaky.

Inside were books. Small dark colored ones. Five of them.

“That’s all I was given,” Kevin said with a nod.

I sighed as I closed the lid. So much fuss over a few little books.

Kevin chuckled as he sat down in his captain’s chair. His wasn’t as big as Hector’s had been, but it looked far more comfortable. “Brandy’s always scheming. I suggest you put her in her place. Though please do it after I set sail again, she becomes very demanding whenever you discipline her,” Kevin said.

“I don’t discipline,” I said.

Kevin smirked and nodded. “True.”

Deciding to change topics, I glanced around his office again. Why was it so clean? So fresh? Ships weren’t supposed to be this clean it was unnatural.

“How’s the ship?” I asked him.

Kevin shrugged. “Fine. We spent an extra week in Briggs a few moons ago, cleaning and fixing a few things. Nothing too serious. We’ll need new sails soon, but I think I can wait until next season,” Kevin said.

“Do it now. Get the hull checked too, it’s swaying a little heavily to the port,” I said as my eyes lingered on one of the shelves nearby. It was full, but not of books. It had chests and boxes lining its shelves.

“Is it...?” Kevin sounded like he believed me, but was unsure of how I could tell. I ignored his odd look as I stepped over to the shelf I was studying.

On the shelves, little wooden nubs had been installed on the lips. To stop the boxes and chests from sliding off the shelves. They held everything in place firmly... and were...

“Who made this?” I asked.

“One of my crew. His names Hobbs. An older fellow now... probably not too many seasons away from retirement, based off his recent slowness,” Kevin said.

“He’s good,” I complimented the man’s work. It was good. Seamless.

“It’s held up well, yes. It’s been... well almost five years since I replaced the shelves I think,” Kevin spoke lightly, and I knew it was because he wasn’t sure what to think of our conversation.

He like most of our members... mistakenly thought I was something special.

Kevin likely thought I was trying to hint at something, or was searching for something with my questions.

But the truth was far simpler.

I was honestly impressed with the man's work. It was such a simple thing, to make a shelf... but one could always tell a true craftsman's work from an amateurs.

Ignoring Kevin's odd look, I stepped away from the shelf and went back to his desk.

"How's the trading been going?" I asked.

"Smooth. Always busy. It's rare our cargo isn't loaded to the brim anymore. Though lately I've noticed a large uptick in weapons. The south's war must be going badly if they're buying so much iron from the north," Kevin said.

"You've been transporting weapons?" I asked.

He shrugged. "A few times in the last couple months. Not directly though. We've stocked the weapons only when we need something to fill the empty space after a delivery, and it's just what pays the best," Kevin said.

Ah. So a carryover. That was a little relieving to hear. I knew Brandy was... expanding rather intensely, but it would have been surprising for such a religious woman to actively participate in warfare.

Though war was profitable. Vastly so. So maybe I couldn't blame her even if they got involved in it.

"Any news of a plague?" I asked.

Kevin tilted his head and frowned. "Actually yes. Three ports ago, at Pripo. We hadn't been allowed to disembark. The church has quarantined the whole town."

"Really...?" That was very surprising. Not just the fact that an entire town needed to be quarantined, but that the church actually did such a thing.

It must be quite bad for even this era's religious sect to rely on science over their faith.

"Was a pain. They let us unload, and we loaded from another ship that hadn't come in contact. Like us they weren't allowed into town. The Phemas, they headed east. Usually they deal in slaves, so I was surprised at first but their captain said slaves right now aren't profitable thanks to the disease. No one is willing to buy them, if they're sick I guess. We got a load of spices from them, it's what we're unloading now," Kevin said.

"Makes sense," I said.

Between the church locking down ports, and slave traders choosing to partake in normal goods instead of their preferred one is very telling indeed.

Maybe I should have the whole of the society go to secluded villages, like Tor's. Most of our people would, and could, suffer disease just as easily as the humans.

"Should we be worried Vim?" Kevin asked.

"Not sure yet. I suggest staying on this side of the sea, for now, in case you get new orders soon," I said.

He nodded. "Brandy wants me to ferry goods between our warehouses here and the north for a few moons so all is well on that front."

We have warehouses in the north?

I decided not to ask that question aloud. Not just because I wasn't in the mood to interrogate Kevin, but also because I didn't want to torture him that way. If he found out I hadn't known about such warehouses, he'd feel responsible. All my questioning would accomplish, would make him very self conscious. To the point he might even quit his position in shame.

Kevin was a weak willed man when it came to scrutiny. A bad trait for a sailor, honestly.

Yet he's done well since taking over Hector's position. I shouldn't think badly of him.

Glancing to the wall, near the only window, I studied the sea chart upon it. It was newer, and had lots of little notes scribbled upon it. Kevin's handwriting.

Stepping over to it, I studied the details upon it. I memorized the new ports, and remembered the ones familiar to me.

The inland sea had become more crowded it seemed. There were new sea routes, and there were a few notes detailing how busy some were. Large ports were appearing where large rivers were, connecting this sea and the nations landlocked around it.

"Vim?" Kevin must have grown uneasy since the silence had grown heavy. I nodded absentmindedly as I remembered sailing not too long ago. When I had brought in that ship, with the eastern women.

Although that storm, the eastern women, and the chaos had been... annoying... The memory was somehow a fond one. Especially when I had been sailing alone in the storm.

"Have you met Ronaldo yet?" I asked him.

"The young lad? Yes. A good man. He and I will be sailing together soon," Kevin said.

"Side by side?" I asked.

He nodded. "Should we not? He knows this sea, and was obviously born to sail... but I'm to teach him our ways, I've been told..." Kevin spoke without surety; he was now doubting his orders and plans.

"Teach him well," I said.

"Aye sir," Kevin nodded, sounding more sure of himself.

Looking back at the sea chart, I sighed.

Kevin stood from his chair, slowly. I could hear the worry as he did so. He stood without a purpose, and shifted on his heels upon standing.

What did he see before him? A man who was lost? Upset? Annoyed?

Probably all of that and more.

And Fly and the issues around her aren't the only sources of discomfort for that man either.

"I've found myself longing for the sea," I told Kevin honestly.

“Oh...? Honestly I had not thought you heard the call... I’m surprised.” Kevin said softly, as if afraid to say anything at all.

I nodded. “Don’t be. I grew up on the ocean. A vibrant, yet unforgiving sea...” I said as my childhood played itself out in my mind.

A simpler time.

One not without worries... and honestly, it had not been pleasant. Full of strife. Heartache.

Hunger.

Yet...

Lately I’ve been longing for those times, haven’t I?

I blinked away the memories, and wondered why I could hear the gulls and sailors so clearly. Why was it so quiet in here?

Glancing away from the sea chart, to Kevin... I found the man staring at me with an agape mouth.

He looked...

“Kevin?” I worried for the man, who looked as if he had seen something terrifying.

Kevin blinked, and with a small shiver as if from the cold of the sea... he shook his head.

“You okay?” I asked.

He nodded, and then coughed. “Yes. I uh... you’ve never spoken of your past, Vim. At least... never with me. I’m just... humbled. Thank you,” Kevin gave me a strange smile. One that brought forth memories, yet different ones.

That was the same smile he had worn upon being given command of this ship.

A proud one.

Unsure of what to say to the man who looked as if I had just given him a mighty gift, I chose to instead look away.

Taking a small breath, I realized that I had just revealed something to him. Which meant I’d just revealed something to the whole Society.

But...

Did it matter?

Who cared if they knew I longed for the sea?

Why did it matter if they knew of my childhood? Or where I was born?

But no...

Such things were kept secret for a reason.

"Maybe I'm just bored," I said gently, for his sake.

Kevin chuckled. "Ah, but the sea is a cruel mistress. She lulls one into boredom, only to sink the ship while you're not looking!"

I nodded. That did happen.

“The sea has always been good to me. If she’s a cruel mistress, I wonder what I should be calling those I find on land?” I said.

Kevin’s chuckle turned into a hearty laugh, one that was a little loud in this small room. “Now you really do sound like a sailor, Vim!” he said happily.

Smiling at his amused laughter, I did my best to not think of Hector.

He had been a real sailor. One who had been stalwart and true. A man who didn’t just belong on the sea, but claimed it.

Did I miss him, or the ability to talk openly and truly with him? Maybe I didn’t miss the man, but simply the ability to talk honestly with someone.

It was starting to become rather obvious that all of those who I used to see as friends were gone. Or fading, like Nebl was.

Maybe that was why I liked Renn so much, or at least felt like I did. Even though she didn’t know the real me, she also didn’t know the secretive me either.

I was a little more open with her than the rest of the Society.

It was more than that though, wasn't it? After all there were many in the Society who I talked to openly. Or at least, a little more than I did those like Kevin.

And it wasn't like I truly talked openly with Renn. I kept a lot from her... most for her own sake. Yet...

About to open my mouth, I was about to bring something up with Kevin. To test him, in a way. To see if he'd talk to me as Renn did.

Yet fate didn't let me.

A heavy knock on the door kept my mouth shut, and I watched as Kevin stepped around his desk. He grumbled under his breath some obscenities, telling me he knew who was knocking and why... yet was not looking forward to opening the door.

Kevin opened the door, and I listened as the sailor gave a report. One telling Kevin that most of the unloading was done, and they needed their captain to come check the hold. For permission and to sign the port authority permit.

Meaning it was time I stopped bothering him. Kevin, like most of those in the Society... would neglect their duties if I bothered them too much.

"I'll relieve you of this burden, then, Kevin," I said as I went to the desk.

Kevin looked hurt, upset that I had so willingly ended our conversation. I knew why, of course. It wasn't because he wanted to get out of working... but simply because he and I only met once every so many years. And our meetings were always short. Simple. Like this one.

"Come have dinner with us, before you set sail," I said as I picked up the little chest.

Kevin happily accepted the lifeline I had offered him, and he nodded quickly. "Aye sir!"

With the small chest under my arm, I nodded back and stepped around him. To head out of his office.

Pausing before I did so, I once again noticed the way the ship listed. The hold was mostly empty, per that sailors report... yet it was still favoring the port side a little too much. Especially so with it being docked and the sea being calm.

"Be mindful when you load. The bowing is from uneven loads," I warned him.

"Ah... Yes sir," Kevin nodded, and I was able to see the realization dawn upon him. Kevin very likely was right now thinking of several trips and loads, ones that were likely rushed or improperly loaded and he had known about it.

"It's nothing that can't be addressed. Just be mindful. May the seas be gentle with you, Kevin. I'll see you again," I said as I stepped out of the room, heading off the ship.

Carrying Brandy's request off the ship and into the port of Lumen, I headed for the company building.

"Safe sails, Vim! For the Society!" Kevin raised his voice, finally sounding like a sailor should.

Loud and proud.

Chapter 173 The Sunken Barrel

Closing the windows, I sighed at the setting sun.

"You said you'd be quick," I complained as I latched the little metal lock to secure the windows.

Honestly it was pointless. Anyone who could climb to these windows didn't need them to be unlocked as to get in. They'd simple break them. But I'd hate to be the one who let intruders in simply because I hadn't locked up properly.

Before I stepped away, I studied the little cactus plant sitting on the ledge beneath the windowsill. It was a little... greener, it seemed, since I had been given it. But I didn't water it often. Merit had made it very clear that I should only give it a little water, and sparingly.

Which was why it was still here in my room, and not on the roof. Merit said it would have died if we had replanted it up there in the garden. It would have drowned from all the rain.

A plant.

Drowning.

“The world is full of weird things,” I whispered as I glanced at my finished painting.

It was still on the easel, even though I kind of wanted to replace it with a fresh blank canvass.

I had hundreds of paintings to finish, after all. I knew it'd take me years. Especially once Vim and I returned to traveling together. So I wanted to use every moment I could to paint... but...

“But moments with others are precious, too,” I whispered as I stared at the two I had painted.

Spending my free time painting here in this room was not the best use of my time. There were people here I needed to spend as much time with as I could. Especially since those in the paintings I wished to repaint and replace were gone too.

Those I wanted to paint were the very proof that I shouldn't waste all my time alone, painting the past.

Why waste time on those gone, when those still alive were still here?

“A hard choice,” I whispered.

Especially when there were those like Vim who could cry just by seeing those very paintings.

They were gone, based off Vim's telling of them.

Rungle and Stumble.

Stumble was an odd name for a young girl... The origin of it was obvious, but...

How did they know she'd stumble often? It wasn't like she'd be stumbling around while a baby.

Although getting lost in thought as I stared at the painting, I still heard the light footsteps approaching my room.

A tiny moment of my heart increasing its pace came and went, as the realization that there was no way it was Vim came quickly.

Vim's footsteps were rarely heard, and when they were... they weren't that light and soft. The whole world noticed when he allowed it.

Although not the man who had promised to return quickly, I wasn't too unhappy to open my door and find Merit beyond it.

She smirked up at me. "You're very perceptive."

"I am?" I wasn't sure if she was teasing me or not, based off that smile on her face.

"I'm glad you're dressed this time. Get a hat on, and a jacket of some kind. We're going out," Merit said.

"We are?" I asked, but quickly went to oblige. Go out? With Merit?

Threaten me with a good time.

Hurrying over to my dresser, I quickly put my leather hat on that Lellip had made me. Then I put on the heavy cloak that had the Animalia's emblem sewn onto the back of it.

As I got ready, I was about to turn and ask where we were going... then realized the mistake I had just made.

Standing still, motionless... was Merit.

A few feet from the door, in my room.

Staring at the painting.

Uh oh.

Going as still as her, I tried to think of what to say or do. Vim had asked me to not let anyone see this one. He had specially asked me to try and not let anyone see it and...

Merit suddenly took a deep breath, and all of my worry shattered and turned into concern as I watched my friend start to cry.

“Um...” I hesitated as Merit stepped forward, her eyes never left the painting even as they filled with tears. Even as her face scrunched up.

A few moments passed as Merit stared up at the painting. The easel wasn't that tall, but it was still taller than her. Luckily she had come alone... wait... sometimes Sofia came here with her...

Stepping past her and the easel, I did my best to not stare too much at Merit's face. It was wrought with emotion, which was strange since she was crying so quietly.

Going to the door, I peered around the door frame to make sure no one else was nearby. Once I was sure, I went ahead and closed the door.

With a small sigh I took off the cloak I had just put on. I held it on my arm as I stepped up next to Merit.

So she knew them too.

“I’m painting... those that were lost. In the fire, in Ruvindale,” I explained to her.

Merit shifted, and her head turned a little. As if to look at me... but her eyes never left the painting. “The fire...” she whispered.

I nodded. “I spent several months at the Sleepy Artist... as you know. I saw a lot of the paintings there, while I was there. And... well...” I stopped talking as I realized I wasn’t sure exactly what to say.

After all maybe this was not something I should be doing.

To me it made sense. I could remember those paintings in detail. I had the skill to paint them.

So I should.

But maybe...

“Did you know them?” Merit asked me.

“Rungle and Stumble? No. Vim had to tell me their names,” I said softly.

Merit took another deep breath. I heard her shiver as she did. “I see.”

I gulped softly, and dared a glance at her. She was still crying.

This was strange.

Somehow I felt more uncomfortable than even when Vim had been crying. Though he had not cried as hard as she was now... she seemed like she was a hairsbreadth from actually breaking. If she began sobbing I'd not be shocked at all.

Then of course I'd probably start crying too...

“I never saw this painting,” Merit whispered.

“Oh...” I awkwardly flinched. I should be able to say more than that, come on Renn!

“Rungle was a good man. Pirta wasn’t the smartest but she was a good friend, too,” Merit said.

Pirta... Maybe the mother?

It was interesting to hear the same thing from her that Vim had mentioned, though. He had also said that Rungle had been a good man.

A few moments passed in silence as Merit studied the painting. She kept crying, but had a smile on her face as she did... So I didn’t worry for her too much.

While Merit studied the painting, I stared at the spot near the young girl’s head. In her hair, there was a tuft. One I didn’t think I had painted properly. I could see it in my head, when I brought the memory of the painting up... but something about the swirls in her short hair were off to me. Maybe they didn’t go to the left, but to the right...

“What do you plan on doing with this? When it’s time for you to leave?” Merit asked suddenly.

“Huh...? Oh... Uh...” That was a very good question... it was far too big to carry, even if I wrapped the canvas up...

“Can I have it?” Merit turned to look at me.

I stood up straighter, and wasn't sure what to say.

Merit smiled at me, and then blinked a few times... and I noticed the dryer eyes after she squeezed out her last few tears. "I'll hang it up in my room. To keep it safe," she said.

"Oh... I... I'd be okay with that, I think. I'll have to ask Vim though, Merit. I'll be honest I actually haven't thought about what to do with the things I paint once I'm done with them," I said.

I should have. It was so obvious. I wanted to replace what had been burnt... to preserve the memories. Yet how could I do that while on the road?

"I can tell. I'd say maybe hang it downstairs, but..." Merit sighed, and then shook her head. "They were my friends. Not theirs," Merit finished.

Oh...?

Merit frowned, then looked away and began to wipe her face off with her forearms. "Let's go. Or else I'll stand here all night crying," she said.

"Right..." I nodded, and wasn't sure what to feel about that. Should I feel bad, or take that as a compliment?

“Vim told you not to let anyone see it, didn’t he?” Merit asked as she headed for the door.

I nodded as I went to putting the cloak back on.

“Of course he did. He’s gentle that way...” Merit paused before the door, with her hand on the handle. She glanced past me to the painting. I waited patiently as she studied it for a moment once more.

“It’s finished, Merit... so if he says yes you can have it now,” I said gently.

“Hm... You paint really well. Is that the only one? Other than that village you painted?” Merit asked.

“So far yes. I have another blank canvas I plan on using soon, for another,” I said with a gesture to it. It was near the bed.

“Who are you painting next?” she asked.

“Honestly Merit... I don’t really know any of the people I plan on painting. I hadn’t even known their names, until Vim saw it a few weeks ago,” I said.

“I see. That makes sense. Let me know when you start the next one. Can I watch?” Merit asked as she opened the door.

"I... I don't see why not. Since you know now, anyway," I said with a small laugh.

"You shouldn't be so intent on keeping secrets, Renn. I know you want to be like Vim, but really," Merit said with a sigh.

Leaving my room, I chuckled as I closed the door behind me. "Rather than secrets, I was just hoping no one would notice it so I didn't have to worry about it," I said honestly.

"That's one way to live, I guess! Usually backfires often, though," Merit gave me a kind warning, but the way she was talking told me it was far from serious. She was just making small talk, mostly.

"Is it strange, Merit? That I... What I'm doing?" I asked her.

"You're very strange Renn. You wish to join Vim. You're even attracted to him, for crying out loud! Painting... or well, doing what you're doing isn't that strange compared to your fascination with Vim. So don't worry about it. If anything I'd personally say it's very sweet of you," Merit said.

"He is a little plain, but he's not that bad," I said as we rounded a corner.

Merit grinned as she let loose a laugh. It sounded good, better than usual. More real.

Maybe crying earlier made her more emotional.

“Should we be leaving even though Fly will be showing up soon?” I asked.

“Brandy and the rest will take care of her, it’s fine. Plus we won’t be too long,” Merit said.

I nodded as we reached the metal doors that protected the Society Housing area. Merit easily opened the door, and I closed it behind us.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“The Sunken Barrel,” Merit said.

“Oh?” I couldn’t help but grow excited.

“You’ve been there already?” Merit asked as we headed for the stairs.

“No. But Reatti’s told me of it. She said a lot of us go there, that the food is good and the owners are members,” I said.

“Well, quasi-members. Something similar to your eastern girl,” Merit said.

“Right,” I nodded. Yes. Some members didn’t see the human members as actual members.

It was interesting that Merit was one of them.

But maybe not, at the same time.

Maybe it was her age.

It did seem the older one was the more that they hated the humans...

But that didn’t explain Vim, if that was the case.

Fly didn’t seem to like humans at all, but that was likely thanks to her circumstances.

She was too inhuman to blend in with them... so of course they’d be seen as enemies. Real ones.

“Shouldn’t we wait until Vim gets back?” I asked as we headed down the stairs towards the main lobby, the one between the bank and depot.

“He’s the one we’re going to see, Renn,” Merit said as she glanced at me. She was walking down the stairs in front of me, so it was a little odd to see her look up at me the way she did. She just tilted her head back, as if she was staring up at the sky. Hopefully she didn’t trip.

Merit easily made it to the bottom of the stairs without a fumble, and I smiled down at her. “Still... he asked me to stay, with you and the rest just in case, while he’s gone...” I said.

“I’m sure he did. We’ll not be long. And the Sunken Barrel isn’t far. It’s only two streets over,” she said.

“Okay...” I nodded. I wasn’t sure if I really liked the idea of leaving the Society so defenseless... but...

Well...

Even if I was here, it wasn’t really like it was defended anyway.

I was no Vim. Not yet, at least.

And Merit...

A few of the human workers waved at us as we left, but none of the Societies members were in the main lobby. Were they at this sunken barrel place too?

Glancing at the very young looking girl I was walking next to as we crossed the street, I wondered if Merit really was as strong as I thought she was.

It was so hard to believe, based off appearance alone. She barely stood half my height, and looked scrawny enough to weigh even less than half than I did.

Not that I'd say such a thing, of course. Not aloud. And least of all to her.

"Do you plan on painting a lot of... them? Renn?" Merit asked as we rounded a corner, heading deeper into the city.

"As many as I can remember, yes."

"I see. You have very good memory. You paint well. You even got Stumble's freckles right, I think," Merit said.

Oh? She meant the few under her eyes, near her nose. A few dozen of them, though I wasn't sure if I really got them as right as she was saying I did.

How could one really remember such minute details? On people...

Wait. Merit said she never saw that painting. Which meant she was comparing that painting to her memories. Of the people themselves, not a painting of them.

“You said you never saw that painting before, Merit?” I asked her.

She nodded. “I spent most of my life in the south, after joining the Society. I... well... I tried to help the Society create a kingdom, during the war. So although I met many of our members, especially those from that time period, I didn’t spend much time this far north so never saw such things. I’ve only ever been to the Cathedral twice, you know?” Merit explained.

“Really?” My mind whirled as I absorbed the information.

A kingdom.

Vim had mentioned such things before.

So she had been a part of that...

“See? Not far at all,” Merit pointed in front of us, and I groaned.

Not far indeed. I had barely noticed. Down the street, across from us, was a well lit building. It had people coming and going from it, and it seemed they were...

"I see," I understood the place's namesake as we approached the sunken stairwell. The entrance was a large staircase, which headed into the ground... to what was undoubtedly the basement of the building.

Merit and I walked around a small group of men, who were deep in conversation, and entered the Sunken Barrel. As we descended into the underground restaurant, I took note of the wooden planks that made up... well...

Nearly everything. The floor. The walls. The ceiling. The oddest part was it all looked... old. Too old. Most of this city was stone. A pretty, clean, stone... yet here was a wooden building. One I was used to. Or well, more used to, than the normal ones here in Lumen.

It smelled like food and wine, and there was a thick smell of burning candles. Scented ones... ones that stunk a little, but was better than the stink of ale.

"Aye, Merit!" A portly man greeted us at the bottom of the stairwell. He was big enough to nearly block the large double-doors that led into the building.

"Shalt. Lose some weight already," Merit said to the man as we passed him.

"As soon as you grow an inch, I will!" he laughed as I nodded in greeting to him. He nodded back, and quickly looked away as to address and greet some people who had followed us down the stairs.

The world became noisy as we entered the establishment, and I quickly felt as if I had returned to the northern lands.

People were all over. Most seated at square tables, situated on top of wooden barrels, while the rest were lined up along the bars, which seemed to line nearly the whole place. It looked as if there were three separated bars, one for each wall.

“Hm... do you see him Renn?” Merit asked as we paused a moment.

Oh. Right. She was too short to look around well enough... Although most people were sitting, thanks to her height they may as well be standing.

Quickly looking around, I stopped studying the place as to find Vim quickly.

At first I didn't, but then I noticed a familiar movement. A lifted hand, waving at us.

“In the corner, that way,” I said to Merit.

She nodded and hurried towards Vim. She seemed to know her way around, based on the way she understood. Maybe Vim always sat in that corner. Wouldn't surprise me... Vim was a man of habit.

Wading through the tables, I noticed that there were a lot of barrel themed things here. Not just the tables, but some of the chairs were fashioned out of old barrels too. The lamps were designed like little lit up barrels, and there were barrel trash bins all over.

“You ordered already?” Merit complained as we reached Vim and his table. He sat alone, but the table was already littered with plates and cups. Probably enough for more than just us three... were more coming?

I couldn't help but smile at Merit as she grumbled a complaint while she climbed up on one of the chairs. Like usual, she chose the biggest and tallest one to use. Even though there were three available, and one would have been nearly perfect height for her.

Sitting next to her, across from Vim, I glanced around the table for...

Yes. There. I couldn't help but smile as I reached over to grab the delicious fruity drink.

It was in a large cup, and I could tell by how cold it was and the lack of anything floating on the top of the liquid's surface that it was fresh. Vim had likely ordered the food shortly before we arrived.

“Sometimes I hate it when you remind me how long we've known one another,” Merit complained as she too grabbed a drink.

Vim didn't seem too bothered by her words as he watched Merit take a drink and pull a plate of bread closer to her.

“Do you mean he got you what you wanted?” I asked after taking a nice long drink of what I had wanted.

“Yes. Makes me realize how simple I am,” Merit said as she started to stuff her mouth with bread.

Simple... did she mean that she enjoyed the simple meals, or that she only really ever ordered the same things so it was easy for Vim to remember her preferred dishes?

“If that’s the case I’m simple too,” I said as I went to take another drink.

“You’re talking as if this place has more than a handful of dishes, Merit. Really,” Vim sighed as he shook his head.

“Shush. Did you get it?” Merit asked with a mouthful.

The seriousness in her voice made me pause for a moment. If not for the mouth full of bread one would think she was upset.

Without a word, or a nod, Vim pulled something out from beneath the table. Maybe it had been on his lap...? It was small, and black and...

“A book?” I asked as I watched him hold it out to Merit over the table.

I startled when Merit shot upward, making the table shake and plates clatter as she childishly grabbed the book out of Vim's hand.

"Haha!" Merit took the book with a huge smirk. She was full of glee as she hurriedly opened the book to a random page, and seemed to read something real quick. After only a glance, she shut the book quickly and then closed her eyes and shivered violently.

"Merit?" I worried for my odd friend. So many emotions so quickly were not normal for her.

"Thirty two years!" Merit sounded as if she was about to cry again.

"Thirty two years...?" I asked worriedly. What was wrong?

"Since the last one. The last release," Vim said as he picked up a knife and fork, to go about cutting some meat.

"Release...?" What did he mean?

"It's nearly twice as big as the last one, too! Oh what joy!" Merit squeezed the book close to her chest, squirming in joy. She looked like a child more than ever, yet... there was a strange hint of maturity in the way she was smiling.

“A member of ours writes stories. They’re popular among the Society,” Vim said as he finished cutting up his meat and began to eat.

Stories! Suddenly I too was very interested in the small black book Merit was holding close.

Yes. I’d protect it with such fervor too.

“This is the fourth installment of this series. The second series, so far,” Merit happily told me.

“Wow...” I tried to think of it. Thirty odd years for the fourth... so...

Hundreds of years?

I couldn’t imagine waiting that long. But maybe that was what made it so good... “Wait, is that what Brandy wanted you to get?” I asked Vim.

He smiled and nodded. “She didn’t want you to know so she could read it first, Renn. She’s selfish like that,” Vim said.

“Indeed! But I had a favor in stock, haha,” Merit giggled happily as she looked at the book, studying its cover and spine closely... there didn’t look to be anything special about the black leather, but maybe there was something unique about it.

“Did Fly show up before you left?” Vim asked after swallowing a bite.

I shook my head as I watched Merit groan while doing her best to not open the book and start reading it. It looked as if it was taking great effort for her not to open the book and begin reading here and now.

“I don’t get it either, Renn. They’re not even that good,” Vim said, likely noticing the amazement upon my expression as I stared at Merit.

“Huh...?” I flinched as Merit glared at Vim, losing her happy smile.

“Shut your filthy mouth,” she scorned him, the malice was thick enough in her voice even people nearby at other tables turned to look at us.

I ignored the odd looks as Merit nearly growled at Vim, who smirked absentmindedly as he ate.

“So... is the uh...” What did they call themselves...? “Authors? Is the author here in Lumen?” I asked. I’d like to meet someone who wrote books.

“No. Only Vim knows who they are. He’s a jerk,” Merit said as she started to move cups and plates away from her, as if afraid the book was going to get dirty or ruined if she didn’t.

“Rude,” Vim said.

“You are! He says there are only two series... but I’ve heard the rumors. You’re a bastard, Vim,” Merit said.

He frowned, which made me frown too. “Rumors?”

She nodded quickly as she pulled the book even closer to her chest, as if to shield it from Vim’s eyes. “There are more books out there, I hear. He’s either hiding them or destroyed them, because he’s a cold bastard,” Merit said.

Glancing at Vim, in search of some honesty or at least some understanding of her words... Vim only shrugged. “They think because I don’t like them, I’ve allowed some to get lost to time or something. Which is ridiculous. Just because I don’t like them doesn’t mean I’d destroy them. I’m not the church,” Vim said.

“Ah... right? He believes in free will... I don’t think Vim would destroy books,” I said.

“He destroyed those paintings, didn’t he?” Merit asked me.

My heart nearly stopped.

He had.

Vim sighed as I joined Merit in her glaring.

We glared at him together, until a waitress walked by. She must have known Vim and Merit for they exchanged pleasantries as she did so. Plus she didn't ask if we needed anything, implying she knew Vim would ask if we did.

"Hmph. Though I suppose I shouldn't badmouth you too much. You did bring this, and honor your promise, at least," Merit then said.

"I keep the ones I can," Vim said.

"Promise?" I asked him.

He nodded. "An old one. What... you said thirty two years? So almost thirty years, then. Please don't ask for interest," Vim said.

Merit chuckled as she glanced at the book in her hands. She smiled warmly at it.

“Why not read it?” I asked. Waiting that long... I’d have opened it the moment I got my hands on it.

“Shut your mouth. This is precious, Renn. It needs to be savored. Treasured. Plus...” Merit’s face contorted a little. As if she wasn’t sure if she wanted to glare at me, or smile.

“She’s too kind to be the first to read it,” Vim said after a moment.

“Oh? Why? It doesn’t look that big, shouldn’t take too long,” I said. I bet she could nearly finish it by the time we finished eating.

“Everyone will want to read it, Renn,” Merit said softly.

“Hm...” Vim nodded.

“Why not read it together then?” I asked. That sounded wonderful. One person could read it aloud, and everyone could sit and listen together... the thought of it was fascinating.

“We do. But only after everyone has a chance to read it alone,” Merit said.

“I see...” I frowned at her answer.

Vim put his knife down, seemingly done with his meat. There were only a few pieces left. "Everyone enjoys books in their own ways, Renn. Do we have the first volume of the series here, Merit?" Vim asked.

"Just the first and third. Brandy took the second to the Bell Church a few years ago and we haven't got it back yet," Merit said.

Sitting silently as Vim and Merit talked about who has what books, and when the last time Merit had seen them... I couldn't help but smile at them.

How neat. They were talking about something so precious, yet shared willingly and openly with the whole Society.

"Why not make copies?" I asked after a moment.

"They think it's rude to the author. But that's dumb," Vim said.

"It's not! You're just..." Merit was about to lambast Vim with profanities, but went quiet as a nearby empty table grew full. People were sitting down.

Seemed most of the place was getting busy. But it was now dinner time, so it made sense.

“I’ll get you the first one, Renn. I think Magda has it now. You’ll suffer having the third and fourth in reach, but not the second... but it’s better than nothing!” Merit told me.

“Thanks,” I nodded and looked forward to it. Hopefully I enjoyed it just as much as she seemed to.

“And so!” Merit nodded as she then turned and got off her chair... seemingly as to leave.

“Huh?” I sat up, and wondered if she meant we really were going to leave now... but...

Glancing at the table of food, and my cup which was still half full...

“Take the cup, Renn,” Vim said gently.

“But...” I glanced at a nearby plate of honey soaked ham. It smelled delicious.

“Come on! I said we’d not be long, remember?” Merit ushered me to hurry, but I knew she only wanted to get back quickly so she could get to reading.

I sighed and nodded, but not before grabbing a few pieces of bread from the plate Merit had been eating from.

The bread was still warm, which was good... but also made me sad that I wouldn't get to enjoy the rest.

"See you later," Vim said with a light wave.

"Not coming?" I asked as Merit turned and headed for the exit.

He shook his head. "I'll be done in a minute. I want to talk to the owner before I go," he said.

Owner of the restaurant... right. They were members. And unlike Merit and the others, Vim saw the humans as genuine members too.

"Alright..." I nodded and turned, to follow Merit.

She was gone, for a moment... until I found her again. She was now near the door, impatiently waiting for me.

"She's quick when she has a purpose," Vim said with a chuckle.

"I see that," I said as I hurried to catch up.

It took a little longer to get out of the place than it did to get in, thanks to it being fuller. In fact the stairwell was so crowded that Merit and I had to nearly hug the wall and handrail, thanks to how many people were waiting in line.

“Oh I can’t wait... The last one ended so painfully, you know,” Merit mumbled as we headed out onto the street.

“I’m sure this one will be worth the wait,” I said to her.

“For sure! The weight of it alone tells me how great it will be! It weighs more than gold!” Merit happily lifted the book, enthralled in it as if it was a beautiful moon.

She looked beautiful with that happy smile on her face. I’d have to thank Vim later. And the author of this supposed book.

I had made her cry earlier, so this was definitely...

“I swear. Ending on a death is just so rude. I mean really, who does that! And...!” Merit began to rant about the last book, which I somewhat tried to ignore... since she seemed to forget I hadn’t read any of them yet.

And because of me doing my best to not pay attention... I only noticed once it was too late.

Merit didn't notice either. Out of the corner of my eye, as the sack was being put over my head, I saw and heard Merit still blabbering on about the book. She was walking in front of me, and didn't see them come out from the alley to our right. From slightly behind us.

Although I hadn't noticed until they were already grabbing me... I still fought back. I still did my best. I swung my cup, with all of its precious fruity drink, and hit one of the men in the head. It cracked and broke upon impact. He stumbled... but the three others didn't falter. In fact my efforts to stop them from grabbing me only seemed to make them even more serious.

Taking a deep breath to shout for Merit's attention, and hopeful help, I just barely got it out before the sack covered my head fully... and something was wrapped around me. Rope, likely. It was wrapped quickly and tightly... tightly enough that even I couldn't fight it. So tight it hurt my tail.

I felt my hat slide off, but at the moment the last thing I cared about was being seen by anyone... as I was lifted off my feet.

Several hands held onto me, and even though I squirmed and tried to get free it was pointless.

Screaming, I heard Merit's voice. I heard shouting. But it was fading. Moving away.

I was being carried away.

Kidnapped.

And the pointy claws digging into me even through the thick sack, the stench of sewers, and the guttural growls of beasts told me exactly who my kidnappers were.

#### Chapter 174 Sewers Descent

“Honestly my daughter’s just... well...” Lana sighed as after she gave up trying to complain about her daughter.

“Some children are just... promiscuous,” I said as I poured the remainder of Renn’s fruity drink into my own cup. She had taken her cup, but had left behind the pitcher I had ordered for her.

Such a waste. I didn’t like it at all.

Lana smirked as she watched me fill my cup. “You’d think she’d run out of men, Vim. I don’t think I’ve seen the same man twice in months,” Lana said.

I nodded. That was a little much. “Least it’s only one at a time?” I suggested a way to think of her daughter’s activities in a good way.

“Don’t tell her that’s possible, please,” she groaned.

Chuckling at Lana’s attempt at keeping her discomfort at bay. She wasn’t succeeding too well, she looked genuinely worried.

“Though I’ll admit, it is funny. Your grandparents had been...” I frowned as I tried to remember what religion they had subscribed to. It hadn’t been the religion of the blind, nor the holy sisters...

“Don’t get me started. At least she does her job. But if you’ll forgive a mother for insulting her own blood, I’m really glad Stan is going to inherit the pub instead,” Lana said.

“Hm...” I nodded as I watched Lana glance to our right. To her son, who was taking orders from another table nearby. He had already come over to say hi to me earlier.

Really. What had been their religion? Maybe something from the west? I remember them wearing crosses, but they had been red in color...

“Still, we’ll be able to run this place for another few years, hopefully. Who knows maybe I’ll be able to work until my end like my mother? Used to think it was silly that she worked even until her death, but today I see the charm in it,” Lana said.

“Doing what you love is the only thing you should be doing, near you end,” I said.

She smiled. “Some would say to do it your whole life, not just near the end,” she said.

“One has duties. Life would be boring without some kind of struggle,” I said.

“Coming from you that’s quite a statement...” Lana whispered.

Was it?

Taking another drink, I felt my eyes get drawn to the entrance. Had I heard something?

For a small moment I saw nothing. People coming and going. The doorman, a large man, was talking to a pair of older humans. Likely new arrivals. Lana's son, Stan, was walking away from a large table and towards the eastern bar. Likely to drop off the platter of dirty plates and cups he was carrying.

What had I...?

Merit.

I stood as Merit ran into the Sunken Barrel. Her distraught face, with her white hair clinging to it thanks to blood, told me all I needed to know.

"Vim!" Lana shouted at me but I left her behind without warning. Before Merit could even shout for me I was next to her, about to bend down a little as to check on her. It looked like she had been hit on the head, thus the blood...

"They took her!" Merit shouted me.

Pausing a moment, I realized she really was hurt. Her quick shout had made some of the blood dripping down her face to splash around.

Renn.

She didn't need to say more, she and I hurried out of the place and up the stairs. People tried to move out of our way but were slow in doing so, caught off guard I bumped into one of the men I passed. I ignored the woman he had been with as she screamed in shock and upon reaching the street I hurriedly looked around.

It wasn't stormy anymore. No more rain. Yet it was damp. Cold. Dark.

And for some reason I couldn't smell Renn. Even though I felt as if I should be able to. Right now all I could smell was Merit's blood.

It smelled of the sea.

"This way!" Merit ran past me, down the road heading towards the Animalia Company. I kept myself calm as I followed her to an alley.

It wasn't empty. There was a man in it. Sprawled near a closed door.

Stepping up to the dead man, I studied the way the man's neck bent and his agape expression. Merit had broken his neck, and rather harshly too.

"They hit me over the head, and took Renn. They wrapped her in some kind of sack and..!" Merit spoke quickly, pointing down the alley. She sounded frustrated, but was keeping herself in enough control to let me know what happened.

"Fly's people," I said, and then sighed as I kicked the body over a little. He was wearing better clothes than Fly did, but they didn't fit him well... and not just because his body was distorted into odd ways thanks to his death. He had odd tumor looking things all over his body. They looked hard, and cancerous. Some were as large as my closed fist. Yet it wasn't them that told me he wasn't human. It was the man's ears. They were long, pointed and sharp. Much harder than the soft cartilage humans had in theirs.

"I let them take her, Vim!" Merit cried.

"Go to the Society. Warn everyone and take a head count. Lock it down," I ordered.

"Vim!" Merit stepped towards me, to argue.

"I'll not abandon her. I'll go get her back. After we verify the Society is fine," I said.

"I didn't come back to you just so you could waste time!" She shouted.

“You’re the one wasting time, Merit,” I said calmly as I stepped out a few feet into the street. Ignoring the people watching us from a distance, I bent down to pick up the small black book.

“Gah!” Merit turned away, hurrying down the street. People hurriedly moved to the other side of the street, as to stay out of her way.

Sighing at her, I glanced one last time to the dead man.

I had no time to handle his body. I’ll just have to deal with it later. Luckily his... tumors, would maybe excuse his ears and any other traits the humans found upon him. They’ll just think he was deformed or something.

“Come on Vim!” Merit shouted without looking behind her. She was nearly at the end of the street already.

Taking a deep breath, I noticed the weird smells. The smell of death, likely from the man in the alley. The stench of the sewers. Renn’s smell. Merit’s blood. The unique leather book in my hand.

It took a lot for me to turn away from the alley and follow after Merit. It was noticeably difficult, which worried me.

I not only shouldn’t worry over Renn more than the rest of the Society... but I also couldn’t afford to actually grow furious.

If I did then I'd not be gentle with her kidnappers, or Merit's attackers.

Running away from the alley, it didn't take long at all for Merit and I to hurry into the Society. Our hurried rush into the building, causing workers and customers alike to pause in what they were doing as to stare, told me the Society was fine.

Reatti was at the door's entrance. She stood upon our hurried entry, her eyes going wide.

"We were attacked," Merit said a little too loudly as she hurried over to Reatti.

Glancing around at those in the main lobby, I noted the many humans. Not just the workers, but the visitors. This was not the place to have such a conversation... even if it was clear that Merit was hurt, based off her appearance.

"Didn't Renn go with you?" Reatti asked worriedly.

Merit nodded harshly, and Reatti quickly looked over at me as I too approached her.

"Is Fly here?" I asked her.

Merit flinched as Reatti quickly understood my meaning.

Luckily Merit, although hurt, wasn't too far out of it. She was able to step forward and grab Reatti's arm, before she could run off.

"Merit!" Reatti nearly growled at the bleeding Merit, her face contorted into wrath.

Reatti tried to pull her arm free, but Merit's grip was firm. I knew the humans would find it odd that such a young girl could so easily keep a grown woman in place, especially when said young girl was so hurt.

"He didn't mean to kill the poor bird, Reatti," Merit said gently.

"But!" The Meerkat's shout had drawn more than just the gazes of those here. Her brother ran into the lobby from the hallway that led to the bank. His eyes were hard, and scanned the room as he approached.

He had heard his sister's tone. They were good at alerting each other, at least.

"I'm going to go get Renn back. Merit you handle the rest here," I said. If Brom was here like that then nothing was wrong here. At least not yet.

"You better! Get going!" Merit turned and shouted at me, even though she still hadn't released Reatti's arm yet.

Holding out the black book, Merit's face scrunched up at the sight of it. She took it, yet did so in a way that told me she was no longer interested in reading it. In fact she simply tossed it over to the nearby desk that Reatti had been sitting at.

Turning away as Brom hurried over, and I noticed Gerald appearing on the second floor. He was looking down at us, concerned.

So Fly was here.

Did she know?

I didn't have time to find out.

Leaving the building, I wasted no time. I ran across the street and to the next block over, the one that Renn had been taken in. I wasn't sure if they had gone straight into the sewers from the alley that they had taken her in, but it was a good bet that they had. Carrying a person in a sack, likely while said person was screaming and struggling, through town wasn't smart even for them.

Going to one of the large warehouse buildings, I rounded it and headed into the back alley. About half way to the next building, I came to a stop before a large grate. One built into the building rather than the alley itself.

Bending down, I pulled the iron bars off one by one. Until there was enough room that I could easily slide in.

Without any hesitation I crawled down into the rain drainage. It was dark. Damp. And I landed in ankle high water.

My landing in the drainage system made a loud echo, and I listened to it as it rolled along the square sewer. I noted that the echo ended quicker to my right than my left.

Which meant the right was a dead end, or something like it.

Hurrying to the left, I didn't care about the loud splashing sounds I made as I ran. I could feel that the center of the sewer was rounded lower than the rest of the ground. Meant to guide the water, and possibly let there be sections on the sides that one could walk along... but there was too much water down here. The water was flooding it seemed, thanks to all the rain.

Running through the sewer, I reached a turn. It went left and right, with the left having a slight decline in it.

Of course I had no idea the layout of the sewers... but I knew that they had been built to divert water as much as sewage. To the sea, especially.

Which meant as long as I followed the water, eventually I'd find a route downward... to the old city below.

As I ran I tried to pay attention for any hints of Fly's people. Usually people, even the nonhuman type, left traces. Scratches in the wall, either from a bored drawing or guidepost for their ally's. Yet the only things I found as I hurried through the sewers were wastewater, flooding tunnels, and blockages.

Pausing in front of a blocked off tunnel, I groaned as I watched the nasty water piling up. It'd not be long until the whole section I was in was underwater at this rate... especially if the storm picked back up, as I suspected it to do.

Lumen needed to clean them. Did they even know that half of their grates were blocked like this?

About to turn away, to find another route... I stopped.

The running water here was not as fast as the other places, thanks to the blocked drain... but that was the point, wasn't it?

Looking back at the blockage, I quickly saw what I hadn't upon my first glance.

The large pieces of wood. The way the wood and blocks were stacked and tied to the grate's iron bars.

"Done on purpose..." I said as I saw the handiwork of man, and not nature.

I wasn't too bothered by the waist high water pooling in front of the blocked drain... but I wasn't sure if this was the route I really wanted. Heading around, I used the location of the blocked drain as a center-point... and eventually found another blocked drain.

This one too looked blocked on purpose. And it too was leading in the same direction as the other had been.

"This is how they keep water out," I said, understanding.

Would explain the flooding too. Even though it had been raining constantly lately, the downpours hadn't been that bad. Nothing that such large drainage systems shouldn't be able to handle.

Hurrying down another tunnel, I slowed to a stop as I approached another drain. This one was blocked as well... but there was more than just wooden panels and large boxes being used.

Near the edge of the blockage, was a makeshift gate. One that even had things piled up in front of it, to let someone climb over it.

An entrance, if such a makeshift thing could be one. How did this stuff not fall apart during such storms? It looked so rickety...

Approaching the makeshift gate, I stepped up onto one of the boxes before it, out of the water, and looked in-between one of the panels. Past the iron bars that hid behind it... and down the dark tunnel beyond.

All I saw was more tunnel, and darkness... but I didn't need to study it long. Especially since there was a slight draft coming from the tunnel.

A draft that stunk horribly... and not just from the waste water.

This might not be their home, but it was definitely connected to it. Their stink was far too strong for it not to be.

Pulling on the makeshift gate, it wasn't hard to open it... in fact, it was too hard to open it without breaking it.

The thing cracked, a little loudly, as I moved it just enough to step through it.

Ignoring the broken gate, I had to crouch a little to get under the sawed off iron bars that they had removed to make their door.

Sighing as I entered the tunnel, I glanced at the floor. There was a small bit of water still, flowing down the drain. It wasn't just because I had broken it either; it seemed to be seeping through all the same.

Explained this stench. The seepage let enough in, and without the rest of the rainwater to wash it out the stunk only became worse.

Not that it mattered.

Heading deeper into the tunnel, I ignored the deep sense of urgency to rush forward. To find Renn, and save her.

I needed to, of course... but...

Sometimes one needed to force calm, even during chaos.

Otherwise one simply joined it.

Walking at a brisk pace, but not a run, I headed deeper into Fly's people's territory.

To find Renn.

To punish those who would kidnap and attack a member of our Society.

To do my job.

Hopefully Renn would forgive me once this was all finished.

Hopefully she'd be able to...

Since I won't.

Chapter 175 The Lost Ones

Landing harshly, I nearly yelped as a sharp pain ran up my tail.

It had broken in the fall.

Not fall. Toss. They hadn't just dropped me, but had actually thrown me to the ground.

I rolled mindlessly for a moment, eventually rolling onto my arms and stomach. Mostly since they were still bound together, and I did my best to not cry out as I hurriedly moved my tail as much as I could to a better position. Which was hard since I was still stuck inside this smelly sack.

Groaning, I regretted not fighting back harder as someone began untying the sack. Before I could blink away the tears in my eyes, the sack opened up around me, but only fell down to my waist. They had tied a rope around my arms and stomach, which held it in place.

Glaring at the people around me, I flinched thanks to the sudden horrid smell. Even through the pain and anger, the stink was strong enough to make me momentarily pause and want to complain as if it was the worst thing happening to me right now.

Focusing through the smell and pain... I looked around at the people standing near me. Men and women. Some looked human on first glance, while a few others barely looked human at all.

And I didn't need to see the dark stone ceiling and walls nearby to know we were in the sewer. The smell alone had told me that.

"She's like the master?" someone asked with a point at me.

"Fly said she smells just like the master," a woman behind a few others said. I couldn't see anything but her legs, thanks to the angle.

I smelled like the master... Fly had definitely mentioned that before. It was such a weird thing. Did it possibly mean the master was like me? A jaguar? Or was it something else? Maybe it was I was just clean, unlike them.

"She scrawny. She one killed Pulti?" a man asked. His voice was rough, and a glance told me he had something in his mouth... but I wasn't sure what. Was he chewing something? Maybe that's why he spoke like a child.

"And broke Frank's hands!" another shouted.

"Stop!" I shouted at them.

Only a few flinched. Oddly most of the ones who did were the men.

Shifting onto my knees, I sat upward and looked behind me. At the two men who stood not far from me.

They were the ones who had kidnapped me.

Both were taller than me, and likely Vim. One was... a thin man. I had not expected him to look as weak as he did, since I knew he was strong. I had felt his grip on my legs as he carried me here. I could feel the throbbing bruises forming on them already.

The other however looked as I had imagined him. Stocky, muscular... and more beast than man. His brow was furrowed, and not just because he was glaring at me. He had fur all over his face, and it was scraggly. It barely hid the huge jaw that jutted outward oddly, with pointed teeth and fangs. He looked like some kind of dog. His hands were likewise covered in fur, and it looked like he had large claws, which were what I had felt as well.

"My name is Renn. I'm a member of the Society," I spoke slowly as I tried to study my situation.

Honestly it didn't look good. They were all glaring at me rather openly, and none looked willing to hear anything I had to say.

"The Society?" a dirty woman stepped forward out from the shadows behind some men. Were more people here than I thought at first? Or were people just arriving? Called here by the noise and shouting?

I nodded briskly as I tried to fumble with the ropes wrapped around my arms. Now that I wasn't being manhandled, and a little calmer, I could see how I could get free. I just needed to wiggle enough until the sack made enough room for me to just slip an arm out, then I could get the other out... then the rope should just slide off completely.

"I think Klamp is dead, Molly," the tall man who had helped kidnap me said.

"What...?" A woman nearby, presumably Molly, turned quickly in shock as to glare at the tall man.

He nodded briskly. "There was a little girl with her. She killed him," he said.

Merit.

"You...!" Molly stepped forward towards him. "I warned you! I told you!" she screamed.

The tall man flinched and looked away. As if in shame. And that shame quickly turned into fear and worry as she began to hit him. He was so tall she could barely hit him in the jaw, yet he began to crouch and scrunch up which gave her the ability to let her fists connect cleanly. He tried to step away as he raised his hands to protect himself, but she didn't seem to care where she was hitting. She was just furious.

The sudden violence was oddly not too surprising to me. But that might just be because I had just been kidnapped, and my tail was hurting bad enough to make me not care much just yet.

Did these people not realize how long it took tails to heal? Why did it have to be my tail? Fingers, arms and legs healed quickly but it always seemed to take forever for my tail to heal and...

“You idiots! Klamp! You!” Molly continued to scream hectically at the man, and I noticed the way the onlookers were not only staring in fear... but also growing in number.

A quick look around showed four more people had shown up. Another appeared from a hallway as well. Just how many people were here? And why did it seem so many of them looked more human than not?

A few were like the dog looking man who had kidnapped me... but the rest seemed to be more human looking than myself. Several didn't even look anything but human, telling me their non-human features were either not readily visible or...

Or...

An odd feeling filled me as I realized some of them were very likely normal humans. After all... why wouldn't there be some here too? Fly had never actually said they didn't have humans living with them too, as we did. That would explain a lot... After all, originally Fly had thought Vim and I were the only non-humans in our group.

It'd make a lot of sense, too. Especially since the homeless humans would need somewhere to live too.

An odd sound of something breaking drew my attention back to Molly and the man she was...

I flinched as I watched her stomp on the tall man's head. Again. And again. Her merciless beating had forced him to the ground, and he was curled up and doing all he could to protect himself... and failing horribly at it. Her stomps had a horrible wet sound to them as she crushed his head.

Was she killing him...? Why wasn't anyone stopping her?

If she was going to kill him for simply telling her that this Klamp was dead... what would she be willing to do to me, after?

"Someone stop her. She'll kill him," a man said, though sounded as if he really didn't care if she did kill him or not.

"Hmhm," my other kidnapper nodded, and stepped forward. Molly didn't pay attention to him at all, even as he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her away.

"You fools!" Molly screamed as she got one last kick in before being pulled away. She squirmed in the dog man's grip, but didn't seem to fight it too much.

"This is her?" a new voice entered the room. Everyone turned to look at it, which made me do the same.

Looking up at a pair of red eyes, I held the woman's cold gaze as she studied me. She had antler looking horns on the side of her head, which she had tied her long hair to in various places as if they were ornaments. She was dressed in familiar Lumen attire, and looked much cleaner than most of others here.

“She killed Klamp!” Molly shouted, still being held back by the dog man.

“Actually he said a child killed him, not her,” another noted.

“Why were they unhurt if she killed Klamp though?” One of the women who spoke earlier asked.

“Well Yams is hurt now,” another woman scoffed. The tall scrawny man groaned, and curled up more over on the floor. Was that blood pooling beneath him?

A few coughed some laughs, but others flinched and groaned in worry. Whispers began to fill the room, and I felt the rope around my arms and waist go slack.

I had gotten the sack out from under it, so now there was room and...

The antler horned woman raised a hand, causing the whole room to go silent as I got an arm free.

They could all see that I was freeing myself, but no one made a move to stop me... so I slowly undid the rest and freed myself. If they weren't going to stop me then there was no reason to stay tied up.

Slowly standing, I did my best to not let anyone see me flinch when I felt another wave of pain shoot up through my tail and then up my spine.

It was definitely broken.

Bastards.

“Who are you?” the antler woman asked me as I took a small breath and released it upon standing up.

“Renn,” I said.

“I am Aunt. Did you kill Klamp?” she asked.

Aunt...? Maybe it was a play on her antlers or something.

“No. They forced that sack over me, I have no idea what happened,” I said honestly with a point to it. It was near my feet, but honestly I wanted to kick it away.

Aunt looked past me, to the dog man who was still holding Molly... even though she had calmed down completely. He nodded quickly. “She probably didn’t see anything, Aunt,” he said.

“Why did he die then?” Aunt asked him. I noticed the way she glared at him... like a mother scorning a child.

Was she their master?

“There was a little girl with her... we thought it was just a child, so I didn’t realize how dangerous she was. She hit Klamp only once, when Yams and I were tying her up,” he said.

“You’re sure Klamp is dead?” Aunt asked.

He nodded firmly.

“Is that child dead too?” Aunt asked.

I glanced at the dog man and was a little relieved to see him shake his head. “We ran away,” was all he said.

Aunt sighed, and a few people stepped forward... as if they wanted to join the conversation. But they didn’t. One even stepped back away, as if in shame that they had even moved in the first place.

“Why are you all doing this? We’ve done nothing to any of you,” I asked.

The woman with antlers studied me for a moment, and I wondered if Vim would find her pretty. She wasn't... anything too special, but the way she embraced her antlers and tied her hair to them made her seem pretty to me. Under another situation I'd probably look forward to being her friend.

"You've now killed two of us. Plus you ruined Frank's hands. He can't work anymore, because of you," Aunt said calmly.

"Because you attacked us first. We didn't even know any of you were down here until that moment," I tried to reason.

"Of course you didn't. No one ever notices those they don't care about," Aunt said with a tiny smile.

I frowned at her comment, and the way she was smirking at me as if she found me funny.

"Let me go. Don't let this..." I hesitated and wondered if it was already too late. "Don't let this get worse, please," I begged her.

Something told me it was too late, but that didn't mean I shouldn't try.

"Worse...?" Aunt frowned at me, and I realized that they had no idea. How could they?

"If you don't let me go... if you keep attacking our members, Vim will come," I said to her.

Her frown deepened. "Vim?"

"Our protector. Please... don't do anything rash. If anything we should all be working together, to survive. To protect each other. We shouldn't be enemies," I said.

A long moment of silence followed my words, and it was obvious how strange they found me. Out of the twenty odd people here, less than a handful seemed to be doing anything but shaking their heads and smiling at me.

"You tried to take our children," Aunt said.

I shook my head. "We wouldn't do that. We invited Fly to join our Society... just as we'd invite any of you, given the chance," I said firmly.

"So you admit it then?" Aunt asked me with a blink of her eyes.

"Admit what?" I asked back.

"That you'd steal from us," she said plainly.

“Steal what...? We’ve taken nothing from you.” At least... not that I knew of.

“Lives, woman,” Aunt then said.

Lives...

She meant more than just those that Vim and Merit had taken, likely. And more too than Frank, the man whose hands Vim had broken.

Aunt likely meant Fly. And those we were trying to recruit through her. Lives they owned, that we were trying to take from them.

Aunt looked away, to a man on her left. “Have everyone gather at the dinner table,” Aunt said.

Dinner table?

The man nodded, and glanced one last time at me before turning around and leaving the room. I noted the hallway he went down.

Across the hall was another hallway. As far as I could tell there hadn't been anyone coming from that one since I had been tossed onto the floor. In fact based off its positioning and my own, it was likely the one that they had carried me through.

That would be the one I'd head for, then.

"When Fly gets back, secure her as well," Aunt then said.

Something deep within me shifted. It kind of felt like when I got sick in the stomach, but it wasn't.

"Don't hurt her," I said to her.

Aunt looked at me. "You're the one who has hurt her. You've led her astray. You lost her to us," Aunt said.

"You lost her yourself. By feeding her friend to a monster," I said.

My ears didn't let me miss the ones in the room who perked up at my words. Especially the two women whose breath had been caught, in shock.

Aunt's face contorted into anger, and I stood up firmer as she stepped towards me a single step. She lowered her head, and I realized that some of her antlers were... well...

Sharp.

“Spoken like one who has never suffered. But don’t worry. You’ll learn, before you fade into memory. As all should,” Aunt said.

“Do you really have no idea what is going on here? If you don’t stop now... you and everyone here will suffer. Many lives will be lost,” I said.

Aunt scoffed at me. “By whose hand? Yours? I think not.”

I shook my head and wondered if there was any way I could properly explain it... but I knew I couldn’t.

After all, it was impossible.

No one could explain Vim. He was something beyond reason, especially so to those who have never seen it.

I’ve seen it yet I couldn’t believe it. I still questioned it.

Turning a little, I studied those around me. Most were far enough away that I was sure I could get through. The hallway I had in mind of escaping to had only one single woman between me and it. She was old too; maybe not even a non-human. She looked as frail as any normal old woman. She was dressed in similar attire that Fly wore, patched old clothes... and was staring at me with an odd look.

"Let me go. Please. If you let me go we can still handle this properly, and no one else will have to get hurt," I said one last time.

"She's crazy," someone whispered.

No. They were.

Glancing at Yams, the scrawny man had gone silent... and still.

Was he dead? There was now a dark puddle around the man's head area... but I couldn't make out his head, thanks to how he had curled up.

No... the better question should be why did I pity the man who had just kidnapped me?

Molly was still being held by my other kidnapper, and didn't look bothered at all. She now looked calm and collected, as if she hadn't just beaten a man to death.

These people were calling me crazy? Seriously?

Maybe that was the insanity Vim and the others spoke of. The insanity of cannibalism. Molly didn't... look that weird... but her actions definitely proved she was a little weird.

"Well? Take her to the dinner table already," Aunt said with a point at me, dismissing me as if I was a loaf of bread.

"I'm leaving," I said, decisively.

"In a way," a woman said as she stepped towards me. I seized her up as she approached with a smile, and wondered what she was. Her general appearance was human enough, but she had a strangely shaped jaw and a lot more teeth than normal accompanied it.

Taking a deep breath, I shifted a little to firm my stance. I ignored the horrible pain my tail brought, simply from moving, and readied myself.

I'd not let them kill them. Nor would I let them stop me from leaving.

At least, I was going to do my best to do such things.

"Careful Yazdi," a man warned from right. A side glance told me it was an older man. One with only one arm.

“Let’s go, woman,” Yazdi reached out, as to grab me by the arm. Likely to lead me wherever they wanted me to go.

This dinner table could maybe be literal. Maybe Aunt was inviting me to dinner, as to talk... but I highly doubted it. And I wasn’t going to take the chance.

I stepped back and slapped her hand away.

Yazdi paused a moment, and I felt the room grow a little colder... but it was the cold realization that she was strong that really bothered me.

When I had smacked her hand away, I had felt the firmness in it. I had put a lot of force into that slap, yet her hand had barely budged.

“Good. I didn’t care about Klamp, but Pulti paid me homage. I’ll be taking it out on you, then,” Yazdi’s smile grew into a toothy grin as her eyes narrowed at me.

My gut churned as I realized why so many of our members had been so worried.

These people really were savages.

"I'll hurt you if you touch me," I warned her.

"I hope you do," Yazdi's grin went stiff, and then she attacked.

I sidestepped a quick fist. She had struck out at my face, and for half a moment I couldn't help but respect the woman's speed. I had almost failed to dodge it.

Yazdi was visibly shocked that I had dodged her blow, but she didn't let it faze her too long. She stepped forward and threw another punch a moment later.

Ducking this one, I had to step to the right so quick that I nearly stumbled thanks to the dropped sack and rope as Yazdi spun and tried to kick me in the stomach.

For a few moments there was nothing but my dodging of Yazdi's attacks... until I neared one of the other women. As I dodged a small charge from Yazdi, out of the corner of my eye I saw the woman we were now near step towards me. She approached quickly, and it was obvious she intended to join... and based off the way she clenched her fists it wasn't to come to my aid.

"Great," I huffed as I quickly realized I was going to have to resort to violence myself.

Yazdi stepped towards me, and shifted as to try and kick me in the side. Thanks to my earlier dodges, she didn't even bother trying to position herself safely. She left herself entirely exposed, allowing me to not just dodge her kick... but step forward, along her leg, and easily land a blow of my own.

Stepping into the attack, I put as much force as I could into it. I punched her right in the stomach, right below her rib cage.

It worried me at how much strength I had put into the blow, but at the same time I didn't hesitate. I couldn't afford to, after all.

Yazdi's eyes went wide, and she toppled over. She released a loud groan as she crumpled, falling to the ground.

Stepping away quickly, I back stepped towards the hallway I wanted to run into. For a tiny moment I stood there, staring at Yazdi who was holding her stomach, kneeling on the ground. The rest of the room was staring at Yazdi as well; even the woman who had stepped forward as to join the fight had paused to watch.

"Bastard," Yazdi groaned, and I heard the pain in her voice. My attack had connected well, so it had worked... but...

"Idiot," someone scoffed at Yazdi, and others chuckled in amusement. Even the humans seemed to smirk and laugh at her situation.

I didn't like the way they all jeered at her. As if this was all some kind of game.

I also didn't like how Yazdi was glaring at me either... She was in pain, and struggling to gather her strength...

But that look wasn't one of defeat or worry.

Either she was insane, or my attack only temporarily worked. Which was worrying, since I had put my all into it.

If she got up shortly and returned to attacking me, it meant the only way I'd be able to stop her would be to kill her. Since she would be too strong for me to do anything else.

Which also meant if others, like that woman who had intended to help Yazdi, also attacked me...

Yazdi coughed and then got a foot under her, and started to stand. She did so haphazardly and slowly... but her strength was returning.

Once the onlookers realized that she was fine, they all returned their attention to me.

"Get her already," Aunt said firmly.

Several people stepped forward, nodding.

Flinching, I turned and ran.

Hurrying into the hallway, I ran away as quickly as I could.

The dark hallway felt blurry as I ran through it, likely thanks to the dark color of the stone and my general condition. My head was fuzzy, thanks to the stench, and the pain in my tail was starting to become unbearable.

I noticed the obvious discomfort from my broken tail, but more so the issues it brought. When I turned a corner, I almost slipped and fell... and not because of the thin layer of water on the floor. My broken tail was throwing me off balance.

"Come on," I grumbled as I picked up my pace and focused.

The hallway was a long one, and every so often I ran past smaller hallways that diverged from it. As I ran I looked for a stairwell, or something like it... surely if I was underground, there would be stairs back up... right?

I needed to get out of here, not just before I got hurt or killed... but before the Society voted to let Vim let loose his wrath upon them.

Not that I believed there was any real chance of stopping it now... but...

My eyes grew watery as I realized it was happening again.

Because of me.

People were dying. Would die. Because of me.

Rounding another corner, I skidded to a stop and once again nearly fell down.

With a huff, I frowned at Yazdi, who stood alone in the hallway in front of me.

Had I rounded around or something? Although I had turned at a few corners I was sure I hadn't circled around completely... after all I had ran quite a distance.

Yazdi wasn't smiling, and she now had...

I studied the long black thing in her hand. It almost looked like a sword, but it wasn't. It was blunt, and round... yet it looked heavy.

Whatever it was, it was definitely intended to be used as a weapon.

Against me.

“Stop this,” I begged.

“But it hasn’t even started yet?” she said.

Taking a breath, I decided to just handle it. To face it, head on.

Stepping towards her as she stepped towards me, I chose my path of attack.

The black weapon was similar to a sword. She held it in her right hand, and it was about as long as the sword I trained with. It was far thicker, but I was able to treat it as a sword. I knew she’d attack as if it was a sword, swinging it at me like a club maybe, so my tactics would be similar to what I’ve been learning from Vim.

I’ll dodge her first swing. I was fast enough. I knew this already, from dodging her earlier. Then after dodging, before she could pull back and attack again, I’ll hit her.

This time I’ll strike her in the chest. A little harder. A little more angled.

A little more deadly.

“Think I’ll take your tail before handing you over. Master won’t notice it, and I could use a new blanket,” Yazdi spoke with a smirk, and I did my best to ignore her words. She was simply being cruel. Taunting me. Trying to unsettle me.

“Funny that you’re all the same,” I whispered as I got into position.

She either didn’t hear me, or care to respond, for she simply rushed towards me. She lifted her weapon upwards, and took a deep breath.

Stepping forward as well, I kept a keen eye on her and not the weapon. I paid attention to her footwork. The way her shoulders tensed. The way her head turned a little to the left.

Stepping to the right, the weapon she swung made a woosh sound as it went where my head had been. Before she could start pulling the weapon back up, or step away, I stepped forward again.

She was quick enough to clench her teeth, expecting the blow, but wasn’t quick enough to dodge or stop it. My fist connected firmly with her sternum. Right where the bones connected. The impact hurt my fist a little, she was a little boney.

The blow was solid, and she released all of her pent up breath through her clenched teeth because of it. She spat a cough, but I didn’t stop. I grabbed the forearm that held the weapon, and I twisted it just enough before smacking it with my other hand. Hitting her at the elbow joint, with it contorted out of place and with her trying to pull her arm free made it easy for it to break. It crunched loudly, and she let loose a tiny yell of pain as she dropped the weapon.

It clanked as it fell to the stone ground, telling me it was metal... then I pushed her away.

She stumbled backward, and slipped. She fell to the ground with a loud oomph.

Before even verifying it was over I turned to run away. There was no point to keep attacking her if she'd just lay there, and there was no point in waiting to make sure if she'd be fine or not.

I didn't care if she'd be fine, just as I didn't care to actually finish her off.

Stepping away, I only got three steps before something smacked me upside the head.

My vision blurred, and by the time my sight returned and I realized what actually had happened... I was on my knees.

My hands were wet. I blinked at the sight of a small layer of water beneath me, and wondered if the layer of still water had been there this whole time. I hadn't heard splashes, had I? Maybe I had...

"Idiot Yazdi. I warned you," a new voice rung in my ears, sounding louder than ever. As if they were shouting... but I knew they weren't. There wasn't even an echo.

"Shut up!" Yazdi spat at the new woman. I turned as I tried to get my feet back under me, as to stand up... but for some reason I was fumbling. My head throbbed as I barely got to my feet.

The new woman was one I hadn't seen yet. I couldn't remember her from the crowd earlier.

She was older... and had a rough looking face. She was snarling at me, but most of her expression seemed to be from the burn scars covering most of her forehead. Her hair was shorter, but it was thick enough to hide if her whole head was covered in those scars or not.

Rubbing the back of my head, I was very surprised to not feel more wetness. In fact my hair made my hand dryer, which was a good sign... maybe.

I took a deep breath and resisted the urge to run just yet. I was still wobbly on my feet.

"You're the one who got me in trouble, huh?" the new woman sounded happy for some reason, even though she was scowling at me. She had a similar black metal pipe in her hand. It wasn't the same one that Yazdi had; hers was lying a few feet away.

"And how did I do that, exactly?" I asked, even though I didn't really care for an answer.

"Because of you I have to beat that stupid bird. Do you know how hard it is not to kill her? A pain in the ass. Though I suppose now that doesn't matter anymore," she said as she lightly spun the black weapon in her hands.

My headache grew worse as it throbbed while my eyes narrowed at her. "You're the one who beat Fly?" I asked.

“Last few times at least,” she nodded with a smile.

Clenching my jaw, I ignored the weird pain that throbbed in the back of my head. Every time my heart thumped, I felt the weird pain in my ears. My human ones, not the ones on top of my head... which was weird.

Yazdi coughed, and groaned as she tried to stand. She stumbled thanks to having tried to use her broken arm as support against the wall. She must not have realized I had broken her elbow. “That bitch,” she cursed as she stared at her wonky arm.

“You’re fault,” the scarred woman said with a smile. She actually seemed to enjoy watching Yazdi struggling as she tried to stand up through the pain.

Where had she come from, actually...? There wasn’t any hallway nearby. Nor were there any places for her to have hidden away... there was nothing in the hallway, other than simple junk on the floor. Papers, trash... there was stuff I really didn’t want to think about, too. Nothing big enough to hide behind.

Only thing I could think of was that I was in much worse shape than I felt. Maybe I was panicking.

Taking a few breaths, I decided it was time to run away again. I still hurt, and felt wobbly, but I needed to get away before more people showed up.

“Let’s go already. I want to be the one to catch the bird when she gets back, so let’s get this over with,” the scarred woman stepped forward as to attack me. She didn’t even hesitate, seemingly confident.

So had Yazdi.

I didn't want to get hit in the back of the head again, so I decided to face her head on. I'd disable her like I did the other woman, and then run away.

About to take a stance, I blinked and suddenly she was in front of me. Within arm's reach.

Shoot! She was quick like Vim!

I curled up and raised my arms, to block the blow. I wasn't going to be able to dodge it.

The black pipe felt heavy. Far heavier than it should have, as she swung it up and then down as to hit me on the head. I covered my head with my arms, and wasn't surprised at all to feel the horrid pain of broken bones as the thing hit my forearms.

Flinching at the pain, I accepted it and then rolled my arms forward, alongside the force of her blow. It forced the bar downward, away from my head and face and to the ground. She stared into my eyes as I followed through after the diverting block, and I shot both of my hands upward towards her throat.

I could feel that my left arm was the worse of the two, but it didn't matter. I only needed to hit her once. I just needed to force my way through the pain, then escape.

All I needed to do was get to the surface. To get to Vim. After that I'd be...

Within a moment my hands were at her throat. Although I opened my hands as to grab her throat, I still struck out as if I had intended to simply hit her in the throat with balled fist. I grabbed her throat as much as I crushed it, and with all the strength I could muster... ever through the pain, I began to squeeze her throat.

Her throat wasn't that big. My hands circled most of it. My thumbs and fingers dug into it, a few went deep enough that I knew I was doing damage just from the squeeze alone... yet...

Yet she didn't even flinch.

She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came. Since no air could go in or out of the throat I was trying to crush. Yet still she didn't stop. She didn't let it bother her. She raised her weapon again, and before I did my best to turn a little as it was brought back down.

The black bar hit my right shoulder, and although it staggered me, I noticed it didn't hurt as badly as the first two blows had. She was acting as if my choking wasn't affecting her, but it was obvious it was. She wasn't able to gather enough strength.

"Kapli!" Yazdi shouted from behind her, but I didn't bother trying to look at her. Right now this woman was all that mattered.

Squeezing tighter, I ignored the woman's other hand as she reached out and grabbed the side of my face. She grabbed hair, my right human ear, and skin. I felt her sharp nails dig into my cheek, and tear at the back of my head.

"Ahh!" I shouted wordlessly as I put more force into my hands. I reeled up and pushed forward, making the woman step back a step.

She raised the bar again, and I groaned as I realized that was why she grabbed my head. To keep it in place.

I wasn't going to be able to do dodge this one.

And the effort to try and do so only ended up with her nails digging deeper into my face and head.

The bar thunked against my head, and the world fuzzed to black.

Wheezing, while unable to see anything... I still felt everything. I felt my head become heavy, and slunk downward... as if I was suddenly sleepy and falling asleep. I felt my tail go slack, even through the pain. I felt my knees buckle... and my hands...

"Sheesh!" Kapli wheezed, and I heard the huge intake of breath from above me.

Falling to the ground, I blinked wildly... and was glad that sight slowly returned. Albeit fuzzily and slowly... as if I was just waking up from a long slumber, I groaned and started to look upward.

Looking upward only showed me a knee. A knee that sent me backward, and caused me to close my eyes in pain once again.

Vim's calm voice filtered into the echoes of Yazdi and Kapli talking to one another. They were yelling at each other for some reason... yet all I heard was Vim.

He spoke calmly. As if we were together again. In the forest. Or on the roof. Sparring.

"You're strong Renn. But strength isn't everything," he said.

No. It obviously wasn't.

"Plus you're... well... Too nice, I guess. But that will change. Once you find a reason to fight, you see," Vim added.

Funny. I thought I had one.

"But that's why we're doing this. So hopefully when the day comes, you're good enough to at escape. Escape to me, that's all you need to do," Vim finished.

I tried Vim. I did.

I coughed, and suddenly Vim was gone. The dark, stinky, pain filled world returned... and I realized I was being dragged.

Sharp pains dug into my rear and lower back, and I realized my tail was being damaged. It was stuck below me, and I was being dragged roughly... so...

Rolling a little, I lifted my head just enough to look downward, towards my feet... One of them was being held by Kapli, who was dragging me behind her.

“Let me have the tail first, Kapli,” Yazdi was walking next to her, and glancing back at me. She was holding her arm and didn’t look very happy.

“Shut up! I should skin you, idiot!” Kapli swatted at her, which made Yazdi yelp and flinch away.

Blinking the blurry sight of the two arguing, I wondered what I should do now. My head was fuzzy. My body weak... Even if I got up and away from these two could I escape now?

Kapli pulled me out of a hallway, and I flinched in pain at the sudden brightness. A horrible throbbing ache thumped behind my eyes as I tried to look around. The world was now very bright, and my eyes blurred drunkenly. There looked as if there were dozens of little suns above me, all brighter than the last.

Voices filled my ears, and I didn't like how some sounded far away and slurred... since I could tell they weren't. There were people around me, staring down at me as I was dragged. Their blurry silhouettes looked funny.

"Let me go," I whispered.

"Sure," Kapli said.

Blinking at the oddly kind tone in her answer, I wondered why she had the sudden change of heart...

Then I felt it.

The ground was gone from beneath me. No longer scraping my back. My head wasn't burning from the bumps and knocks. My tail wasn't erupting in pain anymore, from being crushed and dragged.

And I could now feel the cold blood rolling down my head.

Blinking wildly, I tried to sit up or at least bring my arms up so they didn't dangle so helplessly... but couldn't. I stared at the blurry Kapli, who smirked at me... while being upside down.

She was holding me upward. By my ankle. Out over...

Looking up, which was actually down, I went cold inside as I saw the darkness beneath me.

A darkness that my damaged head and blurry eyes couldn't deny.

Some kind of pit maybe.

"One little bird won't be enough anyway... If you survive the fall, please scream for me," Kapli said... then she let me go.

Chapter 176 The Lost One

More than our kind lived down here.

Slowing my pace as I approached a pair of people... I forcefully calmed myself.

I had to. Since I was getting worried. It's been nearly half an hour since I had delved into this maze of drainage tunnels. Half an hour of running around like a fool without anything to show for it.

The stink of non-humans was everywhere down here, and it made it impossible to narrow down the source. It was likely that they've been down here for decades, based off the way their scents were so overbearing and stable. How'd none of us ever notice?

To top it off these blasted sewers and drainage systems were joined with the old city. They merged and melded with each other, creating a labyrinth. Only further complicating my search.

But I had finally found people.

Or well... humans, at least.

The two were sitting down next to each other, covered in pelts and blankets. They had a small fire burning in front of them, which had been what had let me find them. I had smelled the burning fish being cooked upon it.

Least I hoped those were fish. I tried not to look too closely at them, since they seemed a little oddly shaped.

“What...?” a man’s voice entered my ears as I slowly approached the two.

“Who?” a woman’s voice. She sounded scared.

The two hurriedly stood, and I realized I wasn’t going to need to keep my anger in check.

These two were human. And old. Too old to be down here, in fact.

“Who are you?” the man asked worriedly. He sounded more than scared... he sounded expectant. As if he already knew I was a threat, but wasn’t able to do anything about it.

“My name is Vim. I’ve come down here in search of a family member,” I told them.

The small fire casted deep shadows on their weathered faces, but upon my words I was able to see the worry drain from their faces. The two looked at one another, and I noted the sad realization on their faces.

I must not be the first to have come down here saying such a thing.

“I see... you’re probably looking for those people down below then,” the man said.

“Below?” I asked.

He nodded, and he gestured for the old woman to sit back down. She did so slowly, and not because she was still worried. She simply couldn’t move too quickly. The old man made sure to wrap her back up in the pelts and blankets, which I now noted were... well...

Lacking, to say the least. They weren’t just old, but thin. Too thin for down here, in this cold.

“If you’re alone, son, I recommend not going down there. There’s quite a few of them... and they’re not... well...” the old man coughed as he stepped away from the woman, who was now bundled up. He stepped towards me, putting himself between her and myself.

“What route do I take to get there?” I asked him.

He frowned at me, in worry. The kind that told me he had just decided I was going to die.

“If I tell you, you’ll also get lost,” he said softly.

“My life is not yours to risk, old man. Do not spend a moment to worry over it,” I said gently.

He blinked, and then quickly looked behind him. I couldn’t see her, thanks to him being between us... but I knew he had just looked at the woman. Maybe for conformation.

“You’re an odd one... how did you know I didn’t want your death on my hands?” he asked after looking at me for a moment.

“You’re not the first elder to warn me against acting foolish. I promise you; even if I perish it shall not be your fault. I will go down there, whether you tell me how or not. All you will do by informing me of their location is save me a little time. Nothing more. The result will not change,” I said.

The old man gulped, and I hoped I didn't say it too strangely. I could find them, given time... but Renn likely didn't have time. I needed to find them now.

"Just show him, Paul. Maybe he'll give you something for the trouble," the woman said lightly.

Before Paul could say anything I dug out a few coins. I didn't care their color or worth, and simply extended my hand to him.

"Damn..." Paul whispered at the sight of them, and I hoped it was just because of their value and not because I was forcing him to do something uncomfortable.

Paul shifted and then sighed. He nodded, and then pointed behind him. "This way, lad."

I nodded and stepped forward, to join him... but before I did I stepped over to the woman.

Bending down, I put the coins on the ground in front of her. Since she was so bundled up, she'd not be able to easily get her hand out as to take them from me.

"Thank you," she said, looking down at what was probably a fortune to her.

"Thank you," I said back, and then went to follow Paul.

He walked quickly, but not quick enough for my taste. But there was nothing I could do about it. Not only was he human... he was old.

"You're not part of their group?" I asked him.

"Gods no. Most of us aren't... really. But most don't have a choice. You either bow or die," he said as we walked down the dark hallway. The fire slowly stopped being loud as we walked. The popping and crackling of the fire replaced by the sound of wet footsteps.

"Are they cruel?" I asked him.

"No more than the rest of the world is," he said.

I nodded. That was an expected and standard viewpoint for one his age... and one in his position.

Rounding a corner, I noted the way he slowed a little each time we approached a new hallway.

He was worried about being seen or noticed. Likely by the ones he was leading me to.

It didn't take long for him to lead me to a small stairwell. It was dark, and looked broken more than not. Parts of the steps were worn down and shattered, likely from years of flooding taking its toll.

Paul pointed down the stairwell. "If you take this down all the way to the bottom floor, and then take a right you'll find them. Though... again... I suggest against it. If you go down there, son, you'll never come back up," Paul said with a stern voice. He sounded as if he was being cruel, but that was just his age. He was trying to be kind.

Stepping past Paul to the stairwell, I paused a moment and glanced at the old man. He looked defeated.

"When those coins run out, or it gets too cold, go to the Animalia Guild. Find a member and tell them that Vim sent you. They'll at least make sure you two are fed, and have somewhere warm to sleep when needed," I told him.

The old man's eyes went wide, and it was obvious he didn't know what to say.

Not waiting for the old man to find his nerve, I turned and headed down the stairs.

Hurrying down the small stairwell, I quickly realized the stink of not only non-humans... but something else was starting to grow thick in the air.

Stale air too.

It didn't take long to reach the bottom of the stairs. It had descended three levels, and sure enough the bottom of the stairwell led to a small hallway. One that led left or right.

Heading right, as Paul had told me to, I picked up my pace.

The stagnant air made it clear. This definitely was their territory. Not only was the scent of non-humans much thicker... there were now smells of proof. Proof of people, and the society they created around them.

Food being cooked. Beds and bedding. Bathrooms. Oil from lamps. Dirty clothing. And...

Slowing down, I approached a large room. One that was illuminated by fire, and had voices echoing from within.

Rolling a shoulder, I took a small breath as I exited the hallway and entered the camp of my enemies.

The room was large. Large enough for little buildings to have been made within it. Shacks, made of wood and leather strips, lined the walls. Some looked empty and dark, while others were lit up by lamps and had shadows dancing within. I counted seven small buildings, but could tell there were more out of sight. Some were made in such a way they actually went into other hallways... maybe they turned entire sections of hallways into homes?

There were a few people, but most were sitting at tables. Eating. Drinking. Talking amongst each other without a worry in the world.

Although the shacks, and the tables and other things here, were all made seemingly from scraps and debris... This place wasn't that dirty. It stunk, but only because there was no real ventilation. The air was stagnant, and full of old smells.

The people sitting at the closest table to me looked normal. At least, normal enough. A quick glance around didn't show any non-human individuals... but I could smell them clearly. They were here, or at the very least frequented this area.

"Hm? Who is that?" Someone finally noticed me, but I ignored them and the looks I got as I walked through the...

What was this? A camp? An enclave? A commune of some sorts?

Maybe a slum...?

"Wait!" I slowed as a small figure ran out from between two shacks. The young boy laughed as a girl about his age, but a little taller, chased after him.

The two were so focused on their chasing of each other that neither noticed me as they ran by.

Watching the two kids run off towards a hallway, I looked away from them and to the adults starting to appear in greater numbers.

People were whispering and alerting each other to my presence. Not a surprise, since I wasn't trying to hide, but what was surprising... well...

Everyone here was human.

As more people showed themselves, stepping out from their shacks or from hallways, it became clear that those I searched for weren't here. Or at least, weren't living here. Amongst these people.

Yet their smell was here. These people, and this location, stunk of those not human. So...

"Who're you!" a man shouted at me. He had a short sword in his hand, but kept it lowered.

"Careful... look at him, he isn't scared at all," another man stepped up behind the one with a sword. He had a large hammer in his hand, the kind one used to hammer something large into the ground.

Looking away from the two, I glanced one last time around the area. It wasn't too surprising to see so many people down here. The homeless needed to live somewhere too, after all. But what was shocking was how many different nationalities were down here.

There weren't just the dirty blondes of the east, like Renn's Lamp, but the red skinned southerners. A small family of them were staring at me from the safety of their shack's oddly shaped window.

About to turn away, to head down a large hallway that had more people down it... I had to stop upon seeing someone I recognized.

Or well, what they wore at least.

The Animalia Guild insignia on her shoulder made me frown. Had she stolen it? But no. The woman was too clean, as was the bank uniform she was wearing. Too clean to have been something found or stolen.

A worker. An employee.

Living down here.

If this had been any other moment I would have approached her, to ask why she was down here. To find out the truth.

Yet I had more pressing matters.

“Stop! If you go that way...!” the man with the sword stepped forward as I went to head down the hallway.

Down the larger hallway, I could see more lights. More people. If Renn, and her kidnappers, weren't here I simply needed to move on.

“Wait!” I paused as the man rushed forward, coming up to my right. He reached out to grab me by the arm, but I pulled my arm out of the way before he could. I stepped back to glare at him, expecting an attack.

Instead of attacking, he instead shook his head and put himself between me and the hallway.

“You can’t go down there,” he said harshly.

“And why not?” I asked.

He wasn’t that old. Maybe early twenties... but it was obvious he wasn’t healthy. He had a large frame, and looked like he worked manual labor, but it also looked like he was suffering from something. Maybe a drug addiction of some kind. He was oddly thin in certain areas, and fat in others.

Granted it might just be his lifestyle. Poor habitat, bad hygiene and a worse diet than either of those.

“That’s...” he hesitated a moment, and then seemed to gather his nerve. “That’s where bandits live!” he decided to say.

Bandits.

Sure.

“You’re the second man to try and save my life today. Take pride in it,” I said to the honest man.

“What...?” he wasn’t sure what I meant, but I didn’t care. I stepped forward, only for the man to try and hold his ground.

He made sure to move his sword out of the way, so that it’d not touch me, as he held his hand out and tried to stop me. He pushed on my chest, and was shocked when I didn’t let him do so.

“Mark, careful!” Others behind me, a growing crowd, sounded worried as they warned the man trying to stop me from doing my duty. Others shouted their concern as well, and it seemed to only make him more determined. He dropped his sword, letting it fall to the stone ground in a way that it sounded as if it almost broke.

He put both his hands onto my chest and went to doing all he could to push me back and away from the hallway.

“Young man... Mark is it?” I asked him as I stepped forward, and his thin worn down leather shoes scrapped loudly as I pushed him forward too.

“Huh...?” he stopped struggling for a moment, to look up at me. After half a moment he looked back down, to renew his efforts in stopping me.

“Let me pass Mark. I have something I must do. Do not make this harder for me than it has to be,” I said to the man.

His pushing firmed up, and I paused so as to not break his arms. He had locked his elbows, and fixed his footing even more.

“They’ll kill you. They’re monsters,” he whispered as he strained himself.

Mark’s head was hung low, and he was breathing heavily. He was straining himself, and seemed...  
Distracted?

How many has this young man watched die for him to act like this?

That old man earlier too.

Were Fly's people such blights on this world? Were they that cruel to this community here?

Mark's arms were shaking, and I wondered if I should just knock him out. With him so tightly wound, and struggling like he was, a solid blow to his stomach would do it.

But could I do it without causing permanent harm? I could control my strength well, but this lad was definitely not healthy. What if even a minor blow caused organ damage or...

“Help Mark!”

Before I could make a choice more men came to his assistance. I turned as people went to grabbing me. Some grabbed my arms, others grabbed clothes. One of the larger men even wrapped his arms around my waist, as if to lift me and pull me away.

“The hell...?” the large man was the first to notice, as he put his whole back into it... and I didn’t budge.

Then others noticed, and slowly one by one they all stopped. Hands released me. People stepped away. The large man who had wrapped his arms around my waist had not only released me... but had run off. Heading down another smaller hallway between two larger shacks.

“Hm...” I nodded at the people staring at me with confused awe. A part of them were terrified, yet most seemed simply shocked. Confused. Amazed.

All but the young man, still trying to push me back.

“Mark. Let me pass,” I told the young man.

He shook his head.

Sighing I reached over and grabbed him by his shirt. In the back, near his collar. He fidgeted a moment, wondering what I was doing likely, but didn't get to do much else. I hefted him off his feet, and his hands went from pushing on my chest to holding onto my shirt so that he'd not fall forward onto his face.

"What!" Mark panicked as I held him up, his thin clothing barely held his weight as I stared at the struggling man.

"You've reminded me that those who have the least are those willing to risk the most. You got a job, Mark?" I asked.

"A... a job...?" He sounded worried as I lowered him, letting him stand back on his own feet.

Letting go of his shirt, he stumbled back a little but remained standing. He was no longer confident, however.

"A job. Where do you work?" I asked.

"Oh... the docks..." he glanced past me, likely for help or guidance... but no one in the crowd seemed willing to aid him.

"Go to the Animalia Guild tomorrow. You work there now," I said.

“Huh...” he nodded, even though I knew he hadn’t registered what I had said just yet.

Stepping past him, I patted the young man on the shoulder as I did.

Mark didn’t try to stop me this time, but he did step after me... and at first I worried he’d follow me. But he thankfully stopped after a few feet. “You’ll be okay, right sir?” he asked.

Waving lightly, I nodded. “No matter what you hear... stay away, Mark,” I warned him.

Heading down the hallway, I ignored the chatter from behind me. Their voices echoed wildly in the large hallway... mostly thanks to how empty it was.

Which was strange. Those other hallways had been used, and even the ones not being lived in had still been full of trash.

This one however was clean enough to almost be mistaken for a normal hallway, and not something that existed in a sewer.

“Who cleaned it, Mark and his people or the non humans, though?” I asked myself as I picked up my pace.

Down the hallway, near its end... were more lights. Flickers of lamplight and... by the smell, a fire too.

I didn't need to worry over the ones I approached being actual bandits, as Mark had tried to warn me.

The smell alone told me the truth...

And...

Slowing, I seized up the tall man who stepped out into the hallway from a recess. He slumbered upward, standing up to his full height. A height that was impossible for a human.

"You humans should know better," he spoke with a deep voice... one that was accompanied by a lisp.

I frowned at the man who had a strangely flat face. He was dressed in dirty rags... and looked...

"Some kind of lizard, maybe," I said as I stared at his pupils and nose. His eyes were bulging outward a little, but that might have been just because of how flat his face was... and...

That inward snout. It was like a lizards, and not just because it was covered in dark scales.

“Lizard? Me...?” the man nearly hissed at me as he lowered his head and shoulders... and began to shake.

Shake in anger.

“Was just an assumption,” I politely said.

“I’m no ass either!” he shouted, and then charged forward.

“Tch...” I shifted to my right, closer to the wall as he ran at me. I felt a little bad for using a word he hadn’t known... but I wasn’t in the mood to correct his misunderstanding, nor try and explain myself to him.

After all...

He extended his hands outward, and in the dark hallway his claws glistened as he attacked. He leapt at me, swinging his claws towards my stomach... as to disembowel me.

An attack that was far more than just real. It was something he had obviously done many times. He was proficient at it. An expert, almost.

If he had my strength or speed, it would have been dangerous.

Before his claws reached my stomach, I spun on a heel and kicked the man in the head.

Thanks to how he had lowered his body as to attack in his rush forward, like a tackle, it was easy. My knee hit his arms, and claws. The top of my foot connected with his head, on the side of his flat face...

Then, before he even released I had kicked him... I followed through with the kick, and sent his head into the wall.

The stone wall crunched more than his head did, and he groaned as I pulled my leg back and stepped back... to watch as he fell to his knees.

However he didn't fully fall to the ground. His head was stuck in the wall. Thanks to his height, he was able to simply fall to his knees and sit on them, leaning up against the wall.

Was he dead...? He had groaned, but...

One of his hands twitched, yet the rest of him remained still.

Sighing I stepped away from the wall and the man and returned to heading down the hallway.

Pausing before the recess he had emerged from, I stared at the person hiding within it.

“You killed him?” she asked. She was curled up against the wall... behind the chairs that they had likely been sitting on.

Why were they sitting in the dark in this hallway? Guards maybe? There were boxes, and other items in the recess... but nothing too important.

“I’m not sure,” I said honestly to the woman.

She flinched and curled her arms upward, to hide her face. A face that looked human enough, except the rounded horns extruding from above her ears.

Sheep horns of some kind.

I stepped towards her and she yelped. She curled up even more, turtling into herself... in pure fear.

She was trembling. Afraid. Of me.

It’s been a long time since those I were charged with protecting have been my enemies...

But were they?

“I’m here for someone. You’ve stolen a member of my... family. I’m here to get her back,” I told the sheep woman.

Her trembling didn’t stop but she did look up, out between her curled up arms hiding her head. “You... you mean the wolf girl?”

Wolf girl.

Yes. An easy mistake based off Renn's appearance.

She yelped and hid her head again, and I had to blink a few times to get rid of the obvious expression that had startled her.

“Renn. Yes. Do you know where she is?” I asked her.

She nodded.

I kept the relieved sigh from escaping as I nodded. “Would you please take me to her? I’ll not harm you, I promise,” I said to her in as calm a voice I could muster.

She shook her head, and I noticed the way her large horns bumped and snagged her arms and the sleeves around them.

They were rough. Like hard stone.

Odd. Usually horns weren't so...

"Why not? I promise you I'll not harm you. Please... she's precious to me," I said.

"I can't..." she whispered.

That wasn't just fear of me.

"Then at least tell me where she is, please. Else more will die. If you tell me where she is, you can save more of your..." I slowly stopped talking as I watched the sheep suddenly go still.

A long moment passed without a word, or a heartbeat... and I wondered if the poor thing had just died from stress. She had gone completely still... not even a whimper or...

Then she lowered her arms... and looked up at me with wide eyes. Eyes with pupils that were like her bloodline. Her pupils were wide and elongated.

“You’ll kill them?” she asked with an odd tone.

What was that in her voice...? It wasn’t fear. Nor panic.

I nodded. “To find her. To save her. But if you tell me where she is then...” I started to say, but she stopped my words with a smirk.

One of pure joy.

“Then no. I’ll not tell you.”

A cold wave of understanding pumped out of my heart and throughout the rest of my body... as I stared down at a woman scorned.

I gulped a dry mouth, and for a tiny moment I thought of the many others I had met like her.

Why was it always the women?

“Kill them all, then,” she said with a smile at me.

Glancing away from the suddenly happy woman, I glanced again at the man I had just... possibly killed.

He was still leaning up against the wall. Unmoving. Head still stuck in the stone.

Looking away from his odd clothing, and lack of it in certain areas, I returned to the woman... and the little recessed area she was sitting in.

There were more than chairs and boxes. There was something of a bed. A dirty one. In the corner. Near where she was curled up. Made of straw and loose cloth.

"I see," I said as I understood.

She wrapped herself in her arms, and I did my best to ignore the way she dug her nails into her dirty arms.

She was dirtier than the homeless humans I had just met. Dirty enough I had not noticed the bruises and injuries until now.

Taking a small breath I glanced away from her and down the hallway. To my destination.

No one had heard the commotion. No one was approaching.

Yet I heard voices down there. Echoes.

“My name is Vim. I’m the protector of the Society. I know not your name... nor your story... but know that if you desire freedom, and a life beyond these smelly stones... then find us. Come to us. The Society welcomes all who suffer, and will abide by our rules. We care not your past, only your future,” I spoke evenly... but didn’t look at her. Instead I kept my eyes on the lights down the hallway.

She was silent, but I heard her heartbeat. It was beating wildly. Even more than when she had been shaking in pure terror of me.

“We’re in the Animalia Guild, upside. If you wish to join,” I said as I stepped away.

As I walked away, I heard her fall forward. Crawling on the ground after me... I heard her stop, likely upon reaching the corner of the hall as to stare at me as I left her behind.

Usually I’d do more. I’d be surer about it... but...

Frowning, I did my best to not hate the woman who had been willing to sacrifice Renn... just so I would kill those who made her suffer.

It was hard not to. But I knew that was because of how much I cared for the one she was sacrificing.

Usually I was more...

“Stop! We don’t need to do this!”

I froze for just a moment as the, sing song like, shrill scream echoed down the hallway.

“Fly...?” I couldn’t believe it. That was her voice.

Yet she was supposed to have been at the Society... Maybe I was mistaken or...?

Someone else shouted, and then another... and then I heard it.

Flesh being hit. Flesh being bruised.

Flesh being torn.

Hurrying forward, I ran to the end of the tunnel... right as Fly screamed out in defiance.

Emerging from the tunnel, I skidded to a stop as I took in the sight.

A few dozen people were in the room.

A large room. One littered with junk. Beds. Tables. Boxes... even debris. Off in one corner was a pile of trash, stacked higher than even I was tall.

Yet none of that mattered. Nor even did the dozen non-humans matter either.

All that mattered was the odd hole in the ground. In the center of the room. Likely a drainage pipe. One that led even farther underground.

But honestly even that pipe didn't matter.

All that mattered was Fly.

Being held out over the hole, by a woman with antlers. Ones wrapped by her hair.

Fly was squirming, trying pitifully to free herself. She looked battered and beaten... and oddly was naked. Her feathers were puffed up, giving her an odd look. As if she was far bigger than she really were.

The one with antlers held Fly by her neck. She was taller, but thin... thin and...

Stepping forward, I ignored the dozens of people watching the spectacle. I ignored the looks of terror on some... but I did take note of the looks of pure glee on others.

As I stepped forward, I felt it. In the air. Without warning, yet somehow with one.

“Stop!” I shouted right as Fly was released.

Rushing forward, I ran with all my might. Pushing aside people, jumping over a table, running through a lit campfire and causing embers and wood to scatter everywhere.

The woman with antlers turned towards me as Fly fell into the hole. My gut wrenched as I planned how I'd save her.

That hole was obviously deep. Likely many floors, even. Even if it was angled, it wasn't something someone as frail as Fly could survive.

I'd jump in the hole. But I'd need momentum to catch her. Could I fall in such a way that I could kick off the side of the hole at enough of an angle to force myself to her? Maybe, thanks to her traits, she could flap her arms and stay aloft just enough? Or...!

Before I made it to the hole, and the antler woman who had dropped Fly, I was hit.

Being slammed into, my eyes never left the hole as my hand darted out to grab the throat of the one who had just tackled me.

I was lifted off the ground, and for a few moments was in the air as the one who had tackled me lifted me. Huge arms, thick of muscle and more, wrapped around my waist and stomach... and then we landed. Harshly. Into a table.

Flinching as wood and plates crunched and broke; I rolled as the man tried to get on top of me. As to put me into a hold, and keep me down.

Even still, my eyes never left the hole.

Fly.

I'd not be able to catch her in time now.

I should have been quicker.

I shouldn't have let those humans delay me.

It's my fault.

The world became oddly... quiet... even though I heard yelling. And noise. Lots of it.

Many people were everywhere around us. Things were being broken, and moved. The man trying to pin me was grunting, and not just because he was more beast than man. A woman was shouting orders, and amidst all the chaos... I heard the sound of swords being drawn.

A familiar sound, amongst many more.

Ignoring the shouting and screaming, I grabbed the throat of my attacker. A large man. One covered in fur. I tore my eyes away from the hole, to stare into his.

His eyes were black. Pure black. As if he had no pupil. No iris. As if they weren't eyes at all.

"Thank you," I said to him.

He blinked, and then tried to sit up and back, to get free of my grip.

Yet he couldn't budge.

He was a bull of a man, and not just because of his ferocity. He was easily thrice my size, and likely near my own weight. He was covered in thick dark black fur, and had two large horns where his ears should be. His face was more beast than not, and from glance alone was nearly lacking all human traits. His only human aspect was the way his body was shaped. He stood on two legs. Had two arms, and hands.

The bull opened his mouth, to say something... yet couldn't. My grip on his throat tightened, and I felt the very sudden panic surge within him. He hit me, and tried to stand up and away from me... as he realized I wasn't going to let go. After attacking me a few times I felt his panic increase many fold, likely upon figuring out that he couldn't get me to release him.

Leaning upward, I sat up as the bull tried to flee. I ignored his full on attack of panic, as his fists hit me. In the head. The face. The sternum. He even tried to grab my own throat, yet couldn't seem to calm down enough to actually do it.

Looking into his dark eyes, I smiled... then looked around.

At those staring at us. Men. Women. Nonhuman, and even human alike.

Some with weapons. Some with smiles. Some backing away in fear...

And then finally my eyes locked onto the one with antlers. The woman who had dropped Fly into that hole.

"Thank you. For being the types I needed you to be," I said lowly, as I squeezed. "Thank you for making it easy for me."

As I killed the bull, I was glad that I wasn't lost anymore.

Chapter 177 A Greeting, Bellowed

Sometimes pain was a good thing.

It meant I was alive.

But that didn't mean I wanted to endure so much of it at once.

How long has it been since I had hurt like this? Nory's capture? That day in the church...?

Yes. Maybe. Was this worse? It felt like it was, but something told me it wasn't... and...

I coughed, and I knew I blinked but it didn't change anything. The world was dark... and I wasn't in the mood to try and focus my eyes as to see anything. Right now all I wanted to do was pass out, but I knew I couldn't. Wouldn't.

"Stupid," I groaned at myself as I shifted my left leg. It was fine... but my right wasn't. It hurt, and it hurt to try and move it especially. Broken, but how badly? I didn't want to find out. The idea of sitting up and seeing it gone completely scared me... it felt like it was, after all. I could feel my toes on my right foot move, since it sent waves of pain up my leg... but it still felt as if my whole leg was missing past my knee.

My arms hurt too. Especially my forearms, but I could feel the wet stone with my fingers. My hands kept twitching, as if to make balled fists... likely thanks to the pain. So I knew my arms were... somewhat fine...

And although it hurt to breathe, at least I could. I kept coughing, but my mouth wasn't full of blood nor was it hard to breathe. It just hurt...

Turning my head, I tried to look to my right. I flinched at the feeling of warm wetness against my cheek and head, and hoped it was just water and sewage... but I knew it wasn't. It was blood. Likely from the throbbing from in-between my ears.

The fall had been quick, but the damage definitely wouldn't heal quickly.

If I was able to heal at all...

They hadn't tossed me down this hole just to kill me, after all.

Blinking blurry eyes, I focused my eyes and noticed a wall. It was glistening from wetness. And it was... a little too far away. Did it look like it was that far because I was hurting? The hole I had been tossed in had been large, but got smaller as I fell down it. Near the end I had hit the side of the hole, and skidded along the wall near the end...

Likely one of the reasons I was still alive. It had slowed my fall to a degree and...

Turning my head the other way I coughed again, and flinched at the pain it brought. Once I was done coughing, and blinked some tears out of my eyes that the coughing had caused... I tried to see the wall on the other side of the room. To try and judge how big of a room I had fallen into.

I couldn't see the other wall. Hopefully that was just because of the pain.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and resisted the urge to curl up in a ball and cry.

I needed to get up. I needed to get out of here.

There was no way to know just how deep beneath Lumen I was, but reality was as real as the pain I was enduring. I wasn't going to be saved. No one was going to be able to find me in time.

So I needed to save myself... somehow...

Could I though?

Gritting my teeth I went to try and sit up. At first I thought it impossible, but before I knew it I was sitting upward... even though it was so painful I barely registered how long it had taken me to do so.

My tail was beneath me, stuck under my rear and left thigh... and it hurt horribly, but even though it hurt I wasn't able to gather myself enough as to free it. At least it was still in one piece, it seemed. That freak up there had wanted it. Thankfully the one who had tossed me down here had been the type to focus a little too much on their task...

I shivered, and realized I was cold. Freezing even, maybe.

Likely not just because it was cold. How much blood had I lost...?

Reaching up, I tepidly touched the top of my head. With just my fingertips I tapped the spot between my ears, nearly the center of my head.

It was soaked. And I could feel the gash.

Great. Just great.

Ignoring the blood on my fingers now, I glanced at the rest of my body. What little I could see in the dark told me I was banged up, but didn't look anywhere near as bad as I felt. My fingers were all still there, and not bent oddly. My arms felt broken, but didn't really look it either. Same with my legs. My right leg was definitely still there, and was even moving when I tried to do so.

Licking my teeth, since they felt odd as if thicker than normal, I wondered if the injury on my head was making the rest of my body feel worse than it were.

“Come on Rennalee,” I chastised myself.

Putting my left hand down on the ground, to use as support as to stand... I flinched when the sharp pain ran up my arm and under my armpit.

The pain stopped me from standing... and I groaned.

Yea. Definitely broken.

But that didn't matter. I had to ignore it. I had to endeavor through it.

Using both arms this time, I was thankful to feel nowhere near the amount of pain in my right arm as my left. It let me put more weight on it, which let me sluggishly get to my knees and...

Right as I was about to fully stand, something loud landed nearby.

My heart thumped up into my throat as I shot to my feet, startled by the sudden outburst of sound. Although my head and groans had been noisy, the rest of the world around me hadn't been. It had been eerily quiet in fact...

Yet...

On unsteady feet, I tried to focus in the direction of the sound. It had definitely sounded as if something landed nearby... I had heard the sound of something hitting the ground, and then bouncing. I had heard the sound of water and puddles splashing, too and...

There. Something was definitely nearby. Like a bundle of...

"No..." A tiny groan of pain came from the dark blotch of feathers, and I nearly fell down as I hurried to Fly.

"Fly!" I fell to my knees as I reached her, and worriedly wondered where to grab. In the dark, with half closed eyes from pain, she looked like a giant ball of feathers... Where was her head? Actually, where were her legs and arms and...

"No!" Fly shouted and a head suddenly appeared, as did a hand. A hand that shot out, to hit me in the chest as to keep me away.

Her hand connected, but I barely noticed it. All her push accomplished was to push her own self back a bit, causing her to skid along the ground and...

Studying Fly who was sobbing, likely from the pain, I noticed something rather odd in the moment.

She was naked.

Or at least, as naked as one could be when covered in feathers.

“Fly, it’s me. Renn,” I said quickly, as I understood she probably couldn’t really see me. It was dark enough I barely could see, so there was a chance she couldn’t see anything at all.

Fly startled, and in the dark I saw her shiny eyes go wide as she hurriedly sat up. How had she not gotten more hurt falling down here? It was hard to tell, thanks to the darkness and her feathers but she looked relatively unhurt.

“Wait! Fly!” I startled upon realizing something very important. More important even than her being naked.

“Huh!” she startled too as I drew closer to her and reached out to grab her. I grabbed her where I thought were her arms, but turned out I grabbed her shoulders. “Why are you here!?” I shouted at her.

She should be at the Society! Safe! And!

“I’m sorry!” she shouted back.

I flinched as she leaned forward, to grab me, and since I was holding her she applied what felt like a lot of pressure on my arms. It hurt.

“I’m sorry! Renn!” Fly sobbed as she wrapped her arms around my waist, and went to sobbing. She was oddly wet, likely thanks to her feathers, but she felt warm. Almost too warm. I knew it wasn’t that she was hot, but that I was too cold.

“Fly...” I groaned as I stared down at the feathers that shook in my arms.

“This is all my fault...!” Fly cried.

No. It wasn’t.

“Did they toss you down here too?” I asked her.

She either ignored me or didn’t even hear me as she squeezed me tighter, crying harder.

Great.

Taking a deep breath, I was about to let out a long sigh. One of both relief and...

My back went straight, and my ears turned. Just enough... to my left.

Slowly, I tried to force my eyes to follow the path of my ears. They begrudgingly did so... and I felt a shiver start to erupt from within me.

What is that?

My mouth became dry, and it made my tongue feel odd. As if itchy. My eyes tried to scan the darkness, as I did everything I could to hear past Fly's sobbing and the ruffling of her feathers to hear for what I knew was out in that darkness.

I could smell it. How could I not? How had I not smelled it earlier? The stench was so strong, not even the sewage could be smelled anymore.

It was a thick smell. One that hung in the air. One that made me nauseous, yet alert.

"Fly..." I groaned a warning word, and with an unsteady and shaky hand I tried to get her to stop. To quiet down. To pay attention.

There was no point in trying to go silent and hide. Whatever it was knew we were here. We had made too much noise. Our smells too foreign.

And...

"I'm sorry, Renn. We're going to die, and it's all my fault," Fly cried softly.

“Fly...!” I squinted at the darkness. Something moved. Something... big... Had I actually seen something near the ceiling move, or had that just been my eyes playing tricks on me?

Please have been my pain. Please...

“We’re going to be eaten,” Fly groaned as she squeezed me tighter.

I shifted on my knee, and tried to stand up. Between the pain, and Fly clinging to me, it was impossible.

“The Dinner Table,” I whispered as I understood clearly.

She nodded, burying her face into me even more. “The Master’s Pit.”

Yes. That was this smell. The smell of one of our kind. Someone beyond reason.

It was similar in smell to my grandmother. A smell that didn’t exist anymore. A smell that had nothing to compare it to. No animal, no plant, no place... nothing could replicate it. Nothing could match it.

Fly had said I smelled like this? How? In what way? This was the smell of something worse than death.

Yet...

I felt as if this supposed master was just out of sight. In the darkness. I could smell them. And... maybe see them. If those shadows moving were them.

Yet they hadn't attacked us just yet. Maybe they were waiting. To see what we'd do. To see if anymore would be thrown into the pit alongside us.

Squeezing Fly's shoulders, I pulled her upward. To make her stand up with me. She fumbled, but got the point. She stood up easier than I did, and seemed to somehow know I was struggling. She kept her arms wrapped around me, and even helped steady me as I got to my feet.

"Why'd they throw you down here too, Fly?" I asked her quietly. I knew there was no point in trying to be quiet, yet I couldn't seem to gather more volume to my voice. As if instinctively I knew not to speak loudly.

"Because I said I was leaving. Since I came back to get you. I betrayed them," she whispered.

A new reason for my eyes to water came into existence, and I wrapped my arms around the young feathered girl. Hopefully I didn't hurt her as I felt her feathers shift and move under my arms.

"Welcome, Fly," I whispered to her.

Fly's hug tightened back, and she let out a tiny sob again.

Before I could say anything more, we both jumped as something odd made noise other than us.

The sound of wood clattered nearby... and then something heavy fell with a thump. I flinched at the sight of a body as it actually bounced upward a little, then rolled a few feet away.

Staring at into the dark at the body that had fallen, I panicked for a moment as I tried to figure out who it was.

Had they thrown someone else down here too? Someone I knew? It looked... thin... but whoever it was, was tall, and... The stuff that landed before the body and around it... Something made of wood? Pieces of a chair maybe? Or...

"Aunt..." Fly whispered, and I realized she was right.

Those were her antlers scattered around. Broken... yet not from the fall? How was that possible? Had she hit the side of the hole or something?

Why had she fallen in anyway? Hadn't she been some kind of a boss?

Aunt let out a tiny groan of pain. One I was oddly familiar with, but wasn't sentimental for her at all.

"Why'd she get...?" Fly whispered the same question I had, but went quiet when someone else fell. Behind us. We turned, and I half expected it to not be another body but the master.

This man fell with a loud, and wet, thump. He didn't roll as Aunt had, and instead went completely quiet upon his landing. Not a single noise came from him. Was that a tail bundled under his body? It looked as thick as his waist.

"Who is that?" I asked Fly.

"Bo'. He's... strong," Fly sounded shocked to see him.

Then something else landed.

Just as loudly. Just as heavy... yet without a drop of blood, or crunch of bone.

Turning to the new body, I wondered if maybe I should pull Fly away from this area. If someone fell on us it'd do more than just hurt, especially with how frail she was and...

But this body wasn't broken. Nor someone I didn't recognize.

“Vim...?” I barely whispered his name as I watched Vim stand up from his crouch, and hurriedly turn to look at me.

“Renn...” Vim’s face contorted in worry upon seeing me, which told me that I probably looked as bad as I felt.

“Vim?” Fly’s arms around me squeezed tighter, and I couldn’t help but smile at him as he hurried over to us.

“Look at the two of you...” Vim spoke calmly as he walked over to us, but had a rather upset face... as if he was angry at us, but I knew that wasn’t the case. He was simply worried.

I heaved a small sigh of relief as Vim reached out and grabbed me by the shoulder. His steady hand kept me from collapsing as he looked me and Fly up and down. “Are you okay Fly?” Vim asked the young girl. She began to tremble as she nodded, still in my arms and I hers.

After patting Fly on the head, Vim returned his attention to me. “I know how you look. How do you feel?” he asked me.

“Probably worse than I look,” I said honestly.

He nodded.

Blinking relieved tears, I wondered what to say. It was a good thing I was holding Fly, else I'd probably have collapsed in relief. Not that Vim would think less of me if I did, of course, but...

"Did the fall hurt you, Fly?" Vim asked her.

She shook her head and sniffed loudly. It echoed. "I floated down mostly," she said.

"Floated...? You can fly, Fly?" I asked.

Fly shook her head again. It felt odd, thanks to all the feathers... as if she had a lot of really thick hair all over her. "No?"

"Well we..." Vim started to say something, but then went quiet... and still.

I blinked as I stared at the face of a man who just changed.

Vim was staring past me now. Over my head. Between my ears. If not for the look of defiance and the cold eyes, I'd think he was studying my head wound.

But I knew what he was actually studying.

Unlike me, he could see it.

“Vim...” I whispered the name of the Protector as his hand on my shoulder squeezed me a little.

Before he could say anything, a deep and heart stopping growl filled the air.

Fly yelped, nearly pushing me over as she pushed her head into my stomach as to hide herself. She began to shake and tremble fiercely, as the world shook. The very air seemed to thunder and become heavy, as the growl grew louder and louder.

Vim kept a steady hand on my shoulder, and his other grabbed my forearm. Where I was holding Fly closely, as to steady her, and he kept us both on our feet.

I turned, and flinched as the growl deepened even more. The impossibly loud sound started shifting thanks to the one it was emitting from had begun to move.

The darkness beyond wobbled oddly, and my eyes quickly adjusted to realize why. The thing wasn't just massive, it had scales. Dark scales that blended it into the darkness.

At first, my memories of that large snake came and went. The one that had hunted my family. This thing before me was slithering like it. It was huge like it...

Yet this was no snake. It had a body. A huge one, that loomed upward and...

Looking left and right, my stomach turned and knotted painfully as I realized how big the thing was. Like a snake coiled around itself, it encompassed the whole room. Yet before us, looming high enough to hit the ceiling was a giant body. One that had a huge...

I nearly wept at the sight of all the teeth. Each nearly as big as Fly, some as big as the man I stepped back and up against for support. Large black orbs began to glisten as they stared at us, hovering above the massive mouth of teeth. There were dozens of them and...

With my back against Vim, I held Fly closely as she and I stared up at a monster. One nearly as big as a building.

The teeth opened, and I heard them scrape against each other as it released another low growl... as if in greeting.

A greeting that required no words to be understood.

One of hunger.

Of death.

“Master Monarch...!” Fly cried out, greeting it back.

Chapter 178 A Hazy Barb

“Master Monarch!” Fly cried out.

Monarch...?

This?

Looking away from the beast, I glanced down at the woman I had just slaughtered for.

Renn’s feeble trembling told me she wasn’t up to task, but I couldn’t blame her. Her appearance told me all I needed to know. She hadn’t just been tossed down here by those freaks, but had been beaten rather harshly before they had done so.

Fly at least seemed generally unhurt.

Glancing to my left, to the only accessible exit of this large room... I hoped it at least led far enough away that they’d be safe. Judging by the stone that made up this room, it was clear we were no longer in the sewers of Lumen. This stone was older than Lumen. We were now in the sunken city.

That wasn’t a problem... as long as we stayed away from the toxic sections.

The problem was the large tentacle like appendage between us and the exit.

Running my eyes along the appendage, to the main body... I wondered what it was. It had snake-like appendages emerging from a large bulbous head, which seemed to act as its main body. Extruding from that head was countless little appendages alongside the two main large ones, all looking like little hairs. A huge jaw, with teeth to match its size, was obviously deformed. It was too crooked. Too lopsided. Yet although malformed it was still opening and closing... as if it was trying to talk. The giant jaw sat under dozens of black orb eyes, they were similar to ones found on insects, and nothing about the way the thing was growling and groaning told me it had any real semblance of identity.

It was but a beast. One that lived by instinct and nothing more.

But that didn't make it any less of a threat.

"Vim...!" Renn cried out my name as the thing extended one of its tentacle appendages. The long and slender thing slithered towards us, sliding along the ground as if it was a snake. Renn stepped back, pushing herself even more up against me as she pulled Fly closer into herself.

The thing approached quickly, reaching us in the blink of an eye... but I knew it had not done so in haste. It reached over to the broken body of the woman who had tossed Fly down here, and wrapped around her. The thing picked the woman's body up, and I noted that it did so... well...

Lazily.

The three of us watched as the long appendage curled inward and brought the woman to its body. I heard it crunch bone as the appendage squeezed the body a little before it opened its massive mouth even more, and then tossed the body in.

Renn shivered and Fly made an odd noise as the beast slowly closed its mouth and began to chew.

Interesting.

“Renn,” I gently squeezed Renn’s shoulder, to make sure I got her attention.

Her ears, which were drooping even though alert, startled and turned a little... but she didn’t turn her head as to look at me. She couldn’t take her eyes off the scene in front of us.

With a pat on her shoulder, I then pointed to our left. Towards the hallway. “There’s a hallway over there. Near its other... tentacle thing,” I said.

Renn finally turned away from the beast, and I noted the way she flinched when it bit down again and we heard something crunch and pop. The woman’s head, maybe.

“A hallway...” Renn whispered.

“Take Fly and go hurry down that hallway. Just run. If you can, get back to the surface, otherwise just get as far away as possible until it’s over,” I said.

"I... Vim..." Renn mumbled something as I watched the creature in front of us finish eating. Its massive body shifted, and I noted the way it turned a little to the left.

At first I thought maybe it had understood us, and was shifting as to try and stop anyone from leaving... but it didn't take long for the truth of its purpose to show itself. Its other tentacle, the one that had been lying motionlessly between us and the hallway started to curl inward and move. I pulled Renn, and thus Fly, back a few steps as the tentacle moved towards the other body. The man with the thick lizard-like tail.

He was still alive, though unconscious. He didn't make a sound or move as the tentacle coiled around his waist.

Was it eating them first because they weren't moving, or because it knew they were dead? Why was it ignoring us?

Even if it was without reason and just a beast acting on instinct... You'd think it'd deal with us, those moving and making noise, before eating.

Most beasts didn't eat when there were strangers nearby, thanks to the danger it brought.

Though maybe it didn't feel as if we were anything dangerous. Thanks to its size alone it might not have ever felt in danger before.

Maybe it thought we were those who fed it. Or it was just saving us for last.

“Ugh...!” the lizard man groaned as he was dragged along the floor towards the creature’s main body.

“He’s still alive...!” Renn whispered in awe as she and Fly watched the scene.

Glancing around one last time as the beast lifted the man as to toss him into its mouth, I realized why neither I nor anyone in the Society had ever found out about this thing.

It was stuck in here.

There was another hallway behind it, but it was just like the one to our left. Small. Normal in size and height... meant for humans.

This creature was too big to fit into either of them, and there didn’t seem to be any other way out.

Had it been tossed in here when young, and thus small, or did it get stuck somehow? This large room had probably been a warehouse or something back before the city had been destroyed and submerged. It definitely came after the fall of the city, not before.

Did that mean these people have simply been feeding this creature all this time? For no reason?

If it was stuck in here then there had been no point in feeding it. Especially so if it was without reason. It would have just starved to death if they had let it be.

Wasted lives.

I'm glad now that I hadn't taken the time to interrogate anyone up there, but at the same time I wish I had.

"Vim," Renn said my name as the man was tossed into the things mouth.

The creature slowly closed its mouth, uncaring of the sound of the man's screams that sounded like muffled moans as he was eaten.

"Renn!" Fly cried out with a hushed scream, and I glanced down to see her bury her face into Renn... as if to hide. To hide not just from the beast, but the sounds.

"Go Renn. I'll find you when I'm done," I said, and pushed her gently as to usher her away.

Now was the perfect time. It seemed to take a moment to eat, and now there was nothing between us and the hallway. The tentacle that had been lying between us was now curled up in front of the thing's body.

“Vim...!” Renn sounded as if she wanted to argue... likely to tell me to come with her, but I didn’t give her the chance.

“Go. Something that big makes it difficult to protect anyone while fighting it,” I said firmly.

Her bruised and bloodied face scrunched up, and I had to look away from her. I didn’t like that appearance on her. It made me...

Renn stepped away, and pulled Fly alongside her. As she did I noticed the way she stumbled... and not just because Fly wasn’t being cooperative, thanks to the way she was clinging to her.

Broken legs, maybe.

Maybe her complaint had not been about me not going with her, but rather her trying to tell me she wasn’t up for the task of even running away.

No matter. She was leaving the area, even if slowly.

So...

As Renn and Fly left the room, I wondered if I should simply go with them.

After all, if it was stuck here... and without reason...

Well...

I could just return later, couldn't I? Deal with it at another time, once I was sure everyone else was safe?

But that would enable those idiots to sacrifice others again in the meantime. I had killed quite a few up there, before jumping down here, but I had left just as many alive. I had worried over Fly and...

The creature shifted, and I immediately ran towards Renn and Fly. The tentacle that had been lying listlessly shot outward, towards the fumbling Renn. It moved so quickly that Renn and Fly didn't even notice it until I was between them and the thing as it hit me.

Putting myself between the tentacle and Renn, I more so ran into the thing than it ran into me. I had barely made it in time.

Grabbing onto the tentacle as it started to wrap around me, I felt the slickness of moss... and beneath the moss even slimier scales.

Barely able to get a hold on the thing, I was forced backward as it pushed while wrapping itself around me.

It was about as thick as my waist, at least this section of the tentacle was, but it was heavy. Heavier than me by many fold... and not just because it was putting force into its attempt of grabbing me.

“Vim!” Renn cried out behind me, and I tightened my squeeze and grip even more. Getting a firm hold on the slimy thing, I felt the thick bones within it start to bend and shift from the pressure I was applying.

The beast let out a growl, and the whole room started to vibrate from the noise.

Glancing over the tentacle that was in my arms, and trying to coil around me, I made sure the other large tentacle wasn't going for Renn or Fly. This thing was strong enough to kill them instantly if it got them in its grip, let alone simply crushing them or...

Something sliced into my shoulder, causing me to shift my head away right as the tip of the tentacle slapped downward where my head would have been. It rolled along my shoulder and down my chest, and as it did I felt it cut into my skin.

The tip of the tentacle seemed to be covered in sharp barbs. The kind that not just pierced, but gouged and ripped. Like little hooks.

“Great,” I firmed my footing and squeezed the tentacle even more. Putting more strength into it than should be needed, I felt the tentacle twitch and start to pull back and away from me.

“Vim!” Renn shouted my name again, but this time from farther away. The sound put her more to my left... hopefully that meant she was in the hallway, or at least the entrance.

Ignoring her cry, I felt and heard a loud crunch from within my grasp... then the thing jolted, tugging away its tentacle with enough force to send me into the air alongside it.

I had just broken its main bone. And it hadn't enjoyed that.

The thing was trying to get its tentacle away from me. It even started to unwrap; the barbed end of it was pulled off my chest and shoulder. I ignored the pain as much as I ignored the things attempts to escape me.

Squeezing even more, I pulled my feet up and put them against the tentacle. It put me in an odd position, especially since I was being lifted in the air towards the ceiling, but it let me put more force on the tentacle from a different focal point. The extra leverage, plus my squeezing and pulling from my arms, allowed me to not just crush the thing... but start to tear and rip it too.

The scales broke first, loudly ripping as if it was made of leather, and as I started to tear the tentacle apart the thing let loose a bellow of a roar. One no longer of just pain... but shock.

My ears rung with the roar of a frightened animal.

I smiled as I started to tear the tentacle in two, as the barbed point tried to attack me again. It slithered around to my back, between my shoulder blades. But it was too late. The thing started to give way, and I felt it start to tear. Beneath the slimy scales seemed to be meat similar to fish, based off the way it ripped and tore apart.

Then... right before I could completely separate the thing, I was slammed into the ground.

The impact hadn't hurt that much, since it had slammed me down in haste. Its panic of movement had made it hit the ground with its own tentacle more than me, so most of the blow had been absorbed by itself.

It was that very impact that finished what I had started. Upon hitting the ground, not only did I fly off its tentacle... so did the part I had been tearing.

Rolling on the ground, I splashed through a large puddle and quickly skidded to a stop as I got to my feet.

Something hit the ground next to me right as I started to stand up, and I ducked as another tentacle swiped over my head.

The air swooshed above me with such force I felt my hair and clothes get pulled alongside it. Keeping myself firm, I crouched and took a deep breath as I took in the sight of not just one, but three new tentacles.

A large piece of the one I had just damaged laid a few dozen paces away, still moving. It was coiling and flopping around as if with a mind of its own... which made me reconsider this creature.

Maybe it was some kind of a beast of the sea.

The tentacle I had damaged was coiling into a ball before its massive body, implying I had hurt it enough to be wary. It held it close as one would a broken arm, afraid of anything touching it.

“Vim!”

I frowned and glanced at the source of my name. Renn and Fly were in the hallway, not far from the entrance. They weren't clinging to each other anymore, and instead were waving at me.

“Get going already!” I shouted at them.

Nothing seemed to be wrong with them, other than obviously what had already happened to them... so they had simply been shouting at me over concern for myself.

Pointless worry.

For now at least...

Standing back up, I studied the three tentacles that were moving sporadically. One was lifted up, pushing against the wall behind the creature... as if it was trying to push itself away from the wall it was up against. The other two unharmed ones were on either side of it, parts of them were on the ground and the other parts lifted upward. One of them to my right, the one that had grabbed the antler woman's body, was readied and poised upward... its pointed barbed tip hefted and readied to strike at me.

The large black orbs didn't have eyelids, but yet all the same they looked as if they were glaring at me. It was focused entirely on me now, and its mouth was closed tightly. A few of the teeth even seemed to be moving from the pressure, as if they were loose and about to fall out.

"You act as if you've never felt pain before," I said to the creature.

The tentacle to my left slammed the ground, as if in defiance.

Oh?

Maybe it did have some form of self.

Glancing away from my enemy, I felt a little relief at seeing an empty hallway.

Renn and Fly had left.

Good.

At least, hopefully it was good.

The beast roared at me, forcing my attention back to it.

It opened its jaw as it roared, and I narrowed my eyes... as I watched not just spittle and other gunk fly out of its mouth... but something green.

A weird looking haze flowed out of its mouth, rolling along its teeth and to the floor as it roared. Like a heavy fog, the green haze flowed out of its mouth and into the room.

Poison of some kind?

The creature started to shake its massive body, and more and more of the green haze began to flow out of it. It even gurgled a little, as if it was throwing the stuff up.

Taking a deep breath, I wondered how far that gunk could travel before diluting. If it was as potent as it looked, even if Renn and Fly go far enough away they could still be danger...

"Enough of that," I said, deciding to stop it now. It didn't make sense that it could release too much more of the stuff, since the creature itself was only so big, but I knew that sometimes these kinds of creatures didn't follow the rules of the world.

Rushing forward, I ran through the puddle I had just rolled in earlier.

The creature quickly responded. It shot out the tentacle on my right, the one that had been poised to strike, and I jumped upward right before it would have pierced me.

Although it missed it didn't let it deter it. It rolled the tentacle, sweeping it inward towards itself. I picked up my pace as I heard the tentacle scrape against the floor behind me. It was effectively trying to scoop me up.

Skidding a little, right before reaching the curled up tentacle that I had already damaged, I jumped upward and angled myself for the impact. Half a moment after jumping upward, the tentacle that had been curling behind me hit. Using it as footing I kicked off it and leapt even higher, soaring through the air towards the things head.

The beast shifted, arching upward as it seemed to watch me fly towards it. I noticed the tentacle that was against the wall behind it lower itself and angle around, as to attack me, but it was too slow. I landed on the things head, right below one of the largest eyeballs and a few feet above its mouth.

Upon landing on its head, dozens of little tentacles began wrapping themselves around my feet and legs. The clingy hair all had barbs, like the tip of its tentacles, which would have normally been quite a pain.

For me though it was useful, even if it hurt.

It seemed to calm down a little as I stood up and glanced around, expecting a heavy blow from one of its tentacles that wasn't coming. The thing hesitated in slamming me with its tentacles, likely thanks to its confidence in the little barbed hairs.

"If you can speak I suggest doing it now," I said to it.

Although the thing groaned a growl, it didn't do so in a way that implied any kind of sentience. At least, not the kind that I could communicate with.

"Good. Didn't want to reason with you anyway," I said, and pulled a leg free from the barbs.

Stepping forward, up to the large eye, I didn't hesitate as I stomped down onto it.

The eye popped as my foot delved into it, spewing black blood and other gunk all over... and suddenly the thing was no longer calm.

I felt the great deep breath the thing took, and my whole body reverberated as it released it. A great roar so loud it deafened, causing a loud ringing in my ears as I pulled my foot free of the squished eyeball.

The little tentacle hairs all around me were flailing wildly, some even started coiling around each other so strongly that blood was being drawn from the hooked barbs.

Pulling my other leg free, I stepped over to another eyeball. One that I noticed actually had a layer of glossy wetness upon it.

It was crying.

Stepping down onto this eye as well, I flinched as the beast quaked violently. Thanks to the eye being squishy it gave no support, so I was basically standing on one leg. And one leg, even one being grabbed and held onto by the little tentacle hairs, wasn't enough to keep my stance as the beast began to violently thrash around.

Falling to my side, I hurriedly pushed myself back up and onto my feet. Before I could, a few of the hairs snagged my shoulder and arm.

Although back on my feet, I still stumbled. The beast was shaking wildly, to the point that I begun to feel the swirl of air and tug of gravity as it...

Another roar bellowed out, and suddenly I was sent flying.

The tentacle that hit me only connected for a brief moment. I was sent flying away at such a speed it had no time to wrap around me. I counted the few seconds in the air, and reached five before hitting a wall.

A brief moment of the world going dark, then after I felt the tug of gravity again as I fell down. I wasn't able to count a single second more before I hit the ground, coming to a stop in a puddle of water and broken stone.

Slowly getting up, I brushed broken stone and dirt off my face. Taking a deep breath, I coughed out a pained groan as I stared at the beast across the room from me.

It had sent me into the wall way over here...

Looking up, I flinched at a weird pain in my neck as I found the place I had impacted. Near the ceiling, right above where I was kneeling was a freshly made hole in the stone. Bits and pieces were still clattering off and out of the hole, landing in the puddle I was in with loud clumps.

The beast slammed a tentacle down and roared at me. Then it slammed another, and then did it again.

I had pissed it off.

"You're pissed off? Please," I groaned as I slowly got to my feet.

Rolling my shoulder, I felt the seep of blood drenching my shirt. My shoulder and back must be really shredded. I felt as if I was taking a shower, almost, what with all the blood flowing down my back.

The beast made an odd gurgle sound as it started spewing up even more of the green haze. I sighed at the sight of the miasma forming around its whole body.

What would it do? It was definitely a poison of some kind, but what effect will it have on me? Will it hurt? Make me delirious? Sick?

Or will it do nothing at all, like so many other things?

At least it seemed to settle lower to the ground. None of the green haze seemed to go over the things mouth. Though that didn't mean there wasn't some of the poison higher than that, but it was not as concentrated...

Though...

Remembering the moment of me being on its head, stomping on its eyes, I realized how big the damn thing was.

That haze was taller than me. It was at least two stories tall, maybe even more...

Could I kill this thing before I succumbed to that stuff? It wasn't like I could just open a window here either, so the longer this went on...

Stepping to my right, I barely dodged in time as the chunk of stone flew past.

Although I had dodged the initial stone toss, I was too close to the wall behind me. Large chunks of stone splattered from the impact, and some of them hit me from behind. I stepped away from the wall, nearly stumbling as my head rung like a bell.

"Shit," I flinched as the world went blurry for a moment. Focusing as much as I could, I hurriedly leapt to the left as another large chunk of stone flew past.

Dodging the second attack succeeded and I was now far enough away from the wall that I didn't have to worry over ricocheting debris... but thanks to the earlier blows I was unsteady on my feet. I didn't land gracefully... or really at all. Falling to the ground, I rolled over broken stone pieces as I tried to hurriedly get back on my feet.

Coughing as I clambered back to my feet, I wondered if maybe I was already being damaged by that green haze it was puking out. Usually I'd not be so bothered, even with such damage to my head and...

"Really...?" I shivered at the feeling beneath my feet.

So I hadn't fallen just because of my ringing head.

The world began to shake, and not just because the beast was slamming the ground with its tentacles. It was breaking the stone, to gather ammunition as to throw at me, but this shaking was from more than just that.

I groaned as the floor started to shift. Large sections of stone started to rise upward, as if from pressure. Like an earthquake releasing pent up steam, the ground began to break and open... and more tentacles started to appear.

Very quickly the room got crowded, as more than a dozen tentacles... each bigger than the last sprouted from the ground.

“For a flower, you’re quite an ugly thing,” I grunted as I realized exactly what it was, and that I had made the right choice in sending Renn and Fly away.

At least, hopefully they were far enough away... since this thing seemed to have its roots spread all throughout this place.

Standing up, I took what was probably my last clean breath I’d get during this fight... and then charged forward.

Chapter 179 To Protect

“We’re going to die!” Fly cried as we hurried down the dark hallway.

Dark indeed. I could barely see anything. The only thing that kept me from running into the walls was the faint layer of moisture everywhere... which gave me just enough of a reflection to see at least the walls and floor.

“We’re not going to die, Fly!” I shouted at her. She was right behind me, and was at least running on her own. She was running rather close to me though, telling me that she wanted to latch herself onto me again.

“We are! Master is...!” Fly started to argue, but I paused in my running just enough to turn around and glare at her.

“That’s not your master! Not anymore!” I shouted.

Fly flinched, and then ran into me.

The girl barely weighed anything... and usually, under normal conditions, her running full head on into me wouldn't have done much... but it right now it was enough, with me as hurt as I was.

We both fell to the ground, and I landed harshly on my back as she fell on top of me.

I shivered as my whole body erupted into more pain, and I whined a tiny cry as Fly began to sob on top of me.

I shouldn't have stopped...

Shifting upward, I shivered a little oddly as I sat up. Fly clung to me as she wept, her wet feathers made her feel heavier than she were.

"Fly... come on, we need to get out of here," I said as calmly as I could.

Although Fly didn't stop sobbing, she did at least nod her head. As I got us both back to our feet, I hoped Fly's bad limp on her right leg wasn't a sign of something horrible wrong with her.

Had she gotten hurt in our fall, or was that from the drop into the pit? She had acted as if she was unhurt, but it should have been obvious that such a fall would have hurt her.

It had hurt me...

Once on our feet, I reached out to put a hand against the wall to support myself as I took a few moments to catch my breath.

About to ask Fly if she knew where we were, or had a general idea on how to get out of here... I closed my mouth and gritted my teeth as the air began to vibrate.

Flinching, I nearly fell back to the ground and to my knees as a deep and bone shaking growl reverberated through the hallway.

Fly screamed, burying her face into my stomach, and I didn't like how I had barely heard her. My ears were amplifying the sound, and it was painful and...

Then more than just the air began to shake.

Thankfully I still had a hand on the wall, or else I would have stumbled... especially since Fly jumped towards me in shock at feeling the ground beneath our feet start to tremble.

I closed my eyes as I felt the whole world shiver, similar to an earthquake... but I knew this was not the movement of the earth.

Had the Master been that big? Big enough to shake the whole world like this? We had ran quite a distance already... was it possibly chasing after us?

Surely not. Vim would not have let it do such a thing.

The loud growl started to fade, but other sounds began to replace it. I heard the sound of rocks breaking and falling, echoing loudly as if an entire hallway had just collapsed.

Looking down the hall we had been running down, I tried to make out anything to tell me if the hallway had actually collapsed or not.

The darkness was shifting oddly down there... but I couldn't make out much more than that. Actually, we might have rounded a corner or two as we ran...

"Renn...!" Fly cried out as she started pulling me. She was trying to drag me down the hallway by pulling on my shirt. She had such a vice-grip on my clothes that I could feel them starting to tear and rip.

"Right," I nodded and agreed.

Yes.

Time to go.

Stepping forward, I joined Fly as we returned to running away.

Now following Fly, I was thankful that she released my shirt... but instead she had grabbed my hand. That too wasn't that big a deal, but her nails were a little long and they were digging into me rather deeply. She wasn't aware of what she was doing though.

She was simply scared. Distressed.

Slowing as we approached the end of the hallway, I hesitated as another roar of a growl echoed down the hallway. It was fascinating that I could actually feel the growl as it rolled down the hallway and past us. As it reverberated around us, I felt the blood seeping out of my head pulse alongside my heartbeat.

Upon reaching the end of the hallway, where it diverted two different directions, I had to skid to a stop as Fly came to an abrupt one herself. Nearly knocking her over, I panicked for a moment as she stumbled forward from me running into her.

The only reason she stayed on her feet was because we were holding hands. I said an apology to her, but I wasn't sure if she heard me over the rumbling roar still echoing around us.

Fly though didn't even seem to register that I had ran into her, or that she had almost fallen over. She instead was looking left and right... seemingly trying to decide which way to go.

Taking a moment to catch my breath again, I too glanced down the two options.

Neither looked any different, honestly. Both were the same dark, grimy and wet looking stone hallways...

Though...

When had the stone become so... clean cut? I could barely see the grooves on the walls and beneath my feet I felt as if the ground was a little too slick. Was that why I had bumped into Fly? Where was the traction that stone usually gave?

"I think it's this way!" Fly shouted over the roaring and rumbling of the stones, pointing to our right.

I nodded, and the two of us returned to running.

Running hand in hand, I did my best to not notice how slow I was actually running. I felt exhausted beyond measure and weak... but it was still alarming how slow I was moving. Fly was running ahead of me, and based off the feeling of her tugging on my hand she'd be able to pull ahead if she let me go.

"I've never heard the Master so angry!" Fly shouted.

"It does sound mad," I agreed. The growls weren't as loud as earlier, but they were still there. I could only imagine how bad Vim's ears must be hurting right now, being in the same room with that thing.

I wonder if I'll know when Vim's finished by the sounds alone.

Huffing as we ran, I couldn't help but smile a little.

So I didn't even doubt that Vim would kill it, did I? Even though it should be something I should really worry about.

After all, that thing had been huge. And...

"Wait!" Fly skidded to a stop, and I nearly bumped into her again. Luckily I stopped in time, and I groaned as I realized I had gotten lost in thought.

Don't do that Renn. Not here. Not right now.

"Not this way... here!" Fly turned and pulled me back a bit. I wasn't sure what was wrong, until we came to another intersection. I grumbled at myself as Fly led us down another hallway. I hadn't even noticed that we had not only passed other hallways but had rounded a corner too.

I needed to focus...

“Should be stairs right over here and...!” Fly sounded excited as we picked up our pace, and I couldn’t help but also grow excited. The sooner we got out of here and back to the Society the sooner I could...

Rounding a corner, I could feel Fly’s tension through her hand as we both slowed to a stop... as we both stared at the two down the hallway.

They were standing in front of a stairwell, which was dark... but only because they had lamps lit just outside of the stairwell. The lights illuminated them, but made the stairwell dark from shadows.

I didn’t recognize the two people, but it looked as if they were women. One of them had long hair, which looked to be even dragging on the floor. Why would she let it do that? This place had puddles and was nasty and...

“Humans,” Fly whispered.

Humans. Right. There were humans here too...

“I can handle humans. That’s the way out right?” I asked Fly. I hadn’t talked loudly, but my voice must have carried enough for them to hear me even over the rumbling of the distant creature. The two startled, and turned to look at us.

“I definitely know that stairwell. It goes up near the docks. I live... lived near it,” Fly whispered with a hush.

“Then that’s the one we use. We can’t keep running around and get lost,” I said to her.

Fly nodded but she didn’t take her eyes off the two.

Stepping forward, I took the lead as we walked towards the stairwell.

The growling of the Master seemed to quiet down a little, but it didn’t stop. In fact loud banging could now be heard mixed into the rumbling. Was that them fighting or something else?

“I don’t know them,” Fly whispered to me.

I nodded, and said nothing as we drew closer. It didn’t take long before the two could see us as well as we could see them.

The woman on the left, the one with long hair, looked elderly. Thin. Worried. She looked sickly almost, but it was probably just her stress. The woman on the right however wasn’t just younger, but healthier. She had weight to her, and was taller than me. She had a small knife in her hand, but it had a leather sheath on it. It looked more like something one would use to cook with than fight with.

“It’s the bird girl,” the stout woman said, which caused Fly to come to a stop.

I stopped too, but wasn’t going to just stand around and wait. We needed to get out of here before I simply collapsed.

“Holy... You got away from the Master?” the older woman didn’t seem to be able to believe it, even though we were right in front of her.

“You woke the Master up without feeding it! Fly, you’re crazy!” the other woman shouted at us. She pointed the sheathed knife at us and stepped towards us.

“Shut up! You go feed that thing! Let us pass!” I stepped forward, to put myself between the two and Fly. I didn’t like the way they were looking at her.

“You idiots! We’ll all die if you make the Master that angry! What are we going to do!?” the first woman screamed and grabbed her head, as if in pain.

“Let us pass!” I shouted again, and stepped forward once more.

I didn’t care about them having their foolish panic attacks over the current situation. Right now these people were far from my concern.

“We need to feed her to the Master, Lana,” the woman with the knife said sternly.

“Like I’ll let you,” I squeezed Fly’s hand as I planned on how I’d handle this. The first woman looked frail. Old. Scared. The second however, the one to my right, had the kind of look in her eye that told me she was going to be a problem. She was willing to not just hurt us, but get hurt herself.

A fanatic, like all the rest...!

“We don’t need to feed that thing anymore! We can live without having to—,” Fly spoke up from behind me, but a new presence made her go quiet.

Stepping down the stairs and emerging from the shadows, the large man had a weird looking smile as he stepped between the two women, who both shied away a few steps upon noticing him. I hadn’t heard him come down... I’d blame the roars of the creature, but they weren’t that loud right now.

“Fin...” Fly whispered his name in a way that told me she was far from happy at seeing him.

“Fin...” I studied the way the broad shouldered man’s shirt was torn at the sleeves. Yes. Those were very likely fins extruding from the underside of his arms. They looked like thin webs... were they connected to the side of his body? They were loose and floppy, dangling under his arms.

Fly’s hand squeezed mine, and I felt her start to tremble.

Glancing behind me, I flinched at the look on Fly’s face.

Great. She was terrified of this man. She looked more scared now than she had been upon seeing the Master.

Looking back at the large man, I noticed the way the two women were also keeping an eye on him. Especially the frail one on the left. She was focused on him more than us now.

“No one said she was so tasty looking,” Fin said with an oddly happy sounding voice.

Looking into the eyes of the man who was studying me in a way that made me shiver, I had a horrible suspicion that this man didn't think I was tasty looking in the same way his Master probably thought I had been.

“Please... let us pass,” I begged them. A final plea.

“Fin... you can't. Can't you hear the Master? If we don't toss them back into the dinner table, then!” the woman on the right stepped towards Fin, raising her voice. The rumbling growls grew louder, as if the creature could somehow hear us here in the hall.

Fin ignored the woman, his eyes still on me. “So much trouble over a couple of useless women. Are you the one who killed Aunt and the rest?” Fin asked me.

“And if I am?” I asked him.

“Likely not. You look broken already...” Fin spoke as he rubbed his chin, and as he did I was able to confirm the things under his arms were definitely his namesake. They were webbed and were partially see-through. They looked more like the ones found on the bottom of fish than ones found on the sides or rear.

“Fin!” the stouter woman stepped forward and Fin finally looked away from me. All he did was glance at her, he didn’t even lose his snarky looking smile, and she cowed. She took a deep breath full of apprehension and stepped back, looking away to the ground as if in shame.

How was I going to get past them? The women had been one thing, but this man didn’t just look dangerous... It was clear he really was. Fly being scared of him was one thing, but for the other two women to be so cautious of him too...

Plus he didn’t seem worried about his comrade’s deaths. He had come down here fully expecting to meet the one who had killed the others. Which meant he was confident in himself.

Vim should have come with us.

“The Master is pissed but he’ll calm down. There’s a bunch of bodies at the dinner table we can give’em. We’ll give Fly too. But her? I’m keeping her,” Fin nodded as if he had made a very rational decision, and the whole world should agree with him.

“Insane,” I whispered as I reformulated my plan. Originally my plan had been to just push through the women. Maybe hit the stouter one... but now I knew my only obstacle was him. At least for now.

He was confident. Too confident. The kind of confidence that would let me get at least one hit on him, before he took me seriously. The question was...

Could my one hit be enough? With this broken body?

“Been awhile since I’ve had such a good woman. You look young, but not too young too! And since you ain’t human you won’t break easily... This’ll be great,” Fin stepped forward, and my heavy body suddenly felt a lot lighter.

Without any warning my pain disappeared. The arms and legs that had protested with every twitch became normal. My ears, which had been drooping enough to impact my hearing shot upward and alert. My focus and attention went entirely to the man approaching us, and I stopped thinking about anything else.

“Renn...!” Fly shouted my name, and I tugged my hand free from hers. Her long and sharp nails dug and cut into my hand, since she tried to stop me from doing so, but I ignored her protest and the injuries it wrought.

Fin was bigger than Vim. Not just in height, but size and weight. Every step he took closer made that clear... yet oddly, for some reason I didn’t think he was heavier.

I couldn’t imagine myself throwing Vim, yet I could see how I could toss this man.

Especially since he seemed to have an injury, or deformity. Either new or old. His right knee didn’t bend all the way while walking... and it wasn’t intentional. He was favoring it. His steps with his right leg were not as long of a stride as his left, nor did he let his full weight linger on it very long.

Fin smirked as he rolled his left shoulder, and I could see the way his eyes were focused on my body.

He wasn't even planning anything. He was simply leering at me. His thoughts were clear on his face, and they were too disgusting to give any worth to.

"Renn!" Fly shouted one last time as Fin got close enough that I could finally smell him. He smelled like everyone else did down here. They stunk. For people who lived in a place that seemed perpetually wet they sure did seem to avoid bathing.

Although I couldn't feel pain anymore... although I felt strong again, all of a sudden, I still trembled.

As if cold, my shoulders began to shiver. I held his gaze, but made sure to have my eyes wobble as well. I made sure to make them watery, and blurry. I made sure to not focus on him too hard, so that my pupils would expand enough to be noticeable.

Fin drew closer, and his smile grew larger. His eyes softened a little, and I knew it had worked.

It always did for men like him, after all.

"Let's..." Fin reached me. He extended his hand, to grab me by my right arm, near the shoulder. His hand was large, big enough that I knew he could break whatever bone wasn't broken already just from his grip.

"Renn!" Fly screamed, and stepped forward. I heard her bare feet slap the wet stone as she did so. She was about to get between us... maybe to grab me as to run. Maybe to protect me, even.

Her action had been enough though. Fin's eyes finally left me. They didn't harden, nor did he startle... but I knew it was because he didn't fear Fly. He wasn't worried about her at all. Her outburst drew his attention, but nothing more.

He knew full well she wasn't capable of hurting him. Judging from the way she had trembled and said his name, he likely knew from experience.

Yet her sudden outburst had still made him look away. Only further cementing the fact he was discounting me, as well.

Still, his hand was outstretched. Still heading for my arm. Then... right before he actually grabbed me... I charged forward.

Ducking under his arm, I put all my strength into the two steps it took to get right up next to the man. Even with the cold blood pumping through me, and most of my pain missing... I still felt the tinge of agony in my legs as I stepped down. I felt coil of muscle protesting in my calves, and I felt the lack of strength in my knees... as they almost buckled from my burst of movement.

And still, I didn't let my injuries or frailty stop me... nor did I let myself make the same mistake twice.

I'll not let what happened earlier, with that Kapli woman, happen again. Especially not when my failure didn't just mean my life... but Fly's now as well.

I ignored Fin's face, that I saw slowly turning into a frowning expression out of the corner of my eye, as I stepped right up next to him. He really was taller than Vim. He was also much wider. Yet thanks to his height, and my half crouched position, my target was in perfect positioning.

I sidestepped, and put my hands together, coiling my fingers together into a tight ball of fists, and then... as if I was swinging my sword... with all my might, weight and momentum, I swung my balled up fists into the man's groin.

The blow happened quickly, and I didn't wait to follow through. Before the man even finished releasing a moan or a groan, I swung my right arm down... right as he started to arch forward. His eyes were now wide, and his face had gone pale... hopefully from the pain more than shock, and he was starting to buckle and collapse forward. As his head, and thus his face and jaw, started swinging downward, I slid my whole body along as I swung upward.

Upper-cutting the man right in the mouth, I flinched at the impact probably as much as he did. I felt bones shatter and break, and not just the man's jaw and teeth. The ones that I really felt break were the ones in my fist. His head hadn't been anywhere near as solid as Vim's had been, but I had put far more momentum into the blow... and...

And I actually wanted this man hurt, unlike when I had hit Vim.

The second blow had connected even better than the first had... thanks to the man having fallen into it. His head snapped upward, all of the momentum of his earlier frontal fall now reversed. His head, and upper body flung backward, and the man's lower body fell downward. He landed on his knees, but they crumpled beneath him. He fell in a bundled mess, with his legs bent under him, yet his body trying to lay backward as if to lie down.

“Run, Fly!” I shouted at the stunned girl behind me. She was frozen just a foot behind me, with her hand out... she had been in the middle of grabbing me, likely.

She startled, and I grabbed her outstretched hand with my left. My right was throbbing so violently that I knew it was useless now, even though I still couldn't feel the pain just yet.

Running past the man, who was already moving and twitching, I pulled Fly towards the stairs. Both of the women shied away as we ran past, even the stout one with the knife backed away and put her back to the wall.

We ran up the dark stairwell, and I did my best to not slip and fall as we did so. The stairs were oddly slick for some reason and...

Rounding a corner, the stairwell turned and rounded itself. I slipped and hit the wall, but luckily didn't fall to the ground. I gathered myself quickly and returned to climbing the stairs with Fly.

“Renn...!” Fly cried out as we reached a new floor. One that had lights.

Yet Fly didn't let us run out into it, instead she pulled me up the next flight of stairs.

“You bitch!” a man roared angrily behind us, and my stomach knotted as I recognized the voice.

He was up already? He had crumpled! He had even been twitching!

Huffing as we climbed another flight of stairs, I glanced down to my right hand... and wished I hadn't.

My fingers were bent oddly. It was already far bigger than usual, swelling quickly. And...

Rubbing my knuckles against my side, I flinched as I felt a piece of something hard dig out of my knuckles and fall out.

Hopefully that had been a tooth and not a piece of my bone.

"Just a few more...!" Fly shouted as we rounded another corner. This floor was dark, like the one we had come from.

As we climbed, I noticed the roaring from the Master was starting to grow distant... but every so often I still heard and felt the shaking. The shaking of stone.

Maybe it wasn't actually shaking the earth, but it was the roars that were making the whole place vibrate? How did sound do that though?

"Fly... you said you live near here?" I asked her, and as I did I noticed I was out of breath.

“Huh! Yes! I think so!” she didn’t sound as exhausted as me, but she did sound stressed. Hard to blame her for that, though.

“You’ll need clothes. Or at least something to cover yourself before we get to the city,” I warned.

Fly glanced at me as we reached a new floor. Her face scrunched up in a way that told me she thought I was being ridiculous, but then her eyes hardened in cold understanding as she nodded. “Right...” she agreed.

I nodded back, and realized I too was going to need something for my ears and tail. My tail I could wrap around my waist, but the ears were a little too noticeable especially when running...

“This way,” Fly pulled me up one last stairwell, and then we exited the stairs.

Running into a new hallway, I realized we were back to the stone I was familiar with. The stone of Lumen... and we weren’t alone again.

Fly didn’t even hesitate to pull me right past two people. We ran past them so quickly I hadn’t even been able to notice if they had been human or not.

“What...!” a man’s voice shouted in shock behind us, but we ignored them as we ran down a familiar sewer hallway.

We were back near the surface. Maybe only a few floors beneath it. Good.

Rounding a corner, we hurried down a smaller hallway. One that was too small to run side by side. Fly ran in front of me, and our hands separated thanks to the new positioning.

“Just around this corner, Renn!” Fly said as we ran to a lit up hallway.

I nodded, and flinched when something dripped into my left eye. Either blood or sweat.

Rubbing my eye, I slowed a little as we rounded the hallway... then had to come to a stop as Fly did.

“Shoot...” Fly grunted as I forcefully opened my left eye, and through the blurry redness I saw the three people. They were all sitting on wooden boxes and crates, in front of what looked to be a small door.

“Oh!” Right as one of them noticed us; Fly grabbed my hand and pulled me back. We hurried away, heading down another hallway instead.

“Was that your room, Fly?” I asked as we picked up our pace. There was shouting behind us.

“They were waiting for us...!” she shouted in worry.

How though? How'd they know we had survived the fall, let alone the Master...? Was it just because the Master was making so much noise? Even up here its roars could still be clearly heard. Did they simply know something was wrong only because of that?

"There's a trash heap this way...!" Fly dragged me along, and I followed dutifully.

"Maybe we should just get up top first, Fly. We could hide until the night, if we have to," I said.

"There's a stairwell near the trash pile...!" Fly answered.

Good. We could always just find a dark alley, or an empty warehouse or something and hide in it... I could really use some rest too and...

Rounding more corners, Fly guided me to a dark room. One that stunk so badly I could barely think thanks to it.

We entered the room and Fly immediately went to one of the corners of it as to start shifting through what I only hoped and prayed was just trash.

My head thumped and rung in pain as I glanced around the room, and knew it wasn't just trash.

So this is why these people stunk so badly.

How did it get this bad when they lived in a literal sewer? Surely there was a better way...

“Here!” Fly tossed something at me. I barely grabbed it in time, but the moment I got it in my hand I wanted to drop it again. It was slimy.

Fly continued digging around, and as she did I noticed she was starting to put things on. Whatever they were, were clothes at least...

As was the thing she had tossed at me. Some kind of jacket, or cloak. It was large, large enough that I knew if I put it on I'd not need to worry. I'd stand out, thanks to the thing being so disgusting, but no one would think I was anything but some kind of homeless vagrant. They'd not be able to see my tail or ears...

Taking a deep breath, and regretting it quickly, I went ahead and put it on. The thing was a cloak, and was heavy... and not just because it was wet. It was made of thick leather, and felt rough. I fumbled with the strap that tied it to my neck, since my right hand was messed up, but I eventually got it tied.

I didn't put my arms through the two holes, since it didn't seem to have sleeves anyway.

“Ready?” Fly asked as she ran up to me.

I nodded down to the dark silhouette in front of me. She was now fully covered, in what looked to be some kind of poncho. It looked like she had wrapped it around her several times, since it was too big for her.

“The stairs around the corner lead to a warehouse. One that is only used in winter, so we can exit there and not be noticed. This way,” Fly hurried out of the room, and I was more than happy to follow her out.

Unluckily the smell of the room followed us... likely thanks to what we were wearing, but I kept my discomfort at bay as Fly took me to a new stairwell.

One that had a handrail, and was circular. Spiral. I was thankful for the handrail as we ascended it, since it made me dizzy.

“Come on, Renn, hurry!” Fly ushered me as we neared the top, and I realized I was slowing down.

“I know,” I said to her and myself.

Vim had not said it... but I knew what he expected of me.

He expected me not to just survive... but to make sure Fly did, too.

Reaching the top of the spiral staircase, I nearly couldn't catch my breath... as Fly stopped right before opening the door that led outside.

Huffing, I stared at the back of Fly's head. It was covered by her strange poncho cloak thing, but I knew what kind of face was hidden past it.

One of worry and distress.

"How many?" I asked with what little breath I could gather.

"I... I don't know. But..." Fly turned, and thanks to the angle I was able to see her expression.

She was still crying. Sobbing.

She's been sobbing this whole time, hasn't she?

She was just a girl. A child.

Like Lomi.

Stepping up past Fly, I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing as I angled my head just enough to poke my ears out from under the cloak.

Yes. Beyond the door I could hear voices.

“Sure they’re not humans?” I asked. This led to a warehouse, didn’t it?

“I smell Tarvin. He’s Kapli’s slave,” Fly whispered.

I flinched. Kapli? Why’d that name have to pop up now...? And she could smell someone? All I could smell was the horrible stuff we were wearing.

And slave...

“Is he strong...?” I asked quietly.

“I... I don’t know. I thought Fin was strong too,” Fly said.

Great.

That might also mean Kapli is beyond this door too...

Were they waiting for us? Or...

“Are there other exits? Like this one? Nearby?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “Not nearby. This warehouse is the best one around here,” she said.

Great. That would at least explain why they were in it then. Maybe they weren’t waiting for us, in a trap, but instead were just congregating in a place they all knew and found relatively safe.

Stepping down the stairs, I tried to listen for any sounds behind us. This stairwell wasn’t big, but it circled around in an odd way... it made sounds sound odd, and distorted. I heard the Master’s roars, but felt like I could hear other things too. Were those voices coming from beyond the door behind me, or down the stairs?

“Beyond the door, Fly... how far to the exit? Of the warehouse?” I asked Fly gently.

“Huh? Not far. It’s to the right. In fact it’s only a few seconds away,” she said.

“We’re going to rush out. I want you to run straight for that door. And get out, and then run to the Society. To the Animalia Guild. Go to Merit,” I said.

Fly's face contorted into cold understanding, far beyond her age, and I hated the sight of it. For her to understand so readily told me just how horrible her life has been up till this point.

She understood sacrifice well.

Too well.

"Renn..." She started to sob again, and I smiled at her.

"I'll be right behind you. I'm not going to just give up... but I'm slowing down. I want you to go get Merit, so she can come help me if I stumble, okay?" I asked her. Begged her.

Fly's face scrunched up even more and her mouth started to wobble something fierce as she nodded.

"Merit. Or Brom. Or Reatti..." I whispered... and wondered if I'd even last long enough for them to get here.

Fly was quick. She could run to the Animalia building rather swiftly, especially with such emotion powering her legs. But...

But it'd still take time. Minutes. Many minutes. Then she'd have to guide Merit or whoever came here...

If they even came.

“I came back to get you, Renn. It isn’t supposed to be like this,” Fly cried.

Ah. Right.

She had come back. For me. After hearing I had been captured.

Reaching out, I wrapped the young girl in a hug. I knew she had feathers all over under the cloak, so I knew I probably wasn’t being gentle and was causing her discomfort... but I still squeezed her, with probably a little too much strength.

“You did great. Now... promise me Fly. You’re going straight to Merit. Don’t stop. No matter what,” I said to the girl crying in my arms.

She nodded, and I heard her try and whisper something but couldn’t through her sobs.

“Welcome to the Society Fly. I’m sorry it happened like this... but you’ll see it’s worth it. In the end, it’s worth it,” I said.

It had been for me, after all.

She nodded again.

“Move!” a man’s voice filtered up the stairwell. Far enough to echo, but close enough to make my heart heavy.

That was Fin. I didn’t like how I recognized his voice so easily already.

“Alright. Let’s do this,” I said as I separated from Fly. Before I did, I patted her on the shoulders. As I did, I realized how... small she really was. She was thin, too thin. Even with layers of grimy cloaks on her, she felt far too tiny for one covered in so many feathers.

“Stand tall, Fly,” I said to her.

She stared up at me, and I could tell she wasn’t really sure what I meant. But that was okay. It took me awhile to figure it out too.

“Right,” Fly nodded, deciding to simply agree.

I nodded back... then turned as to open the door.

Yet before I could, someone else opened it.

Chapter 180 A Flower's Roar

Sliding under the tentacle, I kept my eyes open even as my face was splashed with blood.

It was like running into a waterfall, and the gunk stung strangely but I had to ignore it. There were other things to dodge after, and I needed to stop getting caught by them. There was no time to close my eyes.

Leaping over another smaller tentacle, I fell back to the ground and rushed forward towards the main body. The room was now full of its tentacles, all of varying sizes, yet most were those that had sharp barbs. Like thorny roots, they kept trying to wrap themselves around me. Half of my shirt was missing. The only reason I still even had what was left clinging to me was only doing so thanks to the blood.

Regrettably, not just the creatures blood either.

I've torn and damaged dozens of its tentacles, especially the smaller ones that I could easily get a hold on, but it was starting to feel like a pointless endeavor.

For each one I tore two more broke through the stone.

This thing had hundreds of roots, and they were all being brought to war.

War against me.

The creature let loose a bellow as it shifted, trying to turn aside as I ran up to it. The thing realized I was targeting its eyes, so it kept trying to protect them from me. All that did was make me want to crush them even more.

A massive root rolled to my right, preparing to fly out and crush me. Unlike the others that moved quickly, that one was the slowest. It looked like it was connected directly underneath the creature's body... maybe the main one. But although slow it was still dangerous. It was as thick as the massive trees outside of the city, and I knew even I wouldn't just get up and walk away if I got crushed by it. At least not right away.

"Should have brought an axe," I complained as I ducked an arm sized tentacle root. After dodging it, I turned sideways to dodge another that slammed downward next to me.

I pushed off the tentacle that slammed next to me to give me the momentum needed to spin around all the way as to avoid tripping. I changed the route I had been running originally, and went a little more to the right instead. Too many tentacles had been readied to attack me from the other direction.

The thing was completely focused on me, and luckily wasn't the smartest flower to exist. It kept trying to grab me with its tentacles instead of just outright crushing me. Maybe it still wanted to eat me, and knew from experience that a fully crushed body was hard to scrape off the stone.

If it just bundled up all of its tentacle roots at once and rushed at me, I'd have no way to escape or dodge them.

But that didn't mean it wouldn't resort to such a tactic once I pushed it closer to the edge of death.

Jumping over a root that was still half submerged in the stones, I noticed the way it didn't even move as I leapt over it.

Too slow to use it to stop me, or was it a type of root it didn't have much control over? It looked like it had tried to pull it out from the ground yet it had gotten stuck.

The thing was such an oddity. A beast, yet not. Plant like, with thorns and fibers, yet it bled warm blood.

Running through a patch of hundreds of little tiny root tentacles, I ignored the feeling of them grabbing at my feet and ankles. Some were able to latch on and tear into my leather boots and pants, but most couldn't grab hold in time... or simply got crushed under my boot as I trampled them.

Now close to the thing I was deep into the thick green haze it's been spewing out. I had no choice but to breathe when needed, especially when I was about to put a great amount of effort into something.

Like jumping up onto the thing again.

Sucking in the rust tasting air, I jumped up onto the creature's main body. It recoiled and roared at the feeling of me landing upon it, and the moment I was on it the little hair like tentacles all over its body immediately began thrashing and trying to cling to me. I wasted no time in climbing the beast's body, hurrying to the thing's head.

Since it had turned a little, the larger eyeballs were on the other side of it, near the mouth, but there were some here too. I dodged a flailing limb that came crashing down where I had been a heartbeat earlier, and heard the sound of the smaller hair like roots get torn and crushed in the process.

Glancing down at my feet as I stepped aside and closer to one of the eyeballs, I noticed that it did indeed break and destroy some of the smaller tentacles on its main body from that impact.

Did it even realize it was hurting itself? Size wise, those little hairs would be something akin to a beard on a man. Noticeable but sometimes not.

But no matter.

Instead of stepping down onto the eye, this time I chose to kneel down next it. I stared into the bulbous black orb, and realized it wasn't really an insect eye at all. It was more amphibian in structure. Instead of being many thousands of tiny layers it was a giant single ball... it was just deformed and so solid black in color that I had mistaken it for an insect's eye.

The large round eye stared at me, and for a tiny moment I saw the huge pupil that nearly took up the whole sphere on its own... grow a little wider as I pulled back my arm and made a fist.

Right as I took a breath and steeled myself, I heard it too inhale. It sucked in air to such a degree I actually felt the pull of it, and out of the corner of my eye saw the green haze flow wildly in the air around the beast as to head for the mouth.

Then before it could release its scream, I gave it a better reason to do so.

Punching the eye, I delved my fist deep into the thing. I punched through the glob of the eye. I felt my fist push aside muscle tendons and ligaments, and kept forcing my arm into the beast until I was nearly shoulder deep.

Forcing my arm so deep made me have to lean down closer to the beast. I had to put my face right up against the spurting goop the eye was spewing, and the flailing little root tentacle hairs that surrounded it.

I ignored the tentacles as they grabbed and slapped me, just as I ignored the beast as it let loose its deepest and loudest roar yet. I ignored the sound of tentacles, the big ones, slamming around me. Not just on the walls, floor and ceiling of the room but even its own body. It was in such pain it couldn't even attack me correctly.

Feeling around for something similar to a nerve group, bones or really anything... I finally found something. Something thick enough that I knew it wasn't just muscle. Something malleable, so not bone.

Grabbing it, the moment I gripped it I felt a tremble. A shiver. A shudder... as the creature actually went still.

Then I pulled.

Standing up as I heaved, I pulled my arm and hand out of the things eye socket... Pushing aside the remains of the eye I had ruptured, my hand popped out and within it I saw the white nerves wrapping my fist.

The nerves didn't want to pop out, not entirely, and for a small fraction of a moment I was tugging on something connected to the beast. Then the next moment, after putting a little more strength into it, the then snapped somewhere.

With the snap, I fell backwards and away from the beast. I had been stretched a little, trying to tug out the nerves I had grabbed hold of, so my footing hadn't been the best...

As I fell backward, I noticed the way the creature's tentacles had all gone...

Strangely still.

Had I actually grabbed something important? Was I that lucky? This thing was huge... it probably had countless miles of such nerves within it... Though maybe there would be something important connected to an eyeball, even if it had dozens of them.

"Serves you..." I started to taunt the thing, but the rest of my words disappeared as the thing released a shrill screech.

Even I flinched and closed my eyes as I rolled down and off the things body. I felt myself hit a tentacle, one that was coiling around itself, and then felt the hard stone ground as I landed on it.

The thing screeched a high-pitched shriek; nothing like the deep guttural growls and roars it had been doing until now. The sound was ear piercing, mind piercing, and made me wobble as I tried to stand up.

Through half closed eyes I barely made out the thing as it tilted oddly. Its main body began to bend... like a tree about to fall over, as its shrill became even louder.

Stepping away a few feet I glanced around and wondered if I should attack it again. Maybe rip another one of things out? None of the things tentacles were moving at all. Even though it was screaming, and bending in an odd way, none of its tentacles were even twitching. Even the ones in the air, lifted and poised likely from earlier as it thrashed around, were motionless.

I had definitely hurt the thing. In a bad way... But this was a strange way for it to react to such damage.

My head throbbing started to dull as my body got used to the horrid sound... which I noticed wasn't ending.

Did it have lungs? If so how big were they?

Stepping forward, I found one of the larger eyes. One that was bundled near others. It was almost three times bigger than the one I had just attacked, and was situated in a spot that was perfect for my next target. Thanks to the way the creature was bending sideways, it had made that eye and those around it pointed upward towards the ceiling... making it easy for me to attack it. I'd basically be standing on flat ground as I did, once I got up there.

I smiled as I started another attack. I rushed forward, jumping up onto one of the larger root tentacles. It was easy now that none of them were moving.

Maybe I had torn a part of its central nerve system. If so then maybe a few more similar attacks would put this thing down for good.

Leaping off the root I was on and onto the main body, I felt my smile grow into a wry smirk as I started to climb up the body. The mouth wasn't far, but I ignored it. It was wide and open, but it was still screeching madly. Not a threat at the moment.

Even the little hairs on the body weren't moving. They now felt oddly hard as I stepped on them. Before they'd get crushed and smooshed, now they felt more like the roots they looked like.

A few steps away from the large eye that was my target, I reached the grouping of the smaller eyes. I made sure to step on a few of them as I walked amongst them, stepping on the smaller ones as I went to the big one.

"Mistake," I barely said the word, even though I couldn't hear it thanks to the screeching, before I was hit.

I scrunched up, curling my arm and leg inward and to my right side as to absorb as much of the blow as possible.

Once again being sent into the air, I had no time to even try and count the moments before I impacted.

The rock around me crunched and broke. Even the loud screeching seemed to momentarily fade out in the distance, and for who knows how long I only heard and felt my heartbeat.

It thumped. It, like always, barely changed in its beating. It thumped slowly. Hard. Continuously... no matter what happened to my body. No matter what was going on in my head.

No matter how violent the world was my heart like always thumped solidly. Steadily.

Unending.

I focused on it, and hated every moment it continued to beat.

Then noise returned. Like a far off ringing, the things screeching slowly returned to my ears... until it was loud again.

And once the screeching was loud enough to hurt my head again, I realized something very important.

I was still in the air.

Dangling, I coughed and felt the tug of gravity. My arms and legs were dangling downward... and...

Blinking blurry eyes, I groaned as I realized I was in the ceiling. I hadn't been sent into the wall like I had been done before. It had hit me at an angle... sending me upward...

Shifting, I felt the rocks and stone I was stuck in shift and resist. Most of my body and waist was easily a foot or two deep into the stone. It held me in place, and I wondered if I was stuck like this from a singular blow or many.

Had it hit me more than once?

Staring down at the beast, I frowned at the sight of it being a little brighter than before.

Why did it look brighter? I could now see the blood leaking from it a little more. Glistening as if from...

The thing twisted and shook violently beneath me. Its tentacles were flailing wildly again, but this time without any seeming rhyme or reason. They were slapping against each other, the ground and walls. Some were even coiling around each other, like snakes did when mating.

"Pissed? Me too," I said as I coughed again.

Was the coughing from the impact or the haze I kept breathing?

I hadn't coughed up blood yet... but I felt as if I should. How long has it been since I had been hit that hard? That Monarch with Oplar... Had it actually been not that long ago? Usually I went years and years between such...

“Ah.”

My shifting had done the job. I felt myself start to slide out the hole, and I hurriedly glanced down right beneath me to see where I'd be landing... or rather, what I'd be landing on.

A bunch of smaller tentacles. Great. More cuts and gashes.

Still...

Falling out of the hole, I fell alongside a large piece of stone. One that thumped me in the shoulder as I fell to the ground.

Before landing on the bundle of tentacles, I glanced up at the spot I had just fallen from. Sure enough, not far from the spot where I had been lodged into... was a hole. One larger than the hole I had just fallen out of.

A bright white light peered from the hole. Illuminating the room, and brightening the green air swirling within.

Sunlight.

It had broken enough of the roof to reveal sunlight.

Just where were we? I thought we were several floors beneath the surface...

Landing in the bundle of tentacles, I didn't give them a chance to coil around me. I leapt out of them the moment after I landed and got my feet under me. The tentacles all around me went into a frenzy upon it noticing me. I had hoped it would have thought I was just another piece of stone from the ceiling falling, but it must have enough feeling in its roots to notice when something actually pushes against them. It didn't just feel, it could judge what it was feeling.

Even when furious.

Its screeching became a little deeper as it shifted into a roar, and suddenly I was back into battle.

I dodged. I ducked. I jumped over those too low to do anything else. I was hit by those I deemed not worth dodging, and I grabbed and tore and ripped those I felt I could do so without endangering myself more than necessary.

My mind went dull as this continued for a moment. Then another. And another. The green air swirled around me when I rushed forward, or tentacles flew past. Blood drenched me, and then dried enough to become itchy... only for me to get drenched again.

As it did everything it could to hit me, I realized it was no longer trying to just grab me. It was willing to crush me now. Now I was no longer food or a simple pest... now I was its enemy.

It didn't just acknowledge me. It hated me.

"Hate," I hissed the word as I ducked a strangely barbed tentacle. I had barely noticed that its barbs were a little... oddly shaped as it flew past my head. They had looked different in color, for some reason.

Maybe it was the light. The sunlight. Or maybe the hole was allowing the air to thin out a little. It hadn't seemed to spew any of that haze lately either, even though it was screaming so much.

Maybe it had run out of whatever it was.

Hopefully the haze wouldn't seep out into Lumen, or contaminate the water supply...

Would its body? Once it was dead?

"Focus," I chastised myself for letting my thoughts wonder as I grabbed a tentacle that had been able to wrap around my arm. It was a long and thin one, which ran along the floor nearby. I stepped over to it, and with a quick motion stepped down upon it and tore it in two.

The smaller tentacle spurted blood, yet the beast didn't seem to register the damage this time. Either it was too small, or the creature was now in so much pain and so furious it didn't even notice it anymore.

Hopefully Renn and Fly were far away. By now they had to be... Odds were this thing had pulled its roots from a great distance. The hole in the ceiling might have been amplified by its roots being moved.

Running along a huge tentacle that was starting to rise up off the ground, I glanced to the wall where I thought the hallway was. To see if it was still intact, or broken and collapsed.

Oddly it wasn't where I thought it was. Instead it was on the wall to its direct left. I had gotten turned around during the fight.

It was broken, but not completely collapsed. I could see the darkness deep into it. Only a part of its entrance was broken off. Likely from a tentacle slamming into it.

I was glad they hadn't stayed... but at the same time upset I had not gone with them.

I should have escorted them back. This thing was immobile, it seemed. Stuck in place.

But I hadn't known that. I hadn't known it was a flower at first and...

"Master!"

Jumping up onto the large tentacle that was now a few feet off the ground, I turned to find the voice I surely had mistakenly heard.

No. I hadn't.

Looking upward, I stared at the odd sight of someone dangling from the main hole in the center of the room. The one that Fly and Renn had been tossed into.

"Master! Please!" the deep voice of a terrified man shouted, trying his best to be heard over the creature's screams and roars.

He was dangling from a rope, which was tied around his waist... but he was holding it with both of his arms so he was clinging to it as much as he was dangling.

What was he doing?

Glancing at the creature, I shifted my weight as the tentacle lifted itself higher. It began to move faster through the air, likely because it knew now I was on top of it. It was curling inward, likely to take me over to where a large cluster of its bigger tentacles were.

I let it for a moment as I studied the beast, all the while the man from the rope kept shouting for its attention.

Would it notice his cries? Why would it? Surely it had no reasoning. Or did it... and I had simply hurt this thing too much too quickly for me to have noticed?

“Master! Please! Calm yourself!” the man was pleading, and for some reason sounded genuine. As if he was as worried for his supposed master as he was himself.

“Fanatics,” I cursed them as I rushed forward down the tentacle, to head for the main body.

Upon my movement the tentacle shifted, and began to rise upward. But it was slow, even though I could tell it was doing all it could to lift it as fast as possible.

It was time I finished this. Especially now that it was starting to expose itself. If it kept flailing like this, it'd bring the whole ceiling down upon us.

I'd survive... but sadly, so likely would this thing.

Which meant this thing would be out in the open. No longer sealed in. No longer just a caged beast.

The possible deaths of innocents in Lumen were one thing. I didn't like it, even when humans suffered from such chaos... but their deaths weren't serious enough for me to care too much. However this thing wasn't great enough to kill them all. It wasn't powerful enough to survive the wrath of Lumen. A place crawling with mercenaries and knights. Although they would panic at first, and it'd wreak havoc... it'd eventually be subdued.

Humans banded together strongly when such monsters came hunting.

And all it would do, other than kill hundreds if not thousands... would shed light on its existence.

And those like it.

Humans forgot. Over time. But it'd take generations for them to forget this thing.

This would become legend. They'd make statues out of it. Write books of it. Study it.

I needed to kill it before it became that much of a threat.

Running along the tentacle towards the main body, I glared at the mouth. The huge teeth lining it. The blood and gunk flying out of it as it roared at me. It really was big. Nearly as wide as the thing's whole body. Far too big to be natural. Too deformed. Teeth weren't just inside the mouth, but outside it... growing like exposed bone and horns, poking out of torn flesh.

No more small wounds. No more crushed eyes.

Something with blood would have a heart.

So it was time I crushed it.

“Master! Calm yourself!” the man from up above screamed, and I hoped his master noticed him. Just so it’d kill him and shut him up.

Reaching the main body, I leapt off the tentacle. This time though, I didn’t land on its main body. Nor did I land anywhere with those little hairs either.

Jumping into the thing’s open mouth, as it roared, I took a deep breath as I entered the dark green haze.