

Non Human 181

Chapter 181 A Quill To Escape

Being grabbed was a surprise, but not so great a one I let it stop me.

The hand that grabbed me had done so by the top of the cloak I wore. I felt my hair and my left ear get grabbed too. But whoever's hand, or well whatever type of hand they had, was malformed. It was missing fingers, and wasn't grabbing too hard.

Plus they let me go thanks to shock, when I ran right into them and pushed them away from the door.

"Run, Fly!" I shouted as I pushed over the person who had grabbed me. They fell to the ground with a shocked scream, and between their voice and a quick glance down at them I realized it was a woman. One not much larger than me.

And not a human. She had strangely shaped hands, and her face was a dark red... as if freshly burnt from long hours in the sun.

Stepping towards her, I didn't hesitate as I went right up to where her head was and swung back my leg. From the moment I prepared the kick, to connecting my foot to her face, I scanned the rest of the area.

Three other people were readily visible. The place was a little dark, but nothing like the darkness that Fly and I had just ran from. Rays of sunlight peered in from all over, from the walls and ceiling. From holes, not windows. This place was decrepit.

And filthy.

There were boxes, barrels, and piles of trash... reminiscent of the stuff downstairs. Were these people just filthy?

I didn't recognize any of the three still standing people, or the woman I had just kicked, and was really thankful for it.

Good thing it wasn't that Kapli. Since I knew I couldn't beat her.

A burst of movement made me spin my head around, and I felt relief wash through me as I watched Fly.

Fly hadn't lied. Off to the right was indeed a door. One that looked bent and wobbly yet was closed. It obviously led outside, based off the rays of light from all around its edges.

Fly was running to it. She blocked it from my sight after a moment. I couldn't help but bless her for doing what I had begged her to. Thank goodness she hadn't hesitated. Thank goodness she didn't try and stay to help.

"What the hell!" a man shouted, nearly as high pitched a scream as the woman I had just startled and pushed over.

Stepping up against the woman, I kicked her again. This time in her stomach. She let loose a strange guffaw as I kicked all the air out of her.

I felt horrible... yet knew better than to stop. This woman had grabbed me upon opening the door. She hadn't hesitated.

Even if she looked like a feeble woman right now, being brutally assaulted and abused by me...

She was my enemy.

She was the Societies enemy.

Kicking her again, this time I felt my foot hit something a little harder than the stuff before. Something denser... even though I had still kicked her plainly in the waist.

She let loose a shriek of pain, and began to curl up as to defend herself. She covered herself with her strange hands, shouting wordless shrieks. Likely begging for help, or for me to stop... yet she had no air in her lungs, so couldn't formulate a proper word.

Kicking her one last time, I heaved a deep breath and turned around. To look at the door I had just been pulled out of.

It was open, leading to the dark stairwell I had just been in... and I knew soon it'd be the source of my demise.

That man. Fin. Or others, would be here soon... and...

"Who the hell are you!" one of the people behind me shouted. A woman's voice. One I hadn't really studied yet.

I ignored her, and the others, and hurriedly went to a pile of boxes next to the door. They were stacked high, higher than twice my own height, and looked heavy.

Going round them, I positioned myself at just the right angle to push them over in front of the door. I put my hands up against them, and flinched at both the pain touching the boxes brought, and the sight of my mangled fingers.

My right hand was definitely the worst off, but my pinky and middle finger on my left were also bent askew and already inflamed to twice their size.

Ignoring the pain, I pushed with all my might.

At first the boxes didn't move, and I panicked at the thought of me being unable to block the door. I needed to. The four others in this warehouse, at least the three still standing, were dangerous enough as it was. Plus I knew that Fin man would not be someone I could handle if he got here.

Plus I knew I'd not be able to escape them in time.

The idea of running away from them on open flat ground, like through the streets of Lumen, was an impossibly daunting thought.

Then, right before I gave up and decided to switch tactics, the boxes actually shifted. The one I was pushing, which was the second up from the floor in the stack, moved with a loud clang. The things were metal, and seemed to have metal stuff inside too.

I couldn't help but grin and laugh a little as I heaved the tower of boxes over. They fell loudly, banging against the wall the door was built into. One of the boxes rolled away, too far away to be useful, but the rest landed right in front of the door. Two of them even landed on top of one another, blocking the door nearly in its entirety.

Of course I knew that someone like Fin could probably move them aside... but it might give me just that much more time to escape.

"Chaney are you okay?" a man cried out. He was kneeling down next to the woman I had just kicked several times, and I felt a tinge of regret at the sight of the man's face.

He was terrified. He was crying, and his face was contorted in such a way it was as if he was the one I had just brutally assaulted.

"What the hell is going on?" another man asked. He was looking around at me and the rest with an expression that told me he genuinely was shocked.

“Are you why the Master’s so angry?” the woman asked. I noticed the way her fists were balled up... and the look on her face.

Why did it seem like the women of our race were the ones I needed to fear most?

“Chaney is hurt bad!” the man turned to his friends and nearly screamed at them.

“Shut up! Parkly, we need to grab her. She’s obviously got something to do with Master’s outburst!” the woman turned to the other man, while pointing at me.

“I agree. She looks as if she’s been beaten quite a bit already. Maybe Aunt’s doing?” the man frowned at me as he stepped forwards and towards me.

Great.

He was shorter than Vim... and looked a little old, but was still bigger than me in both size and weight. I couldn’t see any obvious non-human traits on him, but even if he was just a human I was in no condition to take him lightly.

Glancing at the door, it was open now. I flinched at the bright sunlight gleaming off the ground and stone just outside the door and looked away.

So Fly had escaped...

Could I too?

I had to try.

Stepping forward, I rounded one of the boxes I had just pushed over. Although it had blocked the door, for now, it had also blocked my escape route.

The man stood up straighter, and I realized he thought I was stepping towards him as to fight.

Glancing at the others, I quickly figured out how I was going to do this.

The woman I had kicked was out of commission, for at least the moment. She was curled up on the ground, being held by the man worrying for her. He too was likely not an immediate threat... though if he was that emotional over her it was likely she was someone important to him. That meant the sorrow and panic he was feeling now would eventually become rage. Especially if she succumbed to the injuries I had given her in the next few moments.

Other than the man approaching me, the other woman was the only one I needed to immediately worry about. She too was heading towards us... but was walking slower than the man was. Unlike him, she was definitely not a human. She had large animal ears on the side of her head. They were floppy and covered in fur, but the fur was different colored than the hair on her head.

She wouldn't be able to go outside. But the two men could. They both looked human enough.

Though she could probably wear a cloak or jacket, as I did...

Taking a few breaths, I planned my attack.

I was just going to run to the door. But I knew he would catch me before I made it. So my plan was to skid to a stop a few feet from the door, right when he would go to grab me... and turn and elbow him. Hopefully in someplace very effective. If I was lucky he'd fumble, maybe even drop in shock and pain, and I'd be able to run outside before anyone could get a hold of me.

Then... right before I turned and ran...

The whole world shook.

I fumbled, and fell against one of the boxes. I flinched as the whole world grew... angry.

It rumbled. It roared. The ground beneath me was moving so wildly, it actually hurt. I kept being pushed every which way; as was the box I had fallen up against. One moment I was sitting up against the box, the next the box was slamming into me and sending me several feet away. Amidst the roaring of the shaking world, was the obvious destruction that accompanied it.

Windows shattering. Boxes and barrels falling over, crashing into one another and breaking. Walls creaking, the roof cracking and breaking. Wooden beams, supporting the whole building, cracked loudly as even they succumbed to the movement.

The sound of terrified screams could be heard, but I couldn't make out what anyone was saying. Especially since the screams weren't coming just from the people in the warehouse.

Rolling on the ground, I covered my head and wondered if Vim was okay. This was undoubtedly the Master's... somehow... which meant he was directly involved in this. And if it was this bad up here, so far away... then...!

Something heavy broke nearby. Its breakage, and following collapse, was somehow as loud as the very shaking which had done the damage. I flinched as what sounded like an entire building collapsed around me.

Half expecting to be crushed, I scrunched up even more as I felt the impact of things far heavier than I falling around me. I felt small things hit my back, like heavy raindrops or clumps of dirt... then the world went still.

Still curled up and covering my head... I couldn't see anything. But I heard the chaos around me.

The people in the warehouse. One of them was screaming. From pain. One of the men.

There were other screams too. Off in the distance. All around us. People all over the area were shouting, and none of them sounded happy.

I could hear things still breaking. What sounded like stone rumbling down a mountain was somewhere to my right, outside of the warehouse. Glass was still shattering, and...

Lifting my head, I peered at the bright sunlit area around me.

Half of the roof had collapsed. It had landed nearby. Parts of it were scattered around me and I was covered in shards of glass and broken metal pieces.

Slowly sitting up, I was now thankful for the heavy cloak I was wearing. Even if it still stunk horribly. It was likely the only reason I hadn't gotten too hurt. I quickly felt around my body, and luckily didn't feel anything more than I had already been feeling.

The woman I had kicked... and the man who had been tending her hadn't been as lucky.

A huge wooden beam had landed on them. The woman was completely under it, only one of her legs was sticking out, and the man who had been kneeling next to her was scraping at the ground... trying to pull himself free from under it.

"Help...!" he shouted a gargled word, and I shivered at the sound of death.

He was crushed. It was a miracle he was still alive. Maybe he wasn't human. Only his chest and upper body was free, and he kept trying to drag himself free of the huge beam. His fingers dug into the dirt ground as he tried to claw himself away.

Glancing at the other two, I flinched at the sight of blood. The man who had been heading for me was on his knees, and was holding his head.

Was that a piece of metal? It was lodged into the side of his head, and was poking out right under his right eye.

I had to look away from the carnage, it was disgusting. Even if I had just been planning to hurt him myself, it still made me wheezy.

The other woman seemed to have been lucky like me. She was already on her feet and was looking around in pure shock. She couldn't believe it anymore than I did.

"Parkly...!" the woman noticed the man with the metal in his head and rushed to his side.

I coughed... and decided it was time I left.

If anything to get away from this area. I hadn't gotten hurt, luckily, but that didn't mean...

Wait...

“Fly...!” I stood as I realized she was likely still nearby. Maybe even close enough that she might have gotten hurt in the chaos too!

Standing on unsteady feet, I turned and was about to step away. Towards the door, but it was gone.

A small hill of debris was now all that remained of the door.

“Shoot.” I was definitely disoriented. But I knew it wasn’t from the shaking just now. I was starting to succumb to my injuries. I felt light headed. I should have noticed the door being blocked first.

Looking around, I quickly found a spot I could use to escape. It was opposite of where the door had been, and was where most of the ceiling had collapsed. But it had done so in a way that would let me escape easily. The roof had taken half the wall with it. I’d easily be able to clamber over what little was in the way and get out.

Turning as to head that way, I barely made it three steps before I was hit from the side.

Falling to the ground, my vision went fuzzy as I was tackled. We hit the ground hard, but what hurt the most was the stuff I fell on. Even through the thick cloak I felt stuff pierce and stab me, especially my back.

“You!” the woman screamed at me as she sat on me. I struggled to push her off, and hated how weak I felt as she grabbed the cloak I wore and lifted me upward towards her.

“Look what you’ve done!” she shouted at me. The cloak I wore fell back, and I flinched at the sight of the woman’s fury. She was so furious that she had huge bulging veins all over her forehead and in her neck.

I tried to wiggle my legs out from under her, but wasn’t able to get any leverage. She was oddly heavy, even though she didn’t seem much larger than me.

“This is all your fault! The Master will eat everyone now!” she shook me, pushing and pulling me by the cloak in her fury. My whole body screamed at me in distress as I was shaken like a little child.

She was strong. Or I was simply far too weak, especially right now.

“I didn’t do anything!” I shouted at her as I slid my arms in-between hers, as to push her back and away from me.

The moment I slid them between hers though, I regretted it.

Sharp stinging pain made me pull my arms back, and as I did I saw the cause. Long thin needles were suddenly poking out of my arms.

They didn’t look like knives... more like...

“Spines...?” I groaned at the number of them. There was at least a dozen now firmly lodged into my forearms. With every twitch and movement I could feel them digging deeper, and even scraping bone.

“The Master’ll devour us all! Once you wake them up they don’t go back to sleep until full! You’ve killed us all!” the woman didn’t even seem to notice that I had been stabbed by her spines, or quills, and she kept on shaking me.

Luckily she didn’t just... lie down and hug me. From what I could tell her spines weren’t on her hands but her arms. Maybe even her chest and upper torso too, since I didn’t feel any poking me from her legs or waist.

“You’re the ones who tossed me down there!” I shouted back at her.

“Raggh!” she screamed wordlessly at me, and then slammed me down against the ground.

The impact surprisingly didn’t hurt much, but she didn’t stop. She leaned forward and started to hit me.

Her punches, even though I had thought her strong, really didn’t hurt much. She was erratic. I felt her fists not only hit my face and shoulder, but sometimes miss me entirely and hit the ground beneath me.

I wasn’t going to just lay here and let her vent her fury on me. Even if she was covered in spines. Even if she was... well...

Partly correct.

Through squeezed eyes, I clenched my teeth and waited until she lifted her right arm high up. The moment she brought her right fist down, I slid to the right. She hit the ground, and I quickly sat straight up.

Hitting her in the nose with my forehead, I felt the crunch of bone as the impact actually sent her backwards and off me.

Crawling out from under her, I ignored the ringing in my head as I turned away and stood. She was groaning angrily, but wasn't out of the fight just yet. She got to her feet nearly as fast as I did.

Hurrying away from her I ran past the broken beam that had landed on the man and woman. He was no longer moving, or screaming for help. Running past their bodies I went straight for the broken part of the wall.

"Stop her!" the woman shouted behind me, and I didn't like the way she had screamed.

That had been said to someone. Someone else.

I didn't look back behind me and instead focused on escaping. I reached the crumbled wall, and almost fell when I had to jump over a broken bundle of wood. Maybe from one of the boxes or barrels.

Tripping over some broken bricks, I reached the outside and found myself in an alley. It was not the biggest, but it was also now... full of junk. Half the warehouse wall had collapsed into it, and it seemed this building hadn't been the only one to collapse.

I ran the direction that had the least amount of blockage, to ensure I wouldn't fall and stumble. Running with all my might, I quickly reached the end of the alley and found it leading me down another. A quick glance down both directions made me hesitate. Both had chaos. One had what seemed to be entire buildings littering it; the other wasn't as full of debris but led to a fire.

"Bitch!"

Jumping at the voice, I made a single glance behind me and then decided to run towards the fire. The other way would have me clambering over what seemed like hills of stone and broken buildings. Nothing I could handle right now in my condition.

I didn't need to look too closely at the man following me.

Fin.

So that was who that spine woman had been shouting to.

He must have emerged from the door when she had tackled me.

Running with all my might, I barely registered the chaos all around me.

Buildings were falling apart. There were fires. Screams of pain and shouts for help in the area all around me. Parts of the ground were fractured and shifted. Entire sections of brick were extruding upward, as if something heavy had hit them from beneath.

That creature... had it really done all this?

Hopefully Vim was okay.

Though something told me he was doing better than me.

Reaching the fire, I felt a bit of relief as I ran past it. It might grow into a raging inferno soon, but right now it was only a single floor of a building... and most of the flames had yet to breach past the windows and broken walls and out into the alleyway.

“You can’t run!” Fin shouted behind me, and I hated how close he already sounded. He sounded closer than the roaring flames I had just ran past.

Reaching a corner, I took a right. I had no time to decide which one to take, but hoped it led me out into the open... maybe a main road, with lots of people.

If I was lucky I’d run out into the main roads and find a bunch of knights or something. They’d at least protect me momentarily, letting me escape... after all Fin was a large man, and I looked like a young woman.

Instead of running out into a main road I instead ran into a smaller alleyway. One not as littered as the last, but it was angled oddly... I felt myself actually running uphill, and it hurt.

Heaving as I ran as hard as I could, I knew it wasn't enough. I was horribly slow.

A brief memory of running around the smithy came and went. Yes. That was what I felt like. Worse than that.

Vim had told me that I would someday know my true limit.

Well...

Here it was.

Hitting an upturned brick, I let out a yelp as I tumbled headfirst.

Rolling forward, I ignored all the pain and focused instead on the horrid acceptance.

This was it.

I'd stumble. I'd get up. Shakily... then I'd fight.

I'd fight with all I had. Tooth and nail. Till my last breath.

Then I'd die.

Because I was exhausted. Because I was weak.

Coming to a stop, I groaned as I lay in a rubble filled puddle. The water, although was old and nasty... felt good on my cheek.

I heard footsteps. Heavy ones. A heavy breathing man, heaving as he slowed in his approach.

Fin was here.

Blinking, I stared at the dirty wall nearby. It looked... old. Grimy. The stone was cracked, and not just from the violent shaking earthquake just now. That stone was possibly as old as me.

It was such a strange thing to notice in my final moments.

Taking a breath, I coughed out some water that had gone up my nose during my inhale. Then I tried to stand.

And failed to do so.

Wincing at the horrid pain, I groaned as I rolled my arms under me, and then regretted it. The spines in my forearms poked and prodded not just my chest and underarms thanks to my curling up, but dug deeper into my arms too.

Right. Spines stuck in my arms.

Broken hand. Broken bones. Fractured skull...

Some protector.

“You’re... either very lucky Renn, or out of luck entirely.”

The familiar voice made my eyes water as I looked up, and my mouth actually started to tremble as I stared up at Brom.

“Brom...?” I couldn’t believe it.

He smiled at me and knelt down. As he did I noticed that he held his spear. It was... oddly shinny, maybe because of the sunlight. Had he just polished it?

“Yeesh... don’t pull those out. Those are quills. What’d you do, hug a porcupine?” Brom asked as he grabbed my hand.

My hands were clenched in fists, so he actually grabbed my balled up fist. With a strangely gentle yet firm grip, Brom helped me to my feet.

Water splashed beneath me as I heaved a sob... which turned into a tiny, painful, laugh.

“Uh... well... not exactly,” I couldn’t help but chuckle at him. He sounded so amused, but I could hear the deep worry in his voice. One didn’t need to see the concern on his face to tell how he was likely just doing his best to keep the spirits lifted.

Before I or Brom could say anything more, right as I stood up fully... a man began to scream.

Turning quickly, I realized I had forgotten about Fin. He had been right behind me and...

I felt my eyes go wide upon the sight. Not too far down the alley, was Fin. He was up against the wall, and flailing around. Or rather... he was trying to flail around.

Wrapped around his waist, with her little arms, was Merit.

She clung to him in such a way that her feet weren't even touching the ground. Her feet and legs flailed nearly as much as Fin did as he shook and did everything he could to pull Merit off him... Yet no matter how much he pulled. No matter how hard he hit. Or how much he tried to pry her arms off him...

Merit hung on.

"What's...?" I couldn't comprehend what I was seeing. Weird noises, like hundreds of little pops and crackles, were echoing in the alley... all the while Merit flashed white and blue.

Actually it looked like the air around Merit was flashing. And with each flash Fin shook. Each flash made Fin scream out in pain, as if his very soul was being tortured.

Then I smelled it.

I stepped back, up against Brom. I felt his hand grab me by my shoulder, to support me... and I shook a little at the smell of burning flesh.

Fin continued to scream, and then strange black smoke started to fizzle around him. From his mouth, his hair, his chest... Then, with a wry moan... Fin stopped making noise and fell to the ground.

Merit still clung to Fin, even as the two fell to the ground. Fin landed hard, lifeless... and for a few seconds I held my breath as Merit and her sparks continued.

“See? Lucky, in a way,” Brom said lightly.

“Huh...?” I glanced at him, and wasn’t sure what the heck he meant.

Did he mean being saved? That was lucky. Yes. A lot. Yet he was acting as if I wasn’t.

Brom glanced at me and then frowned and shrugged. “I mean... he’s lucky it hadn’t been Vim. You’re lucky we found you. Yet he’s lucky too, since it had been us and not Vim,” Brom said.

The odd man made me shake my head as I glanced back at Merit and the man she had just killed. Or well... was he dead? I stepped towards them as Merit unwrapped her arms around the man and slowly stood.

She looked fine... her clothes were now dirty, and wrinkled and crumpled thanks to the confrontation... but she didn’t seem to be bleeding or hurt anywhere.

Walking up to her as she brushed herself off, she huffed and then glanced at me. “Renn, you look like you just fought for your life,” she greeted me.

“Ha...” I laughed, but wasn’t able to get more than a single snort out. It hurt to do anymore than that.

Merit smiled at me in a way that told me she fully understood how I felt, and I pointed at Fin.

She glanced at him in the same way I would a weird weed. "He's dead," she said plainly.

I nodded, and was a little upset at how glad I was to hear he was.

Wait... "Did Fly get there that fast? It feels like she just left..." I said as I realized why they were probably here. Maybe it's been a lot longer than what I thought? It felt as if Fly and I had only just a few minutes ago entered that warehouse. Surely they shouldn't be here already...?

"Huh? Oh... no. Once the earthquakes started I came to find out what was going on. Then we saw Fly running, so we nabbed her. She went back with Reatti to the Society," Brom said from behind me.

"Good..." I nearly collapsed on the floor from relief. So she was safe.

"Easy Renn..." Merit stepped forward and gently grabbed me by the forearm. I noticed she didn't even seem to notice the needles in them.

"I'm uh..." I wasn't sure what to say. I needed to thank them... but... how? What words could I use?

“Where’s Vim, Renn?” Brom asked before I could think of a good way to express what I felt in my heart.

“Huh...? Oh... he’s fighting their master,” I said.

“Which is why you’re in such a condition,” Merit mumbled as she nodded, as if it made perfect sense.

Was it? Was she blaming Vim or simply stating a fact?

“Is uh... Is everyone okay? Some buildings seemed to have...” I wasn’t able to finish the sentence. For some reason I was suddenly out of breath.

“Careful. Brom...” Merit stepped to my right, and glared at the man behind me.

“Right. Come on Renn, let’s get you home,” Brom said. I knew he was stepping towards me, likely to grab me. To carry me back, if he had to.

“I’ll not argue...” I said.

“There’s Fin!”

The three of us turned at the shout, and I groaned at the sight of people hurrying into the alley.

I wasn't able to get much more than a cursory glance at the several people running at us, since Brom put himself in-between them and Merit and I.

"I'll handle this, Brom. You take her back," Merit said sternly.

"She'll survive a few moments more. Then we'll all go back, together," Brom said simply.

"Just because Vim taught you doesn't mean you can act like him!" Merit grumbled a complaint, and then she pulled on my hand.

Although her grip was gentle, she wasn't going to let me ignore her. Merit pulled me over to a nearby door that had a makeshift step in front of it. "Sit," was all she ordered.

I obliged, and realized how silly it was to do so. We had enemies right there, charging at us... yet I was more than happy to oblige her and sit down as if we were going to have a picnic.

Merit sighed and shook her head at me, and I smiled back at her. I could tell she wasn't upset with me... but...

"Merit... Fly called it a Monarch," I said, before I could forget it.

Merit went still, her eyes going wide. Even Brom suddenly turned around, to gape at me.

“What!” Brom shouted.

“Focus, Brom!” Merit shouted back, which made Brom turn back around just in time for the first man to attack him.

Sitting down, I nearly stood back up as a large man charged into Brom... but instead of tackling Brom and sending him to the ground, he instead went limp and fell past Brom and to the floor.

The man falling to the ground, releasing a puff of dirt in the process, made the group that had been running behind him slow to a stop right in front of Brom.

Rolling his shoulder Brom shifted his spear... and as he did I noticed the blood starting to pool beneath the man’s head.

Had he... had he cut the man’s neck? That quickly? I hadn’t even seen it.

Merit stepped forward, and I felt an odd shiver as I watched her step up to Brom’s left. She stood there, obviously willing to fight and kill as much as the man who had just done so.

It was... startling. Even if I knew Merit was strong, and had just seen her kill someone, it was hard to ignore her appearance. She looked like a little girl. Not someone who should be standing up to a group of men and women, some of which who were armed.

There was a long moment of awkward silence as the group stared at them, and the man they had just killed. Several obviously glanced past them to the charred remains of the larger man, Fin, who was not far from me.

“Vim usually doesn’t leave so many,” Brom said simply.

“She said a Monarch, Brom,” Merit grumbled.

The group in front of them shifted, though I couldn’t tell if their unease was from the words Brom and Merit were saying or the simple fact that Brom and Merit were talking so calmly between themselves.

“I suggest we finish this quickly then,” Brom readied his spear, sliding his calloused hands along its shaft. The sound his hands made as he took a stance made a few of the people in the group step back in fear.

“Don’t get in my way,” Merit said, and then stepped forward.

Chapter 182 The Pitiful

Reaching up, I had to stretch all the way to get a hold of the next stone. Once I got my fingers wrapped around it I pulled myself upward.

Quickly grabbing the next foothold, I groaned a sigh and heaved myself up over the ledge.

Rolling over the stones and out into the sunlight, I took a deep breath of fresh air.

It stung. My lungs cried out in pain and annoyance as I forced fresh air in and out, washing out the poisoned gunk I had been breathing in for the last however many hours.

Lying on my back, as I forced my lungs to adapt back to the fresh air which was in a way a poison to me right now, I stared up at the bright blue sky.

Or well, parts of one.

Dark black smoke was filtering up into the sky from what looked to be several locations all around me. Burning fires... the kind that came from burning not just wood, but everything that wood withheld.

Homes were burning. Buildings were burning. Warehouses. Stone, even.

"Bastard," I groaned a cough.

My left leg was still dangling over the ledge of the hole I had just crawled out of, so I scooted away from it a little and pulled my leg out. Not because I was worried I'd fall back in, but just in case one of the stupid tentacle roots found it.

"Though not sure how it'd do that," I said.

Glancing to my right, I blinked at the dark arm and hand lying lifelessly next to me. It honestly wasn't as badly hurt as it felt like it was... Or how it looked, but it was covered in black tar looking gunk. Stained, more like.

The things heart had been... almost like an ink sac. It had been about the size of my head, and when I had punched into it I had been doused in its blood.

Taking a deep breath, I flinched. "I smell like sap," I groaned.

Nasty sap too. Not the stuff one would want on their food, or in their drink. It was probably as poisonous as the crap I had been breathing all this time.

Blinking watery eyes I sat up. My body was heavy, and my lungs were still protesting... but I needed to get up.

Just because that thing was dead didn't mean my job was done after all.

I had climbed up the hole that the creature had made in its thrashing... because all the other routes out of that room had been destroyed. It had brought down a large chunk of the sewers, it seemed.

Which was worrying. For many reasons.

Lumen was literally built on top of the town beneath it. If enough of those underground sections collapsed... well...

It'd not shock me at all if half this city crumbled beneath itself.

But that wasn't something I should worry about right now.

Slowly rolling to my knees, I ignored the protest of my muscles as I stood up.

"Renn..." I glanced around as I tried to get a bearing on my situation. It looked like I was near the docks, based off the color of the buildings around me... but I wasn't sure if this was the north or southern section of the pier.

I needed to find Renn and Fly. Immediately.

If they hadn't succeeded in getting far enough away in time, they'd have gotten caught up in all that collapsing. If they did I needed to get to them before they died from suffocation, or injury.

Especially Renn... she had already been...

Stepping away from the hole, I coughed out some black gunk and spat it at the nearby wall. It splattered the wall and glooped down in an odd way, telling me it was defiantly the blood of the creature.

"Gross," I shivered and hoped I'd not be puking the stuff up for long.

Shaking my head and my ringing ears, I realized the world was actually noisy. Amidst the ringing sounds there was screaming and shouting. There was the roar of fires nearby, and the sound of...

I paused a moment and focused, to make sure. Yes. That was definitely the sound of cannon fire.

Was a ship firing its cannons... or was something strange happening? Maybe a warehouse full of gunpowder had caught alit? Then why did it actually sound like cannons firing and not just plain explosions or bangs?

Cannon fire was very distinctive. Not something a simple explosion or dust explosion could mimic or...

Unable to suppress my curiosity, I quickly found a building I could climb up. It was easy thanks to its wall leaning oddly... likely since it was about ready to fall over. I climbed up the wall, using broken bricks and wood supports to easily reach the roof. Once on the roof, I confirmed the building was leaning and shaking. Likely about to collapse. But I ignored it as I turned around and got my bearings.

There. The port. The northern port too, where most of the military type ships were docked and...

“You have to be joking,” I felt my shoulders slump as I stared at the towering tree.

Standing taller than any of the buildings, or the masts of the great ships that were just beyond it, was a very similar looking creature to the one I had just fought down beneath the city.

This one however was far bigger, and more tree than flower.

And was being attacked by ships.

I frowned as I watched parts of the creature explode and erupt as it was hit by another volley of cannon fire.

Even from this distance I could see the blood and flesh, or pieces of roots, spew from where the cannon balls hit the thing.

“Fascinating,” I couldn’t help but admire the humans. I had no idea how long that thing had been out and about, but it definitely couldn’t have been long. The soonest point it could have emerged was when I had first dropped into that pit. With Renn and Fly... and that had surely not been more than a few hours ago.

For the humans to be fighting back so properly already was a feat. Whoever was in command of those ships was a stout one. I'd need to find out who they were, since they'd be the kind that would make horrible enemies for the Society... and...

"Wait..." I groaned as I recognized one of the set of sails in the distance.

Squinting, I shook my head as I realized that sure enough the man-of-war that I had taken possession of not long ago was indeed one of the five ships attacking the giant creature.

"Well... better than being sunk, I guess," I said as I scanned the rest of the port. Or at least, what I could see from this angle. Most of it was blocked by the large creature. It did look like it had emerged near the main docks... maybe even right next to them. Some of the ships were definitely on fire. It seemed to have emerged not far from the ocean. Maybe it had been nesting near the ocean for a source of water or food... though it was odd it'd drink salt water, it wasn't something to be too shocked over.

It obviously wasn't a normal creature.

Nothing that big was normal.

It luckily didn't seem to have anywhere near as many limbs as the one I had just fought. The thing had a few, I counted a quick six that I could make out right away, but that didn't seem to be many after having to deal with what had felt like hundreds just now.

Though this one's were much bigger... big enough to sink a whole ship, if it could reach them out there in the port.

Chances are its lack of limbs and roots to attack were the reason the humans were so willing to fight it. From the sea, and those ships, they were safe.

Another volley hit the tree like creature, and I frowned as I watched stone and wood fly into the sky off in the distance... away from the creature.

They're missing it? Something that big? How many poor innocents were dying to their own people's failing attempts than they were the monster?

"Let's let them deal with it for now," I decided, and went to look around for any recognizable building nearby. This was near the warehouse I had seen Fly use that one time, wasn't it?

Yes. Over there. About a block away, it was in the group of darker colored buildings. An older, dirtier, section.

Though...

Glancing away from where I knew an entrance to the underground was, I glanced behind me and deeper into Lumen.

Should I check on the Society first?

Looking back at the tall creature, I glared at the thing. Yes. That thing was a problem too. I didn't see a mouth on it, like the one I had just fought... but it was undoubtedly the same. The question was though, is that the parent or just another part of it? Maybe the thing I had killed had just been a branch... a sapling...

What if there was an entire forest of those roots beneath us?

"A forest of teeth," I said as I glanced down at my arms.

They were shredded. From all the barbs and thorns. The sight was... honestly a little disturbing. My arms were stained thanks to the blood of the creature, but even with the black stains one could clearly see the blood and the gruesome wounds. They were grievous, the type of gashes that would have killed a normal man... from shock alone, forgetting blood loss.

Clenching my fists, I noted the way tendons and muscles coiled. Several of them were very visible, thanks to the gashes.

I sighed at myself. Have I gotten sloppy?

Coughing again, I glanced around for a good spot to hop to the next roof. Not only was this one starting to shake, it was time I moved on.

I really wanted to go find Renn and Fly... but thanks to that new creature, especially because of it, my first priority was to check on the Society.

Maybe Renn and Fly made it there already, and I'd just be saving time anyway by going there.

Leaping from roof to roof, I headed for the Animalia Guild.

A deep roar echoed behind me, but thanks to the open air it wasn't as painful to the ears. I paused a moment to glance back at the large creature as it was hit again by another volley.

Well if it could roar, it had to have a mouth. Or some kind of form of one, at least. Even if I couldn't see it from here.

It was exactly what I had wanted to avoid, by staying down there and killing that thing. I had even risked Renn and Fly, to kill it as fast as possible.

All that just for something even worse to throw that whole plan into the trash and set it aflame.

Though...

Landing on a new roof, I slowed down and paused for a moment to look back at the creature.

“Monarch...” I frowned as I remembered what Fly had called it.

Master Monarch.

Glancing down at my stained arms, I wondered if I should head closer to that thing to verify it first.

The one down there hadn't been a Monarch... but that thing?

“After,” I convinced myself to deal with it later.

I was able to stop coughing, mostly, by the time I got to the Animalia Guild Company building. As I approached it, I noticed the chaos around it. The gates were shut closed, and no one was going in or out of the building... but there was still people all around it. People were trying to get their carts to wherever they were going, but thanks to all the chaos there were traffic jams and fights. I passed a group of carriages that looked blocked thanks to a broken one, with men shouting at each other instead of simply working together to move the broken carriage aside out of their way.

Rounding the building I hurried to the main entrance. I found the main lobby had one of its doors opened, but there were guards stationed at the entrance and it seemed they were only letting people exit and not enter.

I walked up to them and wondered if I'd have to get physical with the guards. None of them were members of the Society, and I didn't recognize any of them.

Why wasn't Brom or Reatti amongst them? Especially during such a vital moment?

"Sir, no one's allowed to enter right now," the guard on the right stepped up upon noticing me. He spoke firmly, but I could hear the shaking in his voice.

He looked terrified.

Well...

Glancing behind me, I could just barely make out the tall creature in the distance. From this distance only the top of its body could be seen over the buildings. It didn't have leaves on the top of its head, but from this distance one wouldn't have been able to see such things anyway.

Yes. I could understand why he'd be so shaken.

Something like that to the humans was like a prophecy being fulfilled. A demon. An angel even... come down to pass judgment.

Such things were legends. Stories.

Until they weren't.

"I'm a member of the guild, let me pass," I said simply as I turned back to the man.

"No, we've been told no one is to..." the man started to say but I stepped forward. I didn't want to hurt our own people, but I was in no mood. I'd just hurt him. A single man. The rest would step aside after seeing the violence.

A pity, but a single life... a single human life, was worth less than those I served.

"Let him through!" a woman's voice gave an order. One I didn't recognize.

The man stepped aside, but didn't seem too happy about it as I stepped past him. As I entered, a pair of women left the building. I had to step aside a little to let them pass me, since they were carrying baskets of...

Glancing at the contents of what they were carrying out, I noticed the food and supplies. Bandages. Herbs. Stuff for emergencies.

Such acts of piety. To give those we employed pre-gathered supplies for emergencies.

Brandy's or Gerald's orders, I wonder?

“Vim, Reatti just headed upstairs,” the woman who had given me entry greeted me and I was able to put a history to the voice. It was the human who had spoken to me and Renn in the hallway a few weeks ago. The one that had children...

“Your children?” I asked her.

The woman startled, and then gave me a flushed smile. “Here. In the building. They’re safe,” she said warmly.

I nodded and stepped past her. “Once everyone who wants to leave does, close the door and seal it,” I said.

“Sir!” she nodded as I hurried for the stairs. Reatti must have gone to the houses... but why? She and her brother should be here at the entrance, handling this.

A quick glance around as I hurried up the stairs to the second floor, I recognized a few faces... but everyone here was human.

Coughing one last time as I picked up my pace, I rubbed my mouth to clear it of blood and that black gunk... then realized I was hurt on my face too.

Staring down at the back of my hand, where I had been rubbing... I realized I was likely bleeding rather badly on my face. I had felt a strange pain under my lips. Likely a large gash.

Maybe that man hadn't been terrified of the situation, but me.

"Hmph."

Reaching the metal door of the Societies Houses, I was glad to find it sealed shut. I was careful to not break it as I opened it and shut it behind me. I was hurt, so I knew my strength was going to be all over the place.

Heading down the hallway, I calmed down a little as I smelled... nothing. Nothing too important.

No blood. No death. No sorrow.

The place was still warm. The air was gentle. If not for the rumbling noises outside, which were a far distant sound here, one wouldn't even realize how dangerous the situation was.

Heading downstairs, it didn't take long to hear the voices of the Society... especially since someone was yelling.

Picking up my pace, I nearly jumped down the last flight of steps and then darted down the hall to the shouting. I entered the room with such momentum, I nearly ran over Pierre in the process.

“Vim!” the whole room shouted my name at the sight of me, and I calmed down as I realized they were all fine. They had just been in a heated debate.

Though... over what?

Looking around as everyone hopped off their chairs and away from their tables to rush over to me, I smiled at the looks of concern and shock. Half of the group was glad to see me; relieved... the other half was now very concerned for my safety. Likely thanks to my visible injuries.

“Who’s not here?” I asked loudly. I was counting them, but for some reason I couldn’t think of who wasn’t here. Renn of course, and Fly... but...

Wait...

“Fly?” I noticed the young bird to my right. She had stood up on a table, to get a view over the tiny crowd in front of me.

“My brother and Merit are out there! Still looking for you and Renn!” Reatti shouted up at me. She had been one of the first to run up to me.

I frowned as I confirmed it. Yes. They were the only ones not here.

Merit. Brom. Renn.

“Then why...” I glanced at Fly whose face immediately contorted and she collapsed to her knees. She began to bawl.

Woops.

“Renn made her run away, I guess. It’s why my brother and Merit went to find her. She was in trouble, Fly said,” Reatti said.

Herra and Magda stepped away from the crowd to go over to Fly. They hovered around her, making sure she was okay.

“She alright?” I asked.

“Physically...? I think so,” Brandy said.

“Everyone else?” I asked.

“We’re all fine, Vim,” Reatti said.

“Have you seen the thing outside?” I asked.

"Is it a Monarch?" Tosh asked.

His question made the whole room grow... weirdly quiet.

"I'm not sure. It doesn't seem to be something that moves, so you all should be fine here... but just in case I want you all to prepare to leave. Together. The roads are blocked, so if you take wagons make sure you take axes to clear the road if you need to," I warned.

"Just go kill it already, Vim," Jasna complained.

"I'm going. I came back to make sure you all were okay," I said.

"Get going!" several yelled at once. Reatti even began to push me out of the room.

"Reatti, come with me. You need to seal up the building once I leave," I said.

"Oh. Right. Yea. Let's go," Reatti nodded quickly. She followed me out of the room and down the hallway.

"He was crazy hurt!" Sofia shouted as we left.

“Shush!” Brandy shouted at her, and I was glad that I had gotten away before any of them had made a big deal out of it.

“You are really hurt, Vim. You okay?” Reatti asked as we headed for the exit.

“Yes. You know what I’m capable of enduring, Reatti. No need to ask,” I said.

“Yeah but... you look bad. You have huge gashes all over. Especially your back,” she groaned, and I knew it was because she was staring straight at them. She was following behind me, after all.

“They’re that bad looking?” I asked as I glanced at a window we passed. It wasn’t reflective enough to see myself.

“Really bad.”

Hm. Didn’t feel that bad honestly. My lungs were the things giving me the greatest complaints right now. But I knew it wouldn’t take long for them to re-adapt to the normal air and be fine.

“Fly is a member of the Society, Reatti,” I said as I glanced at her. She had gotten upset before, so I wanted to just make sure.

“She is,” Reatti nodded, but I noted the tone she used.

Great. She’d never like Fly. She must blame her for all of this.

It was likely many would... maybe it was a good thing Fly was so inhuman. She’d have to leave, and now it’d make the reason... well... obvious and easy to express. Even someone like Fly would understand the why.

Approaching the metal door, I slowed a little. Reatti gave me a look as I gestured at it. “Open it for me, I don’t want to break it,” I said.

“Oh. Right!” Reatti hurried forward and obliged me. I nodded in thanks as I stepped past her and she closed the door behind us.

“Once everyone’s out of the building lock it down. Then have a few people on the roof to assess the situation. If that thing starts moving, or the city starts sinking I want all of you out of Lumen as fast as possible,” I gave Reatti orders as we headed for the main entrance.

“Right.”

A pair of men hurried past us, running towards the exit. They weren’t carrying anything and didn’t even really glance at us as they did so.

“Humans. The panic easily,” Reatti said with a sigh.

“It’s what keeps them alive,” I said.

“Where should we go if we have to leave? The Bell Church?” Reatti asked, changing topics.

“The Clothed Woman.”

Reatti paused and I wasn’t in the mood to stop with her and give her an explanation. I continued walking towards the exit, and even picked up my pace.

Merit and Brom would be safe. Merit wouldn’t let Brom overextend himself... but that didn’t mean all was well.

Merit and Brom would both die to save Renn, if they found her in dire straits.

So I needed to hurry, to stop that from happening.

Not only would that be horrible for the Society... It would...

I tried to imagine the look on Renn's face as she watched the two sacrifice themselves for her.

Not only would it traumatize her, it would ruin her. She'd never get close to anyone again, knowing her.

I could not afford that. On many levels.

"Vim!" Reatti hurried to catch up to me as we entered the main lobby.

There weren't as many people here as there had been, most were the guards and those guiding them. And it seemed most of them were preparing to leave themselves.

I nodded to Reatti as I headed for the door. She furrowed her face at me but nodded back.

Leaving the Animalia Company building I stepped out onto the street far enough as to be able to see the horizon.

Good. It was still in the same location. Maybe I'd get lucky, and like the one I had fought below this one couldn't really move.

If it was stationary... although it'd cause horrible damage and wreck chaos for who knows how long, it wasn't an immediate threat. At least not to the Society or me.

Unless...

My lungs protested as I took a deep breath. Yes. That was a problem.

If it was like the one I had fought, or even the same creature entirely, that meant it could likely also release that toxic fume.

Which at that things size... even with the oceans breeze it could probably cover most of the city if it released it.

If even my lungs had such a problem with it, then there were no way the humans or any of the Society could survive it. Not without dire lasting effects, even if they did survive.

Oh. Wait.

Heading back into the building, Reatti smiled at the sight of me and hurried up to me.

"Where'd you find Fly?" I asked.

“Oh! Right! Head towards the canning district. Near the southern port,” Reatti’s face contorted in shame as she realized that she too had forgotten all about it.

“Thanks,” I left the building again, this time with an actual destination.

That wasn’t far from the creature. Closer than I had emerged from... but that was not too surprising. Who knows how far Renn and Fly had to traverse to find an exit.

Picking up the pace, I spat out a much smaller blob of black blood. Good. I needed my lungs healed before I confronted that giant tree. Shouldn’t be long now. Rounding the Animalia Company building, I ran down one of the larger streets that led to the piers. It was... empty, it was an odd sight, especially for this time of day.

As I drew closer to the ports, the sound of chaos returned. Fires. Collapsed buildings. Cannon fire. The roar of the creature.

Running past a man on the ground that was bleeding from a crushed arm, I wondered how long it’d take for Lumen’s army to be roused and sent to restore order. Lumen was a merchant empire, but it still had an army. An army of nobles and...

Slowing a little, I studied the scene I was approaching.

A large building had collapsed. One that had likely been a place of markets. One that had restaurants, shops, stalls... and it had been a busy one.

The whole area was destroyed. It seemed the large building had toppled and as it fell it broke the buildings near it, creating a domino effect. The whole street was covered in debris and dust. There were fires raging in several locations, and there were as many dead bodies as there were injured ones.

I nearly stepped forward to help what looked to be a young woman stuck under a pile of bricks. She was alive, but wasn't moving much. Blood was flowing out of her orifices, telling me she had severe organ damage. Likely the bottom of half of her body had been crushed completely beneath the pile of stones she laid under.

Those not buried had not escaped unscathed completely. There were people with broken limbs, head wounds, and more. There was even a man stumbling around while holding his mouth which was pooling with blood. The fact he was still walking around told me it was a mouth wound and not an internal one. Maybe his tongue had been destroyed.

This damage was recent. The building must have collapsed not long ago... had they been hiding in the building maybe?

At least there didn't seem to be any of those tentacle roots anywhere.

Another volley of cannon fire erupted nearby. This time I counted far more than just the five ships I had seen earlier. Maybe more captains had finally gotten their ships in position.

Maybe they'd kill it before I needed to deal with it.

“Momma!” a child’s scream stopped me. I turned to watch a young girl screaming nearby. She was standing still near a pile of fragments and stone. She was dirty, and had small wounds upon her. She was dressed in clothes that were suited for a commoner, likely the child of someone who had been at work.

The girl sobbed alone, and I wondered if any of the bodies around her had been her parents. There were a few women amongst them, but thanks to all the debris and dust it was impossible to see if any were obviously her mother. The little girl’s auburn hair looked far darker than it was thanks to the layer of dust on her.

There were several dozen people walking around. And some of them weren’t hurt, or at least not hurt that badly... but as of yet no one had noticed her. Everyone was far more concerned with their own well-being, or finding those they cared for. Their own family. Their own friends.

One’s desire for survival eroded their kindness.

A scene very familiar to me.

Walking over to the young girl, I sighed at the sight of her bloody legs. She had huge scrapes running up and down her shins to her knees. She had likely fell during the commotion, or her legs had originally been buried and she had pulled them free.

“Little one, it’s dangerous here. Where’s your home?” I asked her.

The young girl didn’t even register my approach, or my question. She just kept sobbing for her mother.

Reaching out, I lightly grabbed her by her shoulder. She yelped, shocked at the sudden grab, and actually stepped back and away from me. "Who! Momma!?" she cried out in shock. Rather loudly, too.

"It's dangerous here. You need to leave or you'll get hurt again. Where's your home?" I asked her again.

This time she was at least staring at me, but instead of answering me she instead fell to her knees and started to sob even harder.

Sighing at the young girl, I wondered if she was younger than she looked. Or maybe just frail, and not just in the body.

Kneeling down, I fought the internal urge to run off. I shouldn't be wasting time, but once I started something I needed to finish it.

"Young girl, really. Other buildings might collapse, or the fires might spread. Where's your home? I'll take you there," I asked a little firmer this time, but made sure to be gentle while doing so.

Like before the young girl didn't even react to me.

Maybe it was because of the wounds on my body. Between my appearance and the situation... well... it'd be understandable for her to not think I was something worth trusting.

“Charlotte!” I turned as a young man ran towards us. He skidded to his knees next to the girl and wrapped her in a hug.

The man was too young to be her father, but the moment he grabbed her the girl recognized his existence and returned his hug... and erupted into an even greater cry of relief.

“I know... I know... Here...” the man carefully lifted her, and then sniffed a sob himself as he stood.

Standing up alongside him, I watched as the girl started to oddly poke the man on the back, and even dragged her finger along in the process.

The young man nodded quickly and he too went to doing the same to her back. He did so as he spoke, telling her it was alright now and that her brother was here. The acts were... odd, but it didn't take long for me to understand.

She was deaf.

He glanced at me, but didn't linger. Her turned and ran away, carrying the girl as she sobbed and cried.

Maybe not deaf entirely... after all she was speaking.

The boy had noticed me but hadn't said anything. Likely thought I had...

Glancing down at myself, I sighed as I wondered what he had thought of me.

“That was the better of the outcomes, at least,” I said as I turned and headed for the canneries at the southern port.

I needed to find Renn and the rest before I got sidetracked again. Before I saw anyone else who deserved pity.

Pity was something I couldn't afford after all.

My own people had enough of it. More than I could ever give. So there was no point wasting it on humans. Or anyone, or anything else.

At least that was what I told myself as I continued to run past those who were suffering.

Suffering because of us.

Chapter 183 To Get Pushed

“Look! If we don't feed the Master we'll all die!” the only remaining woman screamed desperately, pointing to the sky.

That... was the master? It hadn't been that big, had it?

"Then feed it yourself," Brom said with a heavy breath. He hadn't gotten hurt during the fight, but he definitely sounded winded. A stark contrast from Merit's calm demeanor as she released the man she had just killed.

"They never think to sacrifice themselves, Brom. There's no saving them," Merit said calmly as she walked away from the charred corpse.

I blinked as I took in the scene in front of me. Almost a dozen bodies lay behind the two. It was interesting that Merit had killed more than Brom had.

It was... a little relieving to know that there were others, not just Vim, who were strong in the Society.

Or well, not just strong but reliable. I could rely on them to do what was needed.

"You idiots! You don't understand... the Master!" the woman in front of them was hectic. She seemed to know she was about to die... yet she didn't run. She stood in front of Merit and Brom defiantly, doing all she could to convince them that I should be fed to the master.

Why though? And why me? Why not just feed anyone? Although it was a cruel thought... why weren't they trying to just feed humans to it? If it just needed to be fed to subdue its wrath then...

“I don’t like killing those who don’t fight back,” Brom whispered.

“Grow a spine, rodent,” Merit chastised him, but stepped forward.

I had long since stood from where I had been told to sit, simply out of shock and awe at watching Brom and Merit... but this moment was the first time I actually stepped forward towards them.

I didn’t say anything, nor did I try to stop her... but for some reason I had wanted to.

Keeping my mouth shut, I watched as Merit simply walked up to the woman. The woman stepped back only once, but no more. She stood defiantly, glaring at Merit.

“You’ll all die. You should have listened to us,” the woman scorned Merit.

“As you’ve said,” Merit said, and then wrapped her arms around the woman’s waist.

The woman oddly didn’t fight at all. She simply stood there... then she started to scream.

Finally fighting back, she tried to hit Merit in the head and pry her off... but like all the rest, the effort was fruitless. Merit held on, and began to spark. It only took a few heavy heartbeats until the woman’s fighting increased to the point of frantic death throes, and then... with a blink of the eye... the woman went still and limp. The woman started to release smoke out of her mouth as she let loose one final groan... then she died.

Merit stepped away and released the woman before she fell all the way to the ground. Merit huffed, sounding exhausted.

How did she kill in such a way? Squeezing someone to death I understood... but she wasn't squeezing. She was shocking them to the point it burnt them.

Merit brushed her hands on her shirt, as if they were dirty, and she turned to look at the carnage that she and Brom had just left behind.

"You all right Renn?" Merit asked me.

I nodded, even though I knew I wasn't. My head was fuzzy, and I felt... light. Even though my limbs were heavy and hard to move, I still for some reason felt as if I was in water. About to float away.

"We should go now. I don't know what that thing is but we should get away from it," Brom said with a gesture to the sky.

Merit and I looked upward... at the thing looming in the sky.

It wasn't too close, yet it sounded as if it was. It roared oddly, somehow sounding loud yet distant all the same.

“Is that what Vim’s fighting?” Merit asked.

“The one I saw him fighting was much smaller. Beneath us,” I said.

“What?” Brom didn’t like the sound of that based off the way he spun to look at me.

I nodded. “It... kind of looks like it though. Same colors and shape. How is such a thing so big?” I asked.

“It’s a Monarch isn’t it...?” Brom groaned and shivered.

“Shut up Brom, we don’t know that yet. Come on we need to get Renn home. She’s hurt,” Merit stepped past Brom, huffing at him as she did.

“Right...” Brom agreed, and honestly so did I.

I was exhausted. And...

Glancing at the bodies strewn throughout the alleyway...

Yes. I wanted to leave this place.

These people had fought to the death.

To get to me.

To feed me to their master.

Even when it had been made clear they could not defeat Brom and Merit... they still fought. They had still stood their ground.

Why? Why such devotion to something so...

Glancing up at the sky, I heard the sound of explosions again. Loud booms that shook the air, but not the earth.

No. That wasn't for me to worry about. Not right now.

Right now... I needed to do something far more important.

Looking down at the two, I gave them as warm a smile as I could muster.

“Thank you two. Really,” I said as they approached.

Merit smiled softly at me, and Brom actually grinned.

“Well, Vim wouldn’t have been happy if we hadn’t helped you,” Brom said.

“I’m really getting tired of your comments. Why’s it always have to be about Vim?” Merit turned to glare at the scarred man who smirked and shrugged his shoulders.

Maybe he was doing it to annoy her.

“Let’s go Renn, let’s leave this Vim fanatic here,” Merit said as she stepped up to me.

“Fanatic? Jeez, that’s an insult to these guys...” Brom didn’t seem to mind her comment as he glanced at the body nearest him. A man who he had stabbed in the heart with his spear.

“It was weird...” Even Merit seemed to agree.

“Would feeding me to it really calm that thing down?” I asked. I wasn’t going to do such a thing but it was an interesting thought.

How could just one person make such a difference?

“Who knows?” Merit said as she took my left hand. I noticed the way she eyeballed my hands before deciding which one to grab.

Yeah... my right was pretty...

“Not sure how any of us could be any kind of meal to that thing. It’d be like eating a single fish egg, would barely notice,” Brom said as we headed for the alley’s exit.

Merit glanced at Brom and I wondered if he had used fish eggs as an example on purpose.

“We’ll get those quills out of you shortly, Renn,” Merit said as we reached the street.

“They don’t hurt too badly actually,” I said.

“Hopefully you won’t get an infection...” Merit grumbled while staring at them.

“That place had been real nasty...” I admitted.

“Definitely. What is this you’re wearing? Looks like seal leather,” Brom asked as he came up to my right.

“Seal?” I asked. What was that?

“It actually does,” Merit agreed.

If they were saying so it likely was... but...

“I had to put something on to cover my ears. They tore off the hat and jacket I had been wearing,” I said as I moved my ears under the hood I wore.

“Figured,” Merit said softly.

Squeezing Merit’s hand, I wondered how to explain the feeling of relief that was pulsing through me. To think just a few moments ago I had been thinking about my death and...

Stepping out of the alleyway, I wondered which way to go. Merit already knew, and she gently guided me to the left.

The street was... strangely empty, yet not. There weren't any people here, but the street was filthy. Littered. It seemed there were some collapsed buildings along the road. Parts of warehouses were crumbling into the street. Off in the distance down the road, was oddly an entire wall in the middle of the street. Not in pieces, but standing upright... door and windows and all. The only explanation for it being in one piece and upright as it were was that it had somehow slid out onto the road... but I wasn't sure how such a thing could happen.

"This doesn't sound good. Going to be a lot of funerals after this," Brom said.

"Lots of charity work, too," Merit complained.

I smirked at her. Yes. I should have known she'd be like Vim.

Who would think about such a thing during moments like this?

"We do charity work?" I asked, interested.

"It's good for our public image... plus it's mostly directed towards our employees," Brom said.

"Not you though. You'll need... rest... lots of it," Merit said as she side-glanced me.

True... I wonder how long it'll take to heal? The last time I had been hurt this bad was when the witch had found me. I had gotten a fever and couldn't really remember how long I had spent in that bed...

“Think Vim would...” I started to make a lighthearted joke, to ease the dull pain in my body and heart... but then something landed in front of us.

I wasn't sure where it came from, or what it was... but it hit the ground in front of us in the blink of an eye. Then before I could blink again, I was being pushed. By more than just a single pair of hands.

By the next blink... I was several feet to the right. Near the edge of the street. I was turned away, facing the building instead of facing down the road.

Huh?

I blinked wildly as I turned around to understand what had just happened.

Something huge had landed in front of us. Then... then...

They had pushed me. Out of the way.

Of what had looked like a giant rock. One that had burst through a building nearby. That building was still collapsing thanks to it.

Standing alone, I felt a cold chill as I stared at the weird hole not too far from me. Where I had just been standing, with Brom and Merit... was about a foot deep hole in the stone. A huge chunk of the earth was missing now, thanks to the impact as the thing barreled past me.

My whole body began to spasm as I slowly turned to look behind me. Back down the alleyway we had just left.

There was new stuff within it. And with every heartbeat more fell into it. A part of the building on the right was collapsing into the alleyway, dropping stones, wooden pieces, and even glass.

For a few long seconds... I couldn't breathe. My mind whirled, yet somehow wasn't working as I doubted my eyes.

Merit. Her white hair was easy to spot amongst the dark stone and debris. She was lying face down in the alleyway, up near the building on the left. She was tiny compared to the huge boulder that had broken into the building not far behind her and had come to a stop half way into it.

The damage from the boulder was making the building on the left start to crumble too. But it wasn't coming apart as badly as the building on the right. Only some of the wall near where the boulder had impacted was falling apart, for now at least... but...

"Guys...?" I hesitated as I stepped forward.

Bricks continued to fall off the buildings... and for some reason most of them were landing together near the same pile.

A pile that had a body in it.

For a long few seconds... my eyes bounced around. To his mangled head, only recognizable because of his scars. To the silver gleaming spear poking out of the pile of debris. Then back to the body, or rather to the parts of it... where his torso was scattered in several different directions. One leg was to the right, away from the main pile of stones and debris, the other was sticking out of the pile at an impossible angle... telling me it wasn't connected anymore.

Turning away, I barely made it two steps before I threw up.

Heaving, I puked what little remained in my stomach as my whole body began to shake even more violently. My eyes began to shiver as badly as my body as my vision blurred and my mind screamed at me.

Brom was dead! Mangled! Destroyed!

And Merit could be too!

Right... Merit...!

I forced myself back towards the alley, and nearly fell when I tripped over a large brick. Staying upright, somehow, I went deeper in until I was standing above Merit.

She was in one piece. And I didn't see any blood... but she wasn't moving.

Had Brom taken the brunt of the blow? They had both stepped closer to me, as to push me out of the way.

Maybe Brom had pushed Merit too.

Unable to resist, I looked back at the pile of stones... and Brom's body.

Stepping deeper into the alleyway... I fell to my knees as suddenly I didn't have the strength to keep myself upright.

The fall hurt... but my heart hurt far worse than my body. Which was a feat right now.

I groaned as I squeezed my arms around my stomach. A horrid gut wrenching pain was twisting within me. I felt as if I had suddenly been stabbed by something sharp. As if a huge quill had dug into my stomach near my naval, and was moving around.

"Reatti..." I groaned.

That poor, poor girl. She was going to break.

How was I going to tell her about this? How could I look her in the eye ever again? She had loved her brother so dearly. They had been so close and...

I heaved a sob and bent over. I threw up again, but this time it wasn't much. I heaved again and again as my body tried to throw up more, but there was nothing left to give.

What could I do...? What could I say...?

A loud crash shook the world above me. I knew instinctively that I needed to move. That it wasn't safe yet. That more of the building was collapsing... but I couldn't find it within myself to move. I simply stared at the pile of debris in front of me.

The pile of stones and the body within them.

I had to look away. I heaved again, but nothing came up. I turned away and hit the ground with a balled fist. It hurt.

A few moments passed as more stone and pieces of the buildings fell around me. I felt a few smaller rocks and debris hit me occasionally, but nothing too drastic. Then... something heavy landed behind me. It landed hard enough that I could feel it through my legs and knees.

Turning around to see how close I had just come to dying, again... my throat constricted and I wasn't able to breathe for a few moments as I stared at the clattering stones still falling from the impact.

Another chunk of the building had landed directly on Brom.

"Why...?" I groaned as I watched the dust settle, revealing... only the silver spear and the hand that still held it.

Why? Did the world hate him all of a sudden? Why was everything falling on him?

His mangled hand, scarred and contorted... was barely visible. I'd not have recognized it was his hand if not for the spear it still held.

"Renn...?"

Looking away from the silver gleam, stained by red, I shifted just enough to stare at the entrance of the alleyway.

Vim.

He was hurrying towards me, and I looked away in shame.

“Renn... jeez, look at you...” Vim reached me quickly, and I couldn’t bring myself to look at him.

I groaned as I stared at his feet. He was missing his shoes. Where had they gone?

“Vim...” I cried.

Something brushed my head, near my right ear... and I recognized the feeling of a hand. He was reaching down to check on me. His hand brushed against my ear, and then hesitated. His fingertips lightly touched my head, near my injury. Where I had gotten hit in the head down in the sewers.

His gentleness was... to be expected... but the fact he had gone still, and his hand hung above my head added with his silence was not.

Slowing looking up, I sobbed at the sight of Vim’s face.

He wasn’t looking at me.

He was looking at the pile of stones behind me.

“Vim...!” I cried again.

His look of shock quickly morphed into a knowing look, and then Vim looked away from Brom's body. He looked down at me, and I quickly looked away again in shame.

I felt his hand leave my head, and it slowly fell to my shoulder. Vim's hand gripped my shoulder... and although he squeezed a little hard, it wasn't hard enough to hurt me. He was gentle as he knelt down next to me, and suddenly... I broke.

I was safe now.

Vim was next to me.

Nothing could hurt me anymore.

Yet...

"Vim...!" I sobbed as I turned to look at Brom.

What little could be seen of him anymore.

How had it happened so fast? Just a few moments ago he had been right next to me... and...

“Get up Renn. You need to help me. You have to take yourself and Merit back to the Society,” Vim spoke evenly, and even through my hectic thoughts and sobs I could hear his beseeching tone.

He was nearly begging me.

“Merit...” I heaved a sob as I turned my head just enough to see her. Yes. She was there. Lying nearby. She wasn’t buried like Brom was, but she wasn’t moving. Her thick white hair was blocking her face so I wasn’t able to see her expression or...

“Get up Renn. You told me you wanted to be like me. You promised you’d try. Now’s the time to fulfill that promise. Stand up. Stand, Renn. Stand tall,” Vim squeezed my shoulder, and I nodded.

Yes.

He was right.

Even if...

The world rumbled again, and I flinched down. To cover my head again, just in case another building fell on top of us.

The world was falling apart!

Not just literally, but figuratively too...! The buildings were collapsing. The ground beneath my very feet was shifting... and...

And...

I heaved a dry sob, and tried to pull my eyes away from Brom's hand. I couldn't.

Couldn't.

He died protecting me. He had been next to me. Both Merit and Brom had reacted fine to the boulders appearance and approach. They weren't injured and exhausted like me. Both of them could have dodged it.

Merit was hurt.

Vim was...

"Renn, please. I need to stop that thing and I can't do that until you take Merit back to the Society," Vim's voice was gentle... but firm. Hard. Yet not cold.

How was he so strong?

His friends. My friends. People he's known for hundreds of years... gone and hurt.

"Brom..." I groaned.

"Is dead. Get up Renn, before Merit dies too," Vim said.

A cold shiver ran down my back and through my tail. It hurt, but it made me realize he was right.

Merit was hurt.

I sniffed and nodded, and let Vim help me to my feet.

"I'm going to pull those out, so you can carry her. Steel yourself," Vim said as he grabbed my right forearm, near my wrist.

"Wait what?" I barely was able to ask what he meant, and then I let loose a yelp as he grabbed a bundle of them and pulled.

They tore out easily, yet it felt horrible. I tried to pull my arm away from him, but his grip was undeniable... and he was swift. Before I could even gather the breath needed to shout out in pain he had already finished pulling the rest out of my right arm.

I whimpered as I stared down at my now quill-free right arm. It wasn't bleeding anywhere near as bad as I would have thought it would have with such a violent method, but it sure did hurt. It stung, as if I was continuously being pricked by the barbs.

"Vim!" I shouted out in pain as he tossed aside the last few quills and went to grab my left arm.

"A little flesh. Endure it Renn, for Merit," Vim said.

Oh.

Right.

I nodded as I tightened my stomach and watched as he went to grab the few quills on my left arm. There weren't as many on this one as my right.

He was right. I'd not be able to carry Merit with them stuck in me. It'd just hurt her and me even more than needed.

Watching, I flinched as Vim pulled the quills out one by one. They were too spread apart for him to rip out all at once as he had done with the other arm. He hadn't lied. It seemed all they pulled out with them was a little bit of flesh. They left little ridge like cuts in their wake.

Once he got the last out of my arm, I took an unsteady breath as he tossed the quills aside and went over to Merit.

"How is she?" I asked as I rubbed my arms.

"Her head was hit when that boulder came through. She's strong Renn, but she's still..." Vim went quiet as he knelt down next to her and moved her hair out of the way.

Hurrying over to him, I did my best to ignore the huge gashes running up and down his back.

How was he walking? I could see bone.

"She'll be okay, but she might not wake up any time soon," Vim finally said after examining her head. It looked like she was bleeding, and had a large gash on the side of her head but... I really didn't want to look too close.

Vim picked Merit up gently, and I stood up straighter as he turned to me.

"Take her home, Renn," Vim said to me.

I sniffed and nodded as I held my arms out to take her from him.

Vim handed her over, and as I wrapped my arms around her... I realized something terribly strange.

She was light. Even me, who was hurt and exhausted, barely noticed her weight.

I had let such a small thing protect me.

About to say something, a loud boom made me flinch and step closer to Vim for protection. The world shook again, followed by a roar and a weird screeching sound in the sky.

A few moments later another avalanche sounding explosion erupted nearby.

Another building had just been destroyed.

"Vim...!" I looked up at the man who was staring past me, down the alley and out it.

He blinked, and I realized he was hurt on his face too. It was covered in a weird black gunk looking stuff... so it had hid it a little, but up close it was obvious. A part of his chin was split. The huge cut ran up to his mouth. His lower lip looked like it was split in two.

I groaned at the sight of such damage. Had the Master done this?

“Cry later Renn. I’ll hold you close after this is done, but right now stay strong and stand tall for me,”
Vim said as he looked down at me.

I sniffed and nodded. “Promise?”

He nodded. “Until you can’t cry anymore,” he promised.

Good. He probably had no idea how much I could cry, but I planned to teach him.

Looking down at Merit in my arms, I shifted her a little to get a better hold of her.

Vim patted me on the shoulder and then stepped away... at first I thought he was going to leave, but instead he went over to the pile of stones.

I felt my mouth tremble as I watched Vim kneel down in front of Brom’s body. Or at least, where it was.

With a gentle but firm hand... Vim grabbed the spear that Brom's hand still clung to. He pulled the spear free, and through watery eyes I watched as Vim pulled the spear out of the stone. I didn't like the oddly wet sound that accompanied Brom's hand falling from the spear and to the stone.

Vim stood up, and then with a small movement he thumped the butt of the spear against the ground. As if to free it of all the dirt upon it.

He stared at the spear in his hand for a moment, then took a deep breath... and then nodded. His eyes told me he had just made a pact with it. As if the spear itself had asked him to get revenge.

Hopefully Vim would grant it.

Vim turned and nodded at me. "Go Renn. Get home. When you get back you and the rest should prepare to leave the city. Head for the Clothed Woman," he said.

"Okay," I nodded. Yes. That made sense. This place was falling apart.

"If they... already left, then... just stay in the building with Merit. I'll come get you after I'm done," Vim said.

"Okay," I nodded again as he stepped towards me.

I wanted to hug him, but knew it was foolish to do so. Not just because I held Merit... but because he looked horribly hurt. I'd hate to cause him pain. Was that part of his side really as bad as it looked? It looked like a head sized chunk was missing from his side...

And why was he stained as if he had swum in paint?

"Get out of the city. Kill anyone who tries to stop you," Vim said to me, drawing my eyes away from his injuries.

I nodded.

Another roar rumbled throughout the world, and my heartbeat increased as I waited for the expectant sound of explosions and collapsed buildings that seemed to always follow the roars.

A nearby building was the victim. I flinched as once again pebbles and stones flew into the air above us. Luckily it must have been far enough that none really seemed to be landing nearby...

Then I was hit in the head.

I yelped as a stone a little smaller than Merit's balled up fist rolled off my head and to the ground. I glared at the thing, but was glad it had just been something small. It had hurt, but hadn't killed me.

Vim sighed as he reached over and grabbed my cloak's hood. He pulled it up and over my head. "Hurry and go Renn. Before I abandon my duties," Vim ordered.

Staring up at him, from under my hood... I realized this look was something new.

I had never... wait, no. I have seen it.

I did recognize that look on his face.

I had seen it before.

The reason I didn't recognize it... was because I hadn't seen it on the person himself. I'd never seen Vim give me such a look before, at least not in person.

The look I recognized... was the one I had seen in a painting.

He stood now before me as he had in that painting. The one in the Cathedral. The one that Hands had shown me.

Vim was even holding the spear the same way as that painting too.

“Stay safe, Vim,” I said to the protector of the Society.

“Stand tall, Renn,” Vim said.

“Stand tall.”

Chapter 184 A Spear

Renn ran as one would with broken legs.

At least she was running.

Watching her go as fast as she can down the street, I couldn't help the sigh of grief that it brought forth.

This was going to be painful. In more ways than one.

Merit would live. Her head had been split open, but I had seen her endure worse. Renn however was in dire straits. It was a testament to just how... far away from a normal human she was.

For her to still be alive, let alone running around...

I had severely underestimated that woman's durability and tenacity. Having a body that endured such damage was one thing... but having the wherewithal of the mind and spirit to stay awake? To not give in? To not collapse where you stood?

Renn had broken limbs. Hands were thrashed. She had been covered in inflamed bruises and swelling from a rough beating. Her hair had been matted thanks to how much blood had soaked it, from a very obvious head wound in-between her ears. Her tail had been oddly bent askew and not moving... Those quills had been the least of her worries.

Blood loss alone should have put her down.

She was a rarity beyond simple statistics.

Hopefully this event wouldn't ruin her. Though even if it did... I'd not be able to blame her. How could I?

Renn finally turned a corner, and for a small moment my eyes lingered where she had just been. I was up on the roof of a three story building, the one still standing next to the alleyway I had found them in. I had ascended to watch her go, and to assess the situation... but honestly it was also because I wanted to follow her.

By climbing to the roof for a few moments, it had given my hands and feet something to do. Instead of following her I forced them to climb.

A pitiful excuse, but it worked.

Especially since my left hand wouldn't let go of the bloody spear.

Glancing at the spear I held... I now hated the thing I had been somewhat proud of.

It had blood on it. Not just a single person's either. The different shades of stains and dried blood told me Brom had used this before... before...

Looking back at the spot where Renn had just been, I did my best to distract my mind.

Did my best and failed.

Turning away from the lingering image of Renn holding Merit as she limped, I slowly looked over towards the source of my current displeasure.

It was definitely like the one I had fought and killed down below. The tree like creature loomed just beyond the buildings in front of me. It looked to be about two or so blocks away from here, and did indeed look like it had emerged right near the piers and ocean.

From here I was able to see that it did have tentacles like the other had. They were just... all on the ground. Its body had grown massively, shooting upward into the sky, but none of its long root like tentacles had grown along the main body or near the head. Maybe they really were more akin to roots than anything else...

Every so often a tentacle however could be seen above the buildings. It was flailing them around, grabbing parts of the broken buildings and streets, and trying to throw them in the direction of what was bringing it pain.

The ships out at sea were still firing volleys. Now there was a good dozen of them out there, which helped, but their cannons weren't doing much damage to the thing. Even from here I could see the blood and chunks of flesh being destroyed by the cannon fire... but the mere size of the creature rendered most that damage useless.

It'd take them a whole day or more at this rate of continuous fire to actually inflict a killing blow.

If they even had enough ammunition to bring it down in the first place.

A huge tentacle, probably as wide as the entire creature I had just killed, lifted upward into the sky. I saw stuff falling from the thing it was wrapped around, likely debris and dirt. It arched the tentacle, and then threw what it held out to sea towards the ships.

I followed the large object until it crashed harmlessly into the sea, far away from any of the ships.

It could reach them. It had the strength to throw such large pieces of debris... but it likely had never done such an activity before so it was horrible at it. It wasn't just missing the ships it was aiming at, half the time the stuff it threw went the complete opposite way and into the city. Just how many have died so far? There were smoke stacks from fires all over the city, and not from controlled fires...

The thing threw another bundle of stones, of which only half made it to the sea. The other half splattered all over the port to the south. Even from here I could see the barges and docks shatter and fly into the sky from the impacts.

It wasn't attacking the city intentionally. Yet it was doing as much damage as if it was.

Thus Brom's and Merit's condition...

Turning, I stepped aside as to look down the alleyway I had found Renn in.

A huge boulder was in the middle of the alley. Stuck half into the wall of the building I was standing on, and half buried by the stone of the collapsed building across from me.

What horrible happenstance.

Out of all the places for it to have landed.

Out of all the people for it to have crushed.

"Fate..." I whispered the word I hated most, and wondered how many of the bodies littering the rubble were ones Merit and the rest had killed. Some weapons were laying around... Broken bronze swords, what looked to be the shaft of a wooden spear was sticking out of one of the piles of rubble.

Weapons. Human ones.

Renn had been running. Merit and Brom had found her, and protected her.

Then the boulder had been tossed by the creature, recklessly, and now we were here.

Taking a deep breath, I let out a tiny little groan of anger.

I wanted to blame the creature. The people. The humans. Fly's people...

But the reality... the harsh reality, like always...

"...Vim..."

The whole world froze for a moment, and I ignored the roars of the creature as more cannon fire hit it.

My eyes slowly slid to where they had been avoiding. Not far from the boulder. In its own little pile...

The fist that had been holding the steel spear I now wielded twitched.

Leaping off the roof, I landed in the alley and hurried over to the pile of debris.

“Brom!” I shouted as I quickly deduced where to start digging. Based off where his hand was and what little of him I could see...

Although careful, I didn’t go slowly. Dropping the spear I pushed aside bricks and debris hurriedly as I unburied my friend.

The scarred head and ear appeared, covered in a layer of dust typical from the collapse of a building. I smiled gently down at the blank eyes of a dead man.

“Brom...” I slowed myself, going from pushing aside large chunks of stone to just... picking away at them, around his head.

“Vim...?” Brom whispered my name. Barely audible as he wheezed painfully.

So I hadn’t misheard. I hadn’t imagined it.

“I’m here Brom,” I said softly as I realized that once again, I was going to have to hear a friend’s final words.

Pushing aside another layer of stone near his neck, I realized there was no point in removing much more.

The stone and dirt hiding his main body was soaked in blood. Flowing down from within like a tiny river.

A tiny wheeze blew some dust into the air as Brom took a breath. As he breathed... I noticed that none of the stones or even the smallest pebbles shifted. He wasn't even trying to move. He likely couldn't.

Glancing at the fist to my left, I wondered if it was even still connected to his body. It was still curled, likely because he thought he still held onto the spear.

"Vim... my sister..." Brom said.

Looking back to Brom, I nodded even though I knew he couldn't see me. His eyes were already starting to harden, the pupils already empty. The eyeballs caked in dirt and blood. "Reatti is fine," I told him.

"It's okay. She's strong... She'll be..." Brom's mouth twitched and trembled as he spoke and I knew if he wasn't so far gone he'd be weeping right now. Sobbing.

Reaching out, I gently laid my hand on Brom's head. His hair felt prickly, thanks to all the dust and blood.

“Your last words, Brom. Let me hear them,” I whispered gently.

He twitched. His whole head moved just a bit, shifting rocks... and I realized he had tried to look for me. To see me.

He couldn't.

“Reatti...” Brom whispered.

I nodded.

“I forgive... For... Mother...” he barely got the words out.

“She already knows, Brom. But I will tell her again, for you,” I said as I realized he was already gone.

She knew he had long forgiven her for that. Had he forgotten?

Was his final moments, in his mind at least, reliving those memories? Those horrible... gut wrenching moments?

Instead of all the years of happiness he and his sister had lived, free of their family and here with the Society... He instead spent his final moments reliving that night? Where he had watched his sister kill his family? Where he had been scarred?

Poor, poor Brom...

"Thanks... Vim..." Brom said... and then never took a breath again.

Kneeling there, I too stopped breathing for a moment.

Gently brushing Brom's hair free of dust, I tried to think of what I'd say to Reatti. What did I say, and how did I say it so that she didn't kill herself?

"Oh Brom..." I finally took a breath again as I glanced at the spear.

He had been so very happy over it. So proud. They both had been.

At least he got to use it before he died.

"I'm sorry Brom," I whispered to the young man, who had always been a little boy in my eyes.

I'd need to come back. Once this was over, for his body. Although mangled, it still belonged to my friend. He had earned his place and...

And he had died to protect Renn and Merit.

Taking another deep breath, I realized something horrible.

Merit could endure such a burden. She carried many deaths on her tiny shoulders. Deaths not only from her own hands, but those like this. Those who had sacrificed themselves for her.

Yet Renn...

Reaching over to grab Brom's spear, I listened to the sound of the steel weapon as it slid along stones and dirt. It was a pure tone it released, an almost soothing one... especially here in this moment when the whole world was noisy. Noisy with death and destruction.

"Rest well, Brom. You stood tall until the end," I said as I stood.

Stepping away I headed for the street. I ignored the debris, and the bodies beneath it all.

I needed to slay that creature. Not just to avenge those lost... but to stop any other tragedy from happening.

Fate was cruel like that. This whole city and all the people in it... and it would be my people who suffered the worse if I left fate to its own design.

Brom's death wasn't a singular loss.

It would cost us Reatti. I didn't know how it would go... but I could see the ways it might do so.

Her leaving forever. Her lashing out. Maybe even attacking and hating Renn and Merit for letting her brother die.

Her hating me for not being there to protect him, as I had promised upon finding them all those years ago.

I thought of that night as I ran down the street towards the pier, as to round the buildings and approach the creature from the front.

Reatti, covered in blood. Carrying her small brother on her back who was on the verge of death.

“Again,” I whispered as I reached the end of the road and rounded a corner. I had to make a large birth around a collapsed building, not just because of the pile of debris but all the people trying to un-bury something... or rather, someone.

“Help us out here!” a group of men shouted at me as I passed, but I ignored them.

I had to.

They likely saw the wounds, and the spear, and thought I was a knight of some kind. So I couldn't fault them for asking for help... but...

“But I'm not their protector,” I told myself as I ran past a family on the side of the road. They were bundled around someone on the ground. An older man was kneeling there, in the center of them, and he was holding what looked to be a young boy. He was wailing, cursing his god.

A typical scene during such carnage.

As I headed closer towards the creature, I was a little surprised at just how many people were still around. Most were hurt, or helping those who were... but it was still shocking to see so many humans willingly staying near a creature that loomed over them like a giant. Usually humans ran away from such things.

I slowed as I noticed the gleam of armor. Huffing a breath, I seized up what looked to be a small regiment of some local knights. I didn't recognize any of the emblems on their capes or armors, but it was little doubt they were part of Lumen's military. Or at the very least, members of some nobles

entourage. "Get that blasted thing loaded already!" a man shouted at the top of his lungs. He was on a horse, that was having trouble in settling down. It kept bucking and trying to run away.

As I approached I realized they were all around a giant ballista of some kind. It looked terribly out of place in the middle of Lumen's streets, and I couldn't help but wonder where they had gotten it. It was one of the huge ones that normally was found on a rampart, yet this was the port. There were no large fortifications or walls around here. There were auxiliary towers along the port, but I knew from experience they had cannons not ballistae.

No matter.

Studying the large weapon and the huge bolt that half a dozen men were trying to load onto the mechanism, I wondered if it'd work.

As I stared at the ballista, and the men fumbling around with it, I realized I recognized this part of town. Right next to the group of knights, although half destroyed... was the blue restaurant that Renn and I had eaten at not long ago.

It was a crumbled mess now. Its signs and banisters were all over, and chairs and other items were scattered everywhere... even some food was on the ground nearby. What looked to be some kind of ribs was just off to my right, lying in a pile of dirt.

Renn wouldn't like this.

Once close enough to the group I was able to look down the road they were aiming at. Far down the road, past the crumbling infrastructure, was a world of roots.

The sight of hundreds if not thousands of roots of all sizes wiggling around made me almost think twice about engaging that creature. Those tentacles were a pain in the ass.

Not far past the floor, and nearly wall, of roots... was a wall of what looked to be wood from this distance. Looking up at the creature, I noticed that this thing did have a mouth and eyes like the one beneath had... but oddly, unlike the rest of its body, the mouth and eyes hadn't grown obscenely large alongside the rest of its body.

I squinted and frowned as I stared at the small mouth about half way up the huge body. It was bigger than the mouth of the beast I had already fought, but definitely not scaled properly. It made it look a little... funny, actually.

A volley of cannon fire impacted the creature as I studied it, and for a brief moment the mouth was hidden by smoke and blood from the impacts.

The beast roared again, and from the way the world around me vibrated... from the ground beneath me, to the very air around me, I could tell the roar was coming from more than that mouth. Maybe there were other mouths elsewhere...? Or...

Glancing down at the ground, and the tiny peoples shaking around my feet... I hoped that all of the sounds and rumbling beneath my feet were just from the creature's buried root tentacles and not because there were more creatures beneath the city.

Hopefully this wasn't a forest of monsters. Like a giant mushroom network or something.

Something huge and heavy landed nearby and I followed the sound of it. Down the street, near the creature's base, where most of the buildings were already flattened and crumbled... was something huge falling down.

A giant chunk of flesh landed loudly, sounding as heavy as the wood it looked like. The roots it landed on trembled and shook violently, as if it wasn't able to tell that the stuff landing on its own body was its own flesh.

The cannon fire was hurting it. More than I thought, actually. All over the massive body were massive chunks of flesh. It was nearly raining blood; there was a gleam all over the body from the blood flowing down from the countless wounds, and...

"Fire!"

My attention snapped away from the creature as I watched a lever get pulled, and the ballista shot backward as it released the massive bolt.

I flinched as two men got crushed by the ballista. They hadn't gotten out of the way quick enough. One had his legs crushed, the other had been kneeling down next to the ballista for some reason, and was had half his body crushed under the ballista.

As the wounded men shouted out for help, screaming in pain, I instead followed the bolt the ballista had fired.

Thanks to the huge body of the creature, even the inept knights who obviously had no idea what they were doing had been able to hit their target. The bolt struck the beast a few dozen feet above the roots, impaling itself into the beast.

The beast was already roaring, so there was no way to tell if the thing even registered the bolt. But it had hit. And it had been able to pierce its skin. It hadn't gone all the way into the beast, let alone thru it, but it had gone about half way in. I could just barely make out the iron shaft sticking out of it from here.

"We hit it!" one of the knights noticed, shouting out over the rest as they tried to help their comrades.

"Blasted fool!" the man who had been giving earlier had un-mounted from his horse and had been the first one to rush to the hurt knight's aid. The one whose leg had been crushed was being pulled away from the ballista and the group by two other men, and based off the way his armor was curled and crushed that leg wasn't just going to need to be amputated he might even die before they could treat him in time.

The man stuck beneath the ballista however...

Nearly all the of the knights were trying to lift the ballista off the man. Thanks to the broken street, he somehow had luckily been rolled over right where there was more dirt than stone. His armor was crushed a little, but he wasn't directly beneath the main wheel of the machine. He was simply stuck thanks to how little distance was between the ground and the bottom of the machine.

Stepping forward, I sighed as I weaseled my way through the bundle of knights. My spear let out little clanks and notes of pure sound as it bumped against their armor.

“Huh?” “Hey!” “Wait...” Those who I bumped into and pushed aside were startled, but no one really tried to stop me as I got a hand under the ballista.

I lifted the ballista off the ground, and held it firmly since it started to roll forward. Holding it in place I watched as the knights hurriedly pulled their fallen comrade out from under the machine. Once he was far enough away I let it down.

“Did you see that?” I heard someone whisper behind me, but I ignored them.

Being seen right now doesn't matter.

“Look at his back,” another whispered.

Once the ballista was back on the ground, and everyone stepped back a little I too stepped away. I ignored the looks of the knights, and was thankful not a single one tried to stop me as I headed for the creature.

Walking down the destroyed road towards the tall beast, I glanced at the spear I still held.

Brom's spear.

“May the blood of its heart satiate your soul,” I whispered a small prayer to the thing.

Looking back at the creature, I glanced up at the sky above me. Half a dozen tentacle roots were coiling around up there, above the buildings. Some preparing to throw rocks at the ships, others just hanging there without purpose. I could hear the roots scraping the world around me, breaking buildings and roads as they gathered up large boulders... or likely anything big enough to throw.

The creature didn't notice me as I approached... but why would it? It was too big. I too small. The closer I got, the more I realized how big it was.

"As big as the tree in the Owl's Nest, likely," I realized. I had to crane my neck upward to see the top of the beast from this angle, and it was nearly impossible.

At least four, maybe five stories tall. An impossible creature in today's age.

Yet not the first I've faced let alone the biggest.

"Just another tree to fell," I said as I took a breath... and charged forward.

Chapter 185 A Ship For The Weary

The door wouldn't open.

It was locked from the inside... and I wasn't strong enough at the moment to force it open.

Banging on the door again, I leaned against the door and hit the door with my forehead too. It hurt, a lot, but it wasn't the reason I was crying.

Merit was now on my back. I had shifted her there about half way here, because my right arm had started to go numb and fail me. I couldn't lift it anymore. It hung lifelessly behind me, since I was pushing the arm as much as I could up against Merit's body to hold her on my back.

"Anyone? It's Renn!" I shouted as I banged on the door again.

Vim had said they might have left already... but even if they hadn't, they could all just be locked up within the houses deep within the building. If so how was I going to get in? Was there a window somewhere I could break maybe...?

I banged on the door a little more as I tried to remember any windows on the ground floor. There were plenty on the second and above, some huge ones too... but I couldn't remember any on the ground floor. None in the warehouse. None at the depot. Not a one at the bank or in the main lobbies...

"Please..." I begged as I hit the door one last time.

The creature roared behind me, and I flinched. Nothing came from the roar, it seemed like since I left Vim no more buildings had been collapsing nearby... but maybe I was just far enough away now. Yet I still flinched and expected more chaos to follow all the same. None of the buildings nearby seemed harmed, actually... although it was a little strange how empty the area was. I glanced around and looked up and down the huge street that rounded the Animalia building and felt like I was in a dream. There was a strange layer of dust floating just above the ground, too thick to be mist, and there wasn't a soul in sight.

I understood why there was no one here. Most of the buildings around here were warehouses. Places that one worked at, not lived... so it made sense for no one to be here. They had all ran home, or to safety... but what was up with the strange layer of dust floating around? None of the buildings seemed damaged around here, so had the dust just flowed in from elsewhere?

“Renn!”

I jumped at the sound of someone else, and spun around to see the source. Upon spinning too quickly, I accidentally bumped into the door I had been banging on with my arm and Merit. Luckily I didn't drop her, but it hurt.

Brandy was hurrying towards me, and I nearly fell to my knees in relief at the sight of her.

“Brandy...” I sobbed at the sight of her. Her face was contorted into worry as she hurried up to me. A glance behind her showed me where she had come from. Another door was open about half way down the wall towards the depot. Was that the mail room's entrance?

“What the hell happened,” Brandy groaned as she got close and stepped up to me. She brushed Merit's hair out of the way to get a look at her face, and I smiled at the sight of Brandy's gentle relief upon whatever she saw on Merit's face.

“A lot... Would you take her, Brandy? I'm about to drop her...” I turned as to let her get an easy hold of Merit.

Brandy wasted no time, what little weight Merit had disappeared off my back and I breathed a sigh of relief as Brandy turned and shouted something... something...

“Renn. Renn!”

Suddenly I was drowning.

Trying to get free, I began to panic. I was covered in something thick. Heavy. Warm. What felt like pulling myself out of thick mud nearly made me choke, as I came awake.

Blinking wildly, I realized I was lying down. And not on hard stone.

“What?” I shifted, and flinched as something horribly bright blinded me. A horrid pain shot thru my head, and I tried to bring my arms up as to block the light a bit better... but couldn’t. Something heavy was wrapped around me, heavy enough to stop my arms from getting free and...

“Renn, calm down. You’re alright. Merit, she’s up!” Sofia’s voice hurt my ears, and oddly not just my non-human ones on my head. Even the human ones on the side of my head, which I normally never really ever noticed what I heard from them tinged in pain at Sofia’s words.

I’m up?

Finally getting my left arm free of whatever had been trying to hold it down, I covered my eyes and tried to peer through the pain and brightness.

I saw a fuzzy image of bedding. A blanket. And...

Blinking watery eyes, I realized I was in a room. A small one... made of wood? And I was in bed.

Gulping a very dry mouth, I ignored the feeling of cuts and the bruises not just in my mouth but all over my whole body. Everything hurt.

"What...?" I coughed as I spoke, and more voices filled the room. As I coughed I heard Merit talking to Sofia, and someone else's voice I didn't recognize.

"Out!" Merit shouted, and I instantly became alert. I opened my eyes, and shot up fully and looked around.

Merit was pushing Sofia and... Reatti? Out of the room. My heart thumped wildly as I calmed down, and I realized that Merit's shout hadn't been one of pain or urgency but rather simple annoyance.

A weird feeling cold sweat began to seep from my whole body as I calmed down a little more, and finally understood we were safe.

“Merit... what’s going on?” I asked. She had a bandage wrapped around her head. It was white, yet had a dark splotch not far from her right eye.

“We’re on a boat. Getting ready to leave the harbor. I’m sorry we woke you, Renn, but we need to verify it before setting sail,” Merit spoke quickly, and sounded...

“What’s wrong?” I asked worriedly. Why did she sound so heartbroken? Why did she look so...

The door shook as it was hit... and I finally realized what I was hearing. Shouting. Arguing. Anger and...

“Reatti...” I groaned as somehow my heart realized it before my mind did.

“Brom’s the only one missing, Renn...” Merit said quietly. She stepped forward, up to the bed and leaned against it. To get as close as possible to me, she took a deep breath and released it slowly.

“I smell death. And not just your wounds, or that of humans... Renn, what happened?” Merit asked solemnly.

She already knew the answer. If even instinctively.

It was obvious after all.

Brom and Merit left. Only Merit and I returned... and I had done so while carrying her injured body.

“He was crushed. He...” I barely got the words out as I quickly relived the memories.

Being carried in that sack. Being beaten. Trying to escape. The fall into the pit... Fly, and then Vim... then that monster...

I closed my eyes as I started to sob while the memories flooded through me.

It was moments like these that I hated how accurately my mind was. I was able to remember every vivid detail, so clearly and...

Then I was wrapped again. I blinked my blurry eyes as Merit wrapped me in a hug, and squeezed me.

It hurt, a lot, yet it still filled me with warmth as I returned her hug... but only with my left arm. My right was still under the blankets. I wiggled it free as we held each other.

Once my right arm was free I properly returned Merit's affection, and sobbed with her. She wasn't crying anywhere near as hard as I was but she was still trembling and...

“Vim found us. And...” I tried to continue telling her what happened, but it came out in bursts and haphazardly.

“Did he see Brom’s body?” Merit asked gently.

I nodded.

Merit took a deep breath, and her trembling slowed as she got herself under control.

As she did I glanced at my right arm. It felt a little odd, somehow, even though I was holding Merit with it and...

Instead of a right arm, I had a giant wrap for an arm. I sniffed as the shock of the many bandages stopped me from crying anymore.

Merit slowly let me go, and I did too as I studied my right arm. I could feel my fingers within the bandages, but all the bandages made it look misshapen somehow.

“You were hurt quite badly, Renn. But I think you’ll be able to keep your arm,” Merit said as she noticed what I was staring at.

“Mhm...” I nodded, even though it somehow didn’t make me feel any better.

“Brom was crushed you said? By what Renn?” Merit asked.

“A giant boulder like thing. That... the creature was throwing them around for some reason,” I said as I tore my eyes from my wounds. It wasn’t just my right arm, but my left had bandages too... although not as bad. Several of my fingers were also bandaged in splints, which now that I noticed them it made me itchy.

“Alright... I’ll tell Reatti. Jeez...” Merit groaned softly, and I flinched as if something had just flicked me in the ear.

“I will!” I said as I moved to get up.

Merit reached out to stop me, but I didn’t let her. I forced my legs over the edge of the bed, and as I moved to get up I realized the bed I was lying in was makeshift. They had put a bunch of boxes together and laid down several layers of blankets and cloth over them all.

“Renn...” Merit sounded worried, but I ignored her as I shook my head and went to stand up.

Before I could get all the way off the bed, my legs buckled and I was caught by Merit.

“Sorry...!” I tried my best to get my feet under me, but for some reason I just didn’t have the strength. Merit however was solid, and firmly held me up... which made it a little awkward, since she was so small.

“Jeez Renn. I get it. Here, sit down... I’ll just open the door and let her in,” Merit said as she pushed me back to the bed.

I groaned but didn’t complain. How was I so weak? My legs were trembling and felt oddly numb... and...

Sitting back down, I huffed a relieved sigh of exhaustion. I suddenly felt like I needed to lay back down and go back to sleep.

Actually... how did I even get here? Last thing I remembered was giving Merit to Brandy and...

“Okay,” Merit said, and I looked up to see her firming herself... as she opened the door.

Once she opened it, I flinched again at the bright sunlight peering in. But my eyes quickly adjusted, and I realized it was the light of a setting sun. The door led to the outside it seemed, and it was angled right towards the bright orange in the sky.

“Come in Reatti,” Merit said stiffly as she stepped aside.

“Why are you acting so weird Merit? Did that hit to your head make you...” Reatti stepped in, and as she did I both heard... and saw her anger.

Reatti wasn't her cheerful self.

She came to an abrupt stop right in front of Merit, and the open door... and glared at me.

Taking a deep breath, I felt my jaw quiver as I stared into her eyes. The same eyes that Brom had.

"Reatti..." I flinched when both I failed to keep speaking... and Reatti actually stepped back and away from me. She bumped into the open door, which Merit held firm.

A long heavy moment of silence made me start to shiver, as if suddenly cold. I'd blame the ocean breeze flowing into the room, but I honestly felt hot and was covered in sweat. I knew I wasn't cold.

"Brom he..." I found my voice again and yelled at myself internally. To tell her. I had to. It was my duty to. I needed to... if I didn't then...

I needed to say it before Merit did. I couldn't let her take the blame. I couldn't let her endure this and...

"Don't...!" Reatti shook her head, and shut her eyes.

“He died. Crushed by that...” My words came to a stop as Reatti reached up and grabbed her head with both hands. She let loose a blood curdling scream. Although her scream hurt, and made me flinch... I didn't look away. I held my eyes on hers as she shook her head and shouted wordlessly.

As Reatti screamed I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. People were drawing near the door. Likely drawn by her shout... but...

What would come next? Accusations? Would she yell at me? Attack me? I deserved it.

Yet after a few long heart throbbing moments... Reatti went quiet.

She heaved a few deep breaths... and then lowered her hands from her head. She slowly stood back up straight, and then her eyes found my own.

Her gaze was heavy, marred by tears... but she was actually looking at me. She looked almost normal, if not for the tears and ruffled hair from her movements earlier.

“I'm glad you're okay Renn,” Reatti then said gently.

My throat constricted, and I hated myself. And here I thought she'd actually attack me.

“Reatti...” I groaned and started to cry again.

“May the Society prosper,” Reatti then said, and then turned and left.

I went to get up, to stop her, but not only did she leave too quickly... my body wouldn't listen to me. I nearly fell off the bed as I started to sob.

“Renn... There's nothing more you can do. Just rest,” Merit said softly.

I shook my head as I gripped the edge of the bed. The wooden box beneath the blanket felt hard, and it protested as I squeezed it. I heard wood creak, and even start to break.

“I was there too, Renn. Though I don't remember it... So don't endure all the blame,” Merit then said.

Blame? What blame could Merit possibly have?

She had pushed me out of the way too. Alongside Brom.

It had been me. I had been too weak. Too slow. Too hurt, to notice.

“Where's Vim...?” I asked between hard breaths.

“Not here yet. The creature’s been screaming something fierce for awhile now, we think he’s fighting it,” Merit said.

Looking up at her, I frowned at Merit’s face.

She was crying. Yet it wasn’t her tears that was worrying... it was the line of blood flowing down from her forehead, from under the bandages.

“You’re bleeding, Merit,” I warned her softly.

“So are you, Renn. So are you,” she said.

I was? Where?

“At least we can bleed,” I said.

“We can blame ourselves later, Renn. Right now we have to get out of here and make sure no one else suffers,” Merit said.

I nodded... even though I knew I'd not be much help anymore. I couldn't even stand on my own two feet right now...

Sniffing a horrible thought down, I did my best to smile at Merit. "Thank you Merit, for coming to find me. I'm so sorry it..." I couldn't finish my sentence.

"It's okay Renn. It really is," Merit said, and I noted the trembling in her voice. She was as emotional as I was right now.

Before I or she could say anything more, Sofia ran into the room.

"Reatti just left the ship!" Sofia shouted worriedly.

"Of course she did...!" Merit groaned as she hurried past Sofia, leaving the room.

My stomach and heart squirmed and tightened as I realized how serious the situation was. I once again tried to get out of bed, and this time... my legs somewhat listened to me. I wobbly got to my feet as Sofia turned to leave, but then she noticed what I was doing.

"Renn... Jeez," Sofia mumbled a complaint, yet still came over to help. Instead of pushing me back down as Merit had, Sofia put herself under my left arm as to support me.

"Thank you, Sofia," I said, and meant it, as she helped me out of the room.

A harsh breeze of familiar cold ocean air buffeted us as we left the room, and my eyes narrowed both as I got used to the bright setting sun, and the horrible pain all over my body. From movement and the salty air.

Looking around, I realized we really were on a boat. A huge one. There were people running all around, and we were on the top deck. The room I had been in was near a stairwell that led upward, likely to another deck near the rear of the ship.

“Are we all here?” I asked Sofia as she and I stood still, watching the chaos.

I found Merit. She was with Brandy near the side of the ship, near what had likely been where the bridge connecting the ship to the dock had been. It was now closed off, and the dock was...

We were setting sail!

“Everyone but Reatti now. And Vim, of course,” Sofia said softly.

“Reatti...” I groaned as I realized what that meant. She was going to be left behind. In this city. Alone...

Hopefully Vim would be able to find her. She likely had gone to find her brother’s body and...

“You shouldn’t have told her yet. You should have waited until we were at sea. She can’t swim,” Sofia said softly.

I nodded, agreeing with her... but also didn’t.

“It was my duty to tell her as fast as possible,” I said.

“I know, Renn. I’m not blaming you... I just wish it had gone differently,” Sofia whispered.

Brandy’s loud voice echoed out as she turned away from Merit and the railing, yelling orders to everyone on the deck. Orders to unfold masts, and set sail.

“Who are these people?” I asked Sofia. Some were recognizable, others weren’t.

“Sailors. This is our ship. Have you seen enough Renn? You need to rest and I have a job to do,” Sofia asked me gently. She was being kind, but I could hear the urgency and desperation in her voice. She’d never deny me, and would help me... but desperately wanted to leave to attend whatever assignment she had been given.

“Alright,” I agreed to stop being a burden, if anything so I wouldn’t start sobbing again.

Sofia helped me back into the room, and back into the bed. She gave me a gentle smile, and a reminder that I just needed to shout if I needed anything... then she left the room.

She left the door open, which I was a little thankful for. The sounds of all the people, and the sea, was comforting... and the breeze also felt good on my hot skin.

Blinking heavy eyes, I sent a tiny prayer out to Vim as I fell back to sleep. I prayed he'd not only be okay... but that he would take care of Reatti too. Since I had failed her, I needed him to cover for me.

I needed him to do what he did best, and make sure that poor girl's soul didn't break.

Because if it did... mine might do so too.

Chapter 186 A Marble Boulder

Grabbing onto the upper lip, I pulled back the spear and then thrust it straight in-between the two teeth.

The spear dug deep. The creature didn't really have gums, like a typical creature would, but the flesh around the teeth was still softer than the rest of it. The spear scraped and skidded along the huge teeth as I pushed the spear in as deep as I could force it, and then I turned the spear just enough to put it behind the teeth I had just stabbed between.

My attack, like the last few I had done, caused the creature to shake violently. Unlike the one down below, the first I had fought, this one was so big even the smallest movements made me feel as if I was being shaken around like a tiny bird in a cage. The wind whirled around me. My whole body shifted directions as it shook, one moment I was about to fly upward then the next I was hanging on with all my might as I was pulled to the left.

The amount of force my body was experiencing as the creature shook was daunting. It sucked air out of my lungs. It made my cheeks and lips get forced in odd directions, even though I was gritting my teeth as I tried to dislodge the teeth blocking me from my goal.

Somehow the creature had known not to let me into its mouth. The moment I started climbing it, it shut its mouth firmly. Giant teeth, some even bigger than me, were firmly lodged together. They created an impenetrable wall of enamel and jagged sharpness that I couldn't just slip through, nor break through.

But some of the teeth were wobbly. Some were broken. Some misshapen.

Like the one I was currently trying to dig out.

I dug the spear upward, and felt the tip of the spear hit what was undoubtedly the roof of the tooth behind the two I was focusing on. I forced the spear up into the cavity, and began to twist and push. Using the spear as a leverage point, I waited until the creature slowed its shaking enough for me to risk kicking the tooth I was in front of.

Letting go of the lip I was using as a hold, I jumped backward as if to leap off the creature entirely. Before I actually did, I grabbed onto the spear I had lodged into the creature, and then pulled myself back towards the creature with all the force I could muster. Slamming my feet into the huge gray tooth, I felt it give way and snap. It broke, sending my feet into the creature's mouth and the huge tooth fell upon me, hitting me in the stomach.

The spear came loose, thanks to the tooth falling out, and I quickly stabbed it back into the creature as to keep myself from falling. I had barely got the spear back into another section of flesh, right above another tooth, before it violently shook again.

It roared a little, but I noticed it still didn't open its mouth all the way. The tooth I had knocked free had let me somewhat get into its mouth, but there was still other rows of teeth behind it. And I really didn't want to try and squeeze through what little opening there was now... It was holding its jaw firmly shut now, but if I put myself in a position where all it had to do was open and then shut again quickly to finish me off, then it'd do so.

Using the teeth around me, and the spear, to keep myself from being flung off, for a few long moments the whole world did nothing but spin. The world blurred, my breath caught, and the tooth that had hit me flew off into the sky.

Blood splattered me, from the tooth I had just dislodged, and I tried to peer through the rush of air and gravity to see which tooth I'd target next.

The one right behind the hole I had just made, or the one next to it? The one behind it was smaller, so even if I dislodged that one too it'd be difficult to squeeze through and...

My feet suddenly lost their support. The creature opened its jaws for the first time, and I nearly missed the opportunity. Yet before I could leap in... it exhaled out.

Buffeted by a huge gust, I squinted as a familiar green haze emerged from the back of its great mouth. Within the blink of an eye, my whole world went green. The haze flew into me, and then past me and out into the world so quickly I hadn't even had the time to take a deep breath of fresh air before it could.

Unable to see anything thanks to the thickness of the haze, I quickly shifted and tugged on the spear I was clinging to. Pulling it free, I swung myself in the direction that I hoped was still the thing's mouth. I couldn't see anymore, and although the mouth was huge it wasn't a sure thing I was still leaping into its mouth. It was so massive even the smallest twitch made it move dozens of feet.

I got my answer as I landed on something soft, instead of sharp teeth or thorny roots and tentacles.

Like the one I had fought beneath the city of Lumen, this one didn't seem to have a tongue either. Yet the inside of its mouth was just as slimy. I skidded on the bottom of its mouth, and heard and felt the layer of liquid.

This is the second time in only a few hours that I've been in another creature's mouth. I really needed to make sure this didn't become habit...

Heading deeper into the mouth, the green haze pushed against me like a great wind. I squinted through it until I reached its throat, and knew from the last one I had delved into... that the thing had two holes. One for air, the other... well... everything else.

Unlike the last one though I only had a general idea of where I'd find the heart. The other had been large, but small enough that a little flailing and crushing I was able to eventually find the heart. I had found the lungs too, but crushing those hadn't seemed to really do anything to the creature down below. Odds were it'd not do much to this one either.

Maybe it, being plant-like, was able to draw oxygen from its roots and body. It didn't really have petals or anything, but...

Tossing the thoughts out of my head, I jumped down into the darkness of the throat.

The airway was forcing air upward, as to spew out the toxic fumes. The winds buffeted against me as I sent the spear out and stabbed into the wall of the throat. It slid for a moment, slicing the soft flesh, until it came to a stop.

Dangling in the throat, I pushed my feet up against the wall of the throat... and slowly removed the spear. Sliding downward or well... falling really, I occasionally speared the throat again to slow my descent and keep me from falling away from the throat's wall.

I knew from the last creature that the heart was near the lungs. But this things size was so gargantuan in comparison, I wasn't sure just how much farther they...

There. My feet suddenly had no throat to push against. I glanced down, and through the darkness and green haze I thought I saw movement. Air flowing in another direction than all the rest around me.

Another hole. Another air way.

Sliding down the throat a little more, I flung myself into the new hole. One that led deeper into the creature, not down it.

This hole was much smaller than the throat, and after only a few steps the floor became steep. So steep that I started to slide and fall.

Keeping my spear leveled, I did my best to not let it stab anywhere and get stuck. Although I didn't want to fall too quickly, I also knew this would lead me where I needed to go. The creature I had killed down below had a similar hole in its throat... though that one had not been big enough to walk or slide in. I had torn it to get to its lungs.

I slid a little while, and then I felt it. The pull. The tug of air, from not far from in front of me.

Sliding the spear into the wall as to slow down, I came to an eventual stop and stood. The hole I was in was no longer big enough to stand up entirely, but I was about to slouch just enough that I was able to stand up. Once up, I closed my eyes and focused on the air all around me.

It was hot. Warm. And... moist... but most importantly, the air was flowing inward, not outward as it had been earlier. Every so often the air tugged forward, and it was strong enough I actually felt the pull. If I wasn't as heavy or steadfast, it might even have been enough of a gust to make me stumble.

Heading deeper into the hole, I slowed my pace as I kept my eyes closed. Not just because it was dark, but to better focus. To feel past the tug of the air whooshing around me. To feel past the shaking of the creature itself, and the roars vibrating all around. To feel past the coiling and moving of flesh and muscle and...

There. I froze as I felt something heavy. Like a beat of a drum.

Spinning the spear around, I stabbed it right into the wall of flesh to my left. The flesh was soft, and easily cut. It didn't take long for me to open up a hole big enough for me to pass through.

Cutting more and more, I eventually found myself in a recess of muscle. The muscles were coiling all around, and not just because I was cutting them with my spear or pushing past them. They were moving alongside the deep beat of the drum that led me deeper and deeper.

A few minutes later, and what had been many league of muscles and flesh... I finally laid eyes on what was creating the sound that had led me to my destination.

Within a strange alcove of muscle and veins, was a giant heart. In the dark it was really hard to tell its finer features, but it was moving wildly. It beat with a strange pressure, and sounded almost as if it had a heartbeat of its own.

Although I needed to end this creature's life as fast as possible... I still found myself standing in awe at the sight.

The heart thumped, drowning out the sounds of anything and everything else. I could no longer hear the creature's roars. I couldn't hear the cannon fire. I couldn't even hear my own thoughts.

Approaching the heart, I slid between a pair of what was likely a form of muscles. They contracted away from me on my touch, giving me more room.

Hefting the spear, I studied the heart that suddenly increased in its heartbeat's pace. The thumping went to something with a rhythm to one sporadic and...

It knew I was here. It felt me.

The other one had as well, but it hadn't been anywhere near this size. The heart had only been the size of my head. This one was...

It was hard to tell its size, thanks to all the muscles and flesh surrounding it... but it was definitely bigger than me. Nearly twice my size, at least.

Hopefully it was the only heart it had. This one was hard enough to find.

Wasting no time, I stepped forward and speared the heart.

The moment the spear point punctured the black organ, the whole heart and the cavity I was in began to vibrate. I couldn't hear the roar of the creature, but I felt it. I felt it in my feet, and saw it in the way everything around me shook violently.

Pulling the spear out, I ignored the blood that gushed forth and stabbed it again.

Stabbing at another angle, I made sure to pull and push the spear as I dug it in and pulled it free again. To cut as much of it up as I could. To do as much damage, as quickly as possible.

Getting doused in really hot blood, I stepped to the side as I pulled the spear around and swiped it. A massive gash separated one of the huge valves near the top of the heart, and I went to cutting more and more.

Mindlessly cutting and stabbing away at the heart of the beast, I focused my all on doing damage... and staying sure footed. The creature was thrashing wildly, more than ever before, and now there was a very thick layer of liquid all over. It was quickly pooling beneath me, already above my ankles.

The heart thumped heavily, with each pump it spewed out more blood. Most of it hit me, and before I knew it I was up to my waist in the gunk.

Stabbing the heart one last time, I noted the way the heart thumped along the spear's shaft. It hesitated. It slowed.

Holding the spear there, I studied the heart as it slowly stopped its beating. The creature was still thrashing, and now its roaring could be heard again. Though now the noisiest thing was the blood splashing all around.

Pulling the spear out, I took a deep breath as I both stepped away and nearly swam away. The blood was to my chest.

The heart was no longer thumping... but it was twitching. It looked weird now. There were pieces floating in the blood nearby. Chunks were hanging by small threads. It was now lopsided, leaning oddly to the right as if about to fall over.

Heading for the hole I had used to enter, I really didn't have to search hard for it. The blood had a current leading to it, thanks to it being the only real exit for all the liquid.

I had a much easier time squeezing through the muscles and flesh exiting. The river of blood didn't just push and carry me out; the creature wasn't as tensed up as before.

Reaching the airway, I stuck the spear into the side wall of the hole I had made to keep myself from falling into the huge hole alongside all the blood. I stood a few feet from the ledge, and the blood poured around my feet and into the thing's airway. It roared as it splashed and fell, like a waterfall. It sounded weird in here.

Glancing up, I tried to find the place I had slid down from. The mouth or throat as it was. It was so hard to see in the dark, and my eyes were burning. Likely from both the green toxic fumes and the blood...

As I searched, and found what looked to be my escape, I noticed something interesting.

The creature wasn't roaring. It wasn't moving.

There was movement. Not just of the blood either. The flesh and muscles around me were... expanding. Relaxing. Un-tightening.

Was it dead? Already?

The smaller one hadn't died so fast. It had taken several minutes for it to bleed out and die... maybe this one died quicker thanks to its size.

Glancing down at my feet, I grimaced at the sight of the blood. It was growing thicker, oddly. Heavier. Plus it was quickly becoming dangerous. It had been midway up my shins, now it was over my knees.

I needed to get out of here before I drowned.

Pulling the spear free, I leapt out into the airway. Stabbing the other side of the flesh wall, I hung there for a moment to make sure the spear didn't slide out, or down. Once sure it was good, I began to climb.

Dislodge the spear. Reach up, grab as much of the flesh as I could with my free hand and then stab with the spear again. Each time I only ascended an arm's length, but it worked.

Climbing slowly, I listened intently as I heard the blood flowing. I heard the impacts of cannon fire, but didn't feel it. I heard the rush of wind from up above, yet couldn't smell or taste the fresh air yet.

And oddly...

Delving the spear into flesh again, I held myself for a moment as I verified it.

Yes. I was no longer hanging upright. There was now a slight tilt to the wall I was climbing. I could rest my feet and knees on the wall, and be at an angle. An angle that hadn't existed before.

The creature was falling. Or at least, collapsing into itself.

Groaning at the thought of having to dig myself out of this thing, I picked up my pace.

Thanks to the growing shift in the creature's placement, it was easier for me to ascend the wall of flesh. I reached the opening of the throat quickly, and found it was more angled than last time. I had slid down it then at an angle that would have required climbing in a similar way I had just done... yet now I was able to just walk up it as if it was just a small hill.

Every so often I had to stab the spear into the ground to keep myself from sliding, but the continued collapse of the creature just made it easier to escape. I found the mouth quickly enough, and the stinging air it held, and finally was able to see again.

The light peering from the mouth told me the creature really was dead or at least dying and close to death. The mouth was open agape just a bit, yet wasn't moving at all. The green haze was no longer flowing out of it as if blown, and instead was just floating around.

I walked up to the teeth and used the spear like a toothpick to pull myself up out of the mouth. I made sure to do it quickly just in case the creature had one last death spasm right as I was passing between the rows of teeth.

Once out into the world, I found I didn't need to worry about descending. The creature was falling, and lowly. It was falling out into the ocean, luckily for Lumen, and thanks to the angle it was collapsing I was able to just walk down its body to the ground.

Descending the beast, I fell to one of the larger tentacle roots. Upon landing on it, I noticed the thing felt much harder than it had before. The little thorns weren't moving around anymore either.

“This thing will need to be burnt, or chopped up and burnt,” I said... and regretted talking as I began to cough up a lung again.

Throwing up some gunk, I noted the black of the thing’s blood. Had I really swallowed that much?

I forced my stomach to expel as much of the stuff as I could, and took a deep breath as I shivered and hoped my lungs and stomach wouldn’t take too long to heal. I hated the feeling of being winded and...

I had to dodge backward, as something silvery flashed in front of my face.

Ducking the next attack, I squeezed my throat and stomach to stop the bile rising... and not because I had more poison to throw up.

Instead I did my best to not puke out of pure disgust... as I stepped back from Reatti.

She snarled at me, shifting her spear into a more proper attack position as she stepped away from the edge of the root. She had almost slid off it and to the ground when she had attacked me.

“Reatti...” I barely was able to say her name, before she shrieked at me and charged.

I shifted my feet and brought my own spear around to block her jabs. In a blurry of movement, Reatti tried relentlessly to stab me. She forced me backward, since I wasn't willing to retaliate, and she spun her spear around and swiped at my legs.

Dodging her swipe, I stepped back a few times and glanced around to make sure we were fine. The creature was still collapsing, but doing so slowly. Plus it was falling the other way from us. The roots we were on was large enough, and long enough that I had plenty of room to backpedal without worry. There were also dozens of similar sized roots around us to leap to if needed.

There were no humans around. No one else to see. Just me and her... and...

Focusing back on Reatti, I squeezed my spear as I hefted it into a defensive position. She shook her head, and then screamed wordlessly.

"Reatti... Please," I spoke calmly, yet was desperate.

"He's dead!" she screamed at me.

I frowned as I nodded. Yes. Brom was.

"Dead!" she screamed again, and then charged.

My heart was heavy as I dodged a fury of stabs, and then blocked a few more. She was lashing out in pure rage, yet her skills and abilities weren't too hindered by her mindless wrath. She really had been the better warrior of the two.

Our spears connected as I blocked her attacks. The silver rang out loudly, and bright sparks flew out each time our spears collided.

"Vim!" she roared at me as she continued her relentless assault. I continued backpedaling, heading closer and closer to the beast's body as I tried to formulate a plan.

Did I let her wear herself out? Knock her out? Run away?

It was so hard to tell what to do in these situations. Reatti had always been... holding a deep resentment. A deep hate. Yet that hate had always been directed at herself. Not me. So I wasn't sure what to think or do...

Her spear nicked my right forearm as I shifted and spun; blocking her spear in a way that sent her tumbling past me so we could swap positions.

I wanted to lead her away from the beast, not closer. I had no idea if it would burst open or collapse inwardly once it fully fell down, and if it did that I wanted Reatti as far as possible from it. She was strong and obviously not human... but she'd not fare well if that things toxins got in her system.

Reatti roared a wordless cry of frustration as I took a deep breath, and nearly coughed it out as my lungs protested. I refused to give the cough life, as I held the breath in and took a stance again.

She spun, to glare at me... and this time didn't take a stance herself. She stepped towards me a few feet, and then started to pace. The root we were on was wide, but only wide enough she could pace a few feet. "You promised, Vim!" she shouted.

"I did," I answered.

"You were here! Right here...!" she screamed her heart at me.

"I was. I am."

Lowering my spear, I stood firm as Reatti's heart broke in front of me. She swung her spear in frustration, cutting only air. "You promised to protect us! Him!" she shouted again.

About to say something, the world shook. Right above us, not far away at all, a volley of cannon fire hit the creature. Reatti didn't even register the chaos happening above us, as flesh and smoke started to fall around us.

Studying the poor girl, I wondered how it always ended like this.

Obviously, it didn't. Usually my presence alone stopped such tragedies from happening. Usually I was better.

Yet here I was... once again being forced to stand before those I failed.

Reatti stopped swinging her spear in frustration, and huffed and heaved as she turned back to face me. A huge chunk of the creature's flesh landed with a strange sounding plop not far behind her, yet she didn't even flinch as she glared at me. She held my gaze, as I waited for her next words and actions.

Whichever, whatever they were... I'd listen. I'd endure.

But I could not do so forever. I needed to go check on the Society. So I'd let Reatti act out a little more and then...

"Why Vim?" Reatti asked me.

"I don't know. I really... really don't," I said honestly.

"Were you there?" she asked as she lifted her spear and pointed it at me.

"No. I arrived shortly after," I said as I turned a little, so that I'd be able to block her incoming attack properly.

Reatti shook her head in aggravation, and then charged at me.

I quickly retreated, blocking and dodging her blows. I made sure to not let block her too harshly, so she'd not fall off the root... but at the same time, I made sure my blocks and dodges always led to her having an easy follow up attack.

The more she attacked, the farther we'd get from the creature. The more she attacked, the more she'd wear herself down... and time would pass so hopefully she'd come to her senses and...

Without warning the root beneath our feet came alive. It lifted upward with such speed that both Reatti and I were sent to our knees, as we were hefted into the sky.

"No..." I groaned as I watched the world disappear around us. The creature was still falling, deflating even, yet the root we were on and several others had come alive again.

Before the tentacle root slowed or stopped, I noticed Reatti start to slide. She wasn't able to stay situated along the rush of movement, or the air, and didn't seem interested in trying to stab the root as to hold herself steady. I hurried towards her, sliding along the root as I grabbed the spear she held right as she slipped off the root.

Although Reatti didn't seem to care, or even really register what was happening, she still clung to the spear. It let me hold onto her as the root finally slowed its ascent and eventually came to a stop.

High up in the air, I pulled Reatti up to me. She snarled at me, and even tried to attack me upon our close proximity. She clawed at my face as I wrapped my arm around her waist and looked around.

We were now high above Lumen. Probably up as high as the creature had been originally. The town looked... familiarly tiny up here. Oddly only a few other tentacle roots were in the air beneath us, but it did seem most of them were the big ones. The massive ones.

Was this a last moment death throe, or something more? Maybe it hadn't died... yet it sure did look it. It was now half fallen over; most of its body was laying on the ground. A part of its top head was even hanging off the side of the sea wall and into the sea.

"Vim!" Reatti screamed at me as she flailed, trying to free herself. She was also trying to spin her spear around, as to hit me... or even stab me with it.

I ignored her attempts, and quickly started running down the root back to the ground. The root had come to a stop, but at any moment it would either fall or fling itself. Either could, or would, kill Reatti from the impact and fall so...

Before I even got a quarter way down the root, the thing snapped. Like a whip, the root snapped outward into the sky... and sent Reatti and I flying.

We flew through the sky, and I groaned as I realized we had just been tossed the opposite way from the ocean. The bright blue sea went from very visible, up here in the sky, to too far away without warning.

I spun Reatti around to my front, and did my best to curl my arms and body around hers. I covered her head and upper body as much as possible... and then we landed.

We hit something hard. But luckily, I hit it first. My back absorbed most of whatever we landed on, and we skidded to a stop rather quickly.

Breathing quickly, I blinked dust out of my eyes as I hurriedly sat up and looked down at the woman in my arms.

Reatti was alive. Her face was scrunched up in pain and covered in a white dust... and...

Quickly looking around, I found other people looking at us. Knights in leather armor were staring at us in pure awe, and there was white stone all around. Large bricks crumpled and broke off above me, landing on my head and shoulders as they collapsed. I covered Reatti again, and realized we had landed at Lumen's main castle.

Or rather, some kind of rampart or...

Reatti coughed, drawing my attention back to her. I shifted and brought my knees under me so I could hold her in a more comfortable position. Laying her down onto the stones, I pushed some bricks and larger clumps of stones aside as she coughed and started to move.

She looked okay. She still had her limbs. Nothing looked too horribly broken, or out of place... she had gashes on her arms, likely from the stone we had been thrown into. It had cut her as it broke.

"Reatti? You alright?" I asked her as I put a hand up against her side. I felt her quick breathing, and could tell her lungs were fine. They weren't punctured by broken ribs, or crushed from the impact.

She opened her eyes, and I noticed her left was bloodshot. It was leaking a little, a mix of tears and blood.

“This is all your fault Vim,” she said with a thin voice.

I nodded.

Reatti glared at me, and then her eyelids slowly started to close. I panicked for a moment, but her heartbeat and breathing remained steady... she was just passing out. Maybe from exhaustion more than the wounds...

“You brought her here...” she whispered as she fell unconscious.

Lifting her head up, I put my hand against her throat and focused as I tried to keep myself calm.

Yes. She was fine. Her heartbeat was steady. Her lungs strong.

She was just hurt. Tired... broken.

“Brought her,” I whispered Reatti’s words, and felt the horrible dread as I understood exactly what she meant.

“What are you idiots doing? Load another, it still lives!” a man’s voice shouted the world awake. I looked up and watched as all the leather clad knights stepped aside to let a new man into the area. He emerged from an archway, and had a weirdly shaped mustache.

He looked furious as he pointed at one of the knights. “Get it together you...” his loud voice slowly died down as he turned and saw what they were all pointing at.

Me and Reatti.

Glancing around, now that I was a little calmer I realized where we were. There was a massive trebuchet not far from us, up on another level. We had landed on a drum tower, near a larger outward tower. One used to support a massive trebuchet.

One that had its sling down, and was empty. We had landed right as they were reloading.

“What the hell... Get loading you idiots!” the man who had froze at the sight of us, and the hole in the rampart we had made, finally regained his senses. He shouted at the knights, and even drew his sword as to emphasize his orders.

The knights burst into a flurry of motion. Those who had been staring in awe at us turned away, seemingly forgetting we even existed.

Coughing, I slowly put Reatti down on the floor and stood. Stepping away from the wall of rubble that had stopped my fall, I went to the edge of the rampart wall and stared out at the city of Lumen towards the sea.

The creature wasn't moving anymore. The few roots still moving, in the sky, looked... lost. Moving without purpose.

It was dead. Or dying. Those were just the death throes.

A loud clunk drew my attention above me, to the level of the siege weapon. It was hard to see from this angle, but I could see the large stone they were loading. It looked like it took a dozen men, and they were using large poles as leverage to push it over onto the sling and...

"Wait..."

I hurried over to the open stairwell that led to the upper floor. I pushed aside the mustached knight who was still barking orders, and reached the trebuchet.

It was firmly situated in a layer of sand. It looked old, and a little worn down. This was likely the first time this weapon had ever gotten used, since being built... yet...

I cared not for the weapon. Or the people loading it... who hadn't noticed me yet.

Instead I focused on the familiar looking boulder being loaded into the weapon.

It was cut in a round shape. Made from the same white marble.

“No...” I turned, and tried to imagine its flight path. They were still loading the weapon, and I knew it’d be many minutes until it fired again as to prove it... yet...

Yes. It would land there. Especially if they missed.

A few deep heavy breaths barely kept me from falling to my knee, and I reached over to grab the rampart wall for support.

That boulder had not been from the creature.

But from the humans.

Blinking watery eyes... I slowly headed back down to the floor where I had left Reatti.

I needed to get her away from here before she wakes. If she saw her brother’s body, as she likely did... she most undoubtedly had also seen the boulder that had done the deed. If anything to verify it.

Which meant she'd recognize it instantly. Just as I had.

Walking over to Reatti, I bent down and was glad to find she was still fine. Asleep, yet alive.

"Who even are you people?" the mustached knight asked behind me, but I ignored him.

I didn't want to even look at him.

After all I now hated him. All of them.

And that wasn't right. It wasn't.

It's not like they attacked with the intent to kill Brom, or hurt Renn and Merit. All they had been doing was defending their homes.

Homes that had been put into danger because of me. Because of our people. Because of our actions.

Humans hadn't killed Brom.

We had.

I had.

Yet... all the same...

Picking Reatti up carefully, I groaned as I realized she and I no longer had our spears. We had lost them in the fall.

I had thrown it aside as to better protect her. A fitting use of the weapon... yet a loss all the same.

Though maybe it was for the best. All those spears would do is remind us of Brom.

"Come on Reatti. Let's go before we hate ourselves even more," I said to her as I turned and carried her away.

I ignored the knights. I ignored the shouting... and the humans we passed as we headed for the Animalia Company building.

After all I now hated.

Hated myself.

Who hated them.

Chapter 187 To Ache Yet not Break

Brandy helped me off the wagon gently, and I stepped away so that I'd be out of the way.

Three wagons were lined up in front of the small house and church, and I felt horribly itchy as I stepped farther away so that they could unload themselves and their cargo.

Even if I could help, they wouldn't let me. It had only been two days since leaving Lumen, and although I was able to walk around... I couldn't do much else. I felt like I was more bandage than skin, and my right arm was firmly stuck in a sling as to keep it steady. It throbbed as I turned to watch the Clothed Woman talk to Merit.

The three wagons were more full of goods than people. All of the human members who had accompanied us on the ship had remained at the ship, ported at a small town to the north. Lawrence and Pierre had stayed with the ship as well.

No one knew what was happening yet. As we sailed away we saw the large creature collapse and fall into the ocean, but no one had been willing to stick around to see if the thing was dead. Lots of its tentacle things were still flailing around in the sky, so Brandy and the rest decided it was still necessary to leave Lumen. Not to mention they were worried over more creatures appearing, or more enemies.

I couldn't blame them, but a part of me had wished we had at least waited for Vim and Reatti to return. Hopefully they were fine.

“Why not go rest, Renn?” Jasna said as she stepped past me, carrying a locked box.

She didn’t wait to hear my response, but I knew she wouldn’t have cared for it anyway. Jasna didn’t like me much... yet it still made me smile to hear she worried for me, even if only a little.

Rest? I’d been resting. They had made me lay in that bed on the ship all day, and then the half day it took to get here from the ship I had been sitting on that wagon the entire time.

I did hurt. I was exhausted. But I was tired of sitting and lying down. I wanted to walk around. To talk to people... To do something.

Plus my tail was broken still. It hurt no matter how I was positioned, or what I was doing, but sitting down seemed to make it hurt the most.

Returning my attention to the wagons, I watched as Fly helped Tosh unload more boxes. I wasn’t entirely sure what was in the boxes they were all carrying into the church, but something told me it wasn’t food and supplies. They looked heavy. Fly was struggling with them.

“I’ll be back!” Brandy shouted as she climbed up onto a horse. I stepped forward to ask where she was going but she ushered the horse and off she went.

Watching her head into the forest, I groaned as I realized I was going to have to just accept that I was going to have to... be patient.

I was hurt. Too hurt to be of use, and that meant I had no choice but to just wait and watch.

Reaching up to itch the side of my head, I made sure not to dislodge the bandage still wrapped around my head. It was horribly itchy, but I didn't think it was because of the wound. The itch felt like it was more so from my ears being bothered by the bandages than anything else.

Stepping over towards the church, I waited until Merit walked back out after carrying a box into it. "Where's Brandy going, Merit?" I asked her.

"The Bell Church. To let them know what happened, and to see how many we can take there if needed," Merit said.

Oh. Right. "Women only right?" I asked.

Merit smirked at me. "Men can go there, Renn. They just can't stay there for a long time. You doing okay?" she asked, changing topics.

I nodded, even though I wasn't sure if I was or not. Not only did I hurt a lot... I had a horrible feeling that something bad was still happening, and could happen... even though I knew we were now safe. We were far enough away from Lumen that even if that creature still lived, there was no reason to worry over it.

"She doesn't look fine. Your face is all swollen, Renn," Gerald said as he passed us. He was carrying a rather small box, but the way he carried it made it seem like it was heavy. Heavier than even the large box Wynn was carrying behind him.

“She smells of blood too,” Wynn said as they both entered the church.

Merit huffed at them.

“Why, Renn, I hope whoever did that to you suffered far worse,” The Clothed Woman stepped over to us, and I noticed the tone in her voice. She meant her words, and likely much more.

“I uh... well... yes. Most did,” I said admittedly.

Merit nodded, proud of herself.

Upon the Clothed Woman’s approach, I noticed her odd smell. For some reason it didn’t bother my nose as badly as it had done when I met her the first time. Maybe it was because I smelled horribly of herbs and bandages.

“Where’s Vim during such a trying time?” The Clothed Woman asked us.

“Still in Lumen, likely,” Merit said.

I nodded, though wondered if he was. If he was that meant he was still fighting that monster, and those who it ruled over... it was hard to believe it would take Vim that long to finish.

Wynn and Gerald stepped out of the church, and I noticed the way they walked past us. Both of the men seemed to try and not look, or get seen, by the Clothed Woman as they passed.

“Still, quite a shock. Were you hurt too Merit? I smell pain from you as well,” the Clothed Woman asked.

Merit pointed at her head. “Cracked my head, yeah.”

The Clothed Woman sighed and shook her head. Her white clothes shuffled as she did. “Really. What was Vim doing? Was anyone else hurt? Is that why Lawrence isn’t here? Is he dead finally?” she asked.

I didn’t like the way she had said that, so kept my mouth shut and let Merit answer. “He’s alive. He and Pierre are with the ship we used, watching over our human members,” Merit said.

The Clothed Woman huffed, and I was glad she didn’t say her thoughts. I knew it was the humans she was currently thinking about... though it was interesting to hear she didn’t seem to like Lawrence.

“And the young bird?” the Clothed woman asked as she turned to look at the wagons. Fly was now on another wagon, the last to be emptied. She and Tosh were handing boxes to the rest, quickly making short work of the cargo.

“Her name is Fly. She’s a new member... She had been a slave to the ones who attacked us,” Merit said.

“I see. It seems you’ve given birth to another thread of fate, Renn, huh?” the Clothed Woman said as she studied Fly.

“I...? Huh?” I tried to think of what to say, and couldn’t. What’d she mean by that? She hadn’t sounded as if she had meant that rudely, in fact she had sounded a little... sad, when she had said it.

“Want something to drink, Renn?” Merit asked with a hurried huff. A glance to her expression told me she wasn’t just asking out of concern, but desire. She either wanted to change the conversation, or leave and step away.

“Sure...” I nodded.

“I’ll be borrowing your kitchen, then,” Merit said as she stepped away from us and headed for the small house.

“Mhm,” the Clothed Woman nodded in a way that told me she didn’t care at all.

Like last time I had been here, it was clear to tell that she didn’t seem to care about worldly possessions at all.

“Thanks, by the way. For letting us rest here,” I said to her.

The Clothed Woman tilted her head at me, and I noted the way her face coverings shifted. Their movement hadn't just been thanks to the tilt of her head either... Did she have an odd feature on her face? Weird ears maybe? "For the Society, Renn," she said.

I blinked and then nodded. "For the Society," I said... then the Clothed Woman turned and walked away. She headed for the wagons, walking slowly.

Watching her go, I wondered how such varied peoples had come together under the banner of the Society. The Clothed Woman obviously held beliefs far different than most... and she even didn't seem to like several, if not most, of our members. Yet she didn't hesitate to acknowledge and accept her position in the Society.

And those here, as Vim had mentioned before, didn't truly acknowledge her either. They didn't count her among the census for their numbers... yet...

Yet they had come here without a second thought, knowing it would be safe for them to do so.

Magdalena and the Clothed Woman started talking, as Magda unhooked the horses that had been pulling the carts. To let them graze.

"You should rest Renn."

I stood up straighter and turned to look at Liina. She had just left the church, which meant she had been in there for awhile now. I hadn't seen her enter it since coming near it. And...

She was looking at me with a worried expression.

"How are you Liina?" I asked back, suddenly very conscious.

This was the first time she had actually spoken to me. On her own accord.

Liina shifted on a heel, and suddenly looked tired. "I... don't like it here. But it's better than dying," she said.

Slowly nodding, I wasn't sure what to say or think. I knew so little about her. Out of everyone, she and Jasna were the ones I've spoken to the least. "Should be able to go to the Bell Church soon, by the sound of it," I said.

She sighed. "I don't like it there either... hopefully Vim finishes soon and we can go home," she said.

Oh...?

Was it because Lumen was their home... or was there something wrong with the Bell Church too? Maybe it was like here, with inhabitants that others were uncomfortable around.

Wynn walked past, carrying one of the last boxes. He had an odd smile on his face, as if happy and content to be doing manual labor.

“This is going to suck. Jasna and Tosh snore like crazy,” Liina groaned.

“They do!” Wynn shouted from within the church, laughing.

Huh? Oh...

Stepping past Liina as to peer into the church, since now there wasn't a bunch of people coming and going from it... I sure enough found that several of the pews were now moved around. They were lined up in rows along the walls, forming makeshift beds.

Right. Small house. Not enough beds...

It was a little odd to realize that we were all going to sleep together in the same room. I hadn't done such a thing since... well...

“Tosh snoring makes sense, but Jasna too?” I asked Liina.

Wynn chuckled a laugh as Liina smiled at me. “Jasna snores the worst. The odd thing is Tosh hadn’t snored when he was... well...” Liina glanced at the wagons, to the ones we were speaking about. Most were now done working, and all standing together around the Clothed Woman and talking. Likely telling her all about what had happened, and how and why. Fly was standing near Sofia, a little closely. Had she grown close to her?

“He hadn’t snored when broken?” I asked. That was odd.

“Weird isn’t it? It’s like he really had become someone different,” Liina said.

It was weird.

“Liina help me with these,” Wynn said from within the church.

Liina sighed as she went to help him out. I stepped aside as she did, and wished Wynn hadn’t said anything... Liina and I had just been having an actual conversation. One without any weird feelings, or a strange atmosphere.

Oh well... maybe there would be more to come.

Maybe Liina had lowered her guard around me, and started to accept me now that... well...

Glancing down at my bandaged arm in the sling, and the rest of my body, I wondered if maybe it was the injuries. Maybe she knew now that I was really a member of the Society, and wasn't dangerous now.

If I'd suffer like this for Fly, someone who hadn't even really been a member yet... Then obviously I couldn't be that bad.

Smiling softly at my thoughts, I turned away and headed for the house. To find Merit. She had likely gone to make drinks out of her simple desire to get away from the Clothed Woman, but I knew she would still be actually making them. I was thirsty.

"Renn!"

I slowed as Fly ran up to me. She skidded to a stop right next to me, and I knew it was because she had originally planned to tackle me in a hug. Yet had stopped upon realizing that it would probably hurt me.

Reaching out, I wrapped my left arm around her shoulders and hugged her close. "How are you Fly?" I asked.

"Great! I've never been out of the city before so this is really interesting! There's a lake and river nearby I guess, I want to go see them," she said, speaking quickly.

"Well, maybe soon. I'll come with you," I said. A lake and river did sound neat.

She nodded, happy, and wrapped her arms around my waist. She squeezed me gently, as if still afraid to touch me, and then beamed a smile up at me.

Smiling down at the young bird, I felt a little... relieved. I was glad she was okay. Fly had been beaten a little before being thrown into the pit, with me, but not as badly as me. And since leaving Lumen, all of her fear of her Master's wrath had seemed to disappear completely. Maybe seeing it collapse had been the reason.

Fly then looked around, and then after confirming we were a ways away she tugged me away closer to the house. I obliged her and once we were far enough away that she felt comfortable she tugged on my shirt to get me to kneel a little. Bending down to hear her whisper, I put an ear closer to her. "What's that smell, Renn?" Fly worriedly asked.

"Ah... that's her. The Clothed Woman. I'm... not sure what it is. But please be kind and don't say anything," I said to her.

"Huh..." Fly nodded as she glanced around me to the one in question. She was still with the rest of the group, talking happily.

"It fades after a bit," I said gently.

"Hope so... I'm used to bad smells, Renn, but this is strange. It makes my nose itch," she said.

Right. Living in a sewer.

“She’s nice,” I said.

“To some.”

Fly and I startled, and looked up at Merit. She was leaning out of a window, smiling at us.

“Merit!” Fly happily greeted her, as if it’d been a long time since the two had seen each other. Fly released me from her little hug, and hurried up to the window as to stare up at Merit. “What’re you doing?” Fly asked.

She sounded so curious. She really was just a child. I wonder if being a bird also made her act a little more... well...

The way she acted.

“Making tea for everyone,” Merit said.

“Oh... that water stuff,” Fly sighed.

“You don’t like tea?” I asked. That was interesting. She seemed excited to drink it whenever I had seen her drink it.

"It's not... bad... I guess," Fly mumbled, and I realized she was now worried she was being rude.

Merit chuckled as she leaned away from the window to head back into the house, likely to finish her tea.

"Come on," I patted Fly on the shoulder and headed for the door. Fly happily joined me as we entered the house.

"Hm..." Fly studied the house as I headed for the kitchen. It was a little... odd to be back here already. I had figured it'd be years and years before I'd be back.

Passing the table in the dining room, I smiled as I remembered the story behind it. "Do you know why Vim broke her table, Merit? They wouldn't tell me the reason he had done so," I asked Merit as I found her in the kitchen. She was standing before a stove, with two large kettles on the surface of the stove. A small fire was burning in the stove's furnace area, hidden by the metal grate.

"He broke a table?" Merit frowned as she looked at me.

I nodded as Fly hurried into the kitchen. Her head was turning every which way as she studied the place. "I guess he... broke the table. Either by throwing someone onto it, or the table onto them. I was wondering if you knew who it was he had done such a thing to and why," I said.

"No idea... How long ago was that?" Merit asked.

“Not sure. Last few visits, I think they said...”

“Oh!” Fly happily opened a cabinet, and smirked at the contents. Some dried meat.

“Don’t eat those Fly,” Merit said coldly.

Fly stopped a moment from grabbing one, and then turned and looked at us. She lowered her arm slowly and smiled in a way that told me she wasn’t upset at being told not to, but rather upset at herself. She realized she had been rude.

“I didn’t stop you because they’re not yours. I stopped you because you shouldn’t eat those. We brought food with us, we’ll cook some soon just wait,” Merit said.

“Huh? It’s just dried meat isn’t it?” I asked as I stepped over to Fly to see it. It might even be some of the meat that Vim and I had prepared for her while we had been here.

“It is dried meat... but not the kind we should be eating, Renn,” Merit said softly.

“Why?” Fly asked as she studied the meat alongside me.

It honestly didn't look like anything strange.

"Well..." Merit seemed about to tell us, but one of the kettles started to whistle. She turned her attention on it, and I could tell she was a little relieved it had been able to distract her.

"That's human meat, Fly. Not something we should eat willingly."

Closing my eyes, I shivered at the cold realization as Herra walked into the kitchen.

"Human..." Fly whispered, and then I heard her slowly close the cabinet.

"What kind of tea is that, Merit?" Herra asked.

I ignored their light conversation as I tried to think of the meat I had helped Vim prepare. Had that been human meat too? Surely not. It had to have been from a deer or something... right...?

"Renn..." Fly whispered for my attention, and grabbed my shirt. I opened my eyes to look at the young bird who oddly didn't look too bothered at all.

"You feeling okay Renn? You look sick," Herra asked, likely for the same reason that Fly was looking at me with concern.

“Yea... I might need to sit down,” I said honestly.

“Oh! Here...!” Fly hurriedly tugged me, by pulling my shirt, over to the table. She pulled a chair out for me, which I accepted.

She happily pulled her own chair out and sat in it too, smiling as she got comfortable. She was enjoying herself.

In fact she didn't look like she had even registered Herra's words, or the meaning behind them.

Was that just because she was young... or...

A familiar cup was held out for me, and I smiled at Herra as I took it from her. “Thanks,” I said.

“Don't let it bother you Renn. If you do you'll only hate her, and she doesn't deserve it,” Herra said gently.

I nodded, and felt horrible. So it had been obvious.

“She can hate her if she wants, Herra. Don't force your religion on everyone else,” Merit grumbled.

“That’s not my religion speaking, Merit. It’s me,” Herra said back.

“What’s a religion?” Fly asked as Herra went to hand her a cup too.

I noted Herra’s hesitation as she put the cup into Fly’s hands. Fly hesitated too, since Herra hadn’t let go of her cup yet.

“I’ll explain it to you later,” Merit said swiftly.

“No! You’ll ruin her!” Herra turned to face Merit.

“Oh? And you wouldn’t?” Merit said back.

Frowning at the two who were now standing face to face... or well, somewhat. Merit was too short to do so. I wondered if the two didn’t like each other. They looked about ready to start screaming at each other.

“Alright, enough. Herra come help us cook!” Gerald shouted from outside. Their arguing had been audible to even those outside. It was interesting that Gerald sounded so... used to it. He had yelled like a father would to his children.

While I studied Herra and Merit, who were glaring at each other... Fly sipped her tea loudly.

“Hmph. Thanks for the tea!” Herra said as she turned to leave. She wasn’t even carrying a cup.

“Enjoy it! It’s tasty!” Merit shouted at her as she left.

Merit returned to the kitchen, mumbling angrily as she went to make more tea.

Turning away, back to Fly... I frowned as I watched Fly happily sip her tea... seemingly unbothered by what had just happened.

She noticed my staring and tilted her head at me. Her feathers perked up a little in the process, making her look a little odd.

“Used to violence, aren’t you?” I asked her.

“That was violent?” she asked, glancing around to see if maybe she had missed something.

“Well... no...” I admitted.

Maybe I was just too sensitive.

“Renn’s a gentle soul, Fly,” Merit said.

“She is gentle, but what’s a soul? I thought you were a cat,” Fly said as she stared into her cup. Maybe it was empty.

I sighed as I took a drink myself, as to stop myself from saying anything stupid.

After all... I wasn’t entirely sure myself what a soul was either.

“Something Vim doesn’t have,” Merit said happily.

Fly frowned. “Think Vim’s okay?” she asked, obviously remembering him thanks to Merit’s comment.

“He’s fine. And will be. That man couldn’t die even if he wanted to,” Merit said.

Hopefully she was right.

“He’s a monster,” Fly complained.

“Right! I’m glad you get it,” Merit agreed.

Sighing at them, I glanced out the nearby window. The one that Merit had used earlier. Thru it I could see everyone outside. They were setting up what looked to be a camp, and a fire, not far from the wagons. So they were going to cook outside, not in the house. It made sense, since there was so many of us. This house barely fit two or three people, let alone...

I blinked as I realized how few of us were here.

Brandy had just left. Vim and Reatti had been left at Lumen. Lawrence and Pierre were at the boat... Brom was...

Fly was here now, a new member... but...

Plus we were lacking our human members. Only Lamp had really ever gone into the Society Houses, but... well...

Maybe I was just used to it being noisier.

“How long do you think we’ll be here, Merit?” I asked my friend as she stepped out of the kitchen. She brought the kettle over, to refill Fly’s cup. I hadn’t needed more yet.

“Who knows? Until Vim and the rest confirm it’s safe to go back, at least,” Merit said.

Shifting in my seat I tried to ignore the throbbing in my tail. It hurt the worst out of all my aches and pains.

Confirms it is safe.

That meant Vim would have to kill all the threats, and then assess the city. Would he make us all wait until he tracked down all of Fly’s entourage?

How many had there been? Dozens at least... but Merit and Brom had... killed...

Thinking of Brom hurt, and I wished I hadn’t.

“Think Reatti’s okay?” I asked softly.

“I don’t know, Renn,” Merit answered just as softly.

Taking a deep breath, I was glad I didn’t start crying. I felt horrible.

Her scream before running off had been... well...

It haunted me. And I knew it would for a long time.

Sometimes I wished I couldn't remember things so clearly.

Fly said nothing, but I couldn't blame the poor girl. She looked like how I felt. Responsible.

It wasn't her fault though. It was mine.

No matter what anyone said.

Brom died protecting me. Because I had been in danger. Not only had he pushed me out of the way of that boulder... I was the reason he was even in such a situation in the first place.

He should have been here too. With Reatti. They should be bickering right now. Maybe arguing over who gets which bed.

I never even got to thank him for sparring with me. Or apologize for hurting him.

Merit sighed as she sat down next to me. She sipped her own tea for a moment, before turning to glare at me. "Stop being so emotional Renn. It's not fair to the rest of us," she said.

Hesitating, I turned my cup a little as if it was too hot to hold. "Am I being emotional?" I asked her.

"You are.... Well... not as bad as you could be, I guess. I'm not saying to not... blame yourself a little. I blame myself too. But don't let it stop you from living, Renn. Don't let it break you. Don't become like Tosh. Don't run. Don't hide. We deserve better," Merit said.

We deserve better.

Looking at her, then at Fly... I wondered if the young girl had any understanding of what was happening. She looked confused and lost, yet not willing to let it bother her. She had a soft smile on her face, even if unsure of herself.

Glancing back out the window, at the crowd out there now all around a large fire... and what looked to be a huge pot; I took a deep breath and sighed.

Yes. She was right. Of course she was.

Tosh being broken for so long had not just been horrible for him... it had been rude to those around him. Those who he had left behind. Who he had ignored. His friends, like Vim... who had gone out of their way to walk on eggshells with him. Who had supported him, without anything in return. For over a hundred years he had been supported, without a question. A hundred years.

They had waited a hundred years, suffering without him.

His weakness, if that was what it should be called, hadn't just hurt him. It had hurt everyone else.

Merit was right. We deserved better. Even if one had every right to cry, wallow and grieve... if we gave in to such feelings, there'd be no end to it.

Sofia, who lost all her children.

Tosh who had broken over something horrendous.

Reatti who had ran away.

I knew each and every one of them had their own stories. Their own pains and sorrows.

Every single member had such failures. Every one of us had our own injuries, even if no longer visible.

Just like me.

Yet... we had to laugh. To stay strong. To keep living.

Even if it hurt. Especially if it hurt.

If I broke now, even if momentarily... it wasn't fair to them. They, who had known Brom and Reatti much longer, yet hadn't broken. Fly, who had just lost everything she knew. Even the ones she had been trying to save. I had never got to meet, or learn the names of the other children she had wanted to bring with her... Hopefully they hadn't... died... or been killed by Vim.

"Stand tall," I said softly... finally understanding what Vim meant all along.

"Stand tall," Merit agreed.

"I'm not very tall, though?" Fly said.

"Me either," Merit said.

"I'm not either if you take away my ears," I said.

"They are kind of big," Fly said.

My ears fluttered at her comment. So they were!

Merit chuckled, and for a tiny little moment... I felt normal. As if I wasn't hurt. As if something horrible hadn't just happened.

As if everything was fine and the world was safe and warm...

Hopefully this time, this feeling lasted... longer than the last few times.

At least until Vim gets back. So once the happy moment did break, he'd be able to protect me and the rest from whatever does it.

Chapter 188 Reatti

“Wait!”

I didn't. Swinging the sword down, I took the life of the mostly human looking man.

His large body fell with a thump, and I noted the way his red eyes spasmed as his head rolled a few feet away and came to a rest. Some kind of bat maybe, based off the way they looked.

Reminded me of Inar's eyes... though he had been more bat than human. And what I was likely remembering the most, per the comparison, was the look of utter shock and terror in the eyes more so.

“Vim, what are we going to do about the humans down here?” Reatti asked as she glanced down the hallway to our left.

“Most were as much victims as not, Reatti. We’ll kill any who attack us, but if they run and hide then we’ll leave them be,” I said as I stepped away from the body. The three other bodies in the hallway weren’t as human. One had a huge claw for her right hand, and the other had thick scales all over their head instead of hair.

“I can’t believe so many were down here. How did none of us ever notice Vim?” Reatti asked softly as she glanced at the one I had just killed.

“Happenstance. That was the nineteenth I know of... I think,” I said as I glanced at the head. The red eyes had stopped twitching.

“Did not a one ask to join? Or not attack you?” Reatti asked as I gestured for her to join me down the next hall. We were near the place that Fly and Renn had been tossed into that pit. The hole. It should be not far from here, if I remembered correctly.

“Well.... One...” I said as I remembered the woman with horns. The one who had been willing to incur my wrath by not telling me where I could have found Renn.

“Fly you mean,” she nodded, misunderstanding.

I kept my mouth shut since I really wasn't looking forward to that woman joining the society. It was hard to blame her for her willingness to sacrifice Renn for her own needs... since I knew her circumstances. But all the same it pissed me off.

Hopefully she never showed herself again.

Reatti walked calmly next to me down the hallway, and had to pause a moment as I stepped around a cave-in. It wasn't the first we'd encountered, but at least this one didn't block off the whole hallway. Only a part of the wall had succumbed.

"The whole sewer is going to need to be rebuilt," Reatti complained as she followed me. She made a few bricks and rocks clatter, likely from kicking a few as she walked past the rubble.

"Let the humans deal with it," I said.

"Which means it'll never get done," she sighed.

Possibly.

So far the humans of Lumen had not ventured down here yet. They were still licking their wounds topside. It's been two days since the creature had died, and they had only just started burning its corpse.

It was a little late, honestly. I knew disease would start to spread, since it'd take them weeks to properly deal with the massive body. It was already decomposing at a steady rate. One of the larger tentacles had landed near the Animalia Company building, a street over, and its scaly flesh was now soft and decaying. Already abuzz with flies and other insects.

Reaching the end of the hallway, we entered a little room. One that had tables and other furniture yet was empty of people. Like most of this area down here, it stunk horribly of the non-humans and now... well...

Blood. Death. And not just of the creatures I had slain.

I had killed quite a few when down here the first time... before jumping into the hole to fight that creature. Yet the smell of death and blood was too strong. Too strong even for all the death I had caused.

They had fought amongst themselves. Maybe those less fortunate, like that sheep-horned woman, had fought back and escaped during the commotion.

Hopefully it hadn't been the survivors of those I had failed to deal with before jumping in the hole simply killing freely.

Reatti and I hadn't really scoured much of the sewers yet, but what little we've gone through had been empty. Even most of the homeless humans were gone.

Wasn't a surprise at all though...

“Sure it’s safe down here?” Reatti asked as we stared down another hallway... or at least only a few feet of it.

The rest of the hallway was fully collapsed unto itself. Sealed off, from all the rubble and brick.

“Well, within reason. The next big storm will tell us just how badly these sewers will become,” I said.

“Great,” Reatti huffed as I chose another hallway to head down. One that was a little bigger than most. A main tunnel.

While walking I listened to Reatti’s fingernail as she tapped her sword’s pommel with it. She had yet to draw her weapon, since I’d been handling all of our confrontations... but I knew she’d do so the moment she got the opportunity.

She was still furious, and would be more than happy to direct that anger at anyone and anything if given the chance.

It was the reason she was down here with me as I cleaned up the place. Usually I’d never allow a member to join me during such a venture... for multiple reasons... but she had been adamant. The kind that would have only made her attack me again if I denied her request to join me down here.

She was furious. Beyond reason. At everyone and everything... which was completely understandable. I neither blamed her, nor judged her, for her emotions and actions.

I could not have asked for a better outcome for her.

She and I were the only ones left in Lumen, of the Society. Brandy had left a message, one in code, which told me they had taken a ship to the north. To take those they could to the Clothed Woman, and the rest to the Bell Church.

They were safe for now, but couldn't return until I made sure they'd not get attacked by any survivors. Revenge was...

Well...

Not just to be expected, but understandable. Even if someone didn't hate our people, or desire to hurt us, they would still seek us out to get revenge upon us. Even if they hadn't cared for their Master or any of their other members.

We had destroyed everything they cared for after all.

Or at least, I had.

Stepping out of the large hallway, Reatti and I entered a small enclave. One that was somewhat similar to the large room that their Master had been sealed in. This one however was used for housing. Houses of wood, metal and scrap lined the walls. Some looked rather good, actually. One near the center was

made of entire logs, like a cabin. It looked weird here in the sewers. How had they gotten entire logs down here?

“They made a whole community down here...” Reatti whispered as we walked among the makeshift houses.

“Is it so surprising?” I asked her as I peered into one of the windows. The house was empty, but there was stuff scattered around.

No one was here... and they had left in haste. Some of the stuff littering the floors, even outside the houses, was valuable. Too valuable to have been willingly left behind.

Bending down to pick up a small purse, I frowned at the design sewn on it. Little familiar clanking sounds came from the thing as I studied the crest of Telmik.

A devotee of Telmik...

Opening the little thing I wasn't too surprised to find Lumen Marks instead of Telmik's Scripts... but I was surprised at how much money was in it. There was enough money in the purse that it was impossible to think of why it was not only down here, but had been left behind.

“Vim?” Reatti stepped up to me, wondering why I was still fixated on something so intently.

Handing her the pouch, I sighed as I wondered how many lives we had uprooted or destroyed completely. Not just those who had been our enemies... but those who had been innocent. Who had nothing to do with those creatures, or the people who had fed them.

Including those lost and hurt up on the surface... well...

"Smells more like humans here than anything else Vim," Reatti said as she let the little purse fall to the ground. She hadn't cared for it, or the money within.

I nodded. "Likely. We must have rounded the area too much..." I said as I imagined the map in my head. Maybe enough of the hallways had collapsed around that pit that I'd not be able to get back to it.

Such a thing wouldn't shock me that much. That creature had pulled its roots from all around... and then of course the one up top...

It had emerged near the edge of Lumen, not far from the sunken capital beneath us. I still wasn't entirely sure yet if the two creatures had actually been two separate beings, or connected somehow. The deeper one went into the sewers, those roots started to appear frequently. Emerging from the walls, floors and ceiling. It was a mess a few more floors down thanks to all the roots, yet I knew those very roots were likely the reason most of the sewers hadn't collapsed already. They were acting as supports in a way.

Which would only further damage the sewers... as they rotted and withered, causing larger gaps and holes to appear all over the place.

Sighing, I wondered if maybe I should have Brandy and the rest dedicate a few years to rebuilding down here. If we used the Animalia Company's resources, we could employ enough people quickly enough to do it swiftly, before the entirety of Lumen collapsed beneath itself. It would also give let us use some of the immense wealth Brandy and the rest had accumulated, without them complaining too much about it.

Plus it'd likely force out any non-human survivors I'd not be able to find before I left. They'd not be able to stay down here in the sewers when they were being frequented by human workers, and knights.

Many birds with a single stone... or well...

Kicking a loose brick as Reatti and I entered another hallway, I nodded to myself.

Yes. Lots of stones. Likely millions of bricks in total.

Rounding a corner Reatti and I came upon a stairwell. One that led upward and down... but only about half way down. Before the stairwell reached the floor below, it ended in a wall of stone and dirt. It had collapsed.

"At this rate we'll get stuck," Reatti complained.

"Which is why it's surprising we had met those idiots earlier," I said as we backtracked. The hallways and stairs here were all sealed, so Reatti and I returned to the room with houses in it.

“They had been carrying packs, Vim. They had likely been escaping,” Reatti said as we passed by the empty houses.

“Well... yes...” I agreed with her assumption, since I had made a similar one. But I didn’t like to say it aloud.

I had killed those who were fleeing. Who likely had no plans to attack the Society or hunt us down.

But I couldn’t bet on that.

Hadn’t.

It had helped that one of those four had been in that pit room before I had jumped down it. They hadn’t attacked me out right but I had remembered them handing a spear to someone who had.

Plus none of them had hesitated to attack us on sight, so that had also made taking their lives easier.

“Vim.”

I paused in my thoughts and turned to see what Reatti was staring at. She was looking upward... to the ceiling and...

Staring up at an arm hanging off the roof of one of the buildings, I noted the way it wasn't moving. It hung lifelessly, without a twitch.

A body was on the roof.

"Should we check it?" Reatti asked.

Had it been there before? Usually I'd notice such a thing... but this place did reek of death. The air was pungent, so I likely hadn't noticed thanks to the stink in the air.

"I'll check it," I said as I headed into the house.

The door had been open, and it led to a makeshift hovel. The small, dirty and mostly empty home was oddly comforting to me. It reminded me of a lot of homes I'd been in over the years, especially of those of the Societies.

It wasn't hard to find the stairwell that led to the next floor, nor the stairs that led to the ceiling. They had been built into the wall in the back of the house, and didn't even have a railing or wall to cover them. As I climbed up the stairs, I noted some of the stuff that hung from the open stairwell. They had hammered nails into the stairs, to hang up clothes and other items beneath.

There was no door to the roof. It led straight up to it, but that wasn't a surprise. We were underground... they didn't really need to worry over rain or the elements...

I stopped before fully exiting onto the ceiling, and studied the body of a young girl. Likely in her teens.

She was dead. Her neck was broken. It looked as if she had been trying to crawl away from her attacker, and had ended up next to the edge of the ceiling.

There were some chairs and a small table near her. All but the table were knocked over, and done so in a way that told me what had likely happened. She had been chased up here to the ceiling, and had nowhere else to run. Maybe she thought of leaping from the roof as a last ditch effort, and had hesitated and then got caught.

“Vim?” Reatti called for me from below. I stepped out onto the ceiling and over to the ledge, as to make sure she was fine. She hadn’t sounded distressed... but Reatti right now was in a peculiar state of mind. I needed to be careful with her.

She was fine. In fact she looked annoyed that I was taking so long.

“A dead child. Looks... human,” I said as I studied the young girl’s body.

“Let’s go then.”

I nodded. Yes.

There were countless reasons as to why she had been killed... but none of them mattered to me right now. I had duties.

She was just another victim of me and my people's fates. Forced upon her without her ever knowing why.

Stepping off the ledge, I fell to the ground. The sword at my waist shifted as I stood back up and nodded to Reatti.

Reatti studied me as I stepped past her and headed for the exit, before we found anymore dead bodies. I was growing tired of finding them.

"Your wounds are healing, Vim," Reatti said as she followed behind me.

I frowned at her statement. She sounded upset. "They are."

She huffed a sigh, and I wondered if she wanted me to... stop healing my injuries or something.

Likely she did. It was... sad, that Reatti would likely never greet me happily again. But it was better than her dying, or being lost to the Society forever.

Her hate was a small price to keep her safe, and with us.

I wasn't sure if she'd stay in Lumen yet... but I didn't expect her to. This place might become painful for her... though some did stay in the locations where their families perished. Like Kaley. Not everyone ran from bad memories like Lughes.

We walked in silence as we returned to the last crossroads, and headed down a new hallway we hadn't been down yet.

This hallway led to a large pipe like structure. One that oddly didn't have much water in it. It hadn't rained in the last two days but there was still a lot of water built up down here. Mostly thanks to all the blockages and collapsed tunnels... though that was likely the reason as well. Odds were if we followed the pipe we'd find a huge hole somewhere, letting the water spill farther down into the sewer systems.

"Did you build these sewers Vim?" Reatti asked as we stared at the small stream running through the pipe.

"Hm? No." Not these ones at least. Not Lumen's.

"Did our Society?" she asked further.

"No. We built some of the ports and parts of the castle, but none of these," I said as I turned around as to head away from the pipe. The pipe would just lead to a wash, or the sea. Not where I wanted to go.

Reatti went lost in thought as I tried to find that pit room again. Why was it proving so difficult? The path I took to get there last time was gone, sealed by cave-ins and debris... but I remembered many other hallways going into it. You'd think at least one path was still intact.

I really wanted to find it before the knights of Lumen came down here. I knew it'd only take a few days at most before they ventured down here, thanks to the hole made by the large creature topside. They'd come down here to verify it was dead, and that there were no more like it.

Odds were there was. It was likely there were a few more of the smaller ones down here, but I've decided to let them be until I found them. Odds were that massive one had lived beneath Lumen for decades, if not hundreds of years. It had been more than happy to survive down there, unbeknownst to anyone, until I had pissed it off.

Rounding another corner, I sighed at the sight of clothes and bags strewn all over the place. Someone had left behind a bunch of stuff as they escaped. Another mess, another tall tell sign that pretty much everyone down here had run away during the commotion and hadn't come back.

"We've been here before Vim," Reatti complained as we entered a new hallway.

"I know. We'll give up soon if we don't find it in the next few hours," I said.

"Find what exactly? You said some kind of pit, but why?" Reatti asked.

"The pit is where they tossed Renn and Fly down to feed them to their master. I killed someone there I want to... dispose of, before the humans found them," I said.

“Oh... someone very inhuman?” she asked, understanding.

I nodded. “The others so far can be explained away. It’ll cause discord... but I’d like to avoid the church becoming too powerful here. Though it’s likely a very fruitless effort. That creature alone will invite the church here. Such things are seeds of faith,” I said.

“It is pointless. Before we came down here, while you were checking the thing’s carcass I overheard some humans talking. They all think it’s a demon,” Reatti said.

“Yes, but a defeated demon nonetheless. If they also find bodies of... our kind, they’ll just have more ammunition. More chances to suspect. More years of our people having to be far more careful than needed. I’d like to keep the rumors and populace fixated on that giant monster, not our kind,” I said as we entered a new hallway. One with more junk on the floor. Trash, clothes... and... buckets. At least the buckets were empty.

Reatti sighed, telling me she likely didn’t think anything I did would change anything.

Well... she was likely right. But I still had to try.

“Afraid your little pet will get found out if the humans are on edge, are you?” Reatti mumbled.

I stopped walking.

The still and stinky air grew colder as I waited.

Reatti stopped walking, coming to a stop right next to me. She didn't look at me, but she did grab her own arm as if suddenly aware of what she had just said.

A long and heavy moment passed before Reatti took a deep breath and sighed.

"Sorry Vim... I... I don't know what to say," Reatti said.

Turning to face her, I studied the way she kept her eyes on the ground. She was ashamed... but I could tell she was also upset. Upset at herself. Me. The situation. Everything.

She knew she was being vindictive and emotional, yet also couldn't help but feel her anger was justified.

How similar we were.

"I can't honestly say that Renn's presence didn't cause this, Reatti," I said gently.

Reatti finally looked up at me, and I did my best to not grow upset over the look in her eyes. "Isn't it obvious Vim? The only reason they even realized we were here is because of her. They smelled her.

Look at all this! They've been down here for years. Maybe even had been in Lumen as long as we have!" Reatti's voice grew louder as she stepped aside to point at all the clothes and junk around us.

She stepped away a few feet, and then turned to glare at me. She looked like she wanted me to set her straight. She had the look of someone waiting to be punished.

Did she want me to grow angry and upset with her?

"You're not wrong, Reatti," I said gently.

Reatti's face scrunched up, and proved I was right. She didn't want me to agree with her.

"One could argue it would have happened eventually, Reatti... but there's no denying that the spark to cause the fire was Renn. Her presence forced fate's hand," I admitted.

She made an odd noise as she groaned and stepped away from me; she grabbed her sword's pommel... but didn't draw it. She instead went to pacing, frustrated.

"You can blame her Reatti. It's okay," I said to her.

The meerkat shook her head. "No it's not!" she cried.

“It is.”

“It isn’t!” she shouted.

“She’ll blame herself too, Reatti,” I said.

She stopped pacing, and her shoulders slumped. “I know,” she cried.

I smiled at the woman in front of me. Maybe I didn’t have to worry over her running off or becoming like Tosh at all.

Glancing down the hallways, to make sure her shouting hadn’t drawn the attention of anyone or anything... I nodded and approached Reatti once I was sure it was safe.

“Who do you think your brother blames, Reatti?” I asked her.

Reatti sniffed as she shook her head. “No one.”

“What of Merit? She had been there too,” I asked.

“Merit will only hate herself,” Reatti whispered softly as she wiped her eyes.

“And what of little Fly, Reatti?” I asked further.

Her face scrunched up even more as she glared at me. “She’s just a child,” she nodded.

I nodded back, glad she understood.

“You can hate, Reatti. Your brother was taken from you. You can hate all you want. But don’t let your hate blind you to the sorrows of those around you,” I said.

“Should I run away?” she asked.

“You can. I’ll help you if you’d like,” I suggested.

As Reatti sniffed and tried to clean her face of tears and snot, I studied the way she swayed in front of me. She suddenly looked exhausted again. “What of you Vim?” she asked.

I frowned. What of me? Was she asking for my thoughts on Renn, what I thought she should do, or something more?

“Aren’t you upset?” she asked after I remained silent.

Ah. “I am,” I said.

“At yourself,” she scoffed.

“Yes. A hypocrite. I know,” I admitted with a nod.

She sniffed as she smiled. “You are... but I guess that’s why you’re the protector, isn’t it?”

I shrugged, since I no longer really believed such a providential excuse. Hadn’t for centuries.

So many said I was perfect for my role, since I didn’t allow my emotions to intrude or make my decisions. Yet in truth it made me worse than those who did.

“It’s not your fault Vim,” Reatti said.

“Are we going to go back and forth like this forever?” I asked her.

She coughed a laugh, and then shook her head. "I mean it. You wanted to come here. You wanted to hunt them down. You suggested using Renn as bait even. We ordered you not to," she whispered.

My eyes blurred a little, and I wished she hadn't realized it. At least... not so quickly.

I wanted her to blame and hate me, not anyone else. Not herself. Not the Society as a whole.

"And it's not... your and their fault for trying for a better result, Reatti. There's no shame in trying to be better. We'd not be anything more than monsters if we didn't try to be kind and welcoming," I said.

"Yet you knew from the beginning. Didn't you?" she asked.

Did I?

Well...

"See? How many times has this happened? Where everyone votes against what you suggest, and you just let it happen. Maybe it is your fault, for not being stricter with us," Reatti said.

"Some have said that, yes," I agreed.

Reatti sighed and once again went to cleaning her face. As she did I was reminded that she was... well...

Young. Young of heart. She may be as old as Renn, but she was more like Lellip and Lomi. She was more like Fly than Renn, even more so right now.

“What should I do Vim...?” Reatti whispered softly.

“Whatever you think you must... though I hope it won’t involve death or bloodshed... and that you’ll not do it alone, whatever it is,” I said gently.

She smiled at me with a pained grin. “I’ll not kill myself, I promise,” she said.

That was good... but I was more so worried over her attacking others, really. Namely a certain woman she... somewhat rightfully... blamed for her brother’s death.

“Nor Renn, Vim. I know it’s not really her fault,” Reatti said.

I blinked and hoped she didn’t say such a thing just because my worry had been visible on my face. “If it makes you feel better... she and I will leave soon,” I said to her.

She shook her head. “That’s not fair, Vim. Don’t banish her from here over this. That’s cruel,” she said.

Reatti blinked some tears out of her eyes, and I couldn't help but praise her. She likely couldn't help but hate Renn, yet was able to say such a thing... and even mean it.

Brom would be proud of her. It was too bad she wasn't the one to be there during his final moments... it would have likely put to rest a lot of Reatti's hate and vitriol. Though she hadn't been there, seeing his mangled corpse had oddly calmed her. The first thing she asked for upon waking up from being knocked out was if I'd help her un-bury him from the rubble, but she hadn't let me help bury him after.

"Where'd you bury him?" I asked her.

She shifted and blinked at me. At first I thought she'd not tell me, but she then smiled. "Beneath a huge tree. He wanted to be buried in an open field, so I found the densest part of the forest I could," she said.

I smiled at her, and nodded. Yes... that was just like her.

Reatti gulped and her smile faded, and I realized she was about to sob and cry.

"Come on Reatti... let's finish this and go home. You need a warm meal," I said.

"Mhm," she made a noise as she let me pat her on the back, and I guided her to join me back down the hallway.

The movement was a good excuse for Reatti not to break down crying, yet she still sniffed as she held back her tears. She walked slower than earlier too, but stayed next to me. I planned to have Reatti join me in most of my efforts and tasks for the next few days, if not weeks. It'd help her keep her mind occupied, and hopefully her hate too.

Walking side by side, I sighed as I realized this would only get worse. Reatti would be like this for years. Merit would get worse, too, and then of course there was Renn...

Such chaos never faded away quickly. Even when the enemies were slain, and the danger gone... there was still much to worry over.

Rounding a corner, Reatti and I ended up at another cave-in. One that had a person trapped beneath the rubble.

Walking up to the wall of brick and dirt, I noted the familiar tentacle root within the rubble. It wasn't moving, but it was obviously the cause of the collapse of the hallway. It had broken through the ceiling.

There was a man half stuck under the pile of debris. He was dead, and his head and right arm were the only parts of him exposed. He had been trying to claw and dig himself free for what had likely been some time. There was blood all over the floor in front of him, and not from any visible wounds. He had tried to pull himself free, desperately.

"He had been alive," Reatti whispered as she saw the same things I did.

I nodded.

“Another thing to prove that most of those down here are gone, Vim. Someone would have heard him screaming, likely. No one came to his aid,” Reatti said.

“Or they did, and decided not to help him upon finding out whom he was,” I said.

Reatti shifted on a heel, not liking what I had said.

But it was the truth. Reatti may not know, but I knew from experience that there were many people down here who had been... or were...

Well...

Cruel. Diabolical.

They had fed monsters for no reason. They had willingly sacrificed Renn and Fly. That man had been abusing that horned woman. Those humans had been terrified of them. Abused by them.

And this man wasn't human.

The man had a deformed forehead. One that at first glance only looked misshapen, but I knew better. It was thicker, and shaped in a way that one could realize what he was if they simply stopped thinking like a human would.

He was a ram. One whose horns never emerged from his skin. The two bulbous bumps on his forehead were rather obvious.

Standing, I decided his body didn't need to be dealt with. Even if the humans noticed his odd bones in his forehead, they'd just chalk it up to the collapse of the ceiling. They'd simply think his skull had been broken oddly, or he was deformed just enough.

Unless of course he had other non-human traits beneath all that rubble... but his hand was human enough. As was his arm, and shoulders.

"Let's go," I said as I headed away, to find another hallway to venture down.

These bodies would need to be dealt with eventually. Another source of disease... luckily these waterways were all drainage and rain water, but the carcasses would still corrupt and decay into the soil. It was a good thing society hadn't developed to the point of running potable water yet.

Though...

"I'll need to check the Societies' water source," I said, making sure to make a mental note to do so.

“Oh? Where is it?” Reatti asked.

“Underground, but not a part of the sewer system. It feeds off a spring below,” I said with a point beneath us.

“So... definitely something that could have broken,” she noted.

I nodded. “Maybe. Most of the damage is in this area. We might be lucky and the Animalia building is far enough away, and it is unscathed,” I said.

“Hm,” Reatti nodded as we found a stairwell. One that only led down, and not because it was blocked off or broken. It seemed to only lead to the floor below.

Staring down the dark stairwell, I sighed as all the stuff I would need to do started to nag at me.

Check the pipes. The sub-floors. Check the sewers for anymore of Fly’s people, or those creatures. Get the city of Lumen to dedicate manpower to fixing the sewers and cleaning them up, one way or another. Ensure the corpse of the creature I had killed is properly disposed of. Make sure the soon to arrive church and other religious groups didn’t take too much advantage of the situation. Check the ships... I still hadn’t found out who had captained it during the battle...

Then of course, all the troubles of the inhabitants of Lumen. My inhabitants. The Society itself.

The next few weeks will be painful and long.

“Vim,” Reatti whispered my name to draw my attention to our right. I turned as Reatti stepped back, as to let me see the people down the hallway clearly.

There were three of them. They were gathered around something, and hadn’t noticed Reatti or me yet. Looked like one was smaller than the other two, a child maybe.

I nodded as I stepped towards them, and gestured for Reatti to stay behind me. They looked human, but I wasn’t close enough yet to verify it.

As we approached, I hoped that things went smoothly from here on out. No more deaths. No more chaos... just the plain old headaches of cleaning up after a mess.

The three noticed us, and I noted their poor appearance as they turned to face us.

A family. A man and woman, with a young girl. All dressed in worn down rags, and were standing next to what looked like a large sack.

“Honey,” the woman’s panicked voice as she reached out to grab the man’s arm told me most of what I needed to know of them. The man stepped between the woman and the child, and he gulped. His expression told me he was doing his best to figure out who and what we were.

Coming to a stop a few dozen feet from them, I glanced at the sack they had been messing with. It was stuffed full of clothes and other stuff. Next to the sack was a small pile. They had been sorting what they would take and what they'd leave behind.

They were scavenging.

Just poor humans who were taking advantage of the moment.

"Sir Knight... we're just gathering our stuff before we leave, that's all," the man finally spoke, and I didn't need to see the panic in his eyes to know he was lying.

Knight...?

Oh. Right. The Animalia Guild emblem.

Thanks to our clothes being destroyed during the events a few days ago, Reatti and I were now walking around in the security uniform of the Animalia Guild. I had us wearing them in case we ran into real knights. It gave us a good excuse as to why we were down here.

I wasn't wearing armor, but the sword on my hip and the clothes made it clear I was someone of note.

"You were living down here?" I asked them.

The woman and child shifted at my voice, but stayed behind the man as he nodded. "Yes sir... A floor down from here. It's sealed though, it collapsed so..." his voice cracked near the end, and I heard Reatti sigh behind me.

They were human, thru and thru. The young girl peered at me from around her father, but was being held back by her mother. She looked malnourished. The parents didn't look as unfed as her. Maybe she was sick or hurt.

"We're just repacking our things, sir... then we'll be gone," the man said stiffly.

"Have you seen anyone else lately?" I asked.

"Lately...? No sir... Most everyone ran out once the world started to shake," the man said. I believed his words, since he sounded confused. He didn't understand why I was asking, or why I'd even care to know.

"We're leaving soon, sir knight, real soon," the woman said quickly. "Just after we finish packing!"

They might not be entirely lying, but it was clear not all of their stuff was theirs. Some of the clothes and items were... well...

There were shoes in their sack. Shoes that obviously were far too nice for them, and likely none of their sizes. The black gleam of a nobles leather shone even in the dark of the sewers. That single shoe was worth more than everything they wore.

Hopefully they'd sell it and buy the poor girl some food, and not alcohol or something worse.

I put aside my sudden worry for the young girl, and returned my attention to the man. "Soon the knights of Lumen will be down here. I suggest getting your family out before that happens," I said to them.

The man stood up straighter and quickly nodded. I nodded back and stepped forward, the family quickly stepped aside and up against the wall to let Reatti and me pass by.

Heading deeper down the hallway, away from the human family, I ignored their hurried whispers as we left. The woman was scorning the man. She had told him they should have left hours ago.

"Hopefully no one tries to pillage the building while we're gone," Reatti mumbled as the human's whispers faded away.

"The building is sealed well enough," I said. I had checked all the doors before leaving.

"Was just a thought," Reatti said softly.

A good one. Though mostly born from her distaste of seeing humans act in such a way.

“There might be some looting, but I expect the knights to take over soon enough. I heard a marching horn earlier before we came down here,” I said.

“Marching horn?” Reatti asked.

“A horn used to give orders to lots of humans at once. Likely a knight’s troop,” I explained.

“Great,” Reatti didn’t like the sound of that.

Reaching another intersection of hallways, I had no choice but to accept the fact that I’d need to give up.

Two of the three available new paths were blocked. One by rubble, the other by roots.

“Well Vim?” Reatti asked as I stared down the only new hallway. It lead to a larger room. One I recognized. An entrance, one that led to a large stairwell that went topside. One near the central market. The same one Reatti and I had used to come down here a few hours ago.

“One last try... then we’ll go back up,” I said.

Reatti sighed but followed obediently.

Chapter 189 A Gentle Fence

Brandy was perfect for speeches. She had that boisterous attitude, which gave her voice a wonderful loudness that didn't bother the ears. Her voice was thick of emotion yet she did it in a way that made it sound natural. She stood on a small crate, not too far from the large campfire we all sat around, and was nearing the end of her story. One of loss. One of hope.

One that transfixed me almost as much as everyone else.

Almost.

It was interesting. And not just the story itself. Brandy had returned from the Bell Church right as we had all gathered to eat dinner. Instead of telling anyone what she had learned, or done, she instead clambered up on that box and began her story.

By the way everyone was acting; no one else had heard this story before. Or if they had, it was simply that good of one. Or maybe it was just Brandy's charisma that made everyone listening become so infatuated with her and the story.

Yet as fascinating it was to hear of a strange land, where a princess had been sacrificed and the small band of knights who had gone to save her, I couldn't stop my mind from wandering.

"And yet, even when their comrade was hurt... they did not rest. They couldn't! They carried on and," Brandy continued her story, and I had to shift in my seat again.

My tail hurt. And not just because I was sitting on an uncomfortable little box.

Glancing around at Fly and Tosh, those I was sitting in-between, I realized I needed to just get up and leave... and I'd be able to do so. I was sitting behind them more than not, thanks to how I had sat down last right as Brandy had jumped up onto her little crate and start her campfire story. And they, like everyone else, were completely transfixed by Brandy. Even the Clothed Woman, who sat over near the wagon the campfire had been built nearby, looked entirely fixated on Brandy.

I waited until Brandy turned around away from me, to look at the group across the fire from us. She did that every so often. She slowly turned, and shifted, and even spun around occasionally as to always include everyone watching her into the story. She sometimes even pointed at people, to ask a question, or what they were thinking. It was an odd way of telling a story as to pass the time, and under normal circumstances I wouldn't even have thought about leaving or anything else... but...

Flinching as another sharp pain shot up my butt and up my spine, I grimaced and glanced around again. To make sure no one was looking or paying attention at me.

No one was.

We were done eating. Most were just drinking, though not everyone was drinking anything but water or tea. The world was dark, and the large fire we were all sitting around was roaring and bright. It and Brandy were loud enough to compensate for everyone being silent.

No one would see me. No one would hear me leave.

Taking a tiny breath, I decided to just do it. I slowly stood, carefully, and felt my heartbeat thump loudly as I stepped away... as no one, not even little Merit who sat a few chairs away, seemed to notice.

Slowly walking away, I headed towards the buildings. The house and church. So that if anyone turned to see what I was doing, they'd hopefully only think I was going to the restroom or something.

It wasn't wrong for me to leave. I knew no one would actually grow upset over me stepping away while Brandy told her story... but I was tired of people worrying about me and being gentle.

Yes. I was hurt. I was injured. Those very injuries were why I was leaving the fun little circle of happiness. Yet just because I was hurt didn't mean I needed to be treated like a baby.

They wouldn't let me help with anything. It's been three days since we got here, and they still won't even let me help make tea.

The worst part was their gentle over protectiveness wasn't just from my injuries, but something more serious.

They were worried for my mental health. Even Tosh, especially Tosh, kept coming over to talk and spend time with me... as if to make sure I didn't end up like him.

Although it felt... good to have so many people care so much for me, something I'd never had before, I couldn't help but feel anxious and upset. I wanted to run away... and not just because I felt as if I had made some horrible mistakes lately.

Maybe if I wasn't hurting so much I'd not be thinking such thoughts... but right now... well...

I flinched as I rounded the church, and wondered how long it would take for my tail to heal. My head wasn't throbbing anymore, though there was still a nice sized section of bruises and scab covered skin between my ears. My forearms were itchy thanks to the scabby healing skin from those quills, and the bones I had broken were already feeling better... I was actually doing better than I thought I'd be doing, so quickly.

Other than my tail, my right arm and hand were the real concern. It was still wrapped in the sling that they had forced onto me, and it ached more than it itched.

Pausing a moment to look around, I sighed as I realized I had walked behind the church so much I was about to round it entirely. Walking back around it and out into the field would just give them an opportunity to see me and wonder what was wrong.

There wasn't really anywhere for me to go here. If I went into the church, someone would eventually come in and start talking to me. Same with the house. Plus I didn't want to sit or lay down. That was why I had gotten up from the campfire in the first place.

Yet there wasn't much space here. The thick forest that surrounded these buildings weren't far, and there was only one path nearby. The one that led to the river and lake. It was too dark for me to traverse it, in my condition.

As I scanned the area, I found myself staring at the little fence that Vim had made when we were here last time.

The fence circled and enclosed a small patch of gardens. Ones that had large melon looking things, some that were now missing thanks to them being plucked and eaten earlier.

Walking over to the fence, I smiled as I stepped up to the spot where Vim and I had spoken to one another last time we had been here. It was in the middle of the fence, closest to the house.

Leaning up against the fence, I listened to the loud laughter from beyond the house. Either Brandy's story had ended, or something interesting had happened. I heard nearly everyone's voices in those laughs.

If things had not gone the way they had... would I be laughing amongst them? Would I not be feeling the way I was?

It was more than my injuries. It was something much deeper.

I gulped, and did my best to not start crying. Luckily, thanks to our close living proximity lately, I'd not really broken down and cried. But I wanted to. I really did.

I wanted to sob. To curl up in a ball under the covers and just...

Taking a breath, I blinked a little harder than usual to make sure my eyes stayed dry... and then I turned around and slowly sat down. Leaning up against the fence, I made sure to not sit on my tail and let it lay down carefully.

“Damn thing,” I whispered as I got situated. I knew I’d not be able to sit for long before it started to hurt too much. What was I going to do with it? Last time I had broken my tail had been with the witch. She had given me some herbal teas that had kept the pain at bay... but it had still taken more than a month for it to heal.

This time it hurt worse... and not just because I didn’t have that special tea the witch made. The bones had been broken in more places, and in a harsher way.

“Least I still have it,” I whispered as I thought of the woman who had broken it.

I had never gotten to see if she had survived or not. Vim had killed some of them, as had Brom and Merit... but I couldn’t remember her.

Hopefully Vim got her.

“Have what?”

Startling, I turned to find Merit behind the fence. She was smirking at me, and I couldn’t help but doubt my eyes.

“Merit?” I asked as I glanced around. Where had she come from? I had just been looking into the garden... Mere moments ago...

“What? I may have white hair but I’m not a ghost,” Merit said with a snicker.

Well... that was true... but...

Maybe the pain of sitting down had been worse than I thought. I wasn’t paying attention...

I coughed lightly, and was about to turn around and stand up but Merit waved at me. “I’ll sit with you,” she said lightly.

Nodding... I frowned as I watched Merit clamber up and over the fence. She huffed as she rolled over the fence, and fell to the ground next to me.

Why had she climbed over it? The fence wasn’t that large, and only had three beams. She could have just ducked a little and walked under it, thanks to her height.

Merit sat down next to me on my right, and I shifted a little as I became conscious of her. I could still hear Brandy’s voice carrying from the campfire, so I knew her story wasn’t over. Merit must have noticed I was gone and snuck away as I had.

“Brandy’s stories make me queasy. So I’m not surprised you ran away,” Merit said lightly.

"I actually found it rather interesting," I said.

"Oh? Because it was about Vim?" Merit asked.

"Wait what?" I turned to look at Merit's face, and her smile told me she was serious.

"Regret leaving now don't you?" she teased me.

"A little... yes..." I admitted.

She chuckled, and I wondered if I'd be able to hear the rest of the story another day. Maybe Merit or Brandy would tell me about it if I asked.

"Hm... just wait until they really start drinking. Then they'll start sharing even more secrets about him. It's disgusting," Merit said.

"Secrets?" I asked.

She nodded. "You might not really realize it Renn, being so close to him, but most of the Society knows very little about Vim. That's why they get so fixated and into the stories about him. Watch, once Brandy is done someone else will get up on that box and tell a story they know. I bet it'll be Tosh next," Merit said.

"Am I that close to him, Merit?" I asked her.

"Far more than you must realize. You probably got a bunch of stories and know stuff about him that most others don't," Merit said.

"You seem to know him well too," I noted.

"Regrettably," she mumbled.

I smiled at her. Wonder what Vim had done to earn her distaste for him. It was such a unique hatred.

"I was starting to hurt... and although I love everyone for being so overprotective of me, I couldn't stand the thought of anyone noticing and stopping everything they're doing just to make sure I was fine. So I ran away as to hurt alone," I told her the truth.

"Ah... Well, you didn't make it far!" Merit seemed to find that funny.

"I sure didn't," I admitted.

“Can’t blame you. You’re really the only one who got hurt this time Renn... I mean... other than Brom, of course. So everyone’s just being really gentle with you. Plus you’re new, so they’re worried you’ll take it very personally and run away if we’re not careful,” Merit said.

She had got hurt too but was already healed. Completely.

“They’re treating me more like a child than they are Fly,” I complained.

“Fly’s not covered in bandages, Renn,” Merit said gently.

Well... that was true... how was she so unharmed anyway? She had been tossed into that pit too... and we had both gotten chased and attacked...

“You did well there, you know. Protecting her that well. Vim would be proud,” Merit said.

Frowning at the way she phrased that... I wondered if she had said it that way in an effort to make me feel better. Maybe she thought it’d make me happy to hear the idea of Vim praising me.

Well... she wasn’t wrong.

“How long does it normally take Vim to... uh...?” I wasn’t sure how to phrase it.

“Kill everything? Depends. Could be days, could be months. I bet it’ll only take him a few more days though. Once he’s killed everything he’s deemed dangerous, he’ll make sure the humans and the city is safe for us and then will come and let us know. I expect most of us to head to the Bell Church soon. Brandy said she’ll let us know tomorrow,” Merit said.

Oh had she? I hadn’t heard that. Maybe I really was worse than I felt. Not noticing Brandy saying such things... Merit sneaking up on me like that...

“Will he kill... everyone, Merit?” I asked her.

“Yes. Vim can be brutal, Renn. Even when he doesn’t want to be. It’s why I was so surprised he had stayed his hand that day on the roof... He’s usually not that gentle. Though... maybe that was the wrong choice, maybe,” Merit said softly.

Was it? “Him staying his hand earned us Fly,” I said.

“At the cost of Brom, and maybe even Lumen. We don’t know if it’s salvageable yet, Renn,” Merit warned.

I didn’t nod in agreement. “Brom was my fault, Merit,” I said.

Merit scoffed, but didn’t say anything. Didn’t argue with me.

That was kind of her.

Although silence followed... it wasn't an awkward one, nor was it heavy. We sat side by side... listening to Brandy's voice carrying on the wind. Thanks to the fact I didn't need to wear a hat here, my ears weren't impeded. I was able to hear her clearly, even from the other side of the buildings.

She was talking about the princess. What she had done and said to the knight who saved her from certain doom.

"So that knight was Vim?" I asked.

"Yes. One of them."

"Who were the others?" I asked.

"I don't know. The princess is her, Renn. This is Brandy's story," she said gently.

My mouth went dry, and I now seriously regretted leaving. How rude of me.

"Don't feel bad Renn, jeez. I can tell you it later if you'd like. Or anyone else. Brandy tells it all the time," she said.

“Still...” I sighed as I closed my eyes and listened a little closer. Based off the way Brandy spoke of what the princess had said, and did, she must have been young. Very young.

“She embellishes a little too. It hadn’t been that big of an army,” Merit said with a smile.

“You know that but don’t know who the other knights were?” I asked.

“Oplar told me. She was there. She might have been one of the knights, I guess, if you think of it that way,” Merit said as she crossed her arms and leaned back. She wasn’t tall enough to actually rest against the fence, as I was. Where my back rested against one of the fence’s wooden pickets, her head was what touched it when she was sitting.

“I’ve not met Oplar yet,” I said.

“Oh? Interesting. She was with Vim not too long ago, so I thought maybe you had.”

I shook my head. “She was with him not too long ago?” I asked.

Merit shifted and elbowed me gently in my side. “I don’t mean it that way. Vim killed a Monarch, and Oplar had gotten involved. Just at the right place at the right time. She stuck around with him for a bit after, like she always does. She chases stories, Renn. She’s fascinated by such things.”

Stories. Maybe that was why she went around telling everyone them.

“Well she missed this one,” I said.

“That she did...” Merit sighed.

“If Lumen is... uh... Lost, as you put it... what do we do, Merit?” I asked.

“Well... some of us will go to the Bell Church. Others will likely head to Telmik. A few will likely head to where they’ve been before. Then we’ll have many years of growing pains, as Brandy and the rest slowly rebuild the Animalia Guild, or whatever form of it they use next time,” Merit said.

“Next time,” I said softly.

She nodded. One of her thick locks brushed against my arm as she did. Was she closer? “We’ve had several companies and guilds over the years. I’ve only been here for a short time, as you know... I spent most of my time in the Society in the south, trying to build the kingdom,” Merit said.

“Hm...” A part of me wanted to say I’d like to have seen that kingdom, and been there to help... but I kept my mouth shut. After all every time I tried to help all I ever did was make it worse.

“You’d have liked it Renn. I wish I could have shown you it,” Merit said.

Glancing at her, I went still at the sight of tears glistening in the night.

“I would have loved to see it,” I said gently.

She nodded, and then started twirling her thumbs around each other. The action was very childish. “You know Vim tried his best. He really did. But... well... those involved. They failed. We failed. We weren’t strong enough. Not wise enough. People gave up. They stopped trying. They... betrayed,” Merit spoke softly, yet seriously.

“I see...” I wasn’t sure what to say. Vim did seem to try his best, so that wasn’t a surprise... but it was surprising to hear Merit compliment him.

“You tried your best too Renn. So please don’t... hate yourself too much over this. We were all there too you know? So was Vim. We all equally share in the blame,” Merit said.

Ah. So this is why she was telling me of that kingdom.

She was trying to say my failures... our failures, here now, are not as bad as I felt they were. Since everyone has made them, likely some even worse.

Yet...

“It still feels bad Merit. Even if Brom hadn’t... died... What of all the others? Those Fly had wanted to bring to the Society with her. There had been other children, per her words. We’ve lost them. Doomed them,” I said.

“Then next time be better. Don’t sacrifice everyone in the future you can help just because you stumbled and failed today,” Merit said.

I blinked at her. “I plan to... Really Merit... It’s not like I plan to run away or become like Tosh had been, I promise,” I said.

“Don’t be upset that I’m worried about it. You’ve been crying the entire night, in your sleep,” Merit said.

“No...” I groaned and covered my face, to rub my eyes. Surely not!

“It wasn’t that bad. You just sniffed and rolled around a bunch. Most didn’t notice, I don’t think,” Merit said kindly.

“Wonderful,” I wondered who had noticed. Merit was likely being gentle with me. Had I kept everyone up then? All night long? Sobbing in my sleep?

“Most will just think it’s your pain, so don’t let it bother you.”

“That’s somehow worse,” I said.

Merit giggled at me, and then leaned closer. I went still as Merit leaned against me, putting her head on my arm. Maybe she was doing it since she couldn’t comfortably lean against the fence...

Although her closeness hurt a little, since she was leaning up against my right arm... I was still very humbled by her proximity. Her willingness to be so close to me showed just how much she liked me. Merit wasn’t very keen on being touchy-feely with others.

“I came here to beg you not to leave. To not go with Vim. But... maybe that’s your destiny. I ignored mine. It cost me everything,” Merit spoke quietly, as if afraid she’d be heard. Brandy’s voice wasn’t as loud as it was earlier, but there was now other voices lingering in the air. Her story must be over, and now they were all making small talk.

“I’m not sure if he’ll even let me go with him anymore, Merit,” I said evenly.

Merit shook her head, and I noted the way her thick hair rolled along my arm. It felt wet, though wasn’t. “Vim doesn’t do that Renn. Even if you had actually failed, and had done so spectacularly... as long as it wasn’t malicious he’ll never judge you for it. Never stop you. He’s a monster, but not a cruel one,” Merit said.

Monster... She’s called him that before.

“Do you know what he is?” I asked her.

“Vim? No. I have a few ideas, but no I don’t know,” she said.

“What kind of ideas?” I asked.

“I think he’s a Monarch. But he and everyone else... even other Monarchs, say he isn’t one. So I’m not sure how that works,” Merit said.

“Monarch...” I thought of that wolf. The one Vim had given... or fed? That heart to.

She thought he was like that?

Merit nodded. “It makes sense. He can kill Monarchs. He’s immortal. I’ve seen him speared by dozens of arrows, all over his body, and a few days later he was fine. Not even I’d survive that, Renn. Crush my heart and I die. Crush his and he just coughs up some blood and gets angry,” Merit said with a wave in the air, as if swatting away a bug.

“Immortal...” I whispered and wondered if he was. I had been... very hurt, and distressed, when I had seen him after Brom died... but I could still remember it clearly. He had been covered in huge gashes, and blood. He even had a horrible cut on his face, splitting his lower lip to the point I had been able to see bone.

“If he really is who knows... but I’ve seen him endure horrible damage and not even flinch. Only Monarchs can do that,” she said with a nod.

“What are Monarchs, anyway?” I asked her.

“You don’t know?” Merit glanced up at me, and I shook my head.

“Hm...” Merit didn’t say anything as she studied me.

I gulped, and wondered what to say. Why was she looking at me as if I was something weird?

“A Monarch is a ruler. A descendant of one of the first ones. A bloodline that gave birth to an entire species. In the past they were considered gods, or servants of them. Today most are just mindless beasts incapable of thought or reason. In the Society, that I know of, there are only three Monarchs. Tor, in the west in his canyon, Bray a giant wolf, and the little multi-tailed creature in the Cathedral,” Merit said.

“Wait what?” I sat up a little straighter.

“Hm?”

“That cute little thing is a Monarch?” I asked, unable to believe it. It had been adorable... and hadn’t seemed dangerous at all!

“Yeah. It is cute, I guess,” Merit nodded.

“You’re kidding...” I had a hard time believing it... for some reason I had thought Monarchs were all... well...

Like that creature in Lumen.

Though, I had thought Bray had been beautiful, hadn’t I? She had been pretty...

“There’s probably more. But those are the only three I’ve ever met. There’s supposedly a couple in the south, and one in the islands to the west, but I’ve never met them or anyone who knows them so that might just be rumors,” Merit said.

“So... not all Monarchs are dangerous, then,” I said.

“Tor isn’t dangerous because he has no desire for anything beyond his canyon. Bray is unable to leave her prison. And the little one in the Cathedral isn’t powerful enough to worry about I guess. Honestly Renn, it’s best to assume any Monarch you encounter is dangerous. They usually operate entirely on instinct. An instinct of destruction, reproduction and such. Not things you want to be at ease with,” Merit said.

Absorbing this information, I let my mind race as I thought of... well... everything.

Merit thought Vim was a Monarch. Honestly...

“How does... how do you even tell if someone or something is a Monarch?” I asked.

Merit shrugged. “I’ve been told they have a certain smell. I can’t tell though.”

“Thus your belief Vim is a Monarch. His lack of scent,” I said, understanding.

“Well that’s one of the reasons, yes.”

It made sense, at least.

“Does everyone think Vim’s a Monarch?” I asked.

“A lot do, yes. There’s dozens of theories and ideas... there’re bets too. So if you somehow squeeze the truth out of him, don’t tell anyone else until you tell me so I can make sure my bet’s right, okay?” Merit said happily.

“Sure,” I agreed.

Merit chuckled happily, which made me smile. She... shook a little when she laughed. Not badly, but enough it felt odd.

Her chuckling ended and a warm silence filled the air. Sitting next to one another, I found myself growing a little sleepy... maybe I could convince Merit to sleep in the same bed as me tonight. She was cold to the touch, but it felt good.

“Be careful, Renn,” Merit then whispered.

I turned a little, to try and see her face. It was hidden by her thick hair.

“You’re strong... strong enough to be with him. Yet weak enough to get hurt. Gentle enough to suffer. So please... please... be careful,” she whispered.

My eyes blurred as they watered, and I endeavored through the pain and wrapped Merit with my right arm. Holding her close, I gave her a hug.

“And you say I’m gentle, Merit,” I said to her.

She sniffed.

Holding the gentle woman close, I basked in her kindness... and hoped a day would come that I could truly earn the kindness Merit was giving me. The kindness they were all giving me. The kindness they gave without judgment, and without expecting anything in return.

This was what I had wanted all this time, after all.

A home. A family. People who could understand me... people who I didn't have to bury after just blinking a few times.

So even though it hurt, both physically and in my heart... I'd continue onward. Enduring.

For the Society.

For them.

For Vim.

And of course... for myself.

Chapter 190 Lumen's Declaration

"All major families have flown their banners! We shall not rest until our home is safe again!"
Thraxton's voice carried over the crowd, barely bothered by the storm winds rolling in from the sea.

He was up on the stage in the center of Lumen, surrounded by not just knights in armor but the cloth and silk of clergies and merchants. Behind them, covering the castle wall the community stage sat right in front of was a sea of color. Dozens of large banners, bigger than a grown man, fluttered in the wind behind him. He was likely right. Chances are even the lowest of nobles and merchants had vowed their services to aid Lumen and its people.

Our banner was fluttering near the center, only three away from Thraxton's. Ours would be right next to his, if not for his son's banner and his wife's.

"We vow to you, Lumen shall not just rebuild... but do so stronger! Together!" Thraxton continued his speech, and all of Lumen was enthralled by it. I turned a little, to look over Reatti's head and scan what was likely the entirety of Lumen around us.

The large street, the largest in Lumen, was packed shoulder to shoulder. Women and children were on men's shoulders. People were on the roofs of the buildings nearby, and dozens of heads peered out of windows. There were more people than stone or city, it was an odd sight.

Reatti blinked up at me as I turned back around, to look the other way. We were near the stage, but in the balcony reserved for merchants. It was only on the second floor, and usually it let us sit or stand leisurely... yet right now it was as packed as the rest of the street. I had put Reatti to my right, next to the banister, as to not force her to stand shoulder to shoulder with humans.

"No demon! No Monster! None shall break us! None shall defeat us! We're Lumen! A city without masters!" Thraxton continued his ideologue, and I recognized the transition. He was no longer telling the listeners of what they had done, found out, and planned to do... but was now going to release his proclamation. The proclamation of sovereignty.

Those in power were going to utilize the creature as a scapegoat. They were going to claim it was a malicious entity sent by those who were jealous. Who wanted Lumen for themselves.

Although... deceitful. It was better than the alternative.

I'd rather them blame some foreigners than my own people. Better they thought it some kind of beast controlled by foreign kings or witches.

My eyes wandered to the knights on the stage. Most were far too old to be actual knights. They were the heads of their households. The lords of noble families. I only recognized a few of the faces on the stage, but that wasn't a surprise. Brandy and Gerald handled Lumen's negotiations for me. The only reason I even knew Thraxton was because I had known him from a small boy.

"Declare it! For all to hear! Lumen stands! It stands tall! And stands alone!" Thraxton roared his defiant decree, and the world went deafening as the entire crowd bellowed in agreement.

For a tiny moment, the world heard them all.

Such a thing usually was followed by war... but there was no war to wage. No real enemy.

There were a few nations and city states nearby that would try to retain control over Lumen, but it was doubtful any of them would actually send armies as to occupy it. The massive mountain range that surrounded Lumen, and the inland sea that surrounded the parts that those mountains didn't, made it a difficult place to truly control. There were several paths through the mountain range, but they all lead to other nations. One to Telmik, one to the south and another north. One singular nation wouldn't be able to blockade their trade routes, and as such it was a fruitless endeavor. And Lumen had been built as a

solid fortress. It could withstand siege for... well... Likely years, if it needed to. Especially with the port. As far as I was aware only one other nation had a naval military capable of threatening Lumen from the sea, and that nation was currently at war with the south. The nations in today's era couldn't wage war on multiple fronts, they didn't have the technology or the know-how.

I sighed as I noticed those injured in the crowd. The crowd was massive, so massive that I shouldn't have been able to see many who had been hurt... by laws of averages even though that creature had decimated an entire section of Lumen, the vast majority of Lumen hadn't been damaged at all. Yet here was the proof. Bandages were everywhere. Broken and mangled bodies. People on crutches, or supported by their fellows. There was also a swath of black garments, typical in the style of the many surrounding regions religion's mourners.

Although the port had only a small portion of houses... it was a focal point of the city. Where many worked, and went to shop or spend their leisure time.

"For Lumen!" Thraxton raised a fist, and quickly the crowd began to chant in agreement.

Turning, I patted Reatti's arm to let her know it was time we left. She said nothing but nodded excitedly as I forced my way out of the balcony and into the building.

I had to forcefully push my way through the men and women, but none of them complained or even bothered to look at me. They too were focused on chanting alongside their fellows. Shouting their glory for Lumen.

The chanting was loud, ear numbing, even in the house. Heading for the stairwell, I was glad that at least inside the house it wasn't too crowded. Although more people were in this building than likely ever before, they were all crowded around the windows and balconies.

Once downstairs, I groaned at the sight of the exit. The large double door was packed with people, all shouting their allegiances' to Lumen. To each other.

"Crazy," Reatti said, and didn't do so quietly... but no one noticed. I had likely been the only one able to hear her.

Forcing our way out of the building, I quickly headed for a nearby alley. I knew that although crowded, since so many people wanted to see their king and leaders it'd not take long for us to reach a section of alleyways and back roads that we'd be able to easily traverse.

It surprisingly took longer than I thought. Thraxton's voice faded away by the second road, but it took the third before the crowd started to thin enough that I no longer had to push shoulders aside.

On the fourth street, Reatti was finally able to sigh in relief. The loud roar of the crowd erupted again, sounding as loud as the creature had done a few days ago.

"Humans are crazy," Reatti said as she hurried up next to me.

"They're dangerous when they get like that, yes," I said.

"I'll say. They're not even declaring their allegiances to a god or anything so how are they so worked up?" Reatti asked as she followed me. I was taking us back to the Animalia Company building.

“Calamity breeds such fervor. It’s human nature to band together during a time of crisis. It’s how such huge wars can wage so easily, and how humans can fight side by side with those they don’t even know, or even hate, under the right circumstances,” I explained.

“Just great... and when’d you give them our banner, Vim?” Reatti asked.

“This morning.”

“Why?”

Glancing at Reatti, I didn’t like the look on her face... but knew better than to say anything. Her dislike of humans was now actual hate. And there was nothing I or anyone could do about it.

“Being the only banner not up on that wall would only sign our death warrants, Reatti,” I said gently.

“Mhm...” Reatti nodded, telling me she had already come to the same conclusion... and agreed. She just didn’t like it.

“Plus it’s what Gerald and Brandy were planning anyway. To support and be a part of Lumen’s declaration of independence. It just... went differently,” I said.

“Isn’t that the truth,” Reatti scoffed.

“Hurry!” A pair of men ran by, huffing as they hurried. They ignored us as they headed for the crowds.

Slowing my pace, I took a deep breath and sighed as I imagined all the work about to pile onto my shoulders.

I wasn’t looking forward to any of it.

“Will you go to the Clothed Woman for me Reatti? To bring our family home?” I asked her.

“Huh? Oh yes. Was wondering when you’d let me go get them,” she said with a nod.

“Thank you. I’m sure some also went to the Bell Church, but to the sanctuary first,” I said.

She nodded. “When do you want me to leave?”

“As soon as you’re willing. The creature is dead, and we can’t find hints of any more. We’ve also scoured the sewers, and now Lumen’s knights are rummaging around down there so any we missed or failed to kill are likely on the run... Plus thanks to the way the humans are handling it, we need not worry over the locals. So there’s no need for us not to be here. If anything we need the rest here as soon as possible, before the humans find our lack of presence odd,” I said.

“Mhm... I’ll leave once we get back then. I’ll take a horse,” she said.

I nodded. She could run faster than a horse, but not for as long. Also with the city being on alert it would likely be odd for Reatti, a young woman, to run out of Lumen in such a way. Especially since she was rather well known by Lumen. A negative to being a very vocal member of the company. Her being the front desk, the first to greet someone... well...

Maybe her position should be reconsidered. At least for a short time.

Maybe she’ll take up her brother’s mantle of being the knight.

The two of us walked in silence for a bit, until we neared the section of the city that had gotten damaged by the creature. I paused a moment to stare down one of the roads, to watch the distant workers as they chopped up a large tentacle root. Several fires were burning around, which the incoming storm’s winds were making the smoke fly every which way.

“How long will it take them you think?” Reatti asked.

“Not sure. Weeks at least. It’s decomposing too, which is annoying... the storm will impede the efforts too,” I said.

“How would you do it?” she asked.

"A much hotter fire, for one," I said. She frowned, and I could tell she wanted to ask more but I ignored her look and pointed at one of the collapsed buildings nearby. "I checked the port earlier. I'll need to find a way to make sure there's room for our ship to dock when they return... Most of the docks are sunk, or had burnt down in the fires," I said.

"Want me to bring them back on foot?" she asked.

"No. They must have taken a lot of stuff, since they used the ship. Better to just return with it. Even if the ship has to stay moored out at sea for a bit," I said. After all even if the ship couldn't dock it was fine. They could just use the smaller boats to ferry themselves into the city.

"They did. Most of the vault is empty, Vim," Reatti said.

"Is it?" That was startling, but not a surprise.

Reatti nodded as we crossed a broken street. The stones in the middle were all lifted upward, as if from an earthquake. Chances were there was a large root just under the street, buried and stuck.

"Can I ask... a serious question, Vim?" Reatti asked, grabbing me by my right sleeve. I turned and nodded, pausing as to face her.

She held onto my sleeve, and I waited patiently for her to gather her nerve. I usually didn't wear long sleeves, but my wounds hadn't healed completely yet. The gashes were still visible; the cuts still bled a little. I had worn a long sleeved jacket as to hide them as best I could.

"Will you take Renn? When you leave? Once this is all done?" she asked.

Taking a small breath, I shifted a little as I stared into Reatti's watery eyes. The look within them was more fear and concern than hate.

"I'm not sure, Reatti. I can't force Renn to do anything anymore than I can force you to. Personally... I think it's best she leaves, yes. But I'll not force her to," I said.

She gulped and nodded. "I know. I know you can't... I just..."

"Just want her gone. I don't blame you. I understand," I said softly.

"You do, don't you?" she whispered.

I nodded. I did.

Reatti and I stood in front of each other for a moment until Reatti took a deep breath and then nodded. "Okay. I'll just... do my best, I guess," she said.

Reaching out, I patted her on the shoulder. A gentle gesture, which made her eyebrows furrow as if she was about to break and cry again. "That's all anyone could ever ask of you, Reatti. If you want I can tell Renn to... stay away from you, if you'd like," I said.

She opened her mouth, to immediately agree, but hesitated. "That's cruel, though," she whispered.

Is it? Was it?

It would break Renn's heart... but something told me she'd understand.

"My brother lost his life protecting her. I shouldn't hate her like this. It's rude to him," she said.

Shifting a little, I wondered when she had come to such a conclusion. It was of course the right one, and I was glad she was wise enough to see through her emotions enough to realize it... but...

"Although you're right Reatti... that doesn't mean you should ignore your heart. It's okay to grieve," I said.

"I know... would you say something? For him?" she asked.

“Your brother...?” I asked, wondering what she meant.

She nodded. “I buried him alone... but I realize now he’d have liked you to have been there. When I get back, would you go with me to his grave?” she asked.

My fingers trembled a little, and I did my best to keep my own feelings from overpowering my thoughts and self as I nodded. “Of course Reatti, I’d be honored,” I said, agreeing.

She sniffed as she nodded. “Thanks.”

Reatti tugged my sleeve a little... as if she wanted me to do or say something, but she hesitated and instead released me. I stayed still, and wondered if she had wanted me to hug her just now.

Before she or I could tell me the answer, she stepped away and started to wipe her face. She must have started crying.

Stepping forward, to join her as we returned to walking, I did my best to not let the awkward feeling in the air linger. It didn’t belong.

Usually here is where I’d say something profound. Something to ease her burden, or make her laugh... yet I wasn’t able to think of anything proper to say. Reatti had come to her own conclusions, her own decisions. She had found a way to compartmentalize her hate, and put it aside. It might not have been the best way to do it, or the wisest, but it was the far better outcome than most else.

I should praise her, but do so in a way that didn't sound too... well...

Moments like this is where I should be a friend, not a teacher. A friend, not a Protector.

Yet that was all I was. All I ever was.

Before I could think of something to say, we rounded the last corner and saw the Animalia building. It, like most of the buildings around here, was fine. Undamaged.

Though lately it's been rather quiet. Thanks to it being all sealed up, no one's been here. Thraxton's steward had come this morning, asking for the banner in support of the declaration, but that had been the only legitimate visitor. The few carts or people that went by along the streets rounding the building did so simply out of necessity. Since the other streets nearby were damaged and unusable.

But beggars would always show themselves eventually... so I wasn't too surprised to see someone sitting in front of the main lobby doors. They were wrapped in a dark cloak, one that looked wet from a distance for some reason. Maybe it had rained elsewhere in the city, and that was where they had come from.

"Who's that?" Reatti asked, noticing the figure.

"Likely a beggar. I'll deal with them," I said.

Reatti nodded softly, and I wondered if she was upset with the tone I had used. It hadn't been that bad had it?

It wasn't like I was genuinely upset over someone asking for help. I just wasn't in the mood to deal with them. Since I felt responsible. I wanted those who would come to ask for help, and charity, to do so after Brandy and the rest got back... so they could deal with it.

I was a coward, in a way.

As we drew closer, the hooded figure noticed us. They stood up quickly, so quickly she almost stumbled. I slowed my approach, since I noticed something odd about the way her hood slid and brushed against her head.

Were they wearing a helmet under their hood? Surely not... They were small of frame and size, and...

Coming to a stop, I sighed as she stood up a little straighter, revealing her face.

The cloaked woman shifted, and looked from me to Reatti with an uncertain look. Her worry barely hid the layer of hope beneath it.

"Well... I suppose I did invite you," I said gently.

She gulped, and Reatti glanced at me as I glanced around. Was she alone?

“I’m alone... I hid... until it was over...” the woman said quickly.

“Vim?” Reatti seemed to realize what was going on, based off the tone in her voice.

Glancing at Reatti, I wondered what she would say or do.

“Let’s talk inside,” I said, gesturing towards the door.

The woman with sheep horns nodded unsurely as I pulled out the key and went to unlocking the door.

Opening the door to a dark and cold building, I stepped in and aside as to let the woman in. She hesitated a moment, looking to Reatti who stayed still. After a moment she slowly entered the building... and then Reatti followed after her.

I kept the door open a moment, to let the hooded woman look around and use the light the door gave to do so. After a few moments I closed the door, and then latched it with the proper full-door beam that locked it firmly.

“You’re one of us,” Reatti said as I locked the door in place.

“Um... yes...” the woman took her hood off, revealing her large horns. She looked dirty, but not on purpose. I could see the streak marks from wiping. The effort she had given to clean herself was very visible, mostly thanks to how dirty she still was even after such a cleaning. By the looks of it, likely with the very cloak she wore... She had washed the cloak not long before coming here. It was why it looked wet. She had bruises and injuries too, which only further made her appearance look... worn down. She was scrawny too, as if she didn’t get enough to eat. Likely hadn’t been, especially lately.

Reatti’s face contorted as she stared at her, and I coughed lightly as to draw the horned woman’s attention. Reatti would need a moment to get her emotions under control. “My name is Vim. I’m the Protector of the Society,” I introduced myself.

“Ah... I’m Wool. I uh... um...” she hesitated, and I wondered if she thought I was expecting to hear her title or something like it, since I had introduced myself in such a way.

“You’re part of Fly’s people,” Reatti said sternly.

Wool startled a little, but nodded. “Yes. I’m... He said if I came here, I’d be able to be free,” Wool said with a point to me.

Studying the woman, I wondered the source of her name. Her hair was human in nature, not like a sheep... maybe she had a more sheep like appearance hidden beneath her cloak. I could just barely remember her in the sewers, from that day, but couldn’t remember more than her face and horns. Her dirty appearance, and the how and why she had been in that hole was what I remembered the most.

“Freedom. If you are able to live amongst us, while obeying our rules,” I specified.

She gulped and nodded. "That's... why I'm here. To find out," she said.

Reatti sighed, and looked away from the woman. Then she looked at me. "She's only here because you killed all the rest," she said.

"Yes," she admitted.

"See?" Reatti scoffed with a wave at the woman, disgusted.

"Hold on Reatti," I waved a little, to calm her. It of course didn't accomplish anything.

"Do you remember what I asked of you upon our meeting?" I asked Wool.

"Yes," she said and nodded, confidently.

I had asked for her help in locating Renn. She had chosen not to help me, in hopes I'd kill any who tried to stop me.

"Your answer. Your response... It would have invalidated your application. It would have been cause to deny you," I said to her.

Reatti shifted into a stance, yet did nothing. She had no sword or weapon, but I knew Reatti didn't need one. Wool however didn't notice, and kept her eyes on me.

"I know. I'm sorry," she said softly.

"Yet that's why you're here isn't it? Because you realized I had kept my own word," I said to her.

She gulped and nodded.

Sighing, I wondered what to do with her. By all counts she really hadn't broken... or failed the Societies expectations, but...

"What'd she do, Vim?" Reatti asked.

"I had asked her for help in finding Renn. Before I encountered the creatures. She didn't help me," I said.

"Then she can't join," Reatti stated.

Wool glanced quickly at Reatti, then back at me. She was now worried.

“Tell her why you refused my request, Wool,” I said softly.

“I... He said he’d kill everyone if I didn’t,” she said.

Reatti once again shifted, but this time not to take a stance as to attack or defend herself. Now she stood uncomfortably... just as unsure of herself as the woman in front of us seemed to be. Reatti had understood the tone that Wool had used.

She wasn’t upset at all that I had killed her people. If anything that was the entire point she was here.

I had promised to kill them. I had.

That made me better than them. In her eyes at least.

A very simple mindset. I was someone worth noting, and trying to befriend, simply because I had killed those who had been cruel to her.

She wasn’t necessarily wrong in her assumptions... but...

I nodded as I sighed. “Why didn’t you run from them before? If they were abusing you,” I asked her.

“Run where?” Wool asked me.

Right. Her horns were too prominent, too large to hide amongst humans. Even I had noticed it offhandedly earlier, thinking she had been wearing a helmet or something.

Renn’s ears were bigger, but soft. Malleable. Those horns couldn’t be bent or squished. Not something one could hide, at least not for long.

Reatti scoffed and crossed her arms, gesturing at me. “That’s not an excuse. Run to the forests or hills! You don’t have to live with people,” she said sternly.

“I... I wouldn’t know how,” the woman whispered.

“How old are you?” I asked her.

“Oh... um... I’m not sure,” Wool hesitated.

“Did you know what Fly was doing? Before this all happened?” I asked her.

“Meeting you all, yes... I... I didn’t really talk to Fly. She lived on the floors above, I wasn’t allowed to go up there, usually...” she said.

I frowned at the information. Her not being allowed to go topside did make sense, since it limited her interaction with humans and the risk it brought... but Fly was even more at risk than she was. Fly's entire body was covered in feathers, and she had talons for feet.

"You were abused?" Reatti asked before I could ask for more information.

Wool gulped and shifted. "Um... I was owned by the man he killed, yes," she said with a point to me.

Owned. Likely why she couldn't go where Fly could. A reason that made sense, at least. For now.

Reatti didn't like that word either, she grumbled as she looked away. She was upset. She wanted to hate this woman, yet it was clearly becoming obvious she couldn't.

"There are rules to our Society. You understand to join you'll have to obey them?" I asked her.

She nodded. "Will you own me?" she asked. I flinched at the happy and expectant smile and tone she had as she spoke.

Reatti groaned and I kept myself from making a similar noise.

Great. One of these. How many years has it been since I've had to deal with someone like her?

Fly had been bad, but not this bad. Luckily thanks to her age, likely, and her appearance. Fly hadn't been well cared for, but they hadn't abused her in the same way. Beatings were Fly's worries. This woman's... well...

Not only was she older, but she was... honestly, pretty. Even as filthy as she was, and covered in bruises, it was plain to see.

"Vim let me," Reatti stepped forward. She grabbed the woman's arm from under her cloak and gestured for her to follow her.

"Reatti?" I stepped forward, to stop her. I didn't think this woman could hurt Reatti, based off what I'd seen and knew of her... but...

"It's fine. I'll handle this one. Come on, let's get you cleaned up you're filthy," Reatti said as she pulled the horned woman away.

Watching them go, I sighed as Wool diligently obeyed... letting Reatti pull her away as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"One headache after another," I mumbled. Reatti taking over was... the better option, for me, but it wasn't right. Especially right now, with the way she was.

Though maybe that was why. Maybe Reatti needed this, needed her, to keep herself sane.

A strange play of fate... but if it worked...

Reatti dragged Wool up the stairs and into the hallway that led deeper into the building. Looked like she was taking her to the employee bathhouses. The ones near the depot.

I scratched my jaw, where a gash was still healing. It had seamed up enough to not start bleeding by my scratching, but it was itchy thanks to its healing.

Well... for now I'd let Reatti deal with her. Like Fly she would need to be judged, and voted on, which couldn't happen until the rest were here. Then they'd have to spend time with her. Likely though she'd be fine.

Many such women had joined our ranks over the years... which wasn't a surprise since the Society was originally formed by such women.

Those abused, or rather tired of being abused, by those who were cruel.

Glancing at the doors, to make sure I had properly shut them... I sighed and turned. To head for the vaults, to check on them. Reatti had said they were mostly empty... which was likely true, but I needed to make sure they weren't empty because of theft.

"So much to do," I complained at myself.

As I walked the empty halls, to check on all the things I needed to... I let my mind drift to Renn. It bothered me to think of the wounds I had seen upon her. The look of utter despair on her face as she ran off while carrying Merit... well... The images made me angry, yet exhausted.

I clung to that anger, and let it smolder within me.

That anger felt good. Familiar... yet new.

It was the same anger I felt when I found my people hurt, yet it was different. It was a hotter type of anger. One that made me question if it was anger at all and instead maybe something worse.

Me being upset over Renn being hurt was understandable. She was someone I was meant to protect. To cherish. And if one was willing to forgive me for the emotion and exalting her in such a way, she was also someone I should feel such over protective emotions for. After all I did love the woman. I valued her.

Yet I wasn't supposed to. To put her above others in the Society was against the rules. It wasn't supposed to happen. I was not allowed to value another over anyone else. They were all equally priceless... or at least should be.

But I couldn't deny the truth of my thoughts and emotions. Even if I was able to hide them, and ignore them, I couldn't deny their existence.

No matter how much I forced self-deprivation... it was impossible to refute.

So the anger made sense... but then why did I feel exhausted over it too?

Why did the thought of her suffering make me weary? The others suffering also made me angry, but they never made me feel like this. I felt this exhaustion when I failed, sure, but that was self-disappointment. Self deprecation. It exhausted me to recognize and accept my own faults and failures.

The obvious meaning was I blamed myself for Renn's injuries... but that wasn't right. After all, I blamed myself for every wound and death of my people. Brom's death hurt, but it didn't make me feel as if I was sick and fatigued.

Had anyone else ever made me feel like this? Celine had made me worry all the time, but that had been a nagging feeling. One that made me fret. Renn made me tired.

Thinking of all the people I've cared for, truly cared for, I tried and failed to find someone that affected me in the way Renn did... and does.

Pondering it as I reached the hallway that led to the vaults, I went to opening the huge steel door.

I needed to focus on other tasks, to stop my mind from wandering in such weird ways.

"So first I'll count coins," I said lightly as I entered the vaults.

Better to count worthless coins than let myself admit something ridiculous, after all.