

## Non Human 191

### Chapter 191 A Gentle Truth

Reatti had arrived this morning. Right as the sun was rising, when the world was still more dark than light.

She had shown up not alone... yet not with Vim, or anyone I had known.

Turns out, no one had known the stranger.

"It's Wool," Fly said softly.

"Wool?" I perked up a little, to stare around the corner of the church building. Fly and I were hiding behind it, the both of us staring at the small crowd near the house. They'd been talking for awhile, but the crowd was now smaller. And not just because of those who had left the small group to go about their day.

Not everyone had gone up to greet Reatti and... the other woman. But that wasn't because they didn't care for her, or weren't happy to see her. There were still several people sleeping inside the church, which for some reason no one was willing to wake them up yet. Which wasn't too surprising, since the sunrise was still happening. It was morning, but early morning. Too early to be this noisy, even for our kind. We were being so noisy, the birds nested on the roof of the church were chipping loudly in complaint.

What I really noted from such a thing though was... well...

The others weren't like me. They weren't afraid to meet Reatti.

I had hid, like a coward.

Though, oddly, so had Fly... though obviously, for different reasons.

Fly nodded quickly, her feathers brushing against me as she did. She was in front of me, but I was leaning forward and over her a little as to look with her. "She lived in the sewers like I did... but I've never really spent time with her. She was always with others, and deeper below. I've never had a problem with her, but I didn't like the one who owned her," Fly said.

"Owned her...?" I asked softly.

Fly nodded and leaned back a little, which made me have to step back too. We couldn't see Reatti or the crowd anymore as Fly glanced around as if to make sure no one was listening. "She was owned by Ortho. A huge man with a flat face and claws. He was cruel, he killed for fun," Fly said.

"So not someone who we'd let join us," I said stiffly.

"I'm not sure about Wool. She was his, but that doesn't mean she was mean too. I never knew her well... I don't think I've spoken to her more than a few times," Fly said as she stepped back to the corner and peered around it.

I sighed, and wondered how and what happened. For Reatti to bring her here then surely that meant Vim had allowed it... but...

“She usually was hurt, though. She might be okay,” Fly said lightly.

Right. Owned. She had meant that word literally.

That Ortho had owned her, like a slave. Like an item, not a person.

Humans did the same... just like with Lamp and her people... So it wasn't really that big of a shock that our kind did the same thing. Especially when one took into account our people's abilities and strengths.

For instance if Vim wanted to... well... force himself of anyone in the Society, I doubted anyone could stop him. If others who were stronger than most desired or wanted to be cruel in such a way there was little those weaker, like Fly, could do to stop them.

I gulped at the thought of my own family. Although they had not outright declared one another as slaves or property... well...

It was the same thing. The same cruelty.

The same evil, just by a different name.

“Are we hiding from Reatti or the sheep?”

Fly and I both jumped at the new voice. We spun, and were greeted by Liina’s odd smirk as she leaned out of one of the Church’s windows.

“Did we wake you? I’m sorry,” I apologized to the grinning cat.

“No. The birds did,” Liina pointed up at the roof, and I nodded in understanding. There was a nest of sparrows or something up there, and they were growing noisier with the sunrise. They squawked as if there was a predator nearby. To them that's probably exactly what we were.

“You talked to them already? Didn’t see you...” Fly said as she looked back around the corner, at the crowd.

“No, Jasna told me. We’re going to return home. A few will go to the Bell Church while the rest of us will go back to Lumen,” Liina said. She lowered herself against the windowsill and rested upon it; after she updated us she took in a deep breath and yawned. The sight made me smile; she was more cat-like than I was.

“How’s Reatti, you think?” I asked her carefully.

“Seems fine. Likely just trying to keep her mind focused, Renn. It’ll only become a problem if you let it,” Liina said softly.

I wanted to complain and comment on how... simple she was making it out to be, but I knew better and kept my mouth shut.

“I’m going to go say hi to Wool!” Fly darted off, excited.

About to follow after her, I hesitated and groaned.

“Reatti won’t blame Fly either, Renn. If she does then she’ll at least not act on it. Don’t worry,” Liina said softly.

“You talking to Renn?” a voice from within the church asked. It sounded like Jasna, based on the huff.

“Don’t pack that! I’ll want it on the trip home!” Liina turned, and then raised her voice as she stepped away from the window. Jasna and Liina went to loudly talking to one another, and in a way that told me they really were packing.

Packing...

Taking a deep breath, I decided to just get it over with. I had to. It wasn’t like I could just... ignore and avoid Reatti forever.

“Unless she wants me to, that is,” I said softly as I stepped over to the corner of the church and peered around it.

Reatti was with Brandy and the Clothed Woman. The crowd was gone. Or rather, fixated on something else. It was now near the house, around Wool. Fly was in the center of it, talking loudly with the... horned woman. Those definitely were sheep horns.

Wonder if she was related to Lughes in any way.

Steeling myself I stepped out from behind the church... and awkwardly approached both the crowd and Reatti.

Who did I go to fist? Wool was interesting. A new face. A new member, like Fly. Someone who had needed to be saved, and by the looks of it had been. She was all smiles, as were all of the people around her. Everyone seemed very excited to be talking to her... a little too excited even. Was it because she was something of a happy surprise, or was it more? Did someone know her or something?

As I approached, I found I didn't have to make the decision. Brandy was waving me over.

Picking up my pace, I did my best to not notice the way Reatti stared at me as I approached. Passing the small crowd, I noted the happy voices as people asked Wool questions, and Fly oddly seemed to answer them more than the one they were directed at.

“She’s healing, but the wounds were severe,” Brandy said lightly as I stepped over to the three women. I noted the way Reatti shifted with Brandy’s words.

The Clothed Woman turned a little as I stepped up next to her. It was impossible to tell where she was looking, but I felt it wasn’t me she was studying but Reatti.

“Renn, we’ve been given the all clear. We’re all going to head back to the ship, then back to Lumen,” Brandy told me.

I nodded. “That’s good,” I said.

“It is. I am happy to oblige my duties, but my Lords would beg your leave,” the Clothed Woman said.

Frowning softly at her as Brandy chuckled, I noted the way Reatti shifted again.

Ah. Reatti wasn’t just uncomfortable because of me, but because of the Clothed Woman.

Maybe they didn’t like each other.

“Vim’s gotten us wrapped up in the restoration of Lumen. He’d like you all to hurry as to help him with it,” Reatti said with a stiff voice.

“Restoration?” I asked.

Reatti nodded, but she didn't look at me. “Typical Vim stuff. He's promised the Societies... or well the Animalia Guild's resources in the effort to clean up and rebuild Lumen. As to fool the humans and keep their eyes off us,” she explained.

Oh. Wow.

“Makes sense,” I said.

“Regrettably,” the Clothed Woman said.

Brandy chuckled as she nodded. “He's always quick on his feet. What'll be interesting to find out is if he's thought ahead already and has realized how much profit we'll get from such an endeavor,” Brandy said.

Profit... from charity work...? Likely something to do with politics then.

“Which is undoubtedly why he has requested your return, Brandy. So you and the rest of us can deal with it all,” Reatti said.

“Who could blame him?” the Clothed Woman said.

“Right. I’ll get everyone ready,” Brandy said, and stepped away. The moment she did she started barking orders to the group nearby, which all startled and quickly dispersed as to obey.

As she left I realized I was going to have to fend for myself. Brandy had called me over... likely for a reason, yet had left already.

Which meant I was to talk to Reatti... Well, not alone. The Clothed Woman was still here.

Looking to the one in question, I frowned as Reatti crossed her arms and glared at the Clothed Woman. “I’ll not hurt her,” Reatti said stiffly.

Huh?

The Clothed Woman shifted a little, and I wondered if that was the gesture of a smirk. “No. You won’t.”

Blinking at the very matter of fact tone coming from the Clothed Woman, I tried to understand what they were talking about.

It was me, obviously... and...

The Clothed Woman was protecting me? Or rather ensuring I would be fine? Why?

Reatti huffed, and then looked to me. "You and I will be taking Fly and Wool to the Bell church. We'll be taking a cart," she said.

Oh. "Okay..." I nodded, unsure of what to say or do. We were going to the Bell Church? I had wanted to go there, so that wasn't that bad of a thing... but...

An odd silence followed, and Reatti shifted as she grumbled and scratched the side of her head. As if itchy. "Okay," she said, then stepped away. Walking past me as to head for the church, likely to help everyone pack and load the carts as to leave.

Watching her go, I wondered what I was supposed to have said.

"Don't let her hate bother you Renn. Her hate isn't worth the blood it boils," the Clothed Woman said.

Turning to her, I frowned at her words. "I got her brother killed... She has a right to hate me," I said.

Her white cloth danced as she shook her head. "Who ordered him to wield a spear?" she asked me.

I gulped, and wondered if she meant literally or figuratively. Did she know he had a spear in his hand at the moment of his death...? Had someone told her? "Well... Vim, maybe?" I wondered. "But no... Vim doesn't order anyone to do anything," I said after a moment.

"Exactly. He chose that life. He chose his death. Her hate is a simple excuse to allow her to overlook her own brother's faults. Think nothing of her hatred, or her self-pity," she said.

Shifting a little, I wondered if this was stemming from her religion... or if she was actually trying to keep me from hating my own self. Something told me it was both.

"You speak like Vim sometimes," I said to her.

The Clothed Woman tilted her head, and I swore I saw an odd smile in that gesture. "Why dear, that's a fine compliment. And an interesting one. Usually Vim is much kinder when speaking of such things. He must be more open with you," she said.

I gulped and shifted. Was he? He actually was kind when talking about such things, she was right... but sometimes he spoke in a similar way. Especially when it came to his weird beliefs concerning free will and such. Vim would let others suffer and die if that was what they themselves desired... so he could be cruel in his own way. Ruthless.

She turned, and was now likely looking at the church and the carts being loaded. It seemed everyone was awake now, and excited.

Did it upset her to see people so happy to leave already? Though maybe not... she really did seem to dislike many here, as did they dislike her. I haven't paid much attention but even I've noticed that most here won't even talk to her.

"They think the creature was a Monarch. Was it?" the Clothed Woman asked.

"I... I don't know. Fly and her people called it Master Monarch, but the only Monarch I've met is Bray, and I have no idea to tell if one's a Monarch or not," I said honestly.

"You've met Bray?" the Clothed Woman asked.

Woops. That was a weird tone in her voice, even for her. "For only a tiny moment, yes," I said.

For a long moment she said and did nothing... and I felt some sweat start to gather under all my bandages. It made me itchy.

"Did Vim say it was a Monarch?" she asked, and finally looked away from me.

"Oh... No. He never said it was, though he never said it wasn't either," I said.

"Hm..." she hummed and then pointed past me, to the carts and wagons. "Watch your tail around her, Renn. She and her brother were weak of mind, but she's still dangerous in her own way. Especially while

you're injured. I'd join you to make sure you'd be safe, but to do so would only result in more bloodshed... I don't mind that, but Vim would. And I'm not ready to meet my Lords just yet," she said.

Blinking at the woman covered in white cloth, I wasn't really sure what to say or think of what she had just said. It was clear what she meant, of course. She felt I wasn't safe with Reatti. But she couldn't come with me because she wasn't allowed to go near the Bell Church.

"You're not allowed to even go near the Bell Church?" I asked her gently.

"Only if I'm willing to fight and kill those who would do the same to me," she said plainly.

Great. Right. Vim had said many didn't like her.

It's so weird that we could all be a part of the same Society, yet have such hate and disgust for one another.

"I appreciate the thought, all the same... If it makes you feel better I promise to not let her hurt me, if I can help it. I feel horrible for what happened but... I have much to do," I said to her, deciding to ignore her statement.

She nodded. "Good."

Although... an odd conversation, and a little unsettling, I still found myself smiling at the woman in front of me.

It seemed we were friends. Wonder what I had done to earn her respect in such a way. Especially since she seemed to hate so many of us.

“Odds are I’ll not see you again for a few years. Make sure you have some better stories when you next return, Renn. Scars and pain are the tithes of my Lords, but I’d rather you bequeath them from someone else.”

My smile grew as I nodded. “I look forward to seeing you again. Thanks for letting us stay here, I’m sure we were noisy,” I said.

She waved lightly as she turned. “It is fine, in small quantities,” she said softly.

Ah. So she had enjoyed it. Interesting.

Now that I thought of it, she had participated in most things. Every night, while everyone cooked food around that large fire and told stories she had been there. She had never really spoken or laughed, but she had still been there. Sitting with us.

“Goodbye,” I said gently, and wished I was confident enough to hug her. No one had really said it... but I got the feeling she wore those cloths for a reason. They were similar to bandages.

I didn't want to hug her if it would hurt her.

"May my Lords never find you," she said as I turned away.

Hesitating a moment, I wasn't sure what to say to that... but decided it was best to just nod and smile. That had probably been a happy parting saying, coming from her.

Someday I'd need to learn about her Lords...

Approaching the church, I stayed back a bit as everyone went to and fro while loading the carts. The strange boxes they had unloaded were now being reloaded. Even Wool was helping out, joined by Fly.

After a few moments of my staring, I shifted and wished I could help. My right arm was still in the sling, but I felt strong and well enough that I could still be of assistance. My left arm felt rather good today, actually.

"Did you say goodbye to the Clothed Woman, Renn?" Brandy noticed me standing indecisively, pausing before going back into the church to grab something else.

I nodded. "I did."

She smiled at me in a way that told me she was glad to hear it. Which was odd... the Clothed Woman and Brandy seemed to be friends, or at least more at ease with each other than the others here... yet as

far as I was aware Brandy was a devout believer in the faith of Telmik. The opposing opposite of the Clothed Woman's.

Maybe they had earned each other's respect in another way, which let them overlook their differences.

Brandy stepped aside to let Wynn and Herra past, and then stepped over to me. I shifted a little, and tried to ignore the looks we got as people passed by while carrying stuff.

"The Bell Church isn't far. A few days, even on a slow cart," Brandy said.

Nodding, I wondered if she was trying to be kind. She must know I wanted to go back with them, and really didn't...

Ignoring Reatti as she walked past, I coughed lightly and shifted uncertainly. "May I ask why me?" I asked quietly.

"Fly asked that you'd go with her," Brandy said just as quietly.

Fly had? Really? Wonder when that conversation had happened.

"I guess that reason is a good one," I admitted.

“It is, isn’t it?” Brandy’s smile told me she liked what I had said, and how genuine I had been. After all it was true. Fly was my doing, good or bad... and for her to want me to join her to her new home and place, meant a lot. It meant she trusted me over anyone else here, for now at least.

“You and Reatti can come back right away after dropping them off. You don’t need to wait around like Vim does,” Brandy then said.

Oh. Right. Vim usually stuck around a bit when something like that happened, to make sure all was well. “Is Vim okay, by the way?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Brandy asked with a smirk.

I didn’t like that smile. Not that it was ugly, or anything, she was pretty. But it made me want to squirm. “Is it so strange a question?” I asked back.

“It is, actually...” Brandy’s smirk died, and I watched as she delved into her mind. Into her memories. “Actually, now that you say that I can’t really think of the last time anyone has ever asked me or I heard someone ask if Vim was okay,” she said after a moment.

“Surely not,” I said softly. Hadn’t he just fought a Monarch not long ago? With Oplar? And who knows what has happened before or since then. Surely at least a few times in the recent past people should worry for his health, right? If not out of worry for the person himself, at least for their protector? What of the worry for their own selves, due to the possible loss of the one who protected them?

Brandy nodded as she frowned, still lost in thought. "I mean it's not an impossible question, it's just... well... maybe it's because everyone left anymore are like us. We haven't had this many new members in such a short time in years, so everyone just... knows better than to ask it, I guess?" Brandy rambled as she pondered, and I didn't really like where her mind was going... or where it was.

She really didn't understand why I'd ask. Rather, she did. She had smirked in a way as to tease me over Vim, or rather my feelings for him. Yet beyond that she saw no reason to ask the question. No reason to doubt Vim's condition, or he himself.

This wasn't the first time I had seen such a thought process when it concerned Vim... but it was very startling for it to be so blatant.

I understood no one really worrying over him, since he was their protector. They wanted to believe and have faith in the one who, was supposed to at least, keep them safe. So vocally admitting he might be in danger was not a good thing at all... but still...

There was no way I had been the only one to see the wounds on him that day. Surely they at least questioned it. Even if it was something they wouldn't willingly admit aloud, or dare to say.

Yet no. Brandy shrugged and seemed to give up the idea, and tossed it aside with ease. She turned and pointed to the smallest cart, one that Gerald and Magdalena were hooking up a stout horse to. "Your cart. You'll be taking a few items with you, if anyone tries to steal'em from you make sure to give them hell," Brandy said, her jubilant tone returning.

"I think I'll let Reatti handle them, if something happens," I said softly.

“Honestly would be for the best, let her vent some of her anger,” Brandy whispered with a nod.

Right. Great. I hadn't meant it that way, but sure.

Wool and Fly passed by again, heading back into the church to grab some more items. They were chatting lightly about the clouds above us.

Glancing up, I sighed at the sight of the dark blotches beyond the tree tops. Great. Rain. Storms. While traveling.

Usually I'd not be bothered by such a thing, but right now I was covered in bandages. The dampness was going to itch something fierce.

“Spend some time with her too. Make sure she's a viable member, as well you can. I'll hear your vote when you get back,” Brandy said softly.

Oh. Right. I nodded quickly as I watched Fly and Wool enter the church. Neither had heard Brandy.

“Reatti says she's fine. A typical air headed sheep, she said, but,” Brandy shrugged.

“Think she's related to Lughes?” I asked.

Brandy tilted her head, and frowned at me. “No? Why? Should she be? Does she know him?” Brandy’s questions, and their quick appearance, made me realize I had obviously mistaken the obvious.

“Sorry... It was just a thought, I don’t know if she is or not,” I said.

“Oh... Right. I doubt it. There’re actually quite a few sheep and goats in the Society. Nearly two dozen, as far as I’m aware,” Brandy said.

Really...

Why was that? Why were some so common, yet others so rare?

Had we at one time all been common? Long ago?

“Brandy! Which cart should we load this one onto?” Wynn waved Brandy over to the carts, he was standing next to Sofia who had a small box in her arms.

“Obviously that one! Really you think we’re sending any of that to those grumps!” Brandy shouted as she stepped away, hurrying to the carts.

Watching her go, I smiled as I watched her hop onto a cart and start pointing at boxes, causing Wynn and others to unload some of the ones they had just loaded. A few of them took them to the cart at the front, the one we'd be taking to the Bell Church.

"She barks orders, without telling anyone in the first place. As if we can read minds," Merit grumbled.

I turned to smile down at my friend, who had a small fruit in her hands. She was munching on it while staring at Brandy and the rest.

"Want to come with us Merit?" I asked her.

"To the Bells? No. I don't mind their religion, but I hate some of the people there. Plus with you and Reatti going, I need to stick with everyone else just in case something happens," Merit said.

Oh. Right. With Brom gone... well...

I gulped as I glanced around at those around us.

How many fighters were left?

"Just me and Brandy. Lawrence is strong too, but he won't fight for anyone but himself so he can't be relied on," Merit said, and not quietly either.

“Were my thoughts that obvious?” I asked.

“I read you as easy as the book,” Merit nodded, proud of herself.

I smiled at her and nodded back. Yes. She had been reading that little black book the last few days. “Did you finish it?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve read it three times already, and plan to read it again on the trip back, and then I’ll hand it off to whoever wants it next,” Merit said.

“You’ve re—read it already?” I asked. It wasn’t that big of a book but that was still a surprise to hear.

She nodded. “Of course, how would I remember it otherwise?”

Well...

“Not everyone is like you Renn. While you’re at the Bell Church you can ask for the second volume, if you’d like to read it. Just bring it back with you to Lumen,” Merit said.

“Oh? The second volume is there? I’ll ask for it,” I nodded, and planned to do just that. That meant I’d be able to read all of them before leaving Lumen.

“When you do read it let me watch you. I want to see the parts you cry at,” Merit said.

I blinked at her words, and hesitated. “They’re sad stories?” I asked worriedly. Maybe I didn’t want to read them then.

“No. Not entirely. You’ll see.”

Great. Now I would, hopefully they didn’t break my heart. It was already so fragile and right now very bruised.

Merit put the rest of the remaining fruit into her mouth, and mumbled something I didn’t understand as she ate it. Then she pointed at the house nearby. “Did you say goodbye?” she swallowed and then asked.

I nodded.

“Good. She likes you,” Merit said.

I nodded again, though wasn’t sure why.

Fly and Wool went by again. This time they were carrying pots and pans. Fly smiled at me as she passed.

“Earlier before, what’d you say to Brandy to make her weird?” Merit then asked.

“Hm? I made Brandy weird?”

She nodded as she wiped her mouth, likely thanks to the fruit’s juices. I didn’t like how I knew exactly what she was talking about... or well, maybe I didn’t.

“She was odd two times, one because I asked if Wool was related to Lughes, and the other because I asked if Vim was okay or not,” I said to her.

Merit paused mid-wipe, and then lowered her arm as she looked up at me.

A weird moment of silence came and went, and then Merit smiled at me. “You really are a gentle one, Renn.”

Frowning at her, I suddenly realized I was growing annoyed with that comment. Even though everyone always said it kindly, and for positive reasons... it was really starting to bother me.

Merit sighed as she lifted her shirt and wiped the rest of her face off. “Really. I think you’re the first one to ask if Vim was okay after a battle in...”

I shifted as Merit’s voice trailed off and her shirt lowered, as she frowned and was suddenly upset.

“Fly asked the other day, Merit,” I said gently.

Merit blinked, and then frowned and shook her head. “I’m trying to think of one of us who has asked such a thing. Someone who has known him for a long time. Someone who knows better,” Merit said.

Someone who has known him for a long time.

In other words, someone who has been indoctrinated into seeing him not as a person but something else.

I let Merit ponder it for a moment, but grew tired of waiting. “Well?” I asked, not liking where this was going.

“At least since the kingdom, I think...” she said softly.

Looking away from Merit, and the rest of the Society around us, I did my best to keep my disgust from growing anymore than it already had.

“Strange,” Merit stated, deciding that was all it was. Strange and nothing else.

“Is him getting hurt really that impossible to consider?” I asked her.

“Not at all. He gets hurt all the time. But he being hurt isn’t like how we get hurt, so it’s not the same... When you get back, wait until I’m nearby before you ask him if he’s okay to his face, okay? I want to see his reaction,” Merit said.

Although I nodded, I made a mental promise to myself to ask the question when we were alone. Maybe even after we left Lumen.

Merit then sighed as she looked upward, to the sky. I followed her gaze and a moment later a far off rumble told me there really was a storm on the way. It sounded... very far away. I might not have noticed the sound had I not focused on it.

“Just great. Come on Renn, let’s get this all loaded and out of here. Maybe the rain will wash the stink off, too,” Merit said as she headed for the church as to return to helping.

Although I followed her, I did so hesitantly.

Staring at Merit’s back as I followed her, I tried my best to not feel disappointed in my friend. For many reasons.

Yet it was that very disappointment that made me realize I had made the right choice in choosing Vim, and not Lumen.

Even if I was willing to ignore my failures... even if I was able to ignore my faults...

I couldn't ignore the fact that... just like at the Sleepy Artist... this place was somewhere I didn't belong.

I did love it. I loved the city. The people. Merit. Brandy. Lamp. I even enjoyed the Clothed Woman, as odd as she was.

Nevertheless...

There were still parts I hated. Parts I couldn't help but wish were different.

Parts and people I couldn't help but feel disenchanting with.

Once again I was forced to realize the differences between me and the others. Those who I was supposed to be similar to. They weren't humans. They were my own kind... so why was I so different? Why did I think so differently than they?

Why did their uncaring attitudes bother me so much? Why was I so upset over their comments that they barely noticed?

Entering the church, I joined Merit as we went to putting the building back into place. We had moved the pews and pulpits as to make room for the beds and sitting areas. Since most of our stuff was now out of the church, and loaded onto the carts, it was time to put it back to how we had found it.

Merit luckily let me help her. She didn't even seem to mind when I fumbled, or moved slowly thanks to my injuries or bandaged arm. Her willingness to let me help her made me happy, even if it was just a simple gesture.

Yet even as I worked, and as happy as I was to be allowed to...

The back of my mind wouldn't let go of the realization. The truth. The terrible reality that I was going to have to really start facing, and accepting. Likely soon.

Once again I had fallen in love with a place I didn't belong. Once again I found myself needing to leave, before something forced me to.

It wasn't good for it to have happened again so quickly. Although Vim and I had gone to several places since leaving Ruvindale, and the Sleepy Artist, this was the first place I had actually considered a location I could live at. The Cathedral in Telmik had been too busy. Too noisy. Though maybe now I'd deal with the amount of people a little better, after spending so much time here in Lumen. And the other locations had been too personal... too tiny, for me to find a place with.

Lumen was a unique location. One with many different types of people. Even though all were members of the Society, there were a few who didn't get along. Yet they lived with one another. They were copacetic. Willing to overlook their differences and live amongst each other with kindness and camaraderie.

A place that Vim had been betting on. A place that he had hoped, and expected, would be where I'd belong and end up staying.

Which meant there were likely very few other places... very few other locations, which could be possible homes for me.

But it wasn't the realization that I was likely running out of possible places to call a home... but that it likely had already been decided.

If I couldn't see eye to eye with the people I lived with, then I either needed to learn to simply accept it... or learn to live alone. Again.

I stayed silent as I worked alongside Merit and everyone else. They were all chatting lightly, talking of the weather or their upcoming trip home... but in reality the world was quiet. Their conversations were gentle things. Their voices low. They were in a hurry, yet not rushing. Brandy hadn't even barked an order since Merit and I had entered the church. The distant rumbling of the storm was the loudest thing, and it was likely something that a few of our members couldn't even hear yet. Their senses not strong enough.

But underneath the quiet and gentle world... was turmoil. My heart and mind were clashing, loudly. As if having a screaming match with one another, they were debating and arguing over the thoughts that hurt my soul.

I wasn't going to be able to live in Lumen. I wouldn't be able to obey their rules. I'd not be able to smile as they voted against my beliefs. At least, not for long.

Which meant... likely... there wasn't anywhere in the Society for me.

Nowhere I belonged.

All because I was gentle in their eyes. Too gentle. For the wrong reasons.

Towards the wrong people.

Like with Amber.

At least this time I realized it before it was too late.

Chapter 192 Thraxton

“Nearly two decades of revenue have been donated already. With the promises of much more from most of the affluent families and guilds, though as you know I don't put much stock in the promises of humans,” Thraxton leaned forward as he spoke, to pick up the small cup of coffee from the table that sat between us.

“Hope your vaults are big enough,” I said. I too had a cup full of coffee, but I hadn’t bothered to take more than a single drink of it yet. Even though I had requested the coffee and also the small plate of snacks sitting on the table too, I no longer had much of an appetite for anything.

“That’s another thing. One of the main reasons I’m here to request your aid, is because I can trust you with it all. What I desire isn’t just your coins, although I do need them, it is instead your people. I can trust you. So I can trust your people thru you. You’ll not steal or mismanage the funds, as all the rest will,” Thraxton said as he leaned back in the dark colored chair.

I took a small breath, as to sigh, but kept myself from actually doing so. Not that I was being mindful to not be rude to the king, or would be king, of Lumen... but rather because the man sitting before me was expecting it. He was waiting for me to grow annoyed, so he could smirk and bring up an old promise that I really wish I had never made.

How could I have known that a baby would be able to remember what I had said? He hadn’t even been able to talk yet. It wasn’t fair.

Renn probably had the same ability. I’d need to be weary around any of her children, once they were born... just in case they inherited her vivid memory.

“The council going to be happy with our company managing the resources and clean up?” I asked him.

“A few will complain, of course, but nothing too bad. Your guild is well respected, especially amongst the council. Gerald is well-liked too, even with those who your guild is technically at odds with,” Thraxton shrugged as he spoke, which told me he genuinely didn’t care if people complained or not.

His willingness to be a despot made him useful, but at the same time dangerous. Hopefully Brandy and Gerald knew what they were doing.

It was a little amusing, honestly. I have known this man since his birth, yet I would have understood him just as well even if I hadn't.

All men with crowns end up being the same, eventually.

"By our ledger, nearly a quarter of all the coins in our vaults belong to you or your family. Kind of amusing to think you still need financial help, when taking that into account," I said.

He smiled as he shifted and put his arm up along the back end of the chair he sat on. "I'll need to donate most of my wealth too, yes. All my posturing and speeches will be for nothing if I don't put my money where my mouth is. Especially with all those damn merchants on the council. But it will be a small price to pay for the city and sovereignty," Thraxton said.

"Power over money," I stated.

He nodded. "Exactly." He seemed excited over it.

It was foolish, but not because it wouldn't work. Rather it was foolish precisely because it would work.

If handled properly, which it would if Thraxton and the council really did give the position of leadership to the Society, it wouldn't just succeed... it'd do so wonderfully.

Lumen would be able to become independent. The city would be rebuilt better than before. The environment for businesses, and the people who benefited from them, would become a beacon in this world. Wealth and power beyond the mountains and seas would pour in from all flocks of life and regions, only further empowering the city and its people.

Such wealth and prosperity was the very thing I was having issues with when I considered the Animalia Company as it was already. Too much wealth and power was just a giant bull's-eye. A target. Something to be destroyed and laid low.

So only adding to that pile of treasure wasn't the brightest move... but there were more positives than negatives to this plan. The goodwill from the community, and the city, towards our guild and thus the Society would only improve dramatically. Plus with the Society being given such a powerful position... not only would we as a whole be safer, it would grant us certain powers and oversight capabilities. Ones that went far and beyond anything we had now.

There was no reason to deny Thraxton's request. Other than my own discomfort and feeling of annoyance. It would undoubtedly bring forth other disasters and issues down the road... but those could be handled then, if they ever arrived.

At the very least it would secure the Societies place in Lumen for the foreseeable future. Which was worth far more to me than any of the wealth or power it'd bring.

"I'll send a messenger when Brandy and Gerald return. You can discuss the finer details with them," I said, deciding to just accept it. After all, it wasn't like I could actually tell him no. The Society would need to vote on it, and I knew Brandy and Gerald would not let this opportunity pass by.

Thraxton nodded and then took another drink of his coffee.

I sat back a little and glanced around at Brandy's office. It was a little bigger than Gerald's, but plainer. It lacked any fancy furniture, rugs, or paintings. There were shelves like his too, but they were more bare than not.

It was places like here that Brandy's pious nature showed itself. It was just too bad it didn't show itself at all when it came to her business practices.

"Might I ask of your newest member, Vim?" Thraxton brought my attention back to him. He was putting the cup back down on the table, and by the sounds it made as he did so it was empty now.

"Hm?" I frowned as I wondered how he had known of Fly... or maybe Wool?

"The adorable one. I first saw her working as a bank teller, not that tall, golden eyes, I think her name was Renn?" Thraxton frowned as he searched his memories, and I noted the way he said her name. He hadn't heard her name said aloud, but instead had likely read it... likely from a name-tag.

Renn.

"She's newer, yes, but not exactly a new member. What's wrong with her?" I asked.

“Nothing? She’s just beautiful. A few of your members are, but she’s the first I’ve actually found attractive myself,” he said calmly.

Thraxton was speaking in a way that told me this was more small talk than not, but I still focused on him as if it wasn’t. The conversation was now more serious than the one we just had.

“She’s a little old for you,” I said lightly.

He smirked and nodded. “I bet! It really isn’t fair, you know!” Thraxton chuckled after he spoke, seemingly enjoying the thoughts in his head.

“What would your wife think of you chasing the tail of a woman old enough to be your grandmother?” I asked.

His chuckling turned into a full on laugh as he nodded. “She’d suffocate me in my sleep, for sure!”

Would she? I’ve never spent much time with Thraxton’s wife, but I never got that image from her. She always seemed... well... subservient. Simple. As if she had no desires of her own to speak of.

But I guess any woman got that way when it came to such things.

“Speaking of wives, do you have any Vim?” Thraxton changed the topic a little as his laughter died down.

“Not that I’m currently aware of,” I said.

He chuckled and nodded, as if he had expected such an answer. “Such a life... and to think others believe I have one of wonder. How little people know,” he said.

“Ruling a city is fun,” I admitted.

“Ah! So there is a chance,” Thraxton sat forward, suddenly more focused on me.

Woops.

“During wartime, that is,” I added quickly.

Thraxton’s smile dimmed a little, but didn’t die off completely as he leaned back in his chair and sighed. “You know, it’s only a single year Vim,” he said.

“A blink of an eye,” I said and nodded.

“Exactly! Especially for you! This would be a great opportunity. Let Brandy and Gerald run Lumen, they’ll have my full support. Surely now would be the perfect time?” Thraxton asked.

I shook my head. “I have no desire for your city, Thraxton. Why would I give up a year of my life for something I don’t even want?” I asked.

“Surely your Society could use it, at least? Think about it, a whole city! You could bring all of your members here and make the perfect environment for them! And all I’m asking for in return is just one year... For someone who has a seemingly unlimited number of them, you sure are stingy with them,” Thraxton once again tried to negotiate for me.

“You’re the odd one, Thraxton, not me. You are already at the top of the food-chain... so just what do you even want to use me for a year for?” I asked.

He didn’t need to me destroy enemies, conquer nations, or defeat monsters. So just what did he want?

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked.

I shrugged as I shook my head.

“Why, Vim, I want you of course,” he said plainly.

Dumbfounded, I couldn't believe the man who was nodding seriously. "You're into women aren't you...?" I asked, unable to believe it. After all hadn't he just mentioned he had noticed Renn's beauty?

Thraxton's face contorted from a serious one to one as confused as I felt... then he broke out into a laugh. "Not for me myself, Vim, jeez!" he barely got the words out as he waved me down.

Slightly relieved, I kept myself from relaxing even more. After all, he still hadn't answered my question.

After a moment of laughing, Thraxton contained himself and then nodded. "I do want your body, or blood I guess, but not that way. I want a child from you. Preferably a son, if I could get one," he finally said.

Blinking, I contained my vast relief and calmed down. I was glad to hear of his true purpose, but didn't want him to realize how comforting I found it to be.

"A son," I said.

He nodded. "I'd take any child, of course, but I bet your sons have more chance to inherit your strength. Plus a son could then sire many more, while a daughter... well," he shrugged, not needing to say more.

I see. So he simply wanted my bloodline. To enrich his own. To further his own agendas, even hundreds of years from now when he's long dead and gone.

“That explains all those women you used to send to my room back in the day,” I said as I thought of those nights, long ago. Back when Lumen had first been founded.

He chuckled. “Never worked, regrettably. I’m assuming it’s something to do with your... unique self. Which is why I figure a year would be safe enough,” Thraxton said.

A year. To give birth to a child, that he could raise as his own.

And in exchange I get, or rather the Society gets, Lumen in its entirety.

In any other world, in any other scenario, it wasn’t a bad trade. One I might have considered... if it had been the first time someone had asked it of me.

Though I hadn’t agreed the first time either, had I?

“Nonetheless, I shall have to turn you down Thraxton. Spending a year in indulgence sounds fun, but all of the headaches I’d have to deal afterward wouldn’t be,” I turned him down, as usual.

Thraxton smiled as he nodded, but I could see the truth in his accepting nod. He wasn’t happy. Even though he seemingly had... long given up in actually convincing me, he still desired that outcome.

Hopefully in his later years he didn’t become... desperate.

“Do you have any children, Vim?” Thraxton then asked.

“If I did you’ll not be able to convince them anymore than myself,” I warned.

He chuckled and nodded, accepting defeat.

I glanced at the window near Brandy’s desk. It wasn’t a very large one, and it was being pelted with rain. The storm was here, and had been since this morning.

“The church will arrive soon,” Thraxton said.

“They’re already here, Thraxton. Or at least, their eyes and ears are,” I corrected him.

He sighed as he nodded. “That’s the truth. They’ve been trying to wiggle their way into Lumen ever since we opened the ports,” he said.

“Coins are only strong as gods when one has enough of them. They become weak when one has none,” I said.

“Isn’t that the truth... I’ve been told that hundreds of people likely had been living in the sewers, is that true?” he asked.

I nodded.

Thraxton shook his head and he stood from his chair. He turned to stare out the window to the rain and dark clouds. “Lumen should be the wealthiest city in the world, yet I feel as if we’re the poorest sometimes,” he said.

Keeping my scornful snicker inside, I ignored Thraxton’s vain attempt of being melancholic at his own failures.

Kings were all the same.

“How would you fix poverty, Vim?” Thraxton asked.

“You don’t want to know how I’d fix it, Thraxton,” I said gently.

He smiled and nodded. “Likely not...”

Slowly standing, I decided it was best to end the conversation here. Before he really started to ask for favors, and didn’t just throw them out for small talk. “They should be back tomorrow or the next day, Thraxton. How about coming back here for the negotiations, instead of your castle?” I asked.

“Sure. May I bring my family?” he asked.

I blinked at the man’s odd request. Although I have met his wife, and children, I wasn’t aware if anyone else in the Society had. Yet...

Staring at the man who I had known since his birth, I noted the graying hair. The thin beard. The wrinkles and skin that was starting to age a little too much.

I see.

“Sure... They like you are always welcome in our doors, Thraxton, you know that,” I said.

He nodded as he looked down to the table between us. At the cups, his empty mine full, and the plate of snacks that neither of us had touched. “I know. I do... Yet I feel as if I don’t, sometimes,” he said.

Frowning at him, I wondered why. He knew I was beyond his rule, as were the rest of the Society... but we’ve always been something similar to friends with one another. He’s helped us, and we’ve helped him many times over the years.

“I believe Gerald does not like me. Though not sure why,” Thraxton gave me the answer I was searching for.

“Really?” I wasn’t too surprised to hear it. Gerald was... odd. Yet it was interesting to hear Thraxton say such a thing, since it meant Gerald must have done something.

“He goes against me often on the council. Never anything too drastic, or dire, but often enough to be noticed,” Thraxton said.

Ah. “He might be doing it as to avoid anyone claiming favoritism, Thraxton. My people have to view things in such a way, especially during such negotiations,” I said.

He nodded. “That is likely the reason, yes. Yet sometimes it bothers me... also Sofia has become very short with me, ever since I asked if she’d like to marry my son,” he said.

I wasn’t able to contain my sigh as I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Thraxton...” I groaned.

“What! You won’t give in, so I need to get the next best thing, right?” he argued.

Really. He’s insatiable. Why were kings and lords always so unabashedly self righteous?

“Leave Sofia be. She’s a hard past, the kind that such a request... even if made in half jest would be painful for her,” I warned him.

“I figured, based off her reaction...” he nodded.

Jeez. Poor Sofia. Children were a very... touchy subject for her. At least he only asked her to marry his son, and not give birth to one.

“You’re an odd man, Thraxton. You didn’t wish to join our Society, yet you seem very serious about joining it all the same,” I said.

He smiled at me. “I want your longevity and strength for my descendants, Vim. Nothing more.”

“At least you’re honest. Who knows, maybe one day you’ll find someone willing to play along with your strange schemes,” I said.

He nodded thoughtfully and then stepped around the table, as to head for the door. “How about that adorable one? Renn?”

About to follow him out of Brandy’s office, I paused right as I stood. “Renn?” I asked.

Thraxton nodded expectantly as he opened the door. “Not only would I get your bloodlines, I’d get her beauty too! Who knows maybe I could even do the deed myself and not wait for my sons, too!” Thraxton spoke quickly, excitedly... as if he just realized something very wonderful.

For the tiniest moment I debated killing my next monarch... then the moment faded as Thraxton turned to see why I wasn't joining him out the office.

I coughed and gulped, and scratched my healed skin under my lips as to hide the thought that had just planted itself in my mind while I nodded. "You can try. I'll not stop any of my members from agreeing to your request, if you can convince them to," I said calmly, and surprisingly actually sounded so.

He smiled as I joined him out of the office. I closed the door behind me, and was glad I was able to shut it without breaking it. Though I noted the handle was dented a little upon my release of it. "One day, Vim, for sure," he said.

"Just... cease your hunt if anyone tells you no, like Sofia, please," I asked of him.

"Of course Vim. I'm a king, not a tyrant," he said as we headed down the hall, heading for the main lobby so he could rejoin his entourage and be escorted out of the building.

I scoffed at his words as he chuckled.

"Keep telling yourself that, Thraxton. From one tyrant to another, trust me when I say such lies barely work even on a good day," I said.

Thraxton laughed as he nodded, agreeing with me.

As we walked to the main lobby Thraxton made small talk. Of the city. Of the monster. Of the storm and rain... and oddly, his new pet. Some kind of squirrel one of his knights found on a hunt. Something that kept stealing his wife's jewelry.

I obliged his small talk, returning it and adding to it until we stepped out onto the balcony in the main lobby. It was mostly empty, except for his knights and servants who were waiting for him. They were all seated and standing near the main door, and a few of the knights were stationed at the stairwell's openings. Some were making light talk; others were just standing silently... looking bored.

They noticed their king, and quickly started moving. Some of the knights hurried up the stairs as it turned to Thraxton.

He nodded as I shook his hand. "Just one year Vim. Or even just until the birth of a child," he said again.

This time he spoke earnestly, and seriously. His eyes held my own as our hands shook.

"For Lumen?" I asked.

He nodded.

I smiled and shook my head as I separated our hands. "Sorry, Thraxton. But a destroyed city isn't very appealing," I said.

He sighed, and I saw the way his eyes shifted. He didn't like that I had answered his serious request with a lighthearted joke.

Well... I hadn't been joking.

"Worth a shot. See you in a few days," he said as he turned to greet the knights and servants.

I nodded as I watched Thraxton and his people pack up and leave. They left the main lobby, closing the door behind them. I walked down the lobby stairs to the ground floor, and went to lock the door they had used... but paused a moment as to stare out at the rain. It was a light storm, but heavy enough to be a pain. Chances are it would heavily interfere with the burning and disposal of the creature's corpse.

Locking the main lobby, I sighed as I headed back up the stairs... this time heading for the Society Houses within.

No one else was in the building. Before Reatti left she and I had put up notices on the doors, to let the workers know that they would get paid time off to handle their own affairs. That the Animalia Guild would reopen in a few days, and no one would get in trouble if they didn't show up immediately.

It was an easy explanation for us not being open. It was seen as charitable and kind, yet let us hide the fact that none of us were actually here.

"As if it matters," I whispered as I opened one of the heavy metal doors. I closed it carefully, and momentarily stood in front of the door as I listened to the silence within the Society Houses.

It was... unnatural, to hear nothing in here. Even when everyone was out and about, working or elsewhere, this place still usually had sounds. Like leftover lingering notes hanging in the air, indicating there was life here... or rather, that there was usually life here.

Right now however it was dead silent. Empty. Cold. Devoid of life, somehow, even though it had only been a few days.

Walking down the hallway, I paused a moment to look at the doors I passed. They were all shut, some even locked, and there wasn't a single piece of trash or debris anywhere to be found. The Society of Lumen had packed up and ran off, but hadn't done so without diligence. Unlike the sewers, this place looked... clean. Too clean. As if they had swept and wiped down as they ran out of the building.

Maybe they had.

I didn't wander around long, but did check each floor just in case. I wasn't sure what I was checking for... but I was sure as to why I ended up in front of a certain door at the end.

Staring at the door that led to Renn's room, I silently reached out and pushed on it. Unlike most of the other doors, this one wasn't locked.

Likely because Renn hadn't locked it herself. I had sent her back with Merit... she had been hurt.

The door to Renn's room swung open gently, squeaking a little loudly in the silence, until her whole room came into view.

Her bed, only partly made. Some clothes draped over the side of the bed, and her dresser was wide open. Maybe she had changed clothes before leaving.

Taking a small breath, I took in what little of her scent I could smell... and stayed outside of the room. On the precipice, just outside in the hallway.

Her easel was visible, but at this angle I couldn't make out the whole picture. It looked completely from here, but it was hard to tell. Rungle's face was now on it.

She had mentioned she had finished it.

Blinking, I shifted a little as a bright flash lit up the room. Shortly after, the world rumbled as the sky complained.

Near the window being noisily hit by rain, were little flowers. Notably a small cactus... it sat proudly in the center of the windowsill, even though the smallest of the bunch.

They'd be back soon. Reatti had left yesterday. No matter what path they took, or vehicle they chose... boat or cart, it didn't take long to get here from the Clothed Woman's sanctuary, or the Bell Church.

Glancing back down the hallway, to the other rooms in the distance... I did my best to not worry.

I worried over my people. Over Reatti. Over Fly.

Yet it was obvious who I was worrying about the most.

Would Renn return with the rest?

If she even did... would she be the same Renn I knew? Would she smile and laugh the same? Or would she be different... like Tosh.

Would she still desire to be with me? To become like me?

Most gave up such a dream after they endured failure. And although Renn hadn't particularly failed in reality... I knew that was how she will interpret the events.

"I might have lost her," I whispered.

The worst part was there was nothing I could do about it.

Even if I was willing to... favor her over the others, and dedicate time and effort towards her and no one else... there wasn't much one could do about mental afflictions.

My only hope was that Renn would be strong enough. Strong enough to not break. To stumble, yet get back up.

A part of me thought she was... but...

"I had thought Tosh to be strong too," I whispered.

Of course it wasn't just Renn I should worry over. Reatti and Merit were those most affected. Reatti losing her brother... Merit for having been there during the moment it happened. Merit especially took such things critically. She held herself to a higher standard than most realized, so when she failed it took her years to mentally forgive herself... if she ever did. Fly was luckily young enough that she might be fine, but she too was someone I needed to keep an eye on. Then obviously Wool, though I was going to let those at the Bell Church handle her.

The rest... well...

"Our people are too old," I said softly as I looked back at Renn's room. Specifically at the painting of Rungle and Stumble.

Too old to be enduring these burdens. Too tired. Too weak.

Even Renn wasn't a young child.

They should all be living peacefully without trials and tribulations. Living out the remainder of their long lives without a care in the world.

Instead they must now dedicate years to rebuilding a city none of them actually cared for. Just to ensure the place they called home wouldn't be stolen from them. They must now become entangled in politics, and nobles and merchants. They must now become the very things that I usually destroyed to keep us safe. Even Thraxton, that human, who I personally didn't mind, was going to eventually become an annoying problem. As he and his family grew more powerful, and his desires became more serious... it would us, the Society, who would have to deal with him. Thanks to the situation the Society was now responsible for more than we needed to be. And that very responsibility, taken and accepted as to protect ourselves, would only in the end do the opposite.

All because of a few simple events. Whether they had been handled properly or not was now irrelevant. The fact that something as simple as a few non-humans and a large creature could cause such chaos... even whilst I was right in the middle of it...

I sighed as I reached into Renn's room, just far enough to grab the door's handle. I shut it, and didn't like how I could still smell her even as I walked away.

All of this happened, and was happening, because I couldn't carry the burden properly. Because I had not been strong enough, fast enough, or smart enough.

Once again I was being forced to admit and accept something that no one else would. At least... not aloud.

My single pair of shoulders weren't enough.

Not anymore.

If they ever had been.

Chapter 193 The Bell Church

The Bell Church... was more than just a church with a bell.

Walking behind the older woman as she guided me to the library, I wondered if there were as many buildings as there were people here. It felt as if there were several dozen buildings, yet I hadn't seen more than a handful of people yet.

The whole village was centered around the church, but it was done in a way that left a lot of room open. Large gardens, small patches of tree clusters, and even swaths of well kept grass were in-between all the buildings. It was obvious they had built this place to be... nice. Pretty. Calming.

Even the houses were large, yet not imposing. Only a few had more than a single floor, but they all had fancy roofs and large windows. Most were made of stone too. Stuff not usually seen in smaller villages.

"Such a pity. To suffer in such a way for your sisters," the old woman spoke evenly, but seemingly to her own self more than me. After hearing the story of what had happened from Reatti and the rest of us, she and most that were here seemed... well... A little too calm and unbothered over it. It wasn't that they were indifferent, or not sympathetic... they were just...

They reminded me of Rapti. Even natured folk who were rather religious.

The older woman in front of me was even wearing the familiar gray ropes that I had seen in Telmik.

She hadn't introduced herself yet, and now it felt a little awkward to ask for her name. I'd been talking and walking with her for the better part of the morning. We had arrived here late last night, too late to do more than inform the few who had been awake in the church of what had happened in Lumen and who we were.

It was a good thing I had slept a bit before getting here, on the cart with Reatti and the rest... otherwise I'd be exhausted. I hadn't slept at all last night. Though I really wasn't sure why.

We passed some large hedges that looked freshly cut. I studied the way they rounded the path we walked upon, and led to a larger building to our right. It wasn't the building we were heading to, but it looked bigger and more important than most of the others we were passing.

"Are there a lot of us here?" I asked.

"If you three join our numbers here will grow to twenty nine. There are only three humans here, and they're elderly. Too old to be a threat," she said as she glanced back at me.

I frowned at her words, and wondered if she had said that because she thought I hated and despised humans. I mean... I guess I could understand that. Not only because of who and what I was, but also with me being hurt.

"I've been told men aren't really allowed here either," I said.

She nodded as we approached what was likely our destination. We walked onto a new path, one that led to a circular building. "There are four men here. Three are our kind. They too are harmless," she said.

I opened my mouth, to try and explain to her that she didn't need to be so gentle with me... but decided against it. Maybe she wasn't being gentle, but rather giving me a warning. I'd hate to embarrass myself like that, making a mistaken assumption in such a way.

"And... you're believers of the same religion in Telmik?" I asked.

"We're members of the Church of Songs, yes. There are a few others here who don't necessarily subscribe to our particular order, but they're sisters all the same," she said.

"I've read your bible," I said gently as we walked up to the building's front door.

She paused before the door and turned to look at me. She studied me for a moment, and I wondered how old she actually was. She looked old. She was hunched a little, her hair more white than not, and her eyes were a little faded. Yet she wasn't... wrinkly, at all.

Shifting a little I nodded. "I enjoyed reading it, even though Vim complained when I did," I said.

The older woman tilted her head, and then smiled knowingly. "Of course he did. I didn't know you knew our protector," she said.

"I've been traveling with him. Ever since Ruvindale, where I met him. A little over a year ago, I guess," I said.

"Interesting..." she mumbled the word as she turned and opened the door to the library.

Watching the older woman enter first, I hesitated at the bright place inside. I studied it for a moment, and then looked around outside. Off in the distanced I could see people. Some walking between buildings, other mingling with one another near the church. It was odd how... flat this place was, compared to the huge mountains that surrounded us.

Yet the oddest part was that the world was kind of dark. It wasn't raining, or windy, but it was cloudy. Dark clouds hovered above, making the world seem melancholic... yet...

Looking back into the library, I narrowed my eyes at the bright glow from within. How was the inside of a building so much brighter than the outside?

Entering carefully, I turned as to use my left hand to close the door. My right was still in my sling, even though it no longer ached as badly as it had been.

"Oh my, you brought a guest Sister Yana," a new voice greeted me as I turned and stepped deeper into the library.

As I walked up to the two women, one who I know knew was named Yana, I looked up at the source of the place's brightness.

Huge windows were on the ceiling. In fact... the entire roof looked to be made of glass. The glass was somehow amplifying the little bit of sunlight peering through the clouds, to the point that it felt as if I was looking up at a brightly lit sunny day in summer and not a cloudy one.

"Why look at you, such fascination. Is she a fox, Yana?" the new voice brought my attention back down to earth, and I smiled gently at the younger looking woman who was smiling at me. She too wore the same gray robes Yana was wearing, but she had oddly shaped ears. They were pointed outward and down.

"No. She's a cat I'm told," Yana said calmly.

I nodded. "A jaguar, the Chronicler said," I said.

The two tilted their heads, and I felt very self conscious again as they studied me. Why did it feel like they were judging me?

Well... I mean... they probably were. Just like everywhere else I've been, the residents of the location always judged and assessed me. Sometimes even as to vote on if I could stay or not.

If that was what they were doing, it made sense... and I couldn't blame them, even if it felt weird.

“Very interesting,” the pointy eared woman said.

“It is,” Yana nodded, agreeing.

Was it?

“Young Renn, this is Sister Braid. She’s our poor soul who spends more time with paper and words than people, but we love her all the same,” Yana said as she introduced me.

Warmly smiling at Braid, I nodded and gestured lightly with my right arm. Hopefully she didn’t take offense if I didn’t shake her hand. “Hello Braid. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said.

“Indeed it is... Why then is the first building you visit our sanctuary of stories?” she asked.

Oh? Did she not like me? She hadn’t sounded abrasive, but that was definitely her way of asking what I wanted and why I was here.

“She’s come to request the second volume of the Queen’s Lament. Lumen would like it back, for awhile,” Yana explained for me.

I nodded. “If it’s all right,” I said.

“Woe is the one who would deny another the right of knowledge,” Braid said as she nodded.

Was... was that an okay? I glanced at Yana, who smirked at me. “She’s an odd one, isn’t she?” she said.

Oh. I see. Maybe she wasn’t being abrasive with me, but was just... well...

Strange.

“Odd she says. Tell me Jaguar, what if it’s not me who is odd but all of you? A mirror doesn’t know it’s a mirror, does it?” she asked me.

“Uh...” I was lost, yet nodded anyway.

“She gets it,” Braid nodded back, smiling happily.

“No one does. I don’t think even you do, sometimes. Renn does bring something to offer in exchange though, right Renn?” Yana reminded me.

“Oh. Yes!” I hurriedly reached into the little space between my right arm and chest, where the book rested inside my sling.

Pulling out the fourth volume, I barely got the book out of my sling as to offer it to Braid before she rushed towards me.

“No way!” She screamed at me, or rather the sight of the small black book, causing me to stumble backwards in shock. Falling to the ground, I let out a tiny yelp as I landed on my butt... and thus my tail.

“Braid!” Yana yelled at the woman who realized what she had just done, and the both of them quickly stepped up to me and reached down to help me up. I did my best to not whine or start crying as my tail throbbed, sending waves of pain up my spine.

“I’m all right. Sorry...” I apologized as the two held my arms as to support me.

“No, I’m sorry Renn. Are you okay? That was a real bad scream. I shouldn’t of reacted like that,” Braid’s voice was full of compassion, and her eyes were watery as she looked me up and down... checking me for wounds.

“I’m all right. Here, sorry,” I offered her the book, but Braid ignored it as she studied me. There were a few long uncomfortable moments of silence as Yana and Braid stared at me, making me feel very weird.

I probably looked hurt. My eyes were watering, since my tail was still throbbing, but I wasn’t going to blame her. She had just gotten startled at the book, and I had overreacted.

“I’m sorry Renn. You sure you’re okay?” Braid asked.

“Of course she isn’t! I’ve told you before you need to start being more conscious of people! People aren’t like books; we’re not cold and hard!” Yana yelled at Braid, and did so in a way that told me this wasn’t the first time... and likely wouldn’t be the last time that Braid had done something like this.

Though this really wasn’t her fault. It was mine. Why had I been startled so badly? Yes she had yelled and rushed towards me... but it was obvious she was simply reacting to the book I had shown her. She had been excited. Merit had gotten excited at the sight of it too; I should have expected Braid’s reaction... especially since Yana had made it clear Braid was a bookworm just a few seconds ago.

Handing Braid the book, I smiled and did my best to look as calm as I could... even though I was everything but.

Something was wrong with me. I’ve never been the most stalwart of people, but such a thing shouldn’t have happened.

“Fourth installment. I’m told by Merit that it’s the best one yet,” I said.

“Oh! Oh... Merit said that? Gueh,” Braid made an odd noise as she took the book from me, and wrapped it in her arms as to hold it to her chest.

I tilted my head at her, and then looked at Yana when it was clear Braid wouldn’t explain. Yana smiled at me. “She and Merit don’t get along,” she said.

Ah... Merit had said she hated a few people here. Maybe Braid was one of them.

Which was interesting, since Merit had also held that book close in such a way.

Or well, not that exact copy...

"I'll get the second volume. Just the second right? Not the third?" Braid asked as she stepped away.

"Just the second... I'm told that they have the third volume already too," I said.

"Good! These things are too precious to endanger so readily... one alone is bad enough as it is and..." Braid's voice went softer as she disappeared behind a wall. She kept on talking though, and it sounded as if she was mumbling to herself.

Stepping forward, I ignored Yana's happy smile as she watched me peer around the wall... to the library itself.

An odd chill ran down my spine as I took in the sight of large shelves. Most taller than me, to the point I knew I'd need a ladder to reach the upper shelves... and somehow, impossibly, each and every one was filled to the brim with books.

"A real library," I whispered, and was a little shocked to find myself so surprised. After all, this was the Society. Of course they'd have so many books...

The way the bright amplified sunlight illuminated the shelves made it seem almost dream like... as if it wasn't real at all.

"Fascinating isn't it? The only other place with more books is at the Cathedral, at least within the Society," Yana said from behind me.

Yes. I had seen a lot of books there... but I hadn't gotten to enjoy any of them. Like always life kept me busy and...

"Is Vim here Yana?" Braid asked from somewhere inside the shelves.

"Not this time," Yana said, raising her voice as to clearly be heard.

Braid mumbled something, and I wondered if she was upset or glad over Yana's answer. It was interesting that when it came to Vim, it really could be either response.

Stepping over to one of the shelves, I studied the spines of the many books upon it. They varied in shape, size and color... but only a few had lettering on their spines. And of those that did, only one of them had letters I recognized.

"Like to read, do you?" Yana asked as I reached out to touch the book I was able to read. The small yellow thing had only a single word, the same as the city Reatti and I would be returning to soon. Lumen.

"I do. Very much so," I said.

"And she should!" Braid returned, and I tore my eyes away from the books as to carefully take the small black book she offered to me.

It like the one I had just given her had nothing on the cover or spine. It was a dark black book, and... felt a little smaller and lighter than the fourth volume.

"Book two of Queen's Lament," Braid said.

"Thank you," I said, and meant it. Now I could read all four back to back and not have to wait years, maybe even decades.

"Take care of it," Braid said.

I nodded as I slid it into the small space between my chest and right arm, inside the arm sling.

Once it was safely tucked away, I realized Braid and Yana were staring at me again... which wasn't too surprising. I mean... I was new, and odd, plus although I wasn't covered in as many bandages as I was before I still had quite a few... but...

Smiling gently at them, I realized their stares weren't just curiosity. There was something else in their expressions. Something I didn't really... like to see at all.

Worry. Concern. And not just over me and my condition.

"Just what was able to hurt you like this, anyway? You're not as weak as foxes; based off your smell... did the humans do this?" Braid then frowned as she tilted her head, and I realized why she had been staring at me in such a way.

"Well..." I hesitated, since her question told me that Braid didn't know. Didn't know about Lumen, or what had happened. She hadn't been in the church last night when we arrived, or a part of any of the groups who had arrived since then... but...

Well... I had kind of assumed anyone who had heard the news had already run around to tell everyone else already. Maybe the people here weren't as quick to spread the news and gossip as I was used to.

"Creatures and our own kind. Predators. It's why she's here; Reatti brought her with two others who will be joining us. New members," Yana said.

"Oh? You mean you're actually a new member? Not just someone who I've never met before?" Braid's eyes got a little wider, and her strangely pointed ears actually rose upward in shock.

"Well... yes. I've been a member of the Society for over a year now, but Fly and Wool are genuinely new members," I said.

Braid smiled. "Fly and Wool? Let me guess, a bird and a sheep," she said.

I smiled and nodded as Yana sighed. It was nice that she'd focus on that more than the news of danger. To some that might seem like something a scatter brain would do, but I found it endearing. I was growing... tired of people being meek and running from what scared them. Even if I wanted to do the same sometimes.

"Interesting! And Vim isn't here, really? During such an important moment? Not like him," Braid said as she sighed.

"He's in Lumen... handling the aftermath," I said gently.

Braid frowned and nodded, understanding.

Before I could ask about the library right within my reach, I heard the door to the building open.

"Sister Yana?" the new voice drew our attention to the door. It opened slowly, and a younger woman stepped in. She wasn't wearing the grey robes as the others, but instead wore a yellow dress... and she only had one arm. Her right was missing at the shoulder.

The woman smiled at the sight of us and gestured behind her. "Sister Yana, Grandmother Plumb would like you and the guest to return to the church," she said.

“Does she now? Well, let’s go then,” Yana said with a huff.

“Bye Renn. Sorry for startling you, and thank you for the book,” Braid raised the book, to nod to it.

Although a little upset, I didn’t complain. I wanted to linger here, I hadn’t even looked around at all... but the reality was I had no choice. Everyone had made it very clear that Reatti and I were supposed to leave as quickly as possible and return to Lumen as soon as we could.

That meant no loitering. No time for rest, or to enjoy the village and its inhabitants.

Doing my best to not get too bothered or upset, I smiled and waved at Braid as Yana stepped past me.

“See you, Braid,” I followed Yana out of the library, alongside the one armed woman, and we three returned to the main path and started heading back to the large church in the center of the village.

“Renn is it? I’m Limb, nice to meet you,” the one armed woman held out her left arm, to greet me.

I smiled as I took it, and was thankful her remaining arm was the one I could shake comfortably. It would have been awkward otherwise. “Nice to meet you Limb.” Her namesake was obvious... which made me wonder if she had been born without the arm.

“Fly speaks highly of you. She’ll be living with me for awhile, so I promise to take good care of her. I’m also a bird, though I have no idea what type,” Limb said as she pointed at herself.

“Oh? Please do take care of her. She’s a very sweet girl, but she’s... well... a little odd, thanks to her upbringing,” I said as we walked side by side.

Limb broke out into a huge smile as she nodded quickly. “Of course! We’re used to new members being... well...” Limb hesitated, and I realized she was worried she would insult me by saying what she had been thinking.

“You speak as if Renn is leaving, is that true?” Yana though changed the topic of the conversation, and did it in a way that bothered me. Her tone had sounded a little off.

“Hm? Aren’t you Renn?” Limb asked me.

I nodded. Reatti must have told her. “I am. I’ll be going back with Reatti... whenever she’s ready,” I said. Though honestly I wished I wasn’t. Although I wanted to return to Vim... This place was interesting. There were many people here who were obviously older members of the Society, and each with their own stories. I’d love to hear why so many of those in Lumen didn’t like this place, especially when it seemed so quiet and peaceful.

Yana glanced back at us, since she was walking in front of us, but she said nothing as she looked back ahead.

Studying her, after a moment of silence I glanced at Limb... who only shrugged. She didn't seem to know why Yana seemed to care either.

If anything... I would think that she'd be happy I was leaving. After all, I was a predator. One who now genuinely smelled of blood and death?

Though... maybe she pitied me. Maybe in her eyes, the eyes of a devout believer in a gentle faith... maybe to her I was a... well... a lost lamb, which needed shelter and aid.

Maybe I did.

"Are you a pure blood, Renn?" Limb then asked.

"Huh? Oh... Yes, I think so, why?" I asked. What an odd question.

She smirked at me. "Don't meet many of you anymore. In you might be one of the last full blooded predators left, huh," she said.

I blinked at Limb, but didn't take offense. She spoke in an upbeat attitude... but she sounded a little happy over the fact she had brought up. A little too happy, honestly.

"So I've heard, yes," I decided to just nod my head.

"I'm a half blood myself. My father was a human," Limb said as she pointed at herself.

I blinked at her again, for a new reason. "Really?" I asked, a little surprised.

That would explain her lack of... any visible non-human traits. Though maybe that had something to do with her missing arm...?

She nodded as she pointed at the arm in question, or rather the lack of it. "Yep. I was born with a stump of a wing. They amputated it for me, when I was young, so I could blend in if I ever needed to," Limb said.

"I see..." I did my best to smile, even though I really didn't want to. How could she say such a thing so happily? She was practically beaming, as if she was displaying a mighty scar earned from a horrid battle long ago.

How sad.

"Most of our members here are either broken, or descendants of those who were," Yana said in front of us.

Limb nodded. "Yeah!" she happily agreed.

Broken. She didn't meant that just in the sense of someone who was physically or mentally so. She meant by blood.

Most of those here weren't full-blooded non-humans.

Which explained why there were some humans living here. They were the parents, likely. Since they weren't allowed here at all, under normal circumstances. That also explained why there were some men here too, even though they too weren't supposed to be.

"Fly's interesting Sister Yana. She's covered in feathers! Not even Ma' was like that," Limb said cheerfully.

"Most of our ancestors were like her, yes. Though most we remember anymore are those like Renn," Yana said.

My ears on top of my head fluttered, and I wondered if our kind slowly becoming more and more human over the generations was really the inevitable end game. So far it seemed to be going that way... though that didn't account for those like Fly.

Nearing the church, I wasn't too surprised to find Reatti outside with a small group of people. She and the rest were loading packs onto two horses. The cart we had rode in on, and the horses that had pulled it, were nowhere to be seen.

Reatti glanced at me, and then nodded. I nodded back, and was a little glad to see she wasn't really... glaring anymore. She still didn't have a smile on her face, but at least she only looked peeved and not absolutely furious.

"Where's Grandma!?" Limb shouted at the group as we neared.

"Inside!" one of the other women shouted back. Limb didn't even bother or wait to look at Yana or me and simply went straight to the church's large doors and went inside.

Yana sighed as she followed, and I hesitated a moment before following too. Reatti was obviously getting ready to leave... but it looked like they still had some stuff to pack onto the horses. So I decided to just go back into the church.

I did want to meet this Grandma she spoke of, since I hadn't yet... plus I also wanted to say goodbye to Fly and Wool.

My time with Wool had been short. Only two days, and she had spent most of those two days chatting with Fly, but I had decided she was a rather... simple woman. Although older than Fly, she acted just like her. Her attention span was short, her vocabulary dismal, and she knew about as much of the world as Fly did... if not less, somehow.

She wasn't a threat to the Society, not in any real shape or form. Especially since she was notably weak. She had tried to help unload the cart with Fly and Reatti when we got here, and had been told to sit aside with me since she couldn't lift any of the boxes.

Entering the church, I slowly followed after Yana who was following Limb to the main center room. The place where all the pews and chairs were located. Unlike most churches where the entire room faced a single direction, this one instead was built in a circular form. The center of the church had a small hole in the ground, where there was something of a stadium. A place to stand and give an oration. And all around the hole in the floor were the pews and chairs, all of them slowly rising upward... which was strange, since all of the chairs were the same size and height, and I wasn't able to see a visible incline or decline in the floor.

Away from the center of the room, near the doors we passed through to reach it, was a small group of people. Most of them were dressed in the same robes as Yana and the rest, even Fly and Wool now wore them.

"Renn!" Fly happily noticed me, and I couldn't help but break out into a huge smile as she ran out of the small circle of people, passing pews and running between chairs as to come up to me.

She slowed down, but still ran into me. I accepted her impact, and gave her a small hug. Luckily it didn't hurt much anymore. It told me I was healing, just very... slowly.

Although my tail was definitely healing the slowest. Based off the way it was still throbbing from my earlier fall, it felt as if it had only just broken recently. Maybe it had in the fall... maybe I had broken it again or something.

Tossing the bad thoughts away I smiled down at Fly as she beamed a grin back up at me. "How you doing Fly?" I asked.

"Great! I get my own room here too!" she happily told me.

I nodded. "I know, isn't that nice?" How wonderful. She didn't seem sad I was leaving at all. Bless this place, and her, for being what she needed.

She nodded back, and I looked up... as to smile at the crowd watching us... but...

Staring at the small group of women, I felt my smile slowly die... as I realized something was wrong.

Fly still hung on to me, so I wasn't able to move or get any closer... but it wasn't as if I was too far away. Limb and Yana were now a part of the group, talking to the others... but there was a strange tension in the air, and nearly all of them were staring at me.

At least, I hoped they were staring at me... and not Fly. Hopefully they didn't banish or deny Fly residence here, though I couldn't possibly see why they'd do that. Not only was she just a young child, she wasn't a threat in any way! She wasn't a real predator... wasn't someone who had blood-lust or...

"She's their child."

Even Fly noticed the cold tone. She went still, and turned around as to see who had spoken. My eyes locked onto an older woman with white hair. She had stood upon my entrance into the room, and she was staring at me with bright blue eyes that almost looked as if they shone. And not just because of the layer of tears within them. She really did look like a grandmother. She might be one of the oldest members I've met, at least appearance wise.

“Excuse me...?” I asked worriedly as I glanced around at the other people. Why were they all standing so awkwardly? Why were the two women near Wool backing away, with looks of fear?

And why was it me they were staring at in such a way?

Then the old woman looked away from me, and rather forcefully. “Please. Get her out,” she whispered with a pained husk of a voice.

My stiff body went cold as Yana hurriedly turned and began walking towards me. She strode forward... with a purpose. The type that made one anxious.

I stepped back, and Fly actually squeezed me tighter. “Renn?” she asked worriedly. Before I could even gather my wits or nerve, Yana grabbed me by my left arm... and dragged me out of the church.

Fly stayed wrapped around my waist as I gawked and tried to ask what was wrong, but somehow... somehow I knew. Instinctively. I felt familiar bile start to squirm in my stomach and rise upward. I felt the terrible sweat begin to form, and not the hot itchy type from the bandages.

“Yana...” I groaned as she got us outside completely. I ignored the sounds of Reatti and the others nearby, loading the horses. One of them neighed.

“Renn... I am sorry. But you are officially banished from the Bells. You are to leave immediately, and unless given authorized permission never allowed to return,” Yana spoke slowly, but firmly. She held my gaze with her eyes... and even though I could barely comprehend what she was saying, I did at least acknowledge she was doing it without a hint of fear or vehemence. She actually looked hurt and sad, as if this was painful for her.

"I don't understand..." I whispered as my eyes began to water.

I was going to leave. Yet I hadn't wanted to. Plus... I had looked forward to someday returning, with Vim. Even if years from now.

"Renn?" Fly asked worriedly, the feathers on her head swooshed loudly as she kept looking back and forth. From me to Yana.

Yana frowned, and then she shook her head and lowered her gaze. "I'm so sorry Renn. Our Lords decree that the sins of the child are not those of the blood, yet here we are. Weak souls unable to forget the scourge of our fears," Yana said.

"Wait... wait... am I being banished because of what I am?" I asked, and actually felt relieved over it. That was it? That's all? Yes that was horrible but... but...

Understandable.

Yana shook her head... and someone stepped up next to us. I ignored Reatti as she too waited for the answer.

Apprehensive, I squeezed Fly a little as she squeezed me back... and we all waited until Yana gathered her nerve. What would her answer be? What could possibly be the reason I was being banished all of a sudden? If not my bloodline? If not the fact I was a predator?

Especially when they knew I was leaving right away anyway. I mean... why? For what reason? Why not just wait until I was gone? Why make a scene and...

My eyes blurred as I began to cry... as I felt the whole world once again display its hatred and anger for me.

After a heavy moment... Yana sighed and then looked me in the eyes once more.

“You bear the resemblance of your ancestors. The same ones who destroyed the Matriarch’s village. The same as those who slaughtered and ate her family. Your colors. Your scent. Your presence. I’m sorry Renn, but because of the actions of your ancestors... you must leave the Bell Church and never return.”

Chapter 194 Societies Return to Lumen

Everyone was all smiles as they returned home. One could feel the joy in the air as their carts rolled into the warehouse, coming from the piers. I closed the warehouse gate after the last cart rolled into the depot, and went to helping them unload. There was no need to greet them, or ask how their journey had been. I had met them at the dock, and helped moor the ship. I had already gotten a headcount, and been told that all had been fine. Although a few were upset with how long it had taken me to send Reatti and give them the all clear.

They hadn’t brought back too much. Nothing that an hour of everyone working didn’t take care of... especially since we had some human assistance. Lamp had requested, and Brandy and the rest had agreed, to get a few of her people from their Eastern Guild. They hadn’t exactly been told of the Society, or its purpose and those who lived within it yet, but that was the eventual plan. After witnessing the large creature, and the trip on the ship afterwards it seemed Lamp wanted her people to join us quicker than intended... as to keep them safe. She worried for their lives, not because she didn’t trust the Eastern Guild but rather because she knew no amount of normal people could have protected them from such a creature.

It was hard to blame Lamp for wanting to give her people what she deemed a better, and safer, life... but a part of me wondered if joining the Society was in the end just as dangerous.

After all so many of us ended up dead.

Walking back into the depot after dropping off a large box to the vault, I found it mostly empty. Most of the Society had finished their tasks, and were likely resettling back into their homes. Or maybe even getting some well earned rest... I knew many of those here struggled to sleep when on the road, either from the stress or worry. I had noticed a few had... rather dark eye-bags, and had moved slowly.

“From the look of the docks most of the larger ships were destroyed and lost. We’ll have to keep the Saint Light. The cost of canceling the contract would be far less than what we’d earn short term until everyone else is able to rebuild their fleets,” Brandy spoke excitedly to Gerald. They were lost in their little world of business, so I ignored them and approached the largest cart. It was empty now, and the horses taken care of and sent to their barns, but Merit was still messing with it. She was up on the cart and bent down, picking something up.

Stepping up to the side of the cart, I watched as she huffed and lifted a small nail. A black iron one, that looked bent.

“Did someone break something?” I asked. It looked like it was one of the main nails that held the frame together. One of many.

“I did. On accident,” Merit said as she stepped over to the edge of the cart, as to stare down at me. Even though she was short, while on the cart she was still taller than me... though not by much.

Glancing over the cart's side railing, I tried to find the spot she had broken. I didn't see it, but honestly didn't spend much effort on it. After all, it was just a single nail in a single cart. Someone else could handle it later.

Merit however held the nail as if it was important... as if it was something drastic. The way she stared down at it, with upturned eyebrows, made it seem as if she could hear the metal nail screaming out in pain and despair.

"What is wrong, Merit?" I asked her.

"During the ride here, a few people made comments. The kind I didn't like to hear," she whispered.

Ah. I see. That must have been where she had been sitting... and she had fidgeted and messed with the nail, or the wooden plank it had held in place, and then thusly broke it when annoyed.

"You're not one to usually let other's words affect you so deeply," I said to her gently. I wonder what had been said? Was it about Brom's death maybe? She had been there, but I honestly figured that those here would blame either me or Renn before anyone else.

Merit took a deep breath, and then sighed it out in a way that told me she really didn't want to say it aloud. It had been that disturbing for her.

Yet all the same, Merit gathered her courage. Like always, although tiny... she was mighty. "They'll be voting on Renn, Vim."

I blinked, and shifted. Brandy and Gerald's voices were still behind me, near the door... but they were in a heated discussion. Now about using the opportunity to fire certain employees, and replace them. I tried to ignore their conversation, since I honestly didn't like to hear them scheme in such a way. I had relinquished such authority to them long ago, so had no choice but to let them be.

Other than they, Merit and I were now alone in the depot. I didn't need to worry over anyone else joining this conversation, or hearing it.

"Voting on what, Merit?" I asked carefully. She had lowered the nail in her hand, yet was squeezing it tightly. Her eyes were digging into my own, yet I could tell she wasn't actually staring at me.

"If to banish her," she whispered.

Closing my eyes, I took a small breath and nodded.

Of course.

"They don't... blame her for what happened, Vim. As far as I can tell... but..." Merit stopped talking, and even with closed eyes I noted Merit's emotion. She sounded as if she was crying, yet she wasn't.

“But now they’ll fear her causing chaos again,” I said.

I heard Merit nod. Her thick hair sounded odd as it brushed against her shirt. Opening my eyes, I studied the thing she wore. It was some kind of wool looking material. The same thing that most people in this land wore, yet it was definitely something unique. Maybe she had picked it up on the ship.

Taking a deep breath, I smelled the scents of my people. Merit’s was the strongest right now, since she was actually in front of me... but I could smell everyone else. A few had noticeably gone a few days without bathing. Likely thanks to the journey, and where they had stayed. Most didn’t like the Clothed Woman, at all, so were likely on guard the entire time they had been there.

“There’re a few who were very vocally in her favor. Surprisingly Liina and Jasna were amongst those that spoke highly of her... but even they seem to think it best she doesn’t stay here,” Merit said as she stepped away, to the edge of the cart. She hopped off the cart, landing quietly.

“Brom’s death scared them, didn’t it? The creature and the threat of others weren’t that big a deal otherwise,” I said.

Merit nodded as she rounded the cart, to step over to me. “It’s not hard to understand why, Vim. They fear she’ll get involved in something drastic again, and will then need to be protected or assisted... which would then result in someone dying or getting hurt, again,” Merit said.

“Easy excuses, to overlay the truth,” I said.

A wry smile was barely hid by the thick white hair as she nodded. “She’s a predator, a real one. She smells of death now, strongly... though I’m honestly not sure if she actually killed anyone,” Merit said.

"I bet you did more damage than she did, let alone me," I said.

"They don't see it that way. All they see is a predator who returned home covered in blood... and not just the blood of our enemies," Merit said.

I nodded as a door closed. I turned and saw that Brandy and Gerald were gone. They likely had never even noticed we had been behind them. Hopefully they hadn't locked the doors, those were the only ones unlocked right now.

"She had been covered in Brom's blood," I said. I remembered it clearly. She had likely been right next to Brom when he had been hit by that boulder.

"And mine, though no one ever cares for about me when I get hurt," Merit said.

"Don't lie, Sofia cares a lot," I called out her little self-pity filled lie.

She smiled warmly and nodded. "Renn did as well... actually, the Clothed Woman tried to worry for me in her own way too, surprisingly," Merit said. She turned, as to start heading for the main building.

Walking alongside her, I kept to Merit's pace as I frowned. "Really? I figured she would have been rather... frazzled, with all of you showing up as you had," I said.

“She had actually been very accommodating. She had even participated in our dinners and campfires... though she never ate anything, of course,” Merit said.

Huh... that was interesting.

“She really likes Renn by the way. You might want to keep an eye on her when they’re together,” Merit warned.

“Yes... I noticed that last time we were there. I don’t think the Clothed Woman would actually try and eat her, but I had thought that of Kami too,” I said.

Merit chuckled, amused by the memory.

Reaching the door I was glad to find it was unlocked. One of them must have noticed we were still here... or they had simply been in that deep of a conversation, and hadn’t even realized they left it unlocked.

I opened the door for Merit, who walked in slowly. “Welcome home, Merit,” I said to her.

She paused a moment, and then snorted a laugh. “I don’t want to hear that from you!”

Shrugging as I closed the door, I latched the lock and went to join Merit as we headed deeper into the building. "Who suggested the vote?" I asked.

"As far as I'm aware, no one. They all just kind of... started talking about. As if it was hanging in the air this whole time. Though I don't know why they waited until we were actually back in Lumen to bring it up. Renn's been gone since before we left the Clothed Woman. Three days ago," Merit said.

"Well... It shall be what it will," I said.

"Hard to believe you when you flinch as you say that," Merit said.

I waved her comment off. Yes. I had. But I had no choice but accept what was happening. After all... I had no say in it.

I was the protector. Nothing more. I had no control over residences. If the Society of Lumen wanted to banish Renn... well... then...

"She had been banished from Ruvindale too. She showed up after, finding me elsewhere... Her look of pure defeat and sorrow was the only reason I hadn't killed her on sight," I said softly.

"Why would you have killed her on sight?" Merit asked.

“She had smelled of death. Of Amber’s death. After I had just left them all only a week prior, where they had been all smiles and safe,” I said.

“Just like here...” Merit whispered.

Reaching the main hallway, we walked in silence for a bit as we headed for the Society Houses. The hallway was dark, since no lamps were lit, and there were no windows here on this side of the building. None were near the depot.

Yes. Just like here. With Brom’s death... the only real saving grace is likely the fact that Renn had returned while carrying Merit. If she had returned alone, without me... well...

Odds are she would have been denied entry into the building, or worse. Since no one would have trusted her.

Though, maybe a few would have. Merit wasn’t the only one to have taken a liking to Renn, though she definitely seemed to be the most smitten.

Slowing a little, I paused a moment as I considered that fact. It did seem that most people ended up liking Renn, but it seemed it was those more... on the fringes that ended up actually being her friends. True friends.

I wasn’t sure if the Clothed Woman would be considered an actual friend of Renn’s, but it was the same. She was well liked by those that most didn’t like at all.

Was it her nature, or personality that resulted in such things, I wonder?

“Vim?” Merit paused too, a few feet away. She had noticed I had stopped, but it had taken her a few steps to realize I actually was bothered by something.

“Maybe I’ll get lucky and she’ll stay at the Bell Church,” I said. I prayed. I hoped. I pleaded.

Merit scowled at me, and the nail in her hand was now being held as if it was a weapon. “That was a cruel thing to say,” she said, her tone harsh.

“Was it?” I asked her.

She nodded. “That poor girl is traumatized. Yet she’s not broken. She may blame herself, but she hasn’t retreated into her mind as Tosh or so many others have. She’s stronger than that,” Merit said.

“Everyone breaks eventually Merit,” I said softly.

Merit flinched, since she knew that my statement was true. Truer than ever. She knew well, personally.

I sighed as I stepped over to the wall. Leaning against it, I gestured around us. “If she plans to not join me... and instead stay somewhere, and then comes back here only to find herself banished... That might

break her. What broken bones, pain, and death couldn't do... their votes could, and would," I warned her.

Merit's small shoulders started to tremble, and I noticed the way her eyes widened. She was realizing that everything I had said was not just correct... but very likely.

"I may not know everything about her, Merit, but I have spent quite a bit of time with her. She's sensitive, just in... odd ways," I said. She was more bothered by emotions and the feelings of others than she was death and chaos.

She became far more distraught, or emotional, when events or words were spoken that shook her soul.

My burning of the paintings and the subsequent killing of those who had tortured and killed Amber.

The family whose cart I had helped fix. That merchant family we had traveled with for a short time. Our own members, from how I treat them to how I speak with them. For instance like how I had helped Trek, or saved Nebl.

She... interpreted things a little too seriously. A little too deeply. What was a normal moment for me was a momentous one for her. What I'd eventually forget, in little time at all, she'd remember forever.

"She would break, especially if she makes the decision in her heart to stay here before arriving, and finding out," Merit whispered as she nodded.

“Hm. Let us hope she either joins me, or stayed at the Bell Church. She might have you know, she adores that religion and the people who partake in it. It tickles her sense of morals and expectations,” I said.

Merit smiled as she nodded. “I know, it’s so strange. And I forgive her for it, by the way,” Merit said.

I shrugged, since I hadn’t really said that as to poke at Merit’s old scars. Wonder what Renn would say if she knew how many times Merit had been burnt at the cross of that religion she found to be so interesting.

“I don’t want to lose my friend... but I also don’t want to lose my home either, Vim,” Merit said.

“Then do what you must Merit. I shall always support you, as I’ll support all of our members,” I said.

She smiled and nodded. “Even if we don’t deserve it. Yes. I know,” she said.

Well... I didn’t mean it that way.

Though... I wonder if that meant Merit would vote against Renn? Really?

She sighed and stepped over to the opposite wall, as to lean against it as I was mine. “Fly wanted Renn to go to the church. Now I wish she hadn’t,” Merit said.

I shrugged, since I had expected it. When the Societies boat had docked, and I had gone aboard... I admit that I had been a little bothered by the lack of Renn upon it. Not just visibly, but everything else. Her scent was nowhere to be found on that ship... and it had bothered me.

Merit had been kind enough to tell me what had happened, and why she hadn't been aboard the ship, but...

"Letting her go with Reatti alone wasn't a wise move, Merit. Why did no one think that unwise?" I asked.

"I couldn't go! Everyone was worried if I did they'd get hurt!" Merit shouted, upset at me as if it was I who had given the order.

"Lawrence and Tosh had been with them. They would have been fine," I said calmly.

Merit shook her head, and I noted the nail. It was dripping with blood. Very lightly, and very dark blood. The blood sizzled as it fell onto the ceramic tile beneath her. "I argued. I lost. If I fought it any harder it would have become a very big issue, and knowing Renn she would have involved herself and chose to go alone anyway. I decided to avoid all the fighting and just... Just..." Merit's shouting slowly became a quiet whisper as she spoke, until she was silent... and just standing in front of me with her shoulders hunched and drooping low.

I hesitated a little... I had wanted to complain about Merit's and the rest of their audacity of sending Renn alone with Reatti... but now I felt like the bad guy. Merit's child-like appearance made her depressed reaction look all the more serious.

"I abandoned my friend," Merit cried.

Ah, great. She's crying.

I didn't like it when Merit cried. Other women were easy to deal with but she wasn't. If she couldn't control it quickly enough, it always ended up with me being shocked and electrocuted and...

Merit sniffed, and rubbed her face with her arm. As she did I noticed again the thick wool she wore. It sounded weird as it cleaned her face. Seemed she was getting herself under control already. Interesting. I hadn't even said nor done anything yet. "Reatti will not hurt her, Vim. She vowed it to me and Brandy. She's hates Renn, but at the same time sincerely believes that her brother's soul won't rest if she hurts her. He sacrificed himself for her, so she believes Renn has the right to live," Merit said.

"People promise things during the day, yet in the dark of night their deceit shows itself," I said.

Merit sighed and nodded. "I know, Vim. I do. But what was I to do? I couldn't argue or it would have ended up far worse than it had," she said.

"Why did no one else do anything?" I asked.

"A few tried. Brandy thought about going with them, but she didn't want to wait any longer to get back here. Out of fear of the company falling apart," she gestured around us.

Right. Renn was a member of the Society, and as such she was important... but this was something hundreds of years in the making. It not only was something ancient, it was the backbone of the Societies wealth. Many of our members would not be able to survive, or calmly blend in with the humans they hid amongst, without the coins it provided.

By all counts it was far more important than Renn. No matter how one thought about it.

And thus, those who returned here to manage it and run it... well...

Yes. Merit had made the right choice. Even if it had hurt. Even if she'd never forgive herself for it.

"I'm sure she'll be fine. As will Reatti and... Speaking of them, what did you think of Wool?" I asked.

"A typical air-headed sheep. She's fine. She'll end up at some farming village or something. Maybe Tor's, if she doesn't stay at the Bell Church," Merit said with a shrug.

Yes. I had thought the same. Not to be rude to Wool, but her personality was more than just her long years of abuse. She was... just... well...

Simple.

"Fly's the one we'll need to worry about, Vim. She's young and childish now, but she definitely has the call for adventure. She kept trying to sneak off, to see the surrounding the forest. Don't be surprised if

one day you find she's been killed, kidnapped or lost to the world because she wandered away one day," Merit said.

"That's her choice, Merit. You can't place her in a cage, even if she is a bird," I said.

Merit huffed and nodded. Like always she agreed, but didn't. "I'm done talking about this. It hurts. I want to cry. Please... let's talk about something else," Merit then said.

I blinked, and the nodded. "I've begun the negotiations with Thraxton. Our Society will manage and oversee not only the cleanup process of the city, but also the restructuring and rebuilding. Both of the physical city, and the logistics. We'll also be the ones to write the declaration and the bylaws to be put into place for liberation of the city state," I said.

Merit's eyes widened, but I knew she wasn't really impressed. She was simply letting her mind focus on this topic, instead of the last. "Wow. We'll be very busy then, won't we?" she asked.

I nodded. "Very. Tomorrow they'll likely send a messenger to Thraxton. He wants to come with his family and direct subordinates as to forge our alliance contract... so he'll likely show up tomorrow, the moment he's summoned, knowing him," I said.

Turning, I returned to walking. Merit did as well, and she now had a small skip to her steps. She was glad to have set aside the thoughts that hurt her heart.

Which was sad. And too bad.

Renn didn't have many people who cared for her. Less than a handful, at best.

If they all set her aside as to focus on other things, since focusing on her was so painful for them... well... then...

Then she'd be alone. Because knowing her, she'd leave. She would run away, if she found out she was causing such discord and grief.

She was gentle in that way. She'd end her own life; if she found out she was the source of despair.

Which was regrettably common in our people. Especially those of note.

And even more regrettably... was that I had yet to figure out how to save such people.

Even after all these years. After all these tribulations and trials...

I've never figured out how to save anyone from themselves.

No matter what I did, or how I tried to do it. It always ended up failing. Sometimes spectacularly.

Which was no surprise. I struggled so hard to save anyone from normal threats, let alone things I couldn't actually stab with a spear or convince with words.

"Though we will complain, this is the best outcome Vim. To still have our home... and our purpose," Merit said as we neared the Societies Houses.

I nodded, agreeing with her. "Yes. Far better a result than what could have happened."

"Isn't that the truth... By the way, had that thing been a Monarch?"

Pausing at her question, I frowned at her and shook my head.

Merit's eyes widened a little, and then she looked away... as if ashamed. "I see," was all she said.

"I know not where such creatures came from, or how they came to be. Some sort of plant-like beast. Maybe some kind of mutated ancestor of ours, from long ago," I said.

"Everyone will think it was a Monarch," Merit said.

"So they will. I'll not lie about it, but I expect several will try to spread the news that it had been," I said.

“Better a little lie, to spread a little bit of hope and joy,” Merit said with a scoff.

“The Chronicler and the rest are incapable of believing in hope on its own. They need someone to raise the banner of hope like a flag, for them to be able to see through the clouds,” I said.

“Poetic. Renn would like that,” Merit said.

I sighed, since I had not meant it that way at all.

I had been rather serious.

Opening the metal door to the Society Houses, I stepped aside as to let Merit in.

“Once again, welcome home,” I teased her.

Chapter 195 Reatti’s Conclusion

The road to Lumen felt like the longest road I’ve ever traveled... or that anyone’s ever traveled, likely.

And it wasn’t just because Reatti and I were on foot, and not on the horse. Nor was it because it’s been very long either.

Walking next to Reatti, as she walked next to the horse and guided it with its reigns, I wondered if the two of us would walk the whole way in silence.

The trip from the Clothed Woman's sanctuary to the Bell Church hadn't been silent... but that had been because of Fly and Wool. Reatti and I had even talked to one another then, but only because the conversation demanded it.

Yet since leaving the Bell Church... well...

Glancing up at the dark clouds in the sky, I wondered if I should just be thankful that it wasn't raining. It had rained earlier, and my clothes were still damp thanks to it. Hopefully I didn't get sick... I did feel a little cold. I wore traveling clothes, heavy duty stuff made of wool and leather... but they weren't as nice as the stuff Vim had prepared me long ago, or the stuff Lellip had made. Plus some of my bandages were now itchy. They had dried out already, thankfully, yet now felt different than they had before. A little less comfortable, which was saying something since they hadn't been comfortable at all beforehand.

The horse's hooves made persistent sounds as it trotted behind us. It didn't breathe very heavily, even though it was weighed down by half a dozen bags and boxes. Its load was the reason we were on foot, since there was no room for us to sit upon it.

We had left the Bell Church in the morning... and the world was starting to grow darker, and not just because of the dark clouds. The sun would be setting soon. In a few hours, likely.

I wasn't sure how far we were from Lumen, or if we were even heading to Lumen at all. Reatti hadn't said a word since we left the village... and... well...

Our departure had not been a normal one.

We had been forced out. Or rather, I had been.

I was now banished from two locations within the Society.

Though this one didn't hurt as much, yet, it was definitely bothering me.

Just how real were that old woman's claims? I believed it to a point, since I knew how cruel and strong my ancestors were... but...

But...

No. The truth was obvious. After all, such devastation had been the exact reason that witch had found me and my family. It was why she had hunted us.

And how had she known anyway? I had never seen that woman before in my life. Yet she had recognized me instantly... either by sight or smell.

I sighed, and did my best to not start sobbing and breaking down. Not so much because we were out in the middle of some random forest, but also because I didn't want Reatti to hate me even more than she obviously already did.

Though likely nothing I did could make her hate me any more than she did.

I had gotten her brother killed. What could be worse than that?

Rounding a small bend in the trees, I noted a scent in the air. One not usually found in a forest.

Something beyond the smell of the trees, bushes and animals. A little stronger than the rain soaked forestry, or the horse walking behind me.

The smell of something burning. The smell of people. Humans. Dirty ones.

Glancing at Reatti, I wondered if I should say something. If she had also noticed she didn't show it.

Humans weren't that strange to encounter in forests like these. Especially since we were walking on an obvious path that they always trod upon. Yet... we were less than a day away from the Bell Church. Would they want humans this close to it? Maybe there were other villages nearby as well.

Before I could grumble my way to a decision, the world answered it for me. As we finished coming around the bend, a trail of smoke came into view. Smoke from a small campfire on the side of the path up ahead, next to a cart and horse.

The cart was a familiar sight. It was the same type of the countless I had seen in Lumen, particularly in the Animalia Guild's depot. It didn't have our emblem upon it, but instead a darker red colored one, but it was definitely the same kind of cart found all over Lumen.

And it was oddly tilted and positioned next to the path, as if...

The answer became clear as we approached. Dark mud was all around the cart.

I see. It was stuck in the mud, thanks to this morning's rain.

The sides of the path, and sometimes even the path itself, was muddy... but it looked far worse where the cart was stuck, likely thanks to the many footfalls as they tried to unstuck it. Not just from humans, but the horse too.

There were three people sitting at the small campfire, and they all shifted as they noticed us.

I glanced at Reatti, and wondered if I should ask her for permission first. She was staring at them... but...

Her eyebrows were narrowed. Her face stuck in what seemed a permanent frown. She was glaring at them, as if they were something ugly and detestable.

Reatti's always hated humans, but it was obvious her temperament had hardened and gotten crueler after her brother died.

I coughed lightly, and Reatti glanced at me. I gave her a gentle smile as I nodded and stepped away from her and towards the cart.

If she wouldn't stop and help, then I'd just run and catch up to her afterward. Lumen couldn't be that far from here... I bet I could find it even if Reatti and I got separated. Odds were it was only a couple days away at most, based off how long it took to get here on the horse drawn cart. Worst case scenario I only needed to find the sea, and then follow it south.

As I approached the camp, I noted the way the cart looked. Especially the huge wheels.

Luckily the cart wasn't too badly stuck, nor was it too far off the path. It looked like they had likely moved aside to either rest for a moment, either seeking shelter from the very rains that trapped them, or to get out of the way for a larger wagon.

Walking up to the cart, I ignored the horse that neighed at me... or likely instead at our horse, and gently nodded to the older man. "Greetings sir."

The older man studied me in a way that I would have likely found insulting under other conditions, since he was staring at my chest, but I knew it was not because he was being lecherous but rather because he was studying the emblem sewn onto the jacket I wore. Or maybe my arm in the sling.

“The Animalia Guild, eh?” the old man whispered, and then coughed as he stood up from the stump he sat upon. He nodded lowly. “Ma’ names Bretton. I belong to the Fastener’s Guild... as do my children,” the man gestured to the two who were now standing. They had both stood up and away from their small campfire upon my approach.

They didn’t look like the old man at all, but I didn’t doubt his claim. They looked as young as I probably did to the old man, though the girl oddly had a sword and the boy didn’t. Bretton didn’t have a weapon on him either.

“Your cart looks stuck,” I stated.

He nodded. “Stuck like a coin in the tax man’s hand,” he said.

I smiled at his response. He was a merchant indeed. I turned a little to gesture at the horse nearing me.

“We can use our horse. Between the two, and a little effort, I’m sure we can dislodge your cart,” I said with a gesture to the wheel nearest us. It looked to be the one actually stuck, it was dug nearly half of my tail’s length into the thick mud.

“Ah...! Are ya’ sure miss? I won’t be able to pay ya not’n. No coin on me,” Bretton quickly spoke as he looked from me to Reatti, who was now finally walking up next to me. She had left the horse a few feet away.

At least she hadn't kept walking and left me behind. Without both horses this would be difficult.

I frowned at him, and wondered if maybe someone else had already passed by and didn't help because of that very reason. His response was quick, nearly immediate. And the look in his eyes told me he was expecting a certain kind of response from me because of it.

"That's fine. Have your kids help me unload our stuff off the horse," Reatti said as she stepped away.

The old man stood up straighter, and for the tiniest moment I saw relief upon his weathered face. He blinked harshly, and turned away as to shout at his kids. "Get on it! Help em'!" he shouted.

I smiled gently and stepped back as to let the two kids hurry past. I walked away from the man as he tried to hide his emotions, which he honestly wasn't doing a very good job about. He was sniffing, and trying to rub his eyes on his shoulder without being obvious about it.

Stepping over to their cart, I rounded it as to look at the other wheel. Sure enough this one was only about half a hand's deep dug into the muddy dirt. The wheels though were covered in mud... likely from the many attempts of trying to drag it out. The wheels had spun around many times, flinging mud everywhere. It was covering most of the sides of the cart, and the horses legs were nearly layered in the stuff.

Had it lain down in the mud, or had they been trying that long? Maybe they've been stuck here more than a single day...

Their campfire was a little... well made. They had put logs all around it, and gotten little stumps as to use not just for chairs but also tables. One of the stumps had a little game upon it. Some kind of wooden

board with about half a dozen pieces lay upon it. It took a lot of effort to not go over to it, as to learn what it was.

“Alright let’s hook them both up,” Reatti gave orders, and the children and old man all happily obeyed her. Feeling a little out of place, I stayed back a little as they harnessed their own horse and then wrapped some rope upon our horse’s saddle.

Rounding the cart, to get to the back, I was joined by the children as Reatti and the old man ushered the horses.

Since my right arm was still stuck in the sling, I chose to lean against the cart with my left shoulder.

The moment the horses started pulling, I and the children started pushing on the back of the cart. I put as much strength into it as I could, as to avoid letting this take too long. I knew Reatti wouldn’t be happy if we spent too much time on this.

For a long moment the wheels only spun, spitting up mud and dirt, but then the cart jolted forward. A single wheel got unstuck, and the cart started to turn at an odd angle... and then the other got free and rolled forward as well.

The children hollered in relief, and they both stopped pushing. I however kept pushing, and stepped into the thick mud because of it. Thanks to the mud, I wasn’t able to follow the cart any longer. But it wasn’t needed. The cart easily rolled up and out of the mud and to the dirt path.

As the old man hollered a hooray and hugged the horses, I accepted the young girl's outstretched arm. She helped pull me safely out of the thick mud, and I smiled in thanks at her. She actually blushed at me and looked away. Maybe she was younger than she looked.

Stepping away from the mud and their camp, I did my best to wipe my now mud covered boots on the thick grass as I headed for the path and cart.

"Thank ya! Thank ya so much, by the songs thank you!" Bretton was happily shaking Reatti's hands, rather violently, and I couldn't help but snicker at her face. She looked dumbstruck, unable to do anything but accept his fervent thanks.

Before she could say anything more he stepped away and hurried over to me. He took my left hand with both of his own and shook them just as he had done Reatti's. "Thank ya!" he sobbed, and I saw actual snot forming on his beard.

"It was nothing," I said gently, but the man didn't even seem to hear me. Instead he turned and shouted at his kids, to have them reload our horse.

"I won't forget this, I swear it! I'll make sure the Fastner's Guild knows all about this! By my name, I swear it!" Bretton shouted to the world as I nodded to him, and watched Reatti and the two kids repack our stuff onto the horse. I noted the way Reatti ordered the kids around, and pointed out the way she wanted things tied down and fastened.

The kids didn't seem bothered by her harsh tone, but I knew that was only because they were still stuck in the ether of the event. Otherwise they would have definitely noticed the... glare Reatti had as she yelled at them.

“To think the rumors of ye’ Guild be true! I shouldn’ta doubted em!” Bretton shouted.

“Rumors...?” I asked, but he ignored me as he hurried away and to his own horse. He petted the thing, and said loving words of praise to it. It actually shifted and neighed at him, as if happy to not have been forgotten.

“Renn,” Reatti drew my attention, and I was surprised to find they were done already. The stuff was now retied to the horse, as if it had never been undone.

“Ah... Goodbye! Try to avoid mud from now on, okay?” I said to the man and children.

“Bye!” the two children waved happily as Reatti stepped past me, pulling the horse behind her.

“Farewell Animalia Guild! May your vaults never empty!” Bretton shouted as I turned and left with Reatti.

I couldn’t help but awkwardly smile at the man as we walked away. He continued to shout praises and prayers for our good fortune and journeys, even until we were out of earshot. Or at least, human earshot.

Once the man’s voice finally stopped echoing in the world around us... I glanced over at Reatti. We had returned to walking side by side, with the horse right behind us... and she now looked just as she had upon finding that cart stuck in mud.

Her face was placid. Empty. Devoid of any emotion.

As if nothing had just happened. As if the cart, and that old man with his kids, had all been but a fever dream.

I gulped, since it was obvious why she was acting like this.

After all... Reatti was anything but quiet. She was usually so loud, and boisterous. Happy beyond measure. Running around, like a child and...

“Do you think your parents actually did it?”

I nearly stumbled at the question, and not just because it hit me deep in my soul.

Glancing at Reatti, who was staring straight ahead... I did my best to keep my heartbeat under control. She was talking to me!

It was a little odd she'd completely ignore what had just happened, and instead focus on what happened this morning... but...

“Honestly... it’s possible. Rather than my parents, if it really was someone in my family it had to have been my grandparents. They were more beastly, and not just in shape,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

Reatti shifted, and frowned. “How beastly do you mean?” she asked.

“Well they had fur all over, and were large. My grandmother was twice as big as me, and she had a snout too,” I said as I reached up and touched my nose.

“Huh...” Reatti finally looked at me, and I nodded to her as to affirm I was telling the truth.

“Also I had an uncle, who was technically my great uncle...? Or great-great uncle? He was the older uncle of my grandmother. He wasn’t human at all. Though I only ever saw him a few times,” I said.

“Not human at all?” she asked.

I nodded as I relived the memory of my youth. Before I had known anything about my family, or understood anything of the world. “He lived in a cave not far from where we did. He wasn’t able to talk at all, and as far as I’m aware had very little reasoning. He wouldn’t attack us on sight though, and sometimes even brought us stuff he caught and killed. Like deer and bears,” I said.

Reatti was silent for a long moment, and I worried that she’d stop talking again. Yet before I could say anything as to reignite the conversation she gestured at herself. “My family line was several generations too... but the oldest still looked human enough. The most non-human only had sharper teeth and nails,” she said.

“Oh...?” I wasn’t sure what to say to that. It was interesting, but also... well...

Reatti then slowed a little, noticeably enough that even the horse complained. It huffed loudly, breathing out of its nostrils heavily as if to protest. “I know full well the feeling of being born from monsters, Renn. So don’t let their banishment bother you too much. You’re not your parents, or theirs,” Reatti then said.

A little shocked at her, and her very sincere attempt at comforting me... I nodded gently. “Yet all the same it is something I must face. If my ancestors really had killed and burnt down her home... then who knows how many others they had hurt? How many in the Society have suffered because of me?” I said to her.

Reatti scoffed. “You didn’t burn the villages, or kill and eat those people. If we condemned children for the sins of their parents all of us would be dead, Renn. So there’s no need to even fret over it. In fact if you give it time I bet your banishment will be lifted. And even if it doesn’t, don’t let it bother you. Trust me, there are many who have gotten banished... some of them just as undeserving of it as you,” Reatti said.

Walking past a large grouping of berry bushes, I ignored the little squirrels cluttering around them. They were eating the small berries in a furor. It was actually interesting that none of them were hiding from us as we passed. Either they were that hungry, or were used to people walking by as they ate.

“Honestly it was more shocking than anything else... I hadn’t expected it at all,” I said.

“Oh I’m sure. But that’s how those people are. There’s a reason so many people hate going there. My brother hated going there too,” Reatti said.

I noted the way she said the last part a little softer. She spoke of her brother with a very... soft tone. As if she had gotten lost in thought upon remembering him.

Opening my mouth as to say something, about Brom, I hesitated... and looked away from her.

How could I say anything? What could I possibly say that wouldn’t just be felt like a thorn or insult?

Yet I needed to say something didn’t I? I needed to apologize at least, right? Or at least tell her of his final moments... the things he had said and done...

Would it be courageous or foolhardy to say something?

“Why’d you help those humans?” Reatti asked before I could decide to be courageous or a fool.

“Back there...?” I shifted a little, and shrugged my shoulders. “Honestly I don’t know. I saw they were stuck, and their cart didn’t look that heavy. It wasn’t even fully loaded. I figured our horse plus theirs, and a little pushing, could free it,” I explained.

“Yes, but why?” she asked further.

I blinked at her and shook my head. "I don't know Reatti. I guess because I'd hope someone would help me if I was in their position," I said.

Reatti's face scrunched up and she scoffed at me as she looked away. She pointedly shook her head, as if doing her best to not say something cruel.

"I know. It's stupid," I accepted.

"It is. But at least you know it."

I nodded.

"Yet that's who you are. At least you're willing to do what you believe in. Many preach such things, yet never step up when the time comes. Even if it did get my brother killed," Reatti said.

My stomach sunk and twisted, and I nearly choked. "Reatti... I..." I tried to speak, but wasn't able to. It was a miracle I was able to keep walking alongside her.

"Yes. I know. You didn't kill him. I know, Renn. I also know you feel horrible and all that... But right now I can only hate you for it. Maybe someday I can... forgive... but right now I can't," Reatti said.

She spoke evenly, like talking about the weather. The tone she used actually made her words cut deeper somehow.

Doing my best to not cry, I nodded. "I understand," I whispered.

"Mhm," Reatti nodded and made a noise, as if glad we had finally spoken about it.

"I'm sorry, Reatti," I said, before I let the moment pass.

"I don't doubt that. But... please. Just let it be. Let me be. Until I can sort what happened. I'll not... ignore you completely. But let's try not to get too close. I don't want to tarnish my brother's sacrifice by letting my hate grow too much for you, or something worse. For my brother's sake, please let us just endure," Reatti said.

Nodding, I gulped a dry mouth.

What a way to see it. What a conclusion to come to.

She was stronger than me. At least where it counted.

The horse huffed loudly, as if it could somehow understand our conversation. Reatti shifted as to reach over and pat the thing on the snout.

Reatti sighed after a moment, and then pointed ahead of us. "Around this clump of trees are the open fields. Lumen will come into sight soon," she said.

I nodded, and hoped she didn't get too offended over the tears leaking out of my eyes.

It wasn't good that I was crying, and so emotional, and she fine. It was likely rude.

Yet I didn't know what else to do.

Wait until she forgave me? I shall do so. I shall endure forever if I must.

Especially since I doubted she ever would.

After all... I didn't think I could forgive myself either.

Chapter 196 Lumen's Vote

Renn's scent still lingered strongly in her room.

Which really shouldn't be that surprising. After all she's only been gone a little over a dozen days, and she'd been sleeping and staying in this room for months. Add that to my ability to smell stuff so well and her natural scent being... well... a little stronger than a normal creature's, being what she was, such a thing really shouldn't surprise me.

Yet it did all the same.

It was about time for dinner. Which told me I'd hear the answer soon... or at least the general consensus. They might not come to a final vote just yet... this was important, in its own way. And they weren't just voting on Renn, either.

I had closed Renn's room's windows, and the curtains. The storm was still here and roaring strong, and it was accompanied by lightning. I wasn't in the mood for the room to be lit up again and again incessantly. The two candles I had lit illuminated the room well enough.

Honestly I wanted to just sit in the dark, in silence... but I knew better than to let myself indulge in such a thing.

Most of my day had been spent dealing with Thraxton's family. Thraxton himself I had been able to entrust Brandy and Gerald and the rest to, so they could negotiate the contract between the Animalia Company and Lumen. Yet because of the precarious nature of it, Brandy and the rest didn't want Thraxton's children or wife involved. I couldn't blame them, but it wasn't like they didn't know we were... well... special.

Luckily I had been able to let a few of the other members deal with them, but I still ended up spending several hours today with Thraxton's wife and children. They were honestly... typical noble types, those who had been sheltered and pampered most of their lives, but they weren't bad people. A little strange, but not the type of high-class nobles I usually found myself detesting.

Really they had been fine. I was just... not in the mood to deal with such people or things. Not in the mood at all.

Humans, especially human children, always treated me like some kind of special existence when they learned what I was. I've long since grown to not get annoyed over such treatment or their unrelenting questions, but right now I was far from the calm and even-natured man I usually was.

My mood was sour and I was angry... and it honestly wasn't fair to the rest of the world that I was in such a bad mood.

People usually got hurt or died when I was like this, so I needed to be careful.

Thus my hiding in Renn's room... and my attempts to not get involved with Thraxton, his family, or the cleanup of Lumen and that creature's corpse.

I sighed as I leaned forward, to rest on the top of the chair's backrest. I was sitting on it the wrong way, but it was more comfortable for me to do so. The shape of the chair was just... a little odd. The kind of odd that made one feel just uncomfortable enough to notice, yet not have an actual reason to give for it.

The door to Renn's room was open, but only so that I could hear any voices or footsteps to let me know that the rest of the Society had finished their meeting. I wasn't really... restless or too worried over their vote, but at the same time I had to admit I wanted to hear the results.

I had a feeling as to what they would vote to do with Renn, but I still wasn't sure if I should get upset over it or not.

Scratching the spot behind my ear, I studied the large armoire not too far from me. It was still full of Renn's clothes, and likely the real reason her room still smelled so much like her. Some of the stuff hanging in there and upon the large open doors of the thing was stuff she's worn nearly every day for over a year. While traveling, on top of it all.

Speaking of scents... Fly had mentioned many times that Renn had smelled like her master.

Which was very strange, since she didn't smell like those things at all.

Renn's smell was one I'd notice anywhere. For one reason or another, it was something I could notice in a very crowded and smelly room. So I knew the smell well. Or at least, thought I did.

Those flower like creatures had smelled of iron and the sea. And not just because I had crushed their hearts and gotten stained by their ink-like blood.

Renn didn't smell like those things at all.

The only thing I could think of was Fly's nose was either malfunctioning or just tuned differently... or the smell I knew and had smelled during my battles with their master, and the larger one, was not the smell it usually gave off.

Maybe the smell I knew was simply because I had attacked the thing. Maybe during moments of stress and anger, it had stunk in a different way.

Or maybe the things I smelled was completely different than everyone else, to such a degree as that. Maybe Renn really had smelled like those creatures to Fly and the others.

Not too unbelievable... but...

Then the door slammed closed behind me.

Turning slowly, I frowned as I watched Merit walk into the room... with her head hung low.

Her thick hair hid most of her face from view, but the sounds she was making made it clear well enough what had happened... and why Merit had slammed the door in anger.

Staying seated I watched Merit walk up to me... and then for a tiny moment I expected her to reach out, maybe to wrap me in a hug as to electrocute me, or hit me... but instead she plopped down onto the ground. She heaved a sob, curling up into a ball right in front of where I sat.

A little disturbed, I took a deep breath and hoped that her sobbing was indeed only because of the vote... and not because something else had happened.

“Merit...?” I asked gently, and slowly turned a little just in case I needed to actually help her in some way. She didn’t look hurt, but one never could tell sometimes.

Merit continued to sob, and shook her head slowly. Her heavy hair moved oddly thanks to the way she was curled up on the ground. She was kneeling, yet not... almost as if she was half on her belly. Surely that was uncomfortable? Renn’s room had a rug, but it was a thin one. One more for decoration than comfort.

“They voted no,” Merit finally was able to say, yet did so through her sobs.

No.

I took a deep breath, and was a little stunned. And not because I had just been told that Renn was no longer allowed to stay and live here.

I had expected such a result... so why had it nearly knocked the wind out of me?

“She’s not banished, but she can’t live here. Can’t stay here, unless she’s with you,” Merit said quickly, through clenched teeth.

I noted her anger, and focused on it. Trying to relate to her was better than the weird feeling in the pit of my stomach right now. I wanted to ignore that.

“It is likely she would not have stayed anyway, Merit,” I said gently.

“Her heart will break...!” Merit shouted, seemingly at herself as much as me.

Nodding... I sighed as I shook my head. “It will.”

“Broke mine already too...! I can’t believe this, Vim!” Merit finally looked upward, but stayed on the ground. The sight of her staring up at me with such a distraught look reminded me of the long past. Of the day I had returned to find her in that cemetery. Surrounded by the graves of her friends. “What about me then, Vim? What about me! How many died because of me! Not just because I was there, either... but by my own very hands!” Merit’s shouting grew in volume as she finally looked away from me, as to glare at the tiny fists shaking violently on the ground beneath her. They were very pale thanks to how tightly she was squeezing her fists.

Thankfully Merit’s attention remained on her tiny fists... as I smiled at her.

How sweet of you, Merit. To care for Renn so deeply in such a way. To where you’d voice your own deepest fears and concerns so easily.

“Want to know something horrible...? A part of me had wanted her to get denied... when we first got here. So far Renn’s really not been denied or hated by anyone in our Society. Other than Silkie at Tor’s village, but that hadn’t been the same. I wanted to her to realize she needed to find somewhere to stay and live, since it was so rare and hard to find such a home. I wanted her to learn the harsh reality of our Society, before it was too late,” I said softly.

“You’re a heartless bastard,” Merit’s voice was as thick of disgust as her hair.

I nodded. "I am."

"I can't believe this Vim, I don't even know what to say," Merit said as she lowered her head to the ground, placing it on her shaking fists.

Merit returned to sobbing for a moment, yet this time it was joined by tiny little sparks. They shot out from around her shaking body, most of them concentrated around her locks of hair. A few of the sparks danced out and connected with the rug and floor, but others simply sparked upward into the air and disappeared.

Keeping a close eye on the tiny woman in front of me, and her sparks, I sighed as gently and quietly as possible. I didn't want her venting her anger on me. At least not if I could help it. Her shocks could never kill me, or cause any real harm, but they were annoying. When she really went at it, with actual intent, she could do enough damage that I'd have numb limbs for weeks. Or even worse, a numb tongue. It made eating and drinking so damned difficult.

"Maybe in time they'll come around... maybe they just need time," I said gently. More so for her than my own self.

"Feh," she made a noise as she cried. At least some of her sparking had died down.

"Did... did anyone vote yes Merit?" I asked carefully.

Merit shook her head. "Just me and Tosh."

"Lawrence voted no?" I asked. That was concerning. Very concerning.

She shook her head, and more sparks danced because of it. She looked up at me as she sniffed. "He didn't vote. He chose to let the rest of us decide her fate. That's just him being an ass and not picking sides, like you," she scowled as she said to me.

Great, was her venting an inevitability? Just great. It's been years since she last shocked me, but I shouldn't be surprised it was happening again.

"Still... I'm surprised. Lawrence had only good things to say about her, and he's wiser than to judge Renn in such a way," I said. Lawrence was genuinely one of our brighter members, even if he wouldn't ever use his intelligence any more than necessary.

"Reatti didn't vote either," Merit then said.

"She's not back yet," I said. Wasn't that obvious?

Merit shook her head as she sat up a little more. She looked very childish, sitting with her legs sprawled and a snot covered face. Tiny blue sparks danced along the ends of her thick locks as they swayed thanks to her head's movement. "She gave Brandy her vote before we left. She believes she doesn't have a right to vote, because of what happened. I think she feels bad for hating Renn, and so chose not to voice her opinion out of concern over it," Merit said.

Interesting. Based off the conversations the two of us had before she left to let them know it was safe to return, I had expected her to be very vocal and adamant about her feelings and expectations.

She'd not attack Renn, but that didn't mean she had to pretend she didn't hate her.

"I'm sickened Vim. People I've known for years. People I thought were better than this. I can't believe this at all," Merit said.

I blinked at the fury in her eyes. That wasn't good... I needed Merit here. Especially now that Brom was gone. With him gone, and Reatti... well... not entirely trustworthy now, she was the main line of defense for this place.

We couldn't afford Merit to leave or hate this place. Not yet anyway.

"Most of those here are feeble beings, Merit. You know this well," I said softly.

"Still!"

I shook my head. "And most don't actually know what you did Merit. They might know the stories, or rumors, but hearing of something and seeing it are two different things. You know that well," I said.

Merit's face scrunched up, and I knew it was because she didn't like what I was saying at all. Especially more so because I was right.

She shook her head lightly as she took a deep, trembling, breath. "They're cowards. Too weak to banish her. Too weak to let her stay here," she whispered.

"That may be. Yet such is the Society. At least one of its many flaws. A flaw I must defend just as strongly as all the positives," I said.

"I hate your unwilling attitude," she scorned me.

"I know. Many do," I accepted it.

She sniffed and finally went to wiping her face clean. She wore a long sleeve shirt... which very quickly the sleeves were becoming a mess as she used them to wipe her face.

It was a little surprising she was calming down already. Usually by now she'd get angry and attack me. Either Merit was maturing, or what just happened... hurt her heart and soul far deeper than the other events.

Which shouldn't be possible. Yet all the same, maybe it was.

Maybe in her older age such events were more impactful to her. Maybe it was something deeper.

“Renn will cry. Yet she will survive. She’ll... stumble, that’s all,” I said as I glanced at the painting of my friends.

Merit also glanced at it, and she actually smiled. Seemed her old friend’s face, and his daughter, was able to push aside the sorrow if even for just a moment.

“Right... I hope you’re right Vim. I really do. I don’t care what they all say or think, Renn is... important. Valuable. And not just to our Society either,” Merit said.

I frowned at the way she had said that. Did she mean in the sense of the grand-scale of the world... or...?

She nodded. “I mean it. We need those like her, to protect and watch over those no one else would,” she said.

Ah. She meant Renn’s personality. Her gentle side, combined with her predator willingness to do what most wouldn’t dream of.

“To a point, I agree,” I nodded.

“You better. Surely you realize it too? Isn’t that why you like her so much?” Merit asked.

Was it? Honestly I couldn't really pinpoint a singular main reason why I found Renn to be so favorable... but...

After a few moments of thought I nodded. "Yes. I guess I do like that about her, yes," I admitted.

"Good. If you had tried to avoid that topic or make a joke I was going to shock you," Merit said.

Wonderful.

"Don't let your disgust form into hate, Merit. Look at all of those we've lost in such a way," I said to her carefully.

Merit's face scrunched up as she likely remembered each and every one I was speaking of. "I know, Vim. I know. But right now I just... need to cry. And hide. I think I'm going to hide in my room for the next few days," she said.

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Yes there is. But shut up," Merit said.

Smiling at her, I wondered if she even realized how... different she was.

“You used to be far more vocal. You’ve become very meek,” I said.

“I know. What’s wrong with me? Am I getting old?” Merit actually chuckled as she nodded, agreeing with me.

“Or your rebellious years are just finally behind you. I’m proud of you, Merit,” I said.

She shifted on a heel and glared at me from the corner of her eyes. “Sounds cheesy coming from you, but I guess I’ll just accept it.”

Shrugging at her, I wondered what her old friends would have said of her. The ones I hadn’t been able to save in time. Those who had been with her in the south, trying to form that kingdom.

It was sad that I really didn’t remember most of them. I could recall some faces, some memories... a few smells and smiles. Yet...

Only a few names came to mind. And I wasn’t really sure on how accurate some of my memories were about them.

I should have spent more time with them, in that kingdom. Maybe if I had...

“Tosh is upset too, but he still thinks she’s your wife. He spent half the debate trying to understand why we were even voting on such a thing,” Merit brought up Tosh.

“Oh? Oh... right... He might realize he made a mistake soon because of this. Though by now he should be fine. I don’t see how him realizing she’s not actually my wife could make him break again, so there’s no need for it. The danger of such a thing should be mostly gone by now,” I said.

“Poor Renn. Not only banished, now she won’t even be able to pretend,” Merit said softly.

“A poor joke. She didn’t really play along anyway, it made her embarrassed,” I said. The few times I had seen Tosh and Renn spend time together... she had acted a little shy, as if unsure of what to say or do. She was too worried about saying the wrong thing, in the wrong way, to make him misunderstand and hurt his head again. Too gentle to correct him, yet at the same time too gentle to let his little misunderstanding be used to further her own desires.

I could think of quite a few people who would have overplayed it, on purpose. Renn had done the opposite.

“Herra said you’re taking her home,” Merit then said.

I nodded. “Yes. Hopefully soon... I need to get out of here before Brandy or Gerald make me get too involved in all this stupid political bullshit,” I said.

Merit smirked at me. "Funny. They had mentioned they were going to have you do a few things during the meeting."

Shaking my head I waved Merit and the knowledge away. "Please," I begged her not to continue. Right now thinking about all that was the last thing I wanted to do.

Merit chuckled and sniffed as she returned her attention to the painting. She stepped over to it, and reached up as to grab it. She had to stand on the tips of her toes and she still barely reached it.

"Renn said I could have these. I don't really want the one with the Epoch cross, but I'll take it all the same," Merit said as she lifted the painting off the easel.

"Did she?" I asked. That was very interesting.

Merit nodded as she stared as if entranced at the painting of Rungle and Stumble. "She knows she can't travel with them. If she ever paints more, or ones you don't want others to know of, send them to me. I'll take care of them for her," Merit said.

"That's kind of you," I said.

She nodded as she smiled at the painting.

Hm...

“Where will you hang it?” I asked.

“For now my room. If I start getting a bunch... well... I’ll figure it out then. For now though just in my room,” she said with a nod.

I frowned. “Not going to share?” I asked.

Merit finally looked away from the painting, and only to glare at me. “Why would I? Few here knew them, and the other few who did... well... No. They were my friends, not theirs,” Merit said coldly.

Something told me the recent events, namely the vote concerning Renn, was the main reason she said such a thing.

“Well... may as well take them now then,” I said as I stood from my chair. I stepped past Merit as to grab the painting of the Epoch village.

“I should wait until she’s back,” Merit complained a little, but not too fiercely. She didn’t have the sharp bite in her tone she normally did. She actually sounded... kind of nice the way she was now. It was too bad she had to endure sorrow to such a deep degree to become so gentle and soft spoken.

“Nonsense. Plus... what if someone comes in here before she gets back?” I said.

Merit frowned, and I knew it was because she was about to argue with me. Someone coming into another's room? Without permission? It was unheard of in the Society.

Yet... right now...

She finally nodded, as she too must have come to the same conclusion as me.

Yes. Right now someone would.

Because even though they hadn't banished Renn... she was now in their minds, not a member.

Not a real one. Not a trusted one.

Merit sniffed again, and I groaned a little. A little too loudly, because she noticed and immediately glared at me... and sparked.

Whoops.

"Come on. Let's take them to your room... before I burn them again," I said, as I kept a close eye on her hands. They were on the side of the cloth painting, holding it, and so far no sparks had jumped out from them... but...

“Hmph,” Merit huffed at me as she nodded... but paused before stepping towards the door.

“Love her, Vim. Be gentle with her. More gentle than you’ve ever been with anyone,” Merit said.

“That’s how this all came to be in the first place, Merit,” I whispered to her.

Her tiny shoulders hunched upward, and she looked about to protest... but she instead slouched her shoulders and looked down... away from me.

Following her out of Renn’s room, I sighed as we headed for hers.

Gentle...

Merit sniffed and made noises all the way to her room, and thankfully we weren’t noticed or bothered. I could hear voices far beneath us, likely near the kitchens. Their voting was done, now they’d all eat and be festive. To pretend they hadn’t just done something horrible, they’d act as if they accomplished something astounding.

Reaching Merit’s room, I patiently waited as she opened the door and stepped into her room.

I stayed outside; even though I knew she'd not yell or attack me for entering. Merit didn't like entering other people's rooms, but didn't really mind anyone entering hers. Yet right now... right now...

Merit took more than a few moments before returning and taking the painting from me. Before I let go of it though, I nodded down to the red-eyed Merit.

"I'll try, Merit. I'll try," I promised her.

The way her eyes glared at me as she nodded... told me she'd hold me to that promise.

Chapter 197 Charity For The Weary

"Thank you, oh so much!"

The younger woman took the small basket as if it was her newborn child. She held it closely, and her face was scrunched up as if she was about to break down and sob. My eyes watered as I picked up another basket, as to hand to the next person in line.

This time it was an older couple. They had a single voucher, which Henry took and tore in two. Handing the man the basket, I smiled and nodded as the two gently nodded and continued walking as to let the next person in line get their basket.

Henry asked the next person for their voucher, and I waited until he verified it and tore it before handing out the next basket.

“Thanks!” the young man was missing most of his front teeth, yet he didn’t let it stop his huge smile as he accepted the basket.

I nodded as I glanced at Henry who stood next to me. The human worker was usually found in the depot, even though he looked far too old to be doing such hard labor. He, like me, was just one of many in the line. The entire main lobby of the Animalia Guild had been retrofitted and converted into something of a massive vendor stall. We had large booths and tables set up in a way to allow hundreds of people to flow into the building from one end of the room, to out of the building at the other end. Along the way through, those who came here with the little vouchers were given what we were handing out as charitable aid. Baskets of food. Clothes. Receipts and vouchers for inns and other safe houses throughout the city, so people who were now homeless or displaced thanks to the creature’s attack had somewhere to sleep out of the rain and cold.

“Voucher please,” Henry had to once again ask for the next person’s voucher. They produced it after a moment of fishing in what looked to be a tiny pocket in their jacket, but they had acted as if it was deep and endless.

“Thank you, bless you,” they said as I handed them their basket.

I nodded, and wondered how so many people could be... so thankful for so little.

The little baskets I was helping hand out were honestly, not much. A few loaves of bread, some dried meat, tea leaves and a small metal cup one could use to warm and boil water. A small box of spices, and an assortment of fruits and vegetables. Honestly to me it seemed like only a few meals worth of food... but everyone who, at least so far, I had given one of the boxes to has been nothing but thankful. Some, like the next person in line, were even teary eyed as they took it.

And all of them took it.

It felt as if the entirety of Lumen had shown up to receive aid... It was hard to comprehend just how many people were coming and going, even with me being front and center. Most of the Society members weren't helping on this end, but rather the back. They were managing the people, and supplies. They were overlooking things and giving people orders, rather than doing something so hands on.

Honestly I could be too... but right now...

Well...

"Renn."

Turning a little, I smiled at Lamp who gave me a huge smile back. She wasn't alone, she had a few of the other eastern girls with her and they all waved upon noticing me. They were carrying small boxes, and were heading past me and the long line of tables I stood near. It looked like they were heading towards the bank, based off the hallway they were heading towards.

Neither Lamp nor those she was with stuck around too long. I had to return my attention back to the line in front of me. I wasn't the only one handing out the baskets, of course, but there were so many people that even a single person slowing or stopping in their work caused a backup in the line.

Handing off some more baskets, I tried to focus on the task before me. It was easy to do, even if monotonous and simple... thanks to all the people. The ones coming into the building for aid seemed to be from all walks of life. Old, young, those clean dressed and those in tattered rags. A few children came through alone, with vouchers themselves, while sometimes entire families walked through all together.

Another line on the other side of the room gave out bags. Bags of clothes, blankets, and other necessities. It was a little odd that the clothes we handed out had our emblem sewn upon them. But I wasn't going to complain, and neither were those who needed the help.

Maybe we were just handing out what we had available, already made. Hopefully we had enough...

"Thanks!" a young girl happily accepted the basket I gave to her, and I didn't like how she struggled with it. She stayed in line, and didn't drop the basket or its contents but she did become transfixed by the contents within it.

She looked far too young to be standing in line alone. She looked younger than Fly, and not just because she was skin and bones.

"Have your vouchers please," Henry once again had to remind those in line nearby to prepare their vouchers. I noted several down the line begin to dig into their pockets.

"Are you Renn?"

I blinked and turned again, and found a woman I didn't recognize. She smiled at me. And pointed behind her. "I'm here to swap with ya! Go get some rest!"

Ah. Right. Breaks. Humans sure did like them...

I nodded as I smiled next to me at Henry. "See you later Henry," I said.

He nodded as he took a voucher from a pregnant woman who had a bandage wrapped around half her face. It looked like her left eye had gotten hurt.

Stepping away from the table of baskets, I let the woman take my place. I hesitated a moment as I stepped back and away... to take in the sight of the line of tables and people.

There were seven stations on this side of the room. All were handing out those baskets, and there were large carts being brought in from the main hallway, from the depot, which replenished the stock of baskets. People worked quickly, nearly with as much gusto as those who were receiving the aid had.

The sight of people being so... good to one another, even if they were just doing their job, made me feel relieved.

It was moments like this that made it hard to hate humans.

Everyone was being orderly. Everyone was thankful. The worst that was happening so far was the simple annoyance of waiting for someone to find the voucher they lost in their pockets. So far as I could tell no one had tried to disrupt the process, or lie and steal either. Though the many guards stationed at the doors and walking around might have something to do with that.

I stepped out of the way of one of the large carts full of baskets, and noted that these baskets had different contents. The fruit was different, and they had circular bread stuff instead of long ones.

Interesting...

Gulping as I stepped away, I decided to just... walk around a bit and see how the rest of the room was doing. The side handing out clothes and blankets was just as busy as the one handing out food. Most of the people in that line were carrying the very baskets I had been helping hand out.

A pair of women were shaking the hands of one of the helpers, thanking her profusely. The worker, like all here, were employees of the Animalia Guild... and she looked bothered. As if she was embarrassed, and upset that they were making such a big deal out of it.

Most of everyone seemed to be thankful to such a degree, but it slowed the line. Every time someone tried to pause as to thank the workers, it made the whole process longer. No one in line seemed to really care, but...

"Oh? Renn, how's it going?" Clair greeted me as she stepped out from the line, being replaced by a man. She too must be being forced to take a break.

"Well. How're your children?" I asked the human woman. She was like Lamp, a member of the Society even though a human.

Clair smiled at me in a way that told me my question had touched her in the soul. Her eyes even began to water... which bothered me. Had they gotten hurt?

"They're fine. They're here. At the apartments. Our house got damaged, but luckily none of us were home at the time," she said.

Ah. I see. "I'm so sorry." I said as I stepped aside with her, as to get away from the line and the business of the people all over.

She nodded as we headed for the hallway. The one that led deeper into the building, towards the employee lunch rooms and kitchens. Maybe she was hungry.

"Quite an event. I'm so glad it happened while Vim was here, though," Clair said with a quiet voice.

Side-glancing the woman I was walking next to, I tried to ignore the many people in the hallway with us. Most were humans, and although employees I knew it was likely not a one was a member of the Society like us.

"I suppose it was a good thing, yes," I agreed.

I hadn't thought of that. What would have happened if... that creature had emerged, and Vim hadn't been here? Would the humans have been able to face it down? From what I heard they had tried. They had not only attacked it with their knights and machines of war, but from the sea too.

"Such is fate, however. I heard of Brom, a terrible price to pay... but compared to the losses of the general populace, all things considered, it went better than it could have," Clair said with a sigh.

“How bad was it? For the city?” I asked. I didn’t like how she seemed to gloss over Brom’s death in such a way, but I was interested in hearing about the city.

Reatti and I had arrived last night... and although I had heard some of the news from others, and the humans I had been working with like Henry, I still wasn’t too sure exactly how bad it had been for Lumen.

“Thousands are dead or displaced. Nearly three whole city blocks were destroyed by the creature emerging from the ground alone. It’s how our house got destroyed. And we lived nearly two blocks away from where it had been. If you go outside before it gets dark, you’ll see some smoke from fires throughout the city. Those are bodies being burned,” Clair explained as we rounded a corner.

I shivered at the knowledge, and hated to learn it.

Thousands dead.

That explained all the injuries from all those people in that line. That explained why so many were so thankful.

The lives of everyone in this city had been affected, and uprooted. Even those who hadn’t been near the event had gotten involved in one way or another.

Coming up to a cross section, Clair paused and pointed down a smaller hallway. One that had lots of people coming and going from it.

“My daughters should be helping in the kitchens. I’m going to go check on them,” she said with a smile.

“Ah...” I debated going with her. I wanted to meet the children named Sing and Song, to see if their names had somehow granted them unique voices... but...

Nodding gently at Clair I waved at her as she stepped away. “See you later Clair, tell your children hi for me,” I said.

She nodded back as she turned and left.

Judging by how Clair had to slow her pace and get in what looked almost like a line itself as she headed down the hallway, I sighed and decided it was better to avoid that section of the building.

It was likely so busy that I’d not be able to have any kind of conversation with anyone. Those kitchens could be busy even during a normal day, let alone one like this.

Heading down another hallway, one that wasn’t as busy but still busier than I had ever seen it before... I headed for the section behind the bank that they had made into something of a command center. I knew I’d find members of the Society there, likely most of them... but there was a single individual I really wanted to find.

Since arriving last night, I'd only seen a few members. Merit and Sofia last night. Brandy this morning. Tosh had been the one to tell me I could help anywhere I felt comfortable doing so, and I had eventually ended up handing out baskets after wandering around a bit.

The Society was busy. So busy that no one had the time to spend on me.

I wasn't upset over such a thing... but I did feel like there was something else going on. Even Merit had been a little... quiet with me. And not just because she and Sofia had been in a hurry to go off and do whatever they had been tasked with this morning.

But most importantly...

Entering one of the large rooms being used to coordinate everything going on, I paused a moment to scan the room for any familiar face.

I found Lawrence quickly enough, and was a little surprised he was the only one here. I recognized several other people, but none of them were members of the Society. They'd not be able to answer my question.

Or well, maybe they could... but first I'd check with Lawrence.

Walking over to his desk, I ignored the way he ignored me as he signed some kind of yellow paper. It looked odd amongst the more bland colored papers on his desk... why was it such a bright yellow?

“Deliver this to Brandy,” he lifted the paper and held it out to me, which I took and nodded.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Where...?” Lawrence’s voice sounded annoyed, the kind of annoyed that usually was followed by a chide comment... but his anger dissipated immediately upon noticing me.

He sighed and smiled at me. “She’s up in her office. Do you know where it is Renn?” he asked.

I shook my head. “She has an office?” I asked.

Lawrence sighed and one of his attendants stood from her chair nearby. “I’ll take her sir,” she said gently.

He nodded, and then went straight to another document... as if that was all that needed to be said or done about it.

“Lawrence, do you know where Vim is?” I asked him as the woman readied her desk to leave.

“No. Last I saw him was this morning, during the meeting,” he said.

Meeting... we had a meeting? No one had told me.

No. Wait. It might have been something more business-like. Maybe with just them and Gerald and Brandy... not something the whole of the Society had done.

"Any idea where he could be?" I asked as the woman shifted on her heels. She was kind enough to wait for me, but I could sense her urgency. She wanted to be off.

Lawrence stopped before writing something on the next document, and then glanced up at me. "Ask Brandy, Renn. Vim could be anywhere during moments like these," he said calmly.

I nodded. That was true enough.

"I'll get this to her," I said as I wiggled the odd paper in my hand. Why did it feel heavy? It was just a single sheet of paper...

"Please do," Lawrence said as I stepped away, and followed the woman who gestured to a nearby door. It was closed, which was odd... so many doors were open right now, thanks to so many people being so active.

She opened the door to let me pass through, and I waited until she shut it behind her. The door led to a smaller hallway... One that was empty.

Which was very interesting.

I recognized the hallway, but wasn't sure why. Had I been in this hallway before? I couldn't remember it, but I had to have been... since I remembered it. I remembered the way the rug curled a little at the edges near the wall, as if it had gotten severely damp at one time and hadn't been properly dried.

"This way," the woman said as we headed down the hallway... the only way the hallway could go.

Looking down at the paper I was delivering, I frowned as I realized it might not be paper at all. It felt... oddly smooth, and the letters looked sewn into the paper, not inked on.

I read the document, and wished I hadn't.

This was a letter of dismissal. For an employee named Skark.

Lawrence had been but one of several signatures. I had recognized a few of the names upon it. Most were human members, those who were older and managed groups and teams of people.

I really hated being the bearer of bad news... hopefully Brandy didn't ask me to deliver it to the person in question.

"I saw Vim a few hours ago. He was with those eastern girls," the woman then spoke up as we rounded a corner.

“Oh?” I perked up at that. Interesting... Actually it was interesting that I had seen Lamp with the other eastern girls too... “Why did the others return? The other eastern girls?” I asked the woman.

“Not sure? Maybe they’re just here to help. We need all the help we can get right now,” she said lightly. Seemed she didn’t really care.

Hopefully that was all it was. Lamp hadn’t looked upset or hurt... but...

We rounded another corner, and some large windows came into view. Not far down the hallway, was a big door. One open. The only door open.

“Right there. I’ll wait outside in case I need to take something back with me,” the woman pointed at the open door.

I nodded as I entered Brandy’s office... and was surprised to find not just Brandy, but Herra... and a rather plain office.

“Hey Renn,” Herra greeted me, which made Brandy look up from her desk.

Brandy smiled at me. “Tired of handing out baskets are ya?” she asked.

“More like breaks are... too enforced, here,” I said as I stepped past Herra, who was sitting on a strangely thin looking chair. Stepping up to Brandy’s desk, I held out the yellow letter to her.

“Ah. Which ones this?” she asked as she took it.

“There’s more than one?” I asked worriedly.

She nodded as she scratched her neck. “One of many. Thanks. Did I hear one of Lawrence’s people out there?” Brandy asked carefully.

I nodded. Was she asking because she had something for him, or to find out if we were alone?

“Mind giving these to her?” Brandy asked as she lifted two books. The books were more folders than books, but they were heavy all the same.

Taking them from Brandy, I stepped out of the office to hand them off. She nodded and thanked me, seemingly glad to have been given them quickly. She hurried off back down the hallway, heading back where we came from.

Watching her go, I glanced around to make sure we were now alone. Oddly we were.

Why was this place so quiet and empty compared to the rest of the building?

Stepping back into Brandy's office, I noted the... lack of anything decorative. It was honestly not suited for her... she was such a vibrant person, with a boisterous personality. One would expect her office to have more character.

I wonder if the blandness of the office was a reflection of her true personality, or instead her religious side peaking through. Or maybe she simply didn't decorate it because she wasn't here often. She traveled around like Vim did, to a point.

"Do you know where Vim is, Brandy?" I asked.

"There was some trouble on the boat earlier. He should be there still, I bet," Herra said.

Brandy nodded. "The third port to the south. The one near the lighthouse," she verified it.

Something had happened? That required Vim?

If it was something dangerous he likely wouldn't like me going there... especially with the city in such disarray.

"You can go if you want. It wasn't that big of a deal I don't think," Brandy said, likely reading my thoughts on my face.

"Hm..." I nodded, and wondered if I should. Or maybe I should just... stay here. And keep working. To occupy my mind.

"How's the arm, Renn?" Herra asked.

I wiggled it in the small sling and nodded. "Feeling better. I think it won't be long before it's out of this silly thing," I said.

"And the tail?" Brandy asked.

"Still hurts... but not as bad. I can sit down without wanting to cry at least," I said.

That wasn't entirely honest. It was one of the reasons I had chosen to help out at the donation lines. They were all standing... everywhere else was either sitting, or hard labor.

"That's good. You heal quickly... but Merit does too. She cracked her skull, and I think it healed before we even left the Sanctuary," Herra grumbled, as if to complain.

Brandy chuckled as she went to reading another report. It was a long paper, with lots of wrinkles... as if it had been folded dozens of times.

"I saw Lamp with some of the other girls... is it okay for them all to be back here?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh yes. The Eastern Embassy was fine, but some of their support buildings got destroyed and damaged. Lamp came a few days ago and asked if we'd let her and some of her people live here. She plans to bring them into the Society, and feels that if she leaves them at the Eastern Embassy they won't be kept safe. I guess she didn't like how they handled themselves during the chaos," Brandy explained as she wrote on the report.

"Handle themselves..." I whispered, and wondered what that meant. I'd need to find Vim to get him to translate for me, once things settled down a little.

"They panicked. Got some people hurt because of it. Typical human stuff, Renn. Nothing malicious... just incompetence," Herra said.

"Ah..." I nodded, although I still didn't like the sound of that. So some did get hurt. I hope they were all fine.

Lamp had looked okay at least. I had seen her this morning too, but she had only hugged me and then ran off. Not much I could do about that, what with everyone being busy... and the language barrier, but...

"It was nice of you to go with Fly, Renn. I'm sure it made the trip easier for her," Herra then said.

“Hm. She seemed fine when I left. Very excited and happy to be there,” I said. I tried not to think of much more than Fly’s smile from those memories.

Herra nodded, and then sighed. “I also heard what happened. I’m sorry Renn. If it makes you feel any better my family is banished from there, and a few other places as well. For things our ancestors did, too,” Herra said.

“Wait really?” I perked up at that, especially since... I mean...

Studying Herra, I wondered how she and her family had gotten the same treatment. I had no idea what an armadillo was, but surely it wasn’t something too ferocious? Herra was sharp tongued, sometimes, but far from strong or violent. Before I had gotten hurt I had helped her open the heavy metal doors to the Society houses on many occasions. She struggled terribly with them.

She nodded as she shrugged. “Something my great grandfather did. I’ll be honest I never cared much to find out what it was. Let the past be the past,” she said.

I nodded, though I didn’t agree.

I wanted to know what had happened...

Glancing to Brandy, I hesitated. She might know... but she was engrossed in what she was reading. She had a frown, and looked worried a little.

“Anything I could help out with, Herra?” I asked her since Brandy seemed focused.

“Everything and everywhere? I’ll be honest I’m glad I’m leaving, it’s going to be busy like this for months maybe even years. Maybe by the time I get back it’ll settle down a bit,” Herra said with a huff.

Oh. Right. She was going to leave with Vim, to go home.

“So you plan on leaving soon?” I asked.

She nodded. “As soon as Vim thinks we can go. You know how he gets during moments like this,” she said with a wave.

Did I?

Compared to what had happened in Ruvindale... this was far bigger in terms of importance and severity, at least in my opinion. And the only reason we had left Ruvindale so quickly, was simply because all of the members there had disappeared. Either gone into hiding or... well...

Here was a different story. Plus it concerned so much more than just those here. The Society relied on this guild for funds.

“There is something you can do for me. There’s a few people here that Vim invited. He’s not here so we can’t confirm it, but he did mention a few people might show up. Would you go check them for me?” Brandy finally looked away from her desk, and up at me.

“New members? Like Wool?” I asked, interested.

She shook her head and breathed a sigh of relief. “Thankfully, no. They’re humans. He just offered them help... likely because they had helped him or something. He said if any showed up to offer them jobs, basically. They’re at the mail-room, near the makeshift hospitals,” Brandy said as she held out a sheet of paper to me.

I took the paper and glanced down at it. It had her signature, giving permission for rooms at the apartments in the building, and potential jobs if deemed acceptable by those named upon the paper.

Basically a writ of permission. Likely very similar to what had been given to Lamp’s people.

“Near the hospitals,” I nodded. I knew where that was. I not only knew where the mail room was, I knew especially about the makeshift help centers they had set up near the depot. Turns out there were a lot of people injured... and we were helping them too. Surprisingly Tosh was there, running it.

Turned out Tosh was very adept at surgery and such things. I hadn’t known this, but he had been the one to address Merit and my injuries, when we first arrived that day.

“Two families. Just... verify their stories, for me, if you can. I’ll check on them, as will Vim when he gets back. You okay with this?” Brandy asked.

I nodded. "Sure." Seemed interesting, and I liked the idea of... helping those that Vim promised we'd help.

"Thanks. And here Herra, I finished," Brandy said as she went to handing Herra the group of large reports I had noticed earlier. The ones folded oddly.

Herra stood from her seat and took them in her arms, and I noted the way they dangled in them. Neither she nor Brandy seemed to care about folding them up as to easily carry them... even though they already had the necessary wrinkles for such a thing.

"See ya later Renn," Herra said as she stepped past me, and headed out.

Ah. So she had been waiting for that.

"Bye," I said to her and Brandy. Brandy only nodded as I left the office.

I turned left while Herra went right, and as we left I heard voices down the hallway. People were heading for Brandy's office.

Busy, busy.

Glancing down at the note Brandy had gave me, I wondered how often Vim did such a thing. Brandy hadn't sounded too happy over this, yet she had signed off on it...

Offering help was what we were doing for the whole city, it seemed... but these people were those that Vim specifically offered it to.

Interesting. I wonder if it had happened during the event with the Master, or after while we were all gone.

I looked forward to meeting them. And hearing their stories.

Finding a large door, I opened it and was glad to find myself in one of the main hallways. So I had been here before... I had just never realized it led to Brandy's office. It was on the main floor, between the bank and main lobby. An odd place for it, since it was kind of out of the way... and not really near anyone else's offices.

Passing people and carts, I did my best to stay out of everyone's way as I headed towards the mail room. To complete my task... and hopefully distract myself a little longer.

Brandy and Herra had been odd. Even though it was busy, and even though they had spoken openly to me...

I had noticed the odd and tensely feeling in the air in that room.

My hope was that I had simply walked in while they were talking about something serious, but I knew the truth.

Something had happened. Maybe their learning of my banishment from the Bell Church was more serious than I was being led to believe.

“Hey Renn!” A bank worker greeted me as we passed one another. She smiled at me in a way that told me she too knew the feeling of being given a lot to do. She was pushing one of the carts, although it was empty.

Leaving the hallway, I entered the large waiting room for the mail room, and was glad to find that although packed of people... it wasn't too noisy. Most were sitting in chairs, waiting patiently. There was a huge line near the entrance doors, but there were a few tables and desks that had no people in front of them at all. They were being given vouchers here too... they had little blue strips on them. I noticed the many vouchers in everyone's hands, and on their laps as they sat and waited for their names to be called.

What were we handing out here? I didn't see any baskets or goods being distributed, nor were they waiting to get into the nearby hospitals. Even though a few people here had bandages and injuries, and I smelled fresh blood and wounds, this wasn't where people who needed medical help came.

So...

Walking over to one of the main desks, where three women wearing our emblem sat and worked, I noticed the large basket full of torn vouchers.

“Hey there, I’ve been asked to find...” I looked down at the little note. “A Mark family and...” I stumbled on the name of the other family. It wasn’t written in the language I was used to seeing here. Were those letters even real?

“Mark and the old couple? Yes, back there in that room,” the woman farthest from me pointed behind them, to one of the smaller rooms near the main mail room. It like many other rooms had an open door, and I could see people within it.

“Thanks,” I nodded as I walked away, and went to the room.

Inside I found a larger room that it had appeared to be. Inside were only a few people, but they were also... well...

I hesitated a moment, since it stunk. I recognized the smell immediately, even through the smell of blood and old wounds.

The sewers.

Several of the people in the room looked up at me, since they were all sitting in chairs patiently. There were a few older people, some younger ones, and some children. The children were in the corner playing with some kind of toy.

“Honey,” an older woman woke up the older man she sat next to... and I noticed that most of the people here were wearing the clothes we had been handing out all day. And the few wrapped in blankets were the same.

A few were injured. But most looked just like what I assumed them to be.

Impoverished.

These people were from the sewers.

And Vim had offered them sanctuary...

Smiling as I entered the room, I steadied myself as I decided to devote my all to these people. I'd find out what had happened. Their whole stories... and I'd deal with them appropriately. Brandy had only asked me to assess them... but I'd do far more than that, if this was what I thought it was.

I knew that there were seemingly thousands of people who were coming here for help. For aid. For food. For shelter... but right now...

Just as Lamp and her people had been for me before, or Fly...

These were now those I'd focus on and dedicate myself to.

And not just because Vim had been the one to say they needed to be saved.

And not just because I needed to distract myself from the growing suspicion something was horribly wrong.

But because if I didn't help them... I'd likely need help myself.

Such charity would save me from needing it myself.

It made no sense, but it was how I felt right now.

Hopefully I wasn't making another mistake.

Chapter 198 Thieves in the Night and Words Not Spoken

It's never ending.

When the world got active, it never let up. There was always something else. Always another event around the bend.

I took a small breath as one of the men let out a tiny whine. He, like the other three, wore a sack over his head. It was tied lightly with a fisherman's rope, but it honestly didn't need to be. All of them had their hands bound firmly, and were kneeling on the ground.

This was why I needed to leave soon. Even if it wasn't the most correct thing to do.

If I stayed in Lumen I'd never be able to leave. I'd get entwined in all the politics and schemes and...

"This one's a knight, Vim. Had ma' men check. Deserter during the monster attack," Ronaldo pointed at the man in question, it was the man in the middle. His back went straight and his shoulders rose upon being the focus of the conversation.

He didn't say anything though, even as Ronaldo spat near him. I knew none of their mouths were bound, so I knew the only reason none were talking was out of pure fear. They had been muttering and begging when I had entered the room... but had gone silent once I sat in front of them.

Which was interesting... since I hadn't said a word yet, and there really shouldn't be any way these men knew who or what I was.

Maybe Ronaldo and the other sailors had said something.

Ronaldo had sent the other sailors out of the room, and it was now only the two of us with these would-be-thieves. Several of them were hurt, but strangely Ronaldo looked the worse out of all of them.

His face was covered in dried blood, but I didn't say anything. Either he was too angry to clean himself up, or wanted everyone to see his injury. To let them know he was man enough to endure it.

"The others are likely just pirates or opportunists. None of them are too important in the underworld here either," Ronalldo said as he stepped over to the larger man on the right. He sent a harsh foot out and into the man's stomach, kicking the wind out of the man. He buckled, and the other bound men shuffled worriedly as they listened to their friend's groans of pain.

I understood Ronalldo's temper. Even if he hadn't gotten bashed over the head as they had done to him, he would have still been furious. Just like the other sailors here.

These men had tried to steal the ship, during the night. They likely thought with Lumen still in something of disarray they'd easily be able to pirate it and sail away before anyone noticed.

To Ronalldo, and most sailors, their ship was more than just a boat. It was a home. Their country. They took more pride in their ship than they did their own appearance and names, half the time.

They'd sooner forgive these men for murder than what they had done.

"If they were working for someone, they aint' saying it," Ronalldo said as he smirked down at the man still hunched over. His kick had been fierce; maybe Ronalldo's boot had hit ribs.

"Is that true?" I asked the men.

They all shifted, even the one bent over.

My words lingered in the air for a moment, and then Ronalld stepped forward. To kick again. But the men startled at the sound of his footstep, and began to speak.

“No! No one!” the one on the left shouted.

“We aint work for no one!” another said.

Ronalldo didn't let their hurried attempts at staving off his interrogation stop him. He kicked another man, this time in the shoulder. He fell backward, yelling out in pain. He fell harshly, thanks to the way his hands and arms were bound. He struggled to roll over, bumping into the other men in the process.

“Please! We didn't get hired, honest!” the one Ronalldo had said was a knight shouted.

Ronalldo kicked the man he had just sent onto his side. I watched the way Ronalldo broke the man's leg, and tried to ignore the shout of pain that followed.

This room was much too small for such loud screams.

I sighed as Ronaldo huffed and stepped away. He was still fuming, but at least he wasn't smiling. His blood was boiling... but the young man didn't seem to take pleasure in what he was doing, at least.

A good sailor. Willing to do what it took, yet wasn't cruel just for the pleasure of it. Though that might come in time.

"Four men. Sailing a man-of-war. A hard task," I said lightly.

Ronaldo nodded as the man with the broken leg groaned and curled up, as if to try and hide behind the other men next to him. "A hard task indeed," Ronaldo agreed with me.

"We were goin' to sail to Whickler!" the man on the right shouted. His voice was raspy, Ronaldo had definitely broken some of his ribs from his earlier kick.

"Aye!" another shouted.

"My brother's a shipwright in Whickler. We planned to get him and a crew there," the knight revealed their grand master plan, and sounded defeated as he did so. He actually lowered his head, exasperated.

I sighed as Ronaldo scoffed. Whether he believed them or not didn't matter to me.

After all, I did.

These men were simple opportunist. The knight likely had gotten into trouble during the event with the creature. Maybe he had gotten scared and disobeyed orders, and thanks to the cities problems he's not yet been punished for it. He then got his buddies involved, and planned to nab a ship and sail off before he could get fired or hanged for his insubordination.

Such a thing might not be the exact story, but it was what made the most sense to me.

"What ya want to do Vim?" Ronalldo asked me.

I noted his speech. Was it rougher because of his anger, and pain, or was the pirate blood that was drying on his face making him go back to his roots?

"What did your mother teach you to do with those who tried to steal your ship?" I asked him.

"Bleed em' and feed them to the sharks," he said with a nod.

I nodded back as I stood from the small chair. "Keep their bodies in the hold until you set sail. Tossing them into the bay will only cause more problems than not," I said.

"Right sir," Ronalldo nodded as I turned away and to the door.

The four men started to shout, begging for mercy. The knight even offered all his wealth to stave off his punishment, but I ignored them all as I opened the door. Two large sailors were outside, and I nodded to them as I stepped out the door and past them.

Ignoring the sounds as the sailors went into the room, and I heard Ronaldo give the orders, I headed down the dark hallway to the main deck.

The ship was rather quiet, other than the screams behind me down the hall.

Reaching the main door, I opened it and shut it quickly. To make sure the last shouts of those men didn't get heard any more than they could be.

Only a few other sailors were on the deck of the ship, and most were keeping themselves busy. One was on his hands and knees, cleaning the deck. Two others were folding up a massive rope near the port side.

Sailors working hard... in the middle of the night.

Looking up at the dark sky, blocked by dark clouds, I wondered what else could possibly happen before I was able to escape Lumen?

"Always something," I whispered as I stepped away from the doors that led into the ship. I could hear a man shouting. One last man. But I knew that most others out here on the deck likely couldn't. Although

it was the dead of night, the wind was harsh enough and the sea loud enough that I knew most couldn't hear the screams of death.

Yet even if they had... none would say or do anything about it.

The sailors here were all Ronaldo's men. Men of his family. They now wore the Animalia Guild crest on their sleeves and boots, but they were still more pirate than company men.

A good thing too. Had this ship been manned by the common workers of the Animalia Guild... well...

"Might have lost the ship," I said softly as I stepped towards the starboard beam. There were two ramps on the ship, both leading to piers, but the starboard one was the only ramp that led to the city. The port side ramp led to a smaller boat instead, one of the other Animalia ships.

Walking slowly down the ramp to the pier, I noted the crates all along the pier. It looked like they planned on loading the ship tomorrow.

Which is likely why those men had attempted to steal this one tonight. They saw that it wasn't busy, it was near the end of the pier and alone, and all the crates and goods waiting patiently to be loaded on the daybreak...

Yes. The perfect victim.

Lumen would have an uptick in crime for the next few years, likely. Thanks to the chaos made by the clean up and rebuilding of the city. Hopefully the city would survive it... and the infection of crime wouldn't just fester and become stronger.

To survive that creature, yet die slowly to the poison it left afterwards...

"History repeating itself," I whispered as I thought of the city beneath my feet. The one still full of toxins.

Pausing a moment, right before I stepped off the pier and stepped upon the stairs that led upward back into Lumen... I realized the likely source of those creatures.

The toxic air. It might have transformed some kind of plant or beast into those things... and over the course of decades...

"Very likely," I whispered as I realized it was the most probable answer.

An obvious one too. Why hadn't I thought of it before? Or had I and I just hadn't focused on it?

Shaking my head free of the thoughts I left the pier and stepped onto the main streets of the ports. I glanced up and down the cobblestone road, and noted the fires lining the side of the port.

People were living on the streets. Their homes were destroyed, and so they had made temporary shelters all up and down the port. Which was why this section of the pier had been the main target for thievery.

This section was owned by us, the Animalia Company. Our insignia was etched into the wood pillars all over the place, and all but a few of the ships docked in this section were ours. The large man-of-war that accompanied Ronaldo, to the tiny fishing boats that I wasn't really sure why we had.

The ship that the Society had used to leave Lumen, and thus return, was moored a few ships down. It wasn't the smallest, but it wasn't even half the size of the man-of-war.

That would have been the ship I would have stolen, if I had been them. Not only was it large, and well made, it was something half a dozen men could easily sail if need be. Especially if only for a short trip.

Good thing thieves were usually stupid.

And good thing that Ronaldo was...

My mind went numb as my feet came to a stop.

Amidst the smell of the sea. The storm. The death and dried blood from the destroyed city all around me. On the wind full of ash and burning wood... was a new smell. One so potent to me, I found myself only able to smell it and nothing else.

I blinked, and for the tiniest moment... The world had stopped.

No more chaos. No more headaches. No more humans causing grief. No more non-humans putting themselves into danger for no reason. No more politics... no more death...

No more votes.

Just Renn.

She tilted her head and smiled at me, and the world started turning again. I had to step aside off the road as a drunken man fumbled past me. He hadn't even realized I had been in front of him. I had barely noticed him too, which would have worried me at any other moment in my life.

Renn waited for me for only a few steps, but then she too stepped away from the building she had been waiting for me at. It looked like she had been sitting on the stairs that led into a warehouse, which was now locked and quiet of course.

The two of us approached each other, and I couldn't help but notice the slight limp in her stride. It was barely noticeable, likely wouldn't be to anyone else. Either she had an injury still, or something had healed incorrectly...

Still...

She looked good, even if she looked as if she hadn't gotten a good night sleep since I had last seen her.

"Hey Vim," she greeted me first, and I felt as if I had failed somehow.

I should have said something first.

"Welcome back Renn," I said.

A toothy grin made my eyes narrow... and I realized I had genuinely missed her.

I kept myself from spewing forth all the things I wanted to say, and instead nodded and gestured past her. For her to join me on the road, to head back home.

Or at least, home for now...

She was no longer allowed to call this place home, after all.

Which was sad, but not as sad as it being her second banishment in just as many weeks.

“I heard your arm was broken still,” I said as I glanced at her right arm. It was not in a sling, but like her stride I could see it was still injured. It didn’t flow lightly like her left did as she walked. It hugged her body more than not.

“It still hurts, but nowhere near as bad. Honestly what still hurts is my tail. I broke it in several places, and it’s healing really slowly,” Renn said lightly, with an undertone of happiness. She sounded far too calm and happy to be talking about something so painful.

Her tail however made sense. That explained the odd stride. It wasn’t her legs or feet, it was her tail that was putting her off balance.

“Tails do heal slowly. Least you still have it?” I both asked and suggested.

She nodded. “Right!” she agreed, and I almost breathed a sigh of relief. So she did still have her tail. Good.

If she had lost it... well...

Then I would have done a much deeper disservice to her than I already had done.

Renn and I walked past a small tent. One that was empty, since the owners of it were sitting around a small fire. Three women stared at us as we walked by.

I ignored them, but Renn didn't. She glanced at them until we were far enough away that they started to talk amongst themselves again.

Usually I'd take note of what the humans were saying about us, or Renn, but instead...

Instead all I could focus on was the woman next to me.

"You look... normal. Last time I saw you, you were covered in gashes and holes," Renn said.

"Hm. All fine now," I said with a shrug.

"So weird... I mean, I healed so fast that people actually questioned it. Yet I still hurt and have to be careful not to further break anything... So what does that say about you?" she asked.

"Not much. Just that I'm more monster than you," I said.

Renn huffed, but had a smile as we rounded a corner.

"How'd you know where to find me?" I asked her gently. That seemed like a good thing to talk about. Not too dangerous, nor would it reveal my heart to her or...

“Brandy. And Herra. They said I shouldn’t really find you, but after talking to Mark and the rest I... well...”  
Renn hesitated as she glanced at me, and then smiled and looked away.

Basking in Renn’s odd smile as I walked next to her, I wondered how such a simple look on her face made me feel so...

Well, lost.

I wasn’t sure what to say. Or think.

Maybe I was being infected by the stupidity of those around me.

“Mark and who?” I asked, focusing on that instead of the way her body swayed. She was walking as if each step was a joy, even though it obviously hurt to walk. That wasn’t fair. And it especially wasn’t fair that the rags she was wearing, cheap wool stuff with the Animalia Guild symbol on the chest, wasn’t able to make me find her any less attractive.

“Hm? Oh... Mark and his family showed up today. You offered him help, and a job, when you met him down in the sewers. A few others showed up too, an older couple, and then a small family who I guess you and Reatti met?” Renn informed me that much more was happening than I realized.

I of course somewhat remembered who she was talking about. The man who had tried to stop me from finding her. Though he had not done it maliciously. In his perspective he had been trying to save my life.

"I see... You met them?" I asked softly. The old folks too? I had told them they could get help if they came to the company, but I hadn't thought any of them actually would have done so.

She nodded. "I helped them get situated. We gave them a residence, and set them up for work. Which actually helps, since we're so busy now what with the cleanup of the city and all the charity work, and stuff," Renn said.

We turned down a dark road. Not because it was small or insignificant, but because it was half destroyed. Most the buildings here were rubble, and no one had seemed to want to set up camp in this section because of it.

Yet it was the fastest route back to the Animalia Guild Company building.

"Why'd you deal with them, Renn?" I asked, even though I kind of already knew why.

She shrugged. "I... just ended up doing it? It wasn't that difficult, Herra ended up helping me half way through," she said.

I nodded. Right. Still...

Why her? Out of all the people to have been involved with them, why the one who actually cared about helping such people?

Why did fate seemingly want to burden Renn in such ways? Constantly?

“It was very nice of you, Vim, to offer them sanctuary. Mark’s wife told me that he had tried to stop you, and after hearing what happened I know you could have... handled him in a very different way. It’s kind of you to be so gentle sometimes,” Renn said.

I had to look away from her, and the gentle smile on her face.

Paying attention to where we walked, I did my best to make sure we didn’t tread upon the more destroyed sections of the road. Bricks and debris still littered everywhere... but we stayed away from the larger piles of debris or the deep holes scattered everywhere.

We walked in silence, and although I enjoyed it... I also didn’t. I wanted to hear her voice some more. I wanted to hear her thoughts, and concerns... her worries and fears...

Which was unsettling.

I was growing irritated with everyone and everything. I was getting annoyed having to deal with this city, and all its problems.

I was tired of hearing people cry and sob over their injuries or lost family members. I was tired of having to police the area, and deal with would-be thieves or swindlers. I was tired of dealing with the politicians who were worse than all of that combined.

I was even avoiding the Society members, within reason, as to avoid hearing them complain or tell me about their thoughts about Renn and what had happened.

Yet here I was... willing and wanting to hear all of Renn's woes and complaints.

Really, what was wrong with me?

I felt exhausted, even though my body never got tired anymore.

"Did someone try to steal a ship, Vim?" Renn asked me, breaking the silence.

I nodded. "Ronaldo and his men caught them. He's... a good man. I'm now glad I let him into the Society. He'll prove much more useful than most our members, even the non-human ones," I said lightly.

Renn didn't say anything as we walked, and I realized I had just said something degrading. Hopefully she didn't take too much offense over it. She knew I wasn't speaking of her, but I also knew she cared dearly for everyone... so would be hurt all the same, no matter who I spoke of. Simply because I was speaking ill at all.

"Though I wish he had been a little more... like his ancestors. He had waited until I arrived to decide the thieves' fates," I added.

“Their fates...” she whispered.

I nodded. “It’s not a bad thing. He waited until the one he is below arrived and made the official decision, before he did anything drastic. A good trait to have for a sailor, especially a commander. But... it meant I had to deal with it. They were just petty thieves in the dark of the night. Always skittering around, always have and always will,” I said.

“I see...” was all Renn said about it.

Shrugging as we rounded a large pile of wood and other refuse, I recognized the very simple attempts of someone trying to clean up some of the destruction. Either one of the cleanup crews our guild and the Lumen powers to be had started on this section, or it was the very owner of these buildings here. Either way it was a good sign, to see such attempts.

Humans were good at rebuilding after such destruction and chaos. It was too bad my people wouldn’t learn that trait from them.

“He also led the men during the event. He commanded the ship to attack the creature from the sea... and he made sure all our ships left the ports before they burnt to the ground. He saved the Society a lot of money and headache. A good man. It’s too bad he’s human,” I said.

“Hm... think I could meet him? He’s the pirate you brought back with you, right?” Renn asked.

I nodded as I glanced at her. She had that look in her eyes. The kind that told me she was being very serious.

“He’s human, yes. They’re loading tomorrow, and will likely set sail soon. You might be able to see him if you’d like, if you go to the docks tomorrow,” I said.

Renn’s smile dimmed a little, and I knew it was because she read between my words.

She could go meet him. Alone. Without me.

I looked away from her sad eyes, and hated myself. Why was I always so brunt when it mattered most?

“I’m regrettably very busy... I need to leave soon, so I’m trying to do all I can as to ensure I can do so in a timely matter,” I said gently, hoping to apologize in the best way I could.

She nodded. “I know. Herra also hopes to leave soon, she... doesn’t seem to like all this commotion,” she said with a gesture around us.

“Which is funny. She hates going home,” I said.

“Oh? She does?” Renn’s look brightened again.

I nodded. “She does... and...” I slowly stopped walking as I realized something.

Renn slowed as I came to a stop, and she studied me from the few feet away where she had walked to. She looked... worried now.

“Vim...?” she asked softly.

Taking a small breath, I nodded. “I heard what happened. At the Bell Church,” I said.

Renn didn’t even blink as she softly nodded. Her eyes held mine, and I noted their glistening gleam in the night.

“As the Societies Protector... it’s my job to ask, Renn. Do you know anything about their accusation?” I asked her.

Renn took a very deep breath, and then trembled. Just once. The obvious shiver should have been from the cold night air, but I knew it wasn’t.

“I don’t... but I do believe it. My family had not been a good one. My grandparents especially,” she said with a soft tone.

“You mentioned once... That you didn’t think any other member of your family still live. Is that true?” I asked her. I held her gaze as I spoke.

She nodded. "My aunt is the only one I could see still living... and even if she is, I have no idea where she'd be or how to find her," she said.

"And if she still lived... could she have done what Plumb claims?" I asked further.

Renn hesitated, but ended up shaking her head. "My aunt had only one hand, and no legs. Not to say... she couldn't have done it before she had lost her limbs, but..." she said.

Interesting.

"Honestly Vim... it was likely my grandparents. Or great uncle. Though they're definitely dead. I helped light aflame their corpses," she said with a heavy nod.

I nodded back, and stepped forward. I did my best to... keep my hand from doing anything more than grab her by the shoulder. I squeezed it as gently as I could, and gave Renn a smile. "I apologize for asking such things, Renn. But..."

She quickly shook her head. "It's okay! I know... I know why. And... Thank you, for asking."

"Thank you?" I asked her.

She nodded, and then shrugged. My hand on her shoulder shifted a little, and I did my best to not notice how warm she felt beneath her shirt. "If you had... ignored it, I would have been worried. I was worried you'd... well..."

"Treat you with kid gloves," I said softly.

"Something like that. For you to actually ask, well... it means you trust me enough to at least do so, right? I guess...?" She sounded unsure of herself, but all the same she nodded and smiled at me.

I gave her shoulder a tiny squeeze again. Her eyebrows rose upward upon my grip, and I sighed at her. "I trust you so much it's worrisome, Renn," I said to her honestly.

Renn blinked at that, and I turned away as to get us back on our path. I did have things to do. And now that Renn was back... well...

It was time I finished those tasks. So we could leave.

"You're going to come with us, right?" I asked her, to make sure.

"Huh? You mean when you leave with Herra? Of course? Why? Am I not allowed to?" Renn asked quickly as she hurried to keep up with me.

The way she asked told me something horrible.

She didn't know.

She didn't know yet.

No one had told her.

"Good. You can deal with Herra's family then, for me," I said with a forced smile.

Ignoring the horrible sinking pit in my stomach, I actually bit my tongue... to keep myself from telling her.

It was my job to. It was my duty to.

As the protector.

As Vim.

As the one she loved the most in the Society, especially.

I had to tell her.

Yet...

Did I want our long separation, and our meeting finally, to be stained by such a thing?

She'd cry. She had that right.

But... could I stand here as she sobbed and broke, and not grab hold of her?

Could I control myself?

"I'll more than happily meet her family, Vim," Renn said, not noticing the horrible turmoil within me.

"You say that now. They're a loud bunch, and are always singing and dancing... it's horrible," I said, doing my best to focus on this topic and this topic alone. It was easy, since I tasted blood. I had bit deep and thru my tongue.

Renn giggled at me as she took her place to my left. "You say that like it's some kind of a threat, but I swear I hear the exact opposite!"

"I'm sure you do... which is why you're perfect for the job," I said.

"I look forward to it! I can't wait to see why Herra seems to hate her home so much, yet can't wait to leave and return all the same," Renn said happily.

"Oh you'll find out, that's for sure," I grumbled.

The cat giggled next to me, and I noted her lovely smile. The glistening of tears in her eyes only made that smile all the more awe worthy.

As we neared the guild building... I realized the two of us had already returned to normal.

We were walking together, and talking, as if we had never separated. As if she and I had been with each other this whole time.

At least, she was. I was still fretting over the reality that no one had told her she had been banished from Lumen, as well as the Bell Church.

But for now I at least walking calmly... speaking normally. Smiling gently.

That was... a good thing. More than I could explain.

We did have much to talk about, and I still wanted to hear everything I could from her... but for now...

This was fine. This was good enough.

Hopefully.

I should tell her how glad I was to see her. I should voice it. Show it. Show it with action... but...

But if I did, I'd be admitting it. And...

And I'd be risking her far more than I already had.

If they'd banish her over what her ancestors did... over what she did with Fly, or because of Fly...

What would they do to her if they found out I loved her?

The thoughts haunted me. They weighed upon my shoulders more than all the lives I carried.

They kept words in my throat.

I had much to think about. A lot to ponder. And I had to do so as soon as possible.

Walking side by side with the woman who looked far too happy... I realized I was going to have to decide her fate for her.

If she'd let me.

If I would let myself.

If I could, even.

Either I let her be broken and killed by the fate that was so obviously trying to loom over her.

Or I kept her far away from those who would drag her down. To keep her away from those who her gentle sympathy could latch onto.

To keep her safe, I either needed to keep her right next to me... or I needed to take her far away from everyone and everything.

Both were bad choices.

But that was life.

Nothing but endless bad choices.

At least, that was my life.

I just wished it wouldn't be Renn's too.

Chapter 199 Merit's Goodbye

I had never packed so slowly while I wanted to run away as fast as I could.

Even when Nory had died, I hadn't felt this... weird. I had hurt. I had sobbed and cried... and I had also felt the desire to run away, since I didn't want to be in that little cabin without her any longer... but...

But right here and now...

Putting the nightgown into the bag, I hated how... heavy it felt. Even though I knew it was as light as a feather. I barely felt its weight, usually, yet right now...

“The whole world is heavy,” I whispered.

Taking a deep breath, I did my best to not start crying again.

I didn’t want to cry anymore. My eyes hurt. My nose hurt. I felt out of tears, even though my eyes were still blurry.

Vim had been... gentle enough to hold me for nearly an hour, after telling me about the vote. But even Vim’s gentle kindness didn’t last forever. He had duties. He had tasks to finish, before we left... and my sobbing was not as important as the rest of the Societies needs.

“Not important at all,” I whispered as I put the small nail filing box into the bag. I slid it between the folded up nightgown, and the other pairs of socks I had.

Staring down at the little blue box, I took another deep breath and was rather glad I didn’t break down again.

Really, it didn’t hurt that badly. I understood it. I comprehend it. I didn’t blame them.

I couldn’t fault them. I couldn’t hate them for it.

Banishing me made sense, from their perspective.

Yet...

“Yet I wish it hadn’t happened,” I whispered.

Why did they banish me?

Because I had been willing to try and save Fly and her people?

Why was that so bad? Why was such a thing so dangerous? When most of them had willingly voted in the same ways before?

Did none of them remember how they had voted to give Fly her chance? How they had voted to keep Vim, and me, from doing anything that might endanger Fly or their people?

Yet why was...

“Stop,” I bit myself off and turned as to pack up the rest of my clothes.

We were going to leave in the morning. Right before dawn.

Herra was coming with us, since she needed to go back to her family. Her real home. I wasn't sure where it was, or why exactly she needed to go home... but it was something important. Important enough that Herra was leaving right when the Society in Lumen needed everyone as much as ever.

Then why banish me? Aren't I useful? Wouldn't I be...?

I mean... I wouldn't have stayed anyway... but... but...!

"Stop!" I raised my voice a little too much, and nearly threw the pair of pants I had been folding away in the process.

"Stop what, Renn?"

I turned and hesitated at the sight of Merit. The door was open, and she was tilting her head at me.

"Sorry... it's nothing," I said as I quickly composed myself.

"Obviously not... though I can kind of guess what it is. Can I come in?" she asked.

Ah. Right. She was standing right outside the room. I nodded and smiled at her as she stepped in, and didn't hesitate to close the door behind her.

Taking a small breath I walked over to my bed, where my main bag was. I put the now wrinkled pants within it, and was glad to see that the bag was only half full.

Not because I had a bunch still to pack... but rather the opposite. It meant I wasn't really accumulating anything I didn't need. We were travelers, so I needed to be like Vim. Someone who didn't carry much more than the essentials.

"I told Vim already... but if you ever paint anything else, Renn, you can send it to me. I'll keep them safe," Merit said gently as she stepped over to me.

I nodded. "He told me... thank you Merit, for that. I'm not sure when I'll be able to paint again, but I'm sure I will. I have... a lot to paint," I said as I thought of all those lost in the fires.

She nodded back. "Of course. Though if you ever paint Vim, don't you dare send me those ones! I'll feed them to pigs if you do," Merit said with a smirk.

I laughed at her, and it felt really good to do so. Even if it kind of hurt the back of my throat to do so. "Right!"

Merit giggled at me, and I realized she had said such a thing on purpose. To make me laugh.

How kind of her.

“Thanks Merit,” I said softly.

“Hm,” she nodded, as if she understood.

But how could she?

Vim had said she and Tosh had been the only ones to vote in my favor. To not vote to banish me.

Tosh was... surprising, very much so, and in honesty Merit wasn't... but...

But all the same...

Merit sighed and then extended her arms. “Go ahead,” she said with a nod.

I blinked at her a few times, and then laughed again as I bent down and wrapped her in a huge hug.

The small Merit felt even smaller as I realized I had to bend down even more. It was awkward, so I went ahead and just fell to my knees. Luckily the carpet was good enough to not hurt me as Merit and I held each other in a deep hug.

“I’ll miss you Renn. I enjoyed meeting you,” Merit said in my ear. One of my real ones. I was burying my face into her tiny shoulder, so I was angled a little oddly. Just enough she was able to speak into the ears on top of my head and not my human ones.

“I’ll miss you too,” I sobbed.

“Now, now... don’t cry Renn. It hurts... but...” Merit spoke... but eventually her voice started sounding weird.

Then without warning, Merit started crying too.

She began to shake violently, and her tiny arms squeezed me tighter. So tightly in fact, I paused in my crying a moment as I realized she was squeezing me tight enough that it actually hurt.

Merit really was strong...

“I’m so sorry Renn! I’m sorry our lives are so hard... I’m sorry our people are so weak and...!” Merit sobbed as she spoke, and I closed my eyes as I basked in the warmth of Merit’s soul.

Shaking my head as Merit cried even harder than me, I wished with all my heart that Merit would always be happy and healthy. "It's okay Merit. It really is. Thank you... for being who you are," I said to her.

"You too, Renn," Merit said as she squeezed me even tighter.

I smiled as her arms trembled. She felt strong... far too strong for her size and appearance, yet... at the same time... she also felt her appearance.

She was trembling and crying in the same way a little girl would.

The two of us held each other for a long moment, and I realized this was exactly what I wanted. What I needed.

I'd be able to leave now, with a smile. Even if it was one strained.

"Thank you, Merit," I said again.

"Mhm... you better write to me. I won't know where you are, so I'll need you to tell me where to send mine," she said.

I nodded. "Of course. Though I think you'll always be able to reach me by sending one to Vim," I said.

“Urgh... You better realize you’re the only person that I’d ever be able to put up with Vim for,” she said.

Laughing, the two of us shook a little in our hug. She wasn’t squeezing me as hard, yet wasn’t letting me go.

Which I didn’t mind. I wouldn’t mind even if she wanted to stay like this until the morning, when I left.

“Will you keep an eye on Lamp for me, Merit? I... I don’t know if anyone else will,” I asked her.

She nodded. “I will. For you.”

“Thank you.”

“I’d ask you to keep your eyes off Vim for me, but you probably won’t listen so I just won’t say it,” she then said.

Giggling at her, I nodded. “I can try, I guess?”

“That’ll have to be good enough,” she said with a sigh.

The two of us went silent... for a good long while, until she sighed and then patted me on the back. I gave her one last small squeeze, which she returned, before we separated.

Leaning back, I smiled at her as she went to wiping her face. "Is there anything you need Renn? Anything I can get you for your trip?" she asked.

I slowly shook my head as I studied my friend. "I'm fine... I think. Vim doesn't like it when we have too much to carry, so..." I said.

"Right. He's a jerk," she nodded.

Glancing at my bag, I gestured at it. "I got mostly everything ready. I just need to put on my leather... and sword, and I'm ready," I said.

"Hmph..." Merit stepped away from me, and up to my bed. She stood up on her toes to peer into the bag. I slowly got up off my knees, and stood as Merit studied my bag's contents. "You have so little... but knowing Vim he'll say you have a lot. When he brought me here, he wouldn't even let me bring a single bag you know? We came with just the clothes on our backs," she said.

"Really...?" I asked. That was... interesting. I had been mostly joking about Vim's aversion to stuff. He hadn't really ever said anything, honestly, and I had a feeling Vim wouldn't really complain even if I did add a bag or two.

“It’s not his fault though... we had been in a rush. But just let me badmouth him okay? He’s a jerk who’s taking away my friend,” she said.

Taking me away...

Smiling softly at my friend, I kept myself from making a small comment... about who was actually forcing me to leave.

She knew. She knew, so I didn’t need to say it.

“Oh... here. I got it so I could read it but... well...” I stepped over to my desk and grabbed the small book I had gotten at the Bell Church.

“Ah...” Merit recognized it instantly, and sighed as I handed it to her.

“You didn’t get to read them,” she whispered sadly.

I nodded. “It’s okay... maybe another time,” I said.

Honestly I wasn’t sure if I could read them right now even if I had the time. My heart and head were all so... disheveled.

“Maybe during your journey you’ll meet the author. Vim knows who it is after all,” Merit said lightly.

I nodded. Maybe. Maybe...

An odd silence filled the room, and I realized I wasn’t sure what else to say to her.

This could be the last time I saw Merit... if not for ever, at the very least for a very... very long time. Years and years.

“Anything I can do for you, Merit? Before I go?” I asked her.

She smiled at me in the way someone much older than me would. It hurt to see, since I honestly didn’t feel much younger than her. “All will be fine, Renn... I’ll... be okay. I promise you, as I promised Vim, I’ll not abandon this place just because I’m upset with those here. It’s not the first time I’ve...” Merit stopped talking, and I knew better than to pressure her to continue. I knew exactly what she was talking about.

It was sad that I was starting to have the same emotions towards everyone in the Society.

Just as I had been disappointed in those at Ruvindale... I was now similarly upset with those here.

Not a good sign, for me. After all if I grew to dislike and hate everyone, then the problem wasn't everyone else but me.

"I'm told I'll be heading south. Then... back west?" I said. Vim had kind of spoke about our upcoming route, but he had been doing so as I cried in his arms. I remembered it, but at the same time... didn't.

"Unless something happens, yes. Vim rarely goes too far from the Cathedral, though it does happen occasionally. If you do end up going to lands beyond, please be careful Renn. The world is... dangerous. In more ways than one. Especially at the corners, where humans still don't tread," she warned me.

I nodded. "I'll try, Merit."

She smiled at me and then sighed. "I'll... go now, if that's okay. I am really, really, bad at goodbyes. I'll break down and cry all night if I don't," she said.

"All right..." I nodded, and blinked watery eyes. She was leaving already?

"Goodbye Renn. Please be safe. Write to me often. Don't let Vim force you to do anything you don't want to do. Don't let his burdens become yours. His shoulders are so strong that sometimes you misunderstand just how dangerous the burden can be because of it," she said.

Nodding again at her warnings, I couldn't help but take her words to heart. After all... I was starting to realize how serious and right such a warning was.

“Also don’t... think you need to abide by the Societies rules. They’re rules, but they’re just as faulty as the laws of humans sometimes. If you’re ever alone, or need help, and don’t know where to go... come to me Renn. Come back here, even. I’ll help you, even if they won’t,” she promised.

Tears wrecked my eyes as I nodded and stepped forward. She happily accepted another hug.

“Thank you Merit. I’ll miss you,” I said softly.

“Mhm. Take care of yourself Renn...” she said softly.

We separated, and I noted the way she held the book close to her chest as she turned to leave. She opened the door to my room slowly... and gave me one final nod before stepping out of the room.

Taking a deep breath as she shut the door behind her, I trembled as suddenly the room felt... much colder. Too cold.

Gulping lightly, I glanced around my room.

The paintings were gone, taken by Merit... but the easel was still here. As were the other blank canvases I had planned to use.

Upon the windowsill, before the large windows... were several small plants. Most notably the tiny cactus. Which I now wondered if maybe Gerald had not just given it to me out of a simple whim.

The large bed, with the massive pillows. I rarely slept with all of them, since they were so big and fluffy that it bothered my ears.

The open bathroom, which within was memories precious.

My desk, littered with brushes and other random notes and papers. All telling of the many jobs and tasks I've done while here. From working in the bank, to helping Lamp and her people.

My dresser, wide and open now, had several sets of clothes within it... but I wasn't going to pack them. Most of them had the Animalia Guild crest upon them, and something told me I shouldn't take them. After all... I was no longer allowed to stay here.

I wasn't allowed to be a part of the Animalia Guild anymore.

I'd never come back to this room again.

"Banished..." I whispered.

"Not entirely, Renn."

I didn't jump, but my ears did twitch something fierce as I turned around to look at Vim.

Frowning at him, I wondered when he had walked in. The door was closed... I hadn't heard it open or shut again?

He smiled gently at me as he stepped forward, and glanced over at the bag on my bed.

"Basically all packed," I said lightly.

"I see that. Sure you don't want to take more clothes? We're heading south, it gets hot and humid where we're going, you might want an extra set or two for comfort," he said.

"Ah... think so?" I nodded as I stepped over to the dresser. If he was bringing it up, it was probably true. Might as well grab some more clothes, then.

As I rummaged around the top drawer of the dresser, I tried to find within my recent memory Vim opening the door and entering the room.

I couldn't find it.

"Vim... when'd you come in?" I asked him. He was sneaky sometimes, and honestly... I wasn't in the greatest of conditions. But surely I would have heard the door open?

"I entered as Merit left, Renn," Vim said softly.

Ah... had he? Really?

"I didn't notice," I said.

"I see that," he said softly as he nodded.

So I really was distraught. It must be far worse than I felt, based off the way he was looking at me.

Looking away from him, I returned my attention to finding another set of appropriate clothes.

"And I know... it's not a full banishment, like the Bell Church or Ruvindale. But I'll treat it all the same," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

Hesitating, I took a tiny breath as I shrugged. "I don't want to trouble those who obviously aren't comfortable around me," I said.

“Hm.”

I gulped at the noise he made. Why did it sound as if he agreed with me?

“You agree with me?” I asked, unable to contain the worry.

“I do,” he said.

Grabbing the edge of the open drawer, for support as to not fall to the floor... I stared in shock at the man who had just said such a heartbreaking thing.

“Vim...” I barely got his name out.

He nodded, confirming I had heard him correctly. “They don’t deserve your presence, Renn. So yes. You have every right to ignore them,” he said.

Closing my eyes, I groaned as my assumptions were proven true.

He hadn’t said that with the same mindset as I had.

“Vim...” I groaned.

“Renn,” he said back.

Shaking my head, I did my best to not start crying. “You’re the protector! You can’t say stuff like that!” I said.

“I know. I warned you Renn. I warned you.”

Opening my eyes, I stared at the man who held my gaze without flinching.

He had told me. He had warned me.

He had told me his affection for me could cause problems. In more ways than one.

“If... if you...” I couldn’t get the rest of my thoughts in order, as to speak. I had to say it! To say something... but...

“I’ll not abandon them, for you Renn. You need not worry. I shall always return, and aid them, as needed. No matter what they do to you, or say to you,” Vim said firmly.

Although it hurt to hear those words, it also brought me relief. It washed over me in such a wave that I slowly knelt down, once again kneeling on the ground. This time though I did it out of relief and sorrow, not joy.

Vim sighed at the sight of me, but I ignored him as I focused on my breathing. I didn't want to cry anymore, yet I was on the verge of doing so again. More fiercely than ever.

He stepped towards me, and I started to raise a hand. To shoo him away. If he wrapped me in a hug right now I would break, and I really didn't want to spend the last few hours here in this room under such duress and turmoil... I had enough of crying and...

Instead Vim simply sat down on the ground. Next to me. He sat up against the dresser, less than half an arm's reach away.

"I'm sorry Renn. That our Society is... broken. I'm sorry I couldn't make a better one. I'm sorry I wasn't good enough to keep it strong and healthy, or more of the good people alive," Vim said.

He spoke softly and evenly... as if we were not talking about something so serious and emotional, but instead the weather.

"Is it really your fault Vim? It's not like you can force someone to be..." I struggled to find the proper word to use.

“Better? You’d be surprised. A long time ago... I was able to make many people better. Though to be honest, they only became better thanks to the tip of a spear at their throats,” he said.

I scoffed at his words, and almost couldn’t believe the very obvious smirk on his face. He wasn’t joking, yet he found it humorous all the same.

“How did I fail Vim? Where did I go wrong? I... I don’t even feel as if I even did anything. You did all the important stuff,” I said.

“Your only failure Renn, is the thought you did so. You did well. Beyond well. You found a lost individual, who needed saving and you saved them. You saved Fly, Renn. She would have only suffered had she stayed where she was, and only would have died a horrible death. With us she has a chance to be so much more, and accomplish anything she wills to do,” Vim said.

Blinking teary eyes, I nodded. I knew he wasn’t just telling me things to make me feel better. Vim was speaking from the heart. Yet... “Yet I still failed somehow. How could I have not gotten Brom killed? How could I have saved more than just Fly? There had been so many of them down there, Vim,” I said.

“Brom’s death was far beyond your control Renn. The only way his death could have been avoided... well... I suppose if I had found that creature and killed it before it surfaced. But I didn’t do it. So there’s no point thinking about it,” he said.

I shook my head, since I didn’t believe him. There had to of been far more than just that.

“Plus... even if Brom was still alive, odds are the results would have been the same Renn. I’ve... never really said it, aloud, but regrettably because of what you are... well...” Vim sighed as he shifted, and I felt

the dresser behind me move. I wasn't leaning up against it as he was, yet I still felt it move along the floor. "You're a predator. A real one. Then of course... you're also very human, at least in nature. You like to help people. You like to worry about others, and aren't afraid to help someone who needs it."

"So it is my fault," I whispered.

Vim shrugged, making one of the dresser's drawers shift. "If you want to look at it that way, sure. But what are you going to do? Stop helping people? Are you going to be able to ignore it when someone needs help, Renn?" he asked me.

I shook my head. I didn't even hesitate to do so.

"See? Exactly. So it's... pointless to worry over it, or question it. What you're doing is questioning the natural. The nature of you as an individual. It'd be like worrying if the sun is going to be bright tomorrow, or if the night sky will be dark. Stop worrying over the inevitable and unchangeable," he said.

"But my actions don't just affect me, Vim. A lot of people... this time... were affected," I said.

"They were. But how do you know it wouldn't have happened anyway? Or even, a far worse outcome, had you not been the one involved?" he asked.

"If it had been just you, I bet it would have gone much better," I said.

Vim scoffed at me. "Do you not remember why we met, Renn? Lomi's whole village is gone, because I was alone," he said.

I blinked at his words, and shifted as to look at his face better.

He wasn't looking at me, but he still nodded. "I warned you. If you... joined me, you'd come to hate yourself. The world. The Society," he said softly.

"Will it always be this bad?" I asked.

"Most of the time, Renn. Between you, Fly, and Wool... we've had more new members recently than we've had in dozens of years. Yet in the same time you three have joined us, we've had how many deaths? How many losses? Lomi's village. Ruvindale. We almost lost Nebl. Brom. Before Lomi's village, I had also dealt with a Monarch that had been feeding on a whole island. They weren't our members, but some of them had been non-humans. People, who could have been our members, had I instead found them in time before they had suffered. Just like with Fly," Vim said.

I gulped and wished I hadn't asked.

"It's inevitable then, isn't it?" I whispered.

"Yes. That's why there's no point in beating yourself up over it. You can fret, and cry, but don't stop trying Renn. Don't stop standing up tall. Don't give up," Vim said.

“Because if we do, then there wouldn’t be anyone else,” I said.

“Exactly, Renn. Who else is helping these people? These fools, these helpless idiots that can’t even protect themselves. People who are older than any human, some who are wiser than the greatest human philosophers, stronger than a dozen well trained knights, with more instincts than the very animals they represent... These people who are more than human, yet somehow frailer. They can’t survive alone. They need help, and no one in this whole world cares to hear their plea,” Vim said.

“That’s very similar to what she wrote in that book,” I said, remembering the page in that little white book. It was the seventh page, where it talked about how even the Gods had abandoned their children.

“When even their creators abandoned them, who else but us can they turn to?” Vim said, quoting one of the passages on that page.

“Did they?” I asked.

“Hm?”

“Were we created? And did those who did really abandon us?” I asked him.

Vim shifted a little, and I noted the way his eyes held mine.

This was one of those questions. That he didn’t like answering. That he usually didn’t.

“Yes.”

I blinked at his answer, and wondered if he had only done so because of the moment. Maybe he thought if he hadn't, I'd have broken.

I was honestly past that. My emotions were getting under control, and I wasn't crying anymore. In fact right now the biggest issue I had was my tail, it was hurting because I had not sat down very carefully. Luckily I wasn't sitting on it, but it was angled painfully.

“If the only ones helping our people are us Vim, I feel rather worried for us,” I said softly.

He smirked and nodded. “Right?”

I sighed as I leaned back, to rest against the dresser. As I did I reached down to move and adjust my tail a little, so it'd not hurt as much.

“But not everyone is...” I hesitated again, and not just because I couldn't think of the right word to use. Rather I didn't want to say it aloud. “Merit. Tosh, too, surprisingly. And even Reatti! I got her brother killed... and she actually was able to put her hate aside, if even for a moment. We had spoken together and...” I stopped talking, since I was about to cry again.

“Mhm... yes. Tosh shouldn't surprise you, by the way. There's a reason he's my friend,” Vim said.

Ah. Right. He was Vim's friend... "Lawrence is too isn't he? He voted no," I said softly.

"He let the rest decide. He believes in keeping the peace, even if it hurts to do so. He... is a man who will sacrifice the world, to save the future," he said.

I shook my head. "I don't like that. What point is there in a future if we're not all there to see it?"

"He sees it differently, Renn. And we've talked about this. You must be able to learn to cherish and protect everyone, even those with different values," he said.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. "Right. I know... I just..."

"Just wished, and thought, those I called friends would be better than the rest. Yes. I know," Vim said.

"Sorry," I whispered.

"It's fine Renn. How do you think I feel?" I asked.

"No wonder you're so cold sometimes. You're numb," I said.

He didn't say anything, but I heard his thumb tap his knee... rather harshly. My words had bothered him.

"What would... what would Rungle and Stumble had voted?" I asked him.

"Hm? Concerning you?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Well... they'd not have voted, Renn. They were against the Society," he said gently.

"Huh?" I looked over at Vim as he nodded.

"Not everyone agrees with the Societies rules... They never joined the Society. Didn't believe in it."

"But... Merit knew them," I said softly.

"She did. Just as she didn't join the Society either, until after her kingdom fell," he said.

Closing my eyes, I groaned as my head started to hurt. Why were there always so many secrets?

Or well... they weren't really secrets, probably. It was all just stuff I didn't know, because I was so new. Because I hadn't been involved.

Vim reached over and put his hand on my back. I tried to ignore the way he rubbed my back, since it felt good. "They would have never abandoned you Renn. Just as they had not abandoned those they had died for," Vim said.

"They died in such a way...?" I asked.

"They did. They died because they hadn't been willing to give up their friends. And... that is the other extreme, Renn. Those here abandoned you, for their own safety. Rungle and his family died for those who they wouldn't abandon. You're more like them, which worries me," he said.

"Because it means I'll eventually die too," I said.

"Yes. But... if that is what you wish to die for, I could not think of anything better to do so for," he said.

I nodded, and agreed with him there.

If not for those you cared for... then for what else?

“How long, Vim?” I asked.

“For?”

“Do I have? Before you abandon me too?” I asked.

Vim’s hand on my back came to a stop, and I did my best to keep my eyes on the ground. Near the edge of the rug we sat on. I was too afraid to look at him right now.

“I’ve never abandoned anyone Renn. Not willingly. Never without a fight. Though... I suppose you’re talking about what I had said that night, here in this room,” he said.

I nodded. “Yes. You said you either needed to abandon me... or...” I didn’t finish the sentence, since I definitely didn’t want him to try the other option instead right now. I was in no mood to be taken to bed.

“Well, by that I had not meant abandonment in full. Not like this. I rather just meant, to stop you from staying with me,” he said.

“Oh.”

“What you interpreted it differently? Renn you’ve already noticed that I... hate a few of our members. Yet you know I still protect them all the same. Just as fiercely as the rest. You should know better,” he said.

“I guess. But still...” I shrugged.

His fingers tapped lightly on my back, as if I was a table and he bored. “But nothing. If you want to know what I feel or think of what happened, then think no further. You shouldn’t be banished or blacklisted just because bad things happened right after you arrived. It isn’t right,” he said.

“They’re not wrong though Vim. I... I might be dangerous. At least, because I’m not willing to turn a blind eye to things I see,” I said.

“That is true. But that’s a fault on them, Renn, not you. Evil thrives and festers not where evil people exist, but where good ones ignore evil and look away from it.”

“You say pretty things, sometimes,” I said as I soaked up his words.

“Sometimes? Wait till you get me really angry. My words become so eloquently beautiful that anyone who hears them pisses pure spring water and throws up rainbows and syrup,” he said.

Smiling at him, I wondered how I could ever even get him actually angry. The only few times he’s ever gotten seemingly angry with me was in the beginning, and even then it wasn’t so much anger as it was simple annoyance or disgust.

He had thought I had gotten Amber killed at first, after all.

And those times, he had been silent. Not really loud or talkative.

“And really Renn... If you’re dangerous, what am I? Don’t answer that, though, even if what you’re thinking is true,” Vim said with a small laugh.

My smile grew as I nodded. Right. If I really let what happened bother me too deeply... it was both an insult to Vim, and more.

He has been and was involved in such events far worse, and by the sounds of it... he failed often.

“I suppose if we’re going to fail and get hurt, at least we can do it together,” I said.

“There you go,” he nodded as he patted my back again.

“Did you finish whatever you had to do?” I asked.

“Hm? No. I came back to check on you because I heard Merit talking to you,” he said.

"You... heard her talking to me? Where were you?" I asked. Was he that close by?

"Don't worry about it. We leave before the dawn. Herra's ready already. She's even got the horses ready already," he said.

"We get to ride horses?" I asked.

He nodded. "At least until Herra's home."

Interesting. Maybe it was because he felt he was behind schedule, thanks to all that's happened.

"Finish getting ready, Renn. And then get some sleep, if you can. We'll be traveling quickly, if able, to make up for lost time," Vim said as he patted my shoulder and stood up.

Staring up at him, I sniffed as he frowned down at me... and I could tell he was wondering why I hadn't stood up with him.

"I'll miss this place, Vim," I said.

"I'm sure."

"I... never thought I'd actually stay here. But honestly I think I would have done so, if I had to pick somewhere. Out of all the places I've been so far," I said.

"I know."

"Yet now... the thought disgusts me," I said honestly.

Vim nodded.

"Make me fall in love with you Vim," I then said.

His eyes narrowed as I slowly stood up. He held his hand out, to help me up, and I held onto it even once I was standing.

Nodding at him, I held his gaze. "Please. Make me fall in love so deeply... that I never again fall in love with anyone or anything else. So that I'll never hurt like this again," I said.

Vim took a small breath... and then gave me the tiniest nod I'd ever seen.

Chapter 200 Herra

“And I swear! You’d never know, Renn, but my sister is genuinely insane. She once sewed a bunch of frogs together, while they were alive, to see if they’d start croaking in unison,” Herra continued to complain about her family.

“What...?” Renn didn’t like what she was hearing, but yet at the same time still sounded interested.

“And that’s not the worst! When she was young she put a bunch of snakes into my bed while I slept. She was worried they were cold! Cold! Snakes! I nearly died from all the bites!” Herra huffed as she reminisced of her family.

“Snakes do get cold,” I said.

“Not when it’s summer! In the arid desert!” Herra shouted at me.

I decided to keep my mouth shut, as Herra then went on a tirade about how I had always taken her sister’s side back when she was young. I didn’t believe her, but it was interesting to hear she thought so. I mean... I had only met the sister she spoke of a few times. She had died young, to a flesh eating disease. Likely the same thing that had made her erratic and crazy, but I’d never say that aloud. Her death had hurt the family, but I remembered a few sullen whispers of relief during the funeral.

Yet it was still a tragedy. A life lost, before she ever had a chance to be more than a disturbed child.

Which was likely why Herra was complaining about her more than any of the dozen other family members she could whine about.

It was likely her way of remembering her lost sister.

Glancing around, I noted the dark rocks all around us. The green of the forests surrounding Lumen was gone, but the mountains were still here. They just... were now drier, and pointier. Some of the jagged black rocks we were trotting past looked sharp enough to slice open a cow's hide.

Such jagged rocks explained why this place was called Nail Peaks.

"Seriously Renn! Then my other sister goes and marries a human! The same young boy they found lost in the desert! What kind of weirdo marries and mates with the same person you practically raised?" Herra complained.

"That... is a little odd, I agree," Renn said politely.

"If one looked at it from a different perspective, it isn't that weird. Our kind ages slower. They basically grew up together, at least mentally," I said.

The sister she spoke of was Herra's youngest. Serra. She was actually only a few decades old, if I remembered correctly. Odds are she had been in her early twenty's or so when meeting the boy Herra spoke of. An odd age gap, yes, but our kind didn't age the same. A twenty year old, at least a twenty year old non-human with thick pure blood, wasn't too far off from being a young child in relative terms to a human.

Fly was a good example. She looked like very young. Maybe ten or twelve, in human terms. Yet was likely in her twenties too.

“Shut it Vim! Don’t make sense!” Herra shouted at me.

The horse she and Renn were riding neighed, as if to agree with her.

I sighed as I nodded, accepting it.

“You can’t honestly not see it at least a little weird, Vim,” Renn said.

Glancing behind me, at the two women and the horse they rode, I noted the way Herra glared at me... and Renn who also glared at me from over Herra’s shoulder. She sat behind Herra, and had a weird smirk on her face. She was enjoying herself something fierce.

“It is. I’m just doing my best to make sense of it. If I don’t then who knows what I’ll think or say upon meeting them,” I said.

“See!” Herra pointed at me and smiled, as if glad to hear I agreed.

“But you don’t know if he actually lived with your family the whole time or not Herra. They might have found him another home, and they reunited later,” I pointed out.

“That’s still weird, Vim,” Renn said.

I frowned and wondered if it was.

I mean... yes. The age gap was concerning... but any of our members who settled with humans had that problem. Humans simply did not live that long. It was impossible.

Even the mostly human members, whose bloodlines had long forgotten their beastly ancestors... Still lived longer than humans. Maybe not as long as those like Renn and Herra, but long enough that they rarely if ever didn’t outlive their human companions. Unless they died by unnatural means, like Sally.

If I judged Herra’s sister for marrying the same young man that her family had rescued when he was but a small boy... well...

Then I’d have to judge all of the Societies members who ended up with humans. Which was a surprising number, when one thought of it.

But at the same time, how many had met their partners while they were young? Most likely not many, if any at all.

“Could you look at someone romantically, if you had known them as a child?” Herra asked me.

Could I...? Have I?

I tried to think of all the women I've known, and knew, both those I've actually gotten intimate with and those I had only considered doing so.

My mind searched long and hard, but honestly I couldn't find any that I immediately remembered knowing when they had been young. "Honestly, probably not. I wonder if that's why I don't find so many people attractive, even though they are? Because I had known them when they were little..." I said as I realized it.

That would explain why I didn't find Kaley attractive, even though nearly every other man who met her tried to bed her without hesitation. As if she was a walking aphrodisiac. Especially since I did genuinely know she was beautiful.

"Gross, Vim. You're like a grandfather to me, so hearing you talk like that makes me sick," Herra said.

"What? You asked," I defended myself as I noticed a large wagon in the distance.

"I didn't! Renn did," Herra was now defending herself.

"Well, I did. But you're the one who asked that specific question Herra," Renn said, swiftly uprooting any and all defense Herra had to protect herself.

Herra groaned. "Well... I did..."

"Wait... Herra, I thought you liked Vim...?" Renn then whispered.

I pretended to not be able to hear them as Herra made an odd noise, and then tugged on the reins of their horse. It shuffled as it slowed down, as to gain some distance between us.

I allowed it, and pretended to get lost in thought.

"Shush! How do you even know that?" Herra whispered back.

"What...? I mean... well..." Renn sounded flustered.

"I... I mean... I do. But he is still kind of like a grandfather... I've known him since I was born... which means he probably means what he says. Just great. I've always wondered why he wouldn't at least spend a few nights with me every so often," Herra mumbled.

Sighing as the two whispered amongst themselves, I focused on the cart that was drawing closer. It had two large donkeys pulling it, and it looked to be more of a carriage style than one for hauling goods. It had a decorative canopy, and windows on the side. They were glistening in the midday sun.

Well... if Herra stopped bothering me with her weird fascination thanks to this that was a good thing, at least. At least something positive happens during this trip, at least, if nothing else.

Better yet maybe she'll spread such information all around. If so then I'd be able to stop worrying or dealing with... well...

I blinked as I realized most of those who bugged me sometimes, when it came to such things, were indeed those who I had known when they were young. Not all, of course, but quite a few. I had known Magdalena when she was young too, though not as young as the others.

Was there a correlation maybe? Or was I just reading too deeply into it?

Likely was just coincidence. After all I knew far many more who I had known since young, and they never tried anything funny or acted strangely around me. It was like Herra said, most saw me as some kind of odd uncle or something.

"Has he slept with you, Renn?" Herra asked.

"In the same bed, yes, but we've not done anything," she answered honestly.

Herra groaned, likely because even sleeping in the same bed was something I'd never done with anyone else she knew. At least not those like Herra and Magda.

While the two mumbled and told stories, I wondered if I would have found Renn attractive if I had known her as a child.

Likely not. But I knew, from others telling me, that not everyone found Renn attractive either. Some did, and I knew several of those who had not found her attractive had likely been affected by their instincts... being afraid of predators, but...

I sighed as Herra mumbled something about me and her aunt.

“Did he now?” Renn asked coldly. And not with a whisper.

“Did I what?” I asked, pretending I hadn’t heard the earlier statement which had caused Renn’s cold tone.

“Oh, just that I saw you and Aunt Slip in bed together when I was young,” Herra said. She sounded far too happy over the retelling of it.

“You armadillos do like crawling into people’s beds, for whatever reason,” I said back.

Herra huffed a groan, and I glanced back at the two women. Herra was shaking her head, and Renn was glaring at me with an odd look. Oh? She didn’t look as angry as I thought she’d be. Maybe I had misread her tone earlier.

“He had been injured. Or something. She was kicked out once he woke up...” Herra mumbled the truth.

Renn blinked, and her odd look turned into a smile. “He had been hurt? Really? How so?” she focused on the odd again, instead of anything else. Did she not realize that Herra had been trying to disturb Renn with her earlier comments?

Herra sighed, and obviously noticed that Renn wasn’t going to be bothered by anything she said. Lies or not. “I don’t remember. I was real young. I just remember Aunt Slip telling me to go away, and then Vim waking up and kicking her out of the bed. He had bandages on for some reason,” Herra said.

“I had been burned, I think,” I said as I tried to recall the memory. I honestly couldn’t. I could remember Slip many times trying to sneak into my bed, just like Herra has done on occasion, but couldn’t really remember the exact moment she was speaking of.

Yet the only time I had ever gotten hurt badly while visiting the Armadillo’s was when I had been burnt. I had spent a few weeks resting with them before continuing my journey. Not really because the injuries had been that bad, but rather to make sure they would be fine.

Just as I had spent as long as I could in Lumen, before leaving.

We were already two days away from the port city... and to be honest, I wished we were even farther away. I knew nothing could actually come up now, being so far away, but I still had a horrible feeling that I was going to get called back to Lumen for one reason or another.

“During your travels with him Renn, did he ever... you know, visit brothels or anything?” Herra asked. It was interesting that she was now talking normally again. No more whispering it seemed.

“Uhm... no. I don’t think so,” Renn answered, yet I noted she actually paused as to peruse her memories for a moment.

“It’s weird. We’re not human, but we’re still people. He probably has someone he visits. Wonder who it is...” Herra grumbled.

I smiled at her weird complaining. From complaining about her family to me and my... urges. Such an odd way to pass the time.

At least it was harmless. And at least she and Renn seemed to be enjoying themselves... I had worried the trip south would be awkward, what with all the drama that had happened recently.

Seemed Herra didn’t care much. Yet she had also voted to banish Renn...

Unsettling... but it wasn’t as if Herra genuinely hated Renn. She simply didn’t feel comfortable living with her.

I decided it was better to not think too deeply about it.

The carriage along the path started to stay along the side of the road. To give us room to pass. A kind gesture, especially since there was enough room along the sides of the paths for our horses to easily utilize. Their wheels weren’t as sturdy as the horses legs and hooves here, in this rocky mountain.

I guided my horse to the opposite side of the path, and I listened as Herra did the same with hers. We passed the carriage without issue, with the driver nodding his head as we passed.

The thing did have windows, and although there were curtains within it to hide the occupants... they didn't do much good. Especially since they were pushed aside, and a pair of women stared at us as we passed.

Young women. Without guards out here? In the south?

Strange. Though maybe the driver of the carriage was guard enough. He had looked trained, but I hadn't really sized him up as we passed. Didn't think there was a need to.

Once we were past the carriage and able to return to a more leisure stroll, Herra ushered her horse forward as to come up to my side. I glanced at the two as she smirked at me, bringing us close. Our legs almost touched as she gestured behind her at Renn.

"Who would you rather sleep with Vim? Me or her?" she asked.

Renn's face contorted into an odd look of shock, and I could tell it wasn't because she was embarrassed. Rather she was simply shocked.

And shocking indeed it was.

“An odd question from you Herra,” I said honestly.

It was, after all. Herra usually was a lot more prim and proper. The type to get red in the face during such conversations. Never the type to initiate them, or say something like that in such a way.

“I know! Just answer it,” she said... and sure enough her face got redder. Her ears especially became rather flushed.

Sighing at her, and Renn’s worried look, I wondered what was wrong. Maybe Renn’s earlier comment about Herra’s affection towards me had been taken far deeper than I had assumed. Maybe this was some kind of payback for it, or at least an attempt at doing so.

“Neither. If I had to choose out of all the women around here, I’d choose that red-head in the carriage behind us,” I said.

Herra’s face went even deeper red, and Renn’s look of shock turned into contemplation as she glanced back. Had she not seen the women peering at us from the window? Or was she just studying the woman in her memories, likely comparing herself to what I had chosen instead of her.

“You know that makes sense, actually. You always flirt with the Sunken Barrel ladies...” Herra mumbled as she suddenly put many things together.

“Well... I haven’t done that in a while...” I said, and wished I had not picked the red-haired woman and instead the blonde. Of course Herra would have noticed something like that. Though their red hair might disappear from their bloodline, I remembered the young man she had said was her son having a dull blonde. A dirty color, nothing like the bright red the family usually had. What had been his name? Stanly?

“That’s only because all of the women are old now, but I see. So red hair huh? Maybe I should make a trip to the dye house,” Herra said as she went even further into thought.

Shaking my head at her, I tried not to notice Renn’s hand which was lifting some of her loose hair up, as to look at its color.

“I make it a point to not get intimate with other members of the Society. You know that Herra,” I said.

“I wish I knew who made that rule. I bet it was one of your past lovers,” Herra grumbled.

“Celine maybe? Did she have red hair?” Renn asked.

I flinched, which made the horse I was riding shake its head. I had squeezed my knees a little. I patted the thing gently, to calm it and let it know I hadn’t meant to bother it. “She had silver hair. Similar to Merit’s,” I said softly, and wished this conversation had never come up. Why had it anyway? Why were we talking about this, out in the mountains while on horseback? It was such a weird conversation. Maybe not entirely for Renn, but definitely for Herra. She flirted, but was usually a prude thanks to her religious mindset.

“Celine...? You don’t mean the old snake do you?” Herra asked, bringing her horse closer again. My leg and Renn’s bumped into each other, and I noticed the way she smiled at me as they did.

“No. The Celine Renn is talking about died a long time ago. She helped form the Society,” I explained.

“Huh...? How’d you know her Renn?” Herra asked.

“Huh? Oh... stories...?” Renn said, and she finally realized she had made a mistake. Likely thanks to the tone of my voice.

“Stories... oh. From Vim? Wonderful. Well Vim? Was Celine the one who made you swear off all of us?” Herra asked.

“No. But she would have, being the devout sister that she was,” I said.

“Wait what...?” Herra hesitated a moment and I nodded at her.

Guiding my horse, and thus theirs since it was walking in sync with mine now, I made sure we rounded the weird sunken hole in the middle of the road. It looked like a sinkhole, which was really strange out here in these rocky mountains. Something must have made it for some reason. An animal of some kind maybe? It looked as if there had been a tree there, and someone had uprooted it completely.

“Celine was one of the founding sisters. She was so devoted to that religion... she likely died chaste and celibate. So no, she was not my lover,” I told her.

I had loved her though. Just... not that way.

“A founding Sister...” Herra whispered, and I knew I had successfully changed the topic of conversation. After all, Herra was just as devout. Just as pious. To her such knowledge was worth far more than anything else.

Renn however...

Glancing over, I noted that Herra was now lost in thought. Her face was no longer flushed, and she was just barely aware enough that her grip on the reins wasn't too hard or taught. Renn however was staring at me with a gentle look... one of...

Was that pity?

It was.

I looked away from her and sighed. Why was she pitying me? What was that for?

What had I said to make her look at me in such a way? Out of all the things, pity? She should be happy, or upset... not...

“She was a member, Vim?” Herra asked.

I nodded. “She was. Most of her family was. She... was a good person. I may not have agreed with everything she and her group did and said, but I’ll be the first to tell you she was the embodiment of your faith. A perfect example of it,” I said.

“I’d love to hear about her,” Herra said softly.

Shuffling the reins in my hands, I wondered if I could actually tell her. Honestly Celine’s life and story wasn’t... really that serious. Not a secret. Not some lost history that shouldn’t be told anymore...

But if I spoke of Celine, then Renn might be able to put different pieces together. She had read her book after all.

Another danger of letting Renn accompany me. She was smart, and her memory was a potent weapon. Who knows how much she’d learn over the years with me.

“Well... we’ll have time I guess. At this pace it’ll take us at least two weeks to get you home,” I said. It didn’t usually take us that long, but we were moving slower thanks to Renn. Reatti and Renn had returned from the Bell Church on a single horse. Or rather, with a single horse. They hadn’t ridden it since it had been loaded with supplies. I hadn’t thought much of it, other than the obvious reason why they had not come back with two horses. Renn had been banished, and thus wasn’t allowed to take any supplies that she didn’t herself own from that location.

She had not been given a horse.

Not a big deal, it only added a day or so to their travel time... but instead it also revealed something about Renn.

Reatti had said Renn told her it was fine, since she didn't know how to ride a horse anyway.

Thus the reason she was sharing a horse with Herra.

I wonder if her lack of experience with such a thing was because of the dense mountains she was from, or the fact she had never needed one. Hadn't she traveled a little, before? Maybe she hadn't been able to afford a horse. They weren't cheap.

"I'll be more than okay with any sidetracking that must be done, Vim," Herra happily offered.

Smiling at her, I nodded. Of course she would.

"Is your home actually in a desert, Herra?" Renn asked.

“No. It’s on the boundary. And the desert to the south isn’t a real one... although maybe it is classified as one. There’re still trees, lakes and rivers there. It’s just very dry, and gets very hot,” Herra didn’t seem bothered at all to tell Renn of her home.

“Do you not like the heat? Is that why you left?” Renn asked.

Herra chuckled, and her legs shifted a little in the stirrups. She didn’t move the horse; she was just shifting a little. “I don’t, but that’s not why I don’t live there. You see my family and I don’t see eye to eye when it comes to the world,” she said.

“The world...?” Renn whispered the question, since she was trying to decipher Herra’s meaning.

“They’re atheists,” I said simply.

“Ah.” Renn made a noise that told me she now understood completely.

“Ridiculous isn’t it?” Herra complained.

“Mhm...” Renn made a noise as to agree with her, but I knew she wasn’t actually doing so. She just didn’t want to argue with Herra.

I sighed as we started to descend a little. The path we were on was starting to dip and the incline was growing stronger. The huge rocks blocked most of the view, but I knew if I climbed onto one of the

larger rocks I'd be able to see nearly all the way to the bottom of the mountain from here. This path led to the river at the base of the mountain, the one that seeped out from the large rocks below.

The melted snow. A mountain's blood.

For a short while... I focused on the sounds of the horses. Their hooves on the brittle gravel and rocks. The harnesses tightening. Their ears flapping. Their breathing, which was light for them but loud to me. We weren't carrying much, and not traveling hard so they weren't being strained.

Herr and Renn were sharing their horse, but the two weighed less than I did. I likely weighed more than them, and all our supplies combined.

I wonder how much I weighed right now, actually. It's been decades since I had been able to properly weigh myself. Though something told me it was the same as way back then. No matter how much I ate, how hard I worked, or how much flesh I lost in battle... it'd likely never change.

"Vim does that sometimes, but honestly it's rare. I bet he's thinking of something silly," Renn's voice brought me out of my thoughts as I turned a little, to see what was wrong.

The two women were smiling at me, and still astride next to me. I must have been ignoring them.

"Hm?"

Herra smirked at me. "What were you thinking about Vim?" she asked.

"How much I weighed," I said.

Both of their faces scrunched up for a moment, as they comprehended what I had said... and then they both laughed. "See what I mean!" Renn said happily.

Smiling at them, I returned my attention to our surroundings. We were alone, and I didn't hear or smell anything out of place... but I'd been ambushed before on this road. Last time I had been alone, but one of the times had been with a few of our more fragile members. One had gotten hurt, since they had fired lots of arrows at us without warning.

"He's probably just tired of listening to us. But I'm glad you're here Renn. Vim's always been kind enough to talk to me, and indulge me as we traveled, but he is a little boring," Herra said.

"For your information I find myself boring too," I said.

Herra snickered as Renn pointed at me. "I know what you mean Herra. He doesn't ignore us but... If we don't initiate the conversations half the time, we would just be traveling in silence for days. I had to get used to it at first," Renn said.

"Rude," I said simply, but didn't mind. They were right after all.

I've always been told I was a subpar traveling companion.

Sure I could protect, and do the typical labor and journey necessities like cooking and setting up camp... but I was far from amusing.

I'd blame my upbringing, but even before my years as a soldier I had been told the same thing.

"Are we staying at that village tonight Vim? The one below?" Herr asked.

"Yes. It should still be there. It's grown rather well, actually. There are other smaller villages around it now, people are expanding and settling down nearby," I said. One was to our west, higher up on the mountain like we currently were. They raised goats.

If it was still there.

"You've done this trip many times, haven't you Herra?" Renn asked.

"Oh... about a dozen or so times, I think. How many times have we done this now, Vim?" Herra asked.

"Not sure," I said. Honestly I didn't know. Several times, at least... but most of the time our trips were so uneventful I barely remembered anything about them.

In fact, going back to the previous topic... The only time that Herra ever tried anything funny was on the first trip, if I remembered correctly. Which was odd, now that I thought about it. She usually tried to seduce me, or simply sneak into my bed, nearly every time I visited Lumen. Yet she never really tried anything while on the road.

It was likely thanks to her religious personality. Doing something like that out here in the open, in public, was probably what kept her in check.

Though, sneaking into a man's bed in the middle of the night wasn't very holy either... so who knows why Herra was the way she were.

"Will we be escorting you back, Herra?" Renn asked gently.

I noted the way she had spoken, and turned just enough to glance at the two. Renn wasn't leaning forward around Herra's shoulder anymore, as if she was now hiding.

"Not unless Vim needs to go back, I think. I'll be fine on the way back because I'll go with some employees," Herra said. She spoke in a way that told me she too noticed Renn's tone, and likely knew the reason behind it.

Renn was worried we'd be going back to Lumen. A place that she was no longer welcomed at.

She wasn't outright banished, like she was at the Bell Church... but to her it may as well be the same thing.

“The armadillos provide precious gems to the Society. Near their home is a river village, one that has an Animalia Company warehouse. Herra will go there, and take a river boat back to Lumen. It’s a longer trip, but safe,” I explained to Renn.

“We have Animalia locations outside of Lumen?” Renn asked. Herra had ushered her horse a little, as to let Renn be able to speak to me without me having to turn around.

I nodded. “Several. They’re not as big or fancy, though,” I said.

“We have a big warehouse in Telmik, near the Cathedral too,” Herra added.

“Oh...” Renn’s single word sounded so... defeated that I glanced around just in case something was wrong before looking at her. There wasn’t of course, other than the sadness on Renn’s face.

“Your banishment is only for Lumen, Renn. And even then, it’s only for permanent residence. You’re still allowed to go there,” Herra said before I could.

Renn shifted and her shoulders rose as she nodded. “I see. Thank you Herra,” she said warmly.

Studying Renn, and Herra who she sat behind... I wondered how Herra could be so kind to her, yet vote against her.

Herra glanced at me, and then looked away. She blinked a few times, which told me she knew just how awkward it was right now.

Sighing at them, I decided to just let it be.

This was going to be a long couple weeks.

But... it was better than being in Lumen. My head still hurt from all the annoying things going on back there, and I was no longer responsible for any of it.

“So anyway, back to the important stuff. How about you Renn?” Herra asked.

“How about me...?” Renn asked back, and I too wondered what she was saying.

“Who would you choose? Or which one have you chosen, I guess? Everyone says you like Vim, but surely not right?” Herra specified, and I rolled my eyes at her. She wanted to continue that conversation of all things?

Maybe Lumen would have been better.