

Non Human 201

Chapter 201 A Smell to Hate

Some food just smelled... bad.

I knew the meat in the pot wasn't actually rancid, but it sure smelled like it. Just what kind of animal was it from?

Stirring the pot, I wished I had volunteered for something else. Had I known this would have stunk so bad, and burnt my eyes as it was doing, I'd have never offered to do it.

Yet I had... so I'd finish it.

Grumbling as I stirred the pot full of puls, as Vim had called it, I hoped it didn't taste anywhere near as bad as it smelled... but something told me it would.

My nose was usually right about such things. And right now my nose was telling me to run away, or dump the stuff in the pot into the river nearby.

But if I did that not only would Vim look at me funny, it would likely make all the fish in the river sick too.

Vim was over near the horses, and Herra was just over the little ridge Vim had called a stump even though it looked more like a hill. She was fishing at the embankment just beyond, which I was very thankful for. Maybe she'd catch enough I'd not need to eat the stuff in the pot I was stirring.

It was evening, and it's been three days since we left the small river village at the base of the large mountain still looming behind us. It was a far distant sight now, yet it was still... overwhelming. It looked like another world, thanks to all the peaks and the way it seemed layered. It was as if there were hundreds of mountains in the distance, each bigger than the last.

Vim and I had traveled over a mountain range to get to Lumen, from Telmik, but that one looked far bigger... yet it hadn't taken us nearly as long to cross it. Though that might be thanks to the horses, and the fact we hadn't crossed over their peaks. We had rounded them instead.

Luckily my body didn't hurt very much. My right arm felt... mostly fine now, I was even using it to stir the pot. The continuous motion wasn't hurting me, which was a good sign. Yet my tail still hurt... but that might be because I had wrapped it a little too roughly during our journey out of Lumen. I had tucked it away neatly, since I was riding a horse... I probably hadn't needed to go through such lengths, but I wanted to be sure.

Once we were out of Lumen, and in the depths of the mountains, I had unfurled my tail. Vim didn't seem to mind, and it kept me from wincing in pain every time the horse took a step.

It was healing, just... slowly. I had even felt it move earlier, when Vim had started cooking what was in the pot. The smell had made my tail go stiff. Hopefully in a few weeks it'd be healed completely... and even more so, hopefully it wouldn't be permanently damaged.

Some tall grass swayed in the wind nearby, and then shifted again. I glanced over at the patch of grass... and knew what I had heard hadn't been just the wind.

Sure enough it wasn't. A small brown head popped out of the thick grass, and I smiled at the little animal.

It disappeared into the grass again, and I wondered if the small weasel looking animal had been drawn by the smell. Likely not to eat, but instead to glare at something that was stinking up its home.

"Sorry, little one," I whispered an apology as I stirred the pot.

The fire beneath the pot was crackling, yet not as hot or large as it had been earlier. Vim had told me to not feed it any more logs for a bit, as to let the stuff in the pot simmer instead of boil.

A part of me wished to boil it all away, but that would probably just make it stink even worse somehow.

Sighing as I shifted on the rock I sat upon, a tiny little squeak drew my eyes back to the grass.

Popping its head out of the grass again, it tilted its head at me and shook its many whiskers violently.

"What?" I asked it. Was it upset with me? Or rather, the smell?

It bounded out of the grass and onto the crushed grass that made up our little camp. I watched the long thin snake-like animal quickly dart towards me, and then pause several paces away.

The little creature made an adorable squeaking noise as it stood up, and I nearly melted as the thing's whiskers shook at me.

"Fine, but don't tell Vim," I whispered as I slowly spooned out a small piece of meat. I plucked it from the spoon, since the rice broth was thick... and I didn't want the animal to get sick on it.

Putting the small piece of meat onto the rock between me and the small ferret looking animal, I smiled as it lowered back to the ground and hurried up to it. The thing wasted no time, it didn't even smell it, and it just picked it up and started chewing on it.

The creature was cute, and it made little noises as it ate the meat. I noticed as it ate, and when I had picked it up, that the meat was actually really tender and soft. I had nearly been unable to grab it out of the broth.

"Feeding the wildlife I see," Vim's voice startled me, and luckily didn't startle the tiny creature. The thing didn't even move as it focused on eating, it must like the foul smelling meat.

"It's just a tiny bite," I defended myself.

Vim smiled at me in a way that told me he wasn't bothered at all. He stepped forward and held his hand out for the spoon, which I obliged and handed it off.

He spun the contents of the pot for a moment before nodding. "Looking good," he said.

“Wish it smelled good,” I mumbled.

“Mhm... it’s the meat. They cured it in a way that isn’t common for this area. Or... any of the areas around us. But I was in the mood for it. It smells a little, but it’s tasty,” Vim said.

“Smells a little? Smells like it’s dangerous to eat, more like,” I said as I watched the little creature finish eating. It immediately went to cleaning its paws and face, and the sight made me smile. It was soothing to watch the tiny creature.

Vim chuckled a little as he nodded. “Right? And careful, minks become rather bold. Especially when fed like that, by people like you,” Vim said.

“People like me...?” I asked, but wasn’t able to get an answer. Herra huffed as she walked up the embankment, carrying a small rope that had several fish attached to it.

“Whatever is in that pot, has scared every living creature away. Is your nose broken Vim?” she asked loudly, stepping over to us.

Upon her appearance, and loud approach, the tiny creature squeaked and darted off. I watched it hurry off into the underbrush nearby, and wished it had stayed a little longer. It had been adorable.

Seems not only the scent of what we were cooking was scaring things off.

"If it is I'll never know," Vim said simply as he offered me the spoon again, so he could go about helping Herra with the fish.

She mumbled some complaints, but didn't really seem to press it... nor did she seem to be saying anything like she wouldn't be eating the stuff she was complaining about. Maybe she was used to Vim's oddness.

"How about you Renn? Is your nose broken too?" she asked as Vim pulled aside a small wooden board, to place upon his lap as to begin cleaning and preparing the fish.

"No. Or well, it might be now after this. It stinks horribly to me too," I said as I stirred the pot.

"What is it?" she asked as she stepped over to look into it.

"He called it pulss?" I said.

"Puls. A grain pottage. Just a simple soup," Vim said as he procured knives and began to clean the fish.

"Simple? Please..." Herra grumbled as she stared at the stuff I stirred.

It actually didn't look bad. It was thick, and the meat was very dark... but... "Wait grain? That's not rice?" I asked.

"No. It's grains," Vim corrected.

Oh. I had thought it was rice, based off how it looked. I hadn't watched Vim actually prepare the pot, I had only walked over to keep an eye on it and stir it... since he said it needed to simmer for a few hours before it was ready.

The stuff did look more like rice than grains though. Maybe it was because of the broth. It was thick.

Herra sighed as she took a seat near me, on a small log that looked as if it had been sat on hundreds of times before. There was even a small spot near where Herra had sat that looked like an indent, from someone or something sitting for extended periods of time.

The log was a better seat than the rock I sat upon, but it was nearly twice as far away from the small fire and the cooking pot. Not something I could sit on while stirring.

"What were you feeding Renn?" Herra asked as she glanced over to the large grass that the little animal had disappeared into.

"Vim said it was a mink," I said.

“Ah. Yes. I saw several near the river. They must have their little den nearby,” Herra said as she bent over to mess with her shoes. She went to pulling on her socks, to scratch at her ankle.

“Renn was likely just trying to feed as much as she can to the wildlife, as to have less to eat,” Vim teased.

Herra chuckled as she nodded. “Please Renn, keep doing so.”

Smiling at the two, I watched as Vim cut up the fishes even more.

“You’re not putting that into the pot are you?” I asked worriedly.

“No. Why? Want me to?” he asked.

“Don’t!” Herra answered for me as she stood up. She rounded the pot and went over to Vim. She went to helping him finish, by taking the bits of freshly cut and cleaned fish. She huffed at him as she stepped away, carrying a small wooden bowl full of fish.

“I wasn’t going to. Why ruin a good pottage?” Vim said lightly as he went to toss the refuse from the fish he had just cut up. He stepped over the log Herra had been sitting on, and headed for the hill behind it. Likely to toss the bits of fish into or near the river.

“So he says, but I’ve seen him eat some very weird things so I’m not taking any chances,” Herra said as she procured another metal pot. One much smaller than the one I was stirring. In fact it looked more like a bowl than a pot.

She went to putting the pieces of cut up fish into it, and then went to get other stuff to add to it. I noted the stuff she pulled out of the bag nearby, that had all of our cooking supplies in it. She didn’t just grab one of the water jugs, but also spices and other little bottles.

“What kind of weird things?” I asked.

“Weird food, like this stuff... bones. Grass and leaves. I once saw him eat some weird bugs too, on a trip home once. It was a huge crawly thing, with weird wings,” Herra shivered as she spoke, as if remembering the memory made her grossed out.

“Really...” I wasn’t too surprised, since Vim was odd in a way... but I hadn’t ever seen him really eat anything that odd. He sometimes ate very little, but usually ate alongside me... which meant usually something similar.

Though he also rarely ate in front of others. Maybe he was comfortable eating in front of Herra, since he’s known her for so long.

He had eaten several times with everyone at Lumen... but had rarely stayed long enough to say he ate together for the whole dinner, or lunch. He usually just ate a few pieces, then left.

“Wait did you say bones? What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Just what it sounds like. I’ve seen him gnaw and munch on bones. Like from larger animals, like bears. Do you do that too, Renn? Is it a predator thing?” Herra asked.

“Uh... I’m a cat, not a dog. So no, I don’t gnaw on bones,” I said, smiling at my own little joke.

Herra frowned and shrugged as she went to adding stuff to the small metal bowl she was going to use to cook the fish. She didn’t seem to find my joke very amusing.

“Bones have nutrients in them. Plus they can sometimes taste good, depending on how they’re prepared,” Vim said as he walked back over the small hill.

“But... bones are just bones?” I asked him.

He nodded. “I know it sounds funny, but it’s true. If you had been born and grown up far to the east, you’d not only feel eating bones was normal you’d know a dozen ways to prepare them. Just as those there have no idea how to prepare proper wheat bread,” Vim said.

“They don’t have bread?” I asked, interested.

“They do. Just different types. They cook them differently, basically. I’ll show you sometime,” Vim said as he walked over to look down at Herra and her bowl, which she was now putting into the fire as to warm it up.

“Enough for Renn and me,” Herra said up at him, once she noticed his gaze.

I smiled at Herra’s odd kindness as Vim sighed and nodded. “Sure, sure. At least give it a try though, you might find yourself liking it,” he said.

“Oh I’ll give it a try, Vim. But... well...” Herra shrugged, not feeling the need to say more.

Right. The smell alone was... very apparent.

The stuff was likely going to be disgusting.

“As to distract ourselves from the smell, tell me Renn, I hear you don’t get along with your family either?” Herra asked.

“Huh? Oh... Well I didn’t, no,” I said as I refocused on the new topic.

Herra nodded. “It’s weird isn’t it? Most of those who still have families love them, and live with them! I don’t know how they do it,” Herra complained.

Ah. She just wanted to voice her disgruntled feelings over having to go home. That was why she was asking me such things.

“Family is... supposed to be special, they say,” I said carefully.

After all, didn’t her religion say such a thing? Several portions of her bible made it very clear that family was to be seen as important and valued.

“Special,” she scoffed the word.

“To some,” Vim said as he stepped over to me, as to take the spoon from me.

I let him have it, and leaned back and away from the pot. It didn’t help; the smell somehow felt stronger being farther from it.

“So... is it only your difference in opinions Herra? That causes you so much grief?” I asked her.

“No. We’ve had battles over lots of things. Last time Vim took me home, he had to join me to the port nearby since my cousin and I got into a fight,” Herra said plainly.

Glancing at Vim for conformation, he nodded at me.

It was that bad?

“Must be mighty opinions,” I said gently. And here I thought I was the one with conflicting opinions amongst the society. At least none of my opinions had made me and anyone else come to blows yet.

“They are, for them. I’m actually proud of Herra, for standing up for her own beliefs,” Vim said calmly.

Herra looked up at him and her face almost melted as she smiled at him.

I see. Was that why Herra loved him? Because he said such things so smoothly?

If so I was the same, sometimes... but...

But he said such things for everyone, didn’t he? After all, it was sourced from his belief of free-will.

He was praising her ability to think for herself. Whether he agreed with her opinions or not didn’t matter.

“See? So don’t let it bother you Renn. We all have our problems,” Herra said, composing herself.

Nodding at her, I wondered why... Why Herra could say such a thing, and believe it, yet at the same time vote against me.

She could understand why we were different. She could sit here, travel with me, and talk with me as if all was normal... yet wasn't willing to comfortably live with me.

Yet, I suppose she was also willing to go visit her family... the same family she spoke about with such scorn.

"My family and I fought too. I ended up killing a few of them, hopefully you don't ever have to go that far," I said to her.

Herra hesitated a moment as she messed with the bowl of fish. She had removed it from the immediate fire, and set it on some rocks nearby. Maybe to let it cool off.

She said nothing and instead glanced over at Vim, who seemed to be ignoring us all of a sudden.

"They were that bad huh?" Herra then said.

I nodded. "They were."

“Mine regrettably aren’t that bad...” Herra mumbled.

Regrettably huh?

“When’d you... leave? Stop living with them, I mean?” I asked.

Herra shifted and tilted her head. “Right when Lumen was created, right?” she asked Vim and herself.

“I believe so, yes,” Vim nodded.

“Good timing,” I said.

“I used it as an excuse. We’ve been selling our gems to the Society forever, so when Lumen was created I offered to go and be our representative there,” Herra explained.

“Good way to do it,” I said.

“Yea... it’s been fun. Though something tells me it’s going to get very annoying soon. I swear Vim, what are we going to do when they make the guild too big? We already need so many humans, what will we do now that the entire Lumen merchant organization is under our umbrella?” Herra asked.

“Currently not my problem, but yes... it will become one eventually. I’m not looking forward to it,” Vim sighed after he spoke.

“Then why allow it, if it’s going to be such a problem?” I asked.

“Because that’s what they voted on. You wouldn’t know it, but more than Brandy and Gerald want to make the guild more successful. Pierre and Liina for instance. You’d never know it, based off how they talk and act, but their whole lives revolve around their jobs,” Herra said.

Oh? Liina I hadn’t really gotten to spend time with and Pierre was willing to talk to me but was always very busy... which was likely what Herra meant.

“So most of them wanted what’s happening, Vim?” I asked him for conformation.

“They voted overwhelmingly in favor of accepting Thraxton’s proposal, yes,” Vim said.

“All but a few of us voted no. But oh well. At least it gives us all something to focus on and do,” Herra said.

So she had voted no. I wonder who else had done so.

Seemed there were several votes without me. Not that surprising... since I was in a sense banished from Lumen, so didn’t have the right to decide their fates... but...

But it still hurt to hear it.

“Here Renn, eat as much as you can before that gunk is ready,” Herra whispered in a hushed voice as she offered some of the cooked fish. It was the same bowl she had used to cook with, but she had a new bowl on her lap. Her own share, it seemed.

“None for Vim?” I asked as I took the bowl happily.

“And waste room in my stomach for this deliciousness? No thank you,” Vim said.

Smiling at him, I nodded as I sat back and stared down into the small bowl.

There wasn't much in it. But I knew Herra had not been stingy with me. She had only caught a few fish, and after cooking and cleaning there just simply wasn't much to be had.

I had never really paid attention, but it was likely that Herra ate more like a human. In small volumes, and not as often.

“Did you enjoy your stay in Lumen, Renn?” Herra asked as she started eating her share.

Hesitating... I wondered if I had.

“Honestly... I did. I met many wonderful people. Experienced many new things. And I got to see a part of the Society I didn’t know existed,” I said after a moment of thinking about it.

“Good. Better to think of those days fondly, even if they hurt a little,” Herra said.

“She speaks from experience, so take it to heart,” Vim added.

Glancing at Herra who smiled and nodded, I wondered if he was speaking of her relationship with her family... or something else.

Seemed everyone did have a story. It wasn’t too strange, when one considered how long we could live and our... natures... but...

But it was still interesting.

Slowly eating the fish, I noted Herra had likely used a little too much seasoning. It was a little too strong for my taste, but it wasn’t so bad it made me flinch.

She must have a strange sense of taste, to want even her fish to taste like this. Or maybe it was my tongue that was weird.

“How much longer until we reach your home, Herra?” I asked.

“A few more days. The trees will start to thin out, and become thick and spiky. The rocks will become redder, and...” Herra paused as she chewed, and then swallowed. “And I’ll become very irritable. So I apologize in advance, please don’t hold anything I say or do from here on against me,” Herra said to me.

“Oh... uh sure...” I nodded, though wasn’t sure what to think of that.

Would she actually become problematic?

Was her family that bad? Honestly? Maybe it was more than just a difference in opinions.

“I recommend sticking with Vim while there. Don’t let her get entangled in my family, Vim. All right?” Herra pointed at him as she spoke.

“Sure, sure. We’ll not be staying long so there shouldn’t be any chances of anything happening, Herra,” Vim said.

“We’ll not be there long?” I asked worriedly. I had been looking forward to meeting new people... and seeing for myself why Herra seemed to be so against them.

“A few days at most,” he nodded.

Great. Not enough time at all... but it will have to do.

About to stick my fork into my small bowl, as to get some more... I found nothing to poke. There was just some liquid, a few floating specks of seasoning, and a tiny piece of a leaf.

I had eaten it all.

And still felt hungry as if I'd not eaten anything.

Wonderful. I really was going to have to eat the stuff Vim was cooking...

“Almost done,” Vim said, noticing my gaze.

Groaning at him, Herra also made a noise as she shivered.

“How big is your family Herra?” I asked, trying to distract myself from the inevitable.

“Not sure. Depends on how many births, and deaths since I last visited. At least twenty three, that I know of for sure,” she said.

Twenty three! What a large family...

“They... all live together?” I asked.

She nodded. “Gross isn’t it?” she said.

I hadn’t meant it that way, but I still smiled at her answer.

“Though... that might change now, with human blood entering our family. How often do humans give birth, Vim?” Herra asked.

“Depends on many factors, but in these regions it’s not uncommon for a single family to have six or more children,” Vim said as he stopped stirring the pot... and went to procure bowls for everyone.

Great. Here it comes.

“Six? Jeez...” Herra groaned as she thought of it.

Six... "Most human families I knew didn't have that many," I said as I watched Vim rummage around in one of the bags.

"You're from the north, Renn. Families there only have a few kids. Maybe it's the cold?" he said.

"Oh right. Cold. I hate the cold. No wonder you left, Renn," Herra said.

Was it really just because of the cold...?

"You'd think our kind had more children than humans, being able to live for so long," I said.

"Some do. Remember Silkie? She has over a dozen children, which I know of," Vim said as he found the bowls and headed back over.

"She does?" I asked.

He nodded as he went to filling the bowls with the stuff from the pot.

"She's not the only one Sofia what? Ten? Eleven?" Herra reminded me.

“So she did,” Vim said gently as he finished filling one of the bowls... and then turned to me.

I groaned as he stepped over to hand me a bowl first.

Herra flinched alongside me as I took it, and I had to blink and scrunch up my nose as the smell became stronger.

How did it stink so badly? And why did it sting the eyes too?

“Vim I...” Herra mumbled as he held out a bowl for her... but she went quiet and sighed and took it.

He smirked at us and then went to filling his own bowl.

“Maybe I’ll get lucky and it’ll kill me,” Herra mumbled as she stared into her bowl. It was steaming, and it looked like her eyes were as watery as mine.

Vim chuckled as he finished filling his bowl and went over to sit on another rock. One not far from me.

“May your noses survive,” he said with a small raise of his bowl.

“What a statement,” Herra grumbled as she stirred the contents of her bowl slowly... she looked as if she was getting sick.

Staring down at my own bowl, I sighed at the spoon within. The smell was making my stomach hurt. As if I had already eaten a piece, and was already rejecting it.

For a few moments I watched Vim eat. He didn't seem bothered by the smell at all, but I was used to that from him. He never let anything bother him, at least not outwardly.

Herra took a deep breath... and then finally took a bite. She squeezed her eyes shut as she chewed.

She eventually chewed enough, and swallowed... and didn't seem to gag or throw up... but she did have a pained face. She must not have found it appetizing.

Looking down to my lap, and to the bowl in my hands... I sighed.

My bowl would be getting cold if I didn't eat.

Yet as hungry as I was... I had no desire to eat. No urge to spoon the contents into my mouth.

The reason was obvious. The smell was just that bad... yet...

Vim was eating it calmly, and even seemed to have a tiny smile on his face as he did so. He looked to be enjoying himself.

Which was unusual, since Vim rarely seemed to care about what he ate. For him to actually seem to find something delicious... was... well...

Glancing down at my bowl, I groaned. I was going to have to try and eat it. Not just because I was hungry, and the fish Herra had caught hadn't been enough, but because of Vim.

If he found it so delectable, then I needed to find out why. If anything so I could at least understand what he found delicious.

But the smell...

"Well, honestly I can't taste anything. The smell's too strong. If it kills me at least I won't have to deal with my family," Herra mumbled, and then took another bite.

Groaning at her repeated joke, I took a deep breath and scooped up some stuff too.

Taking a bite, I closed my eyes and waited for the sting of disgust.

Instead... Regrettably...

The stuff was delicious.

Chapter 202 The Embers of Chaos

The smoldering village reminded me of Lomi's. Yet this one had far more than a single pile of burnt bodies.

Blood marred the streets. Bodies with spears and arrows were littered everywhere, men and women alike. Half of the buildings were burning, the other half already burnt down.

I couldn't hear the sounds of anyone still alive. No screams. No whimpers... but I also wasn't really searching for them. I stood outside the village limits, just past a broken fence. One that had been likely something of an animal pen. Although no animals were around to prove it, the mud and hoof-prints all around the fence answered its purpose.

"Vim... the war surely hasn't progressed this far north has it?" Herra asked worriedly from behind me.

"Seems it might have," I said.

Flags were staked around the edge of the city. Large banners of red and black flapped in the wind and drafts made by the burning buildings. I didn't recognize the symbol on the banners, but it was obvious this wasn't just the work of typical bandits. This was a message, of some kind.

They didn't take the women and children. Odds are the only reason they took the animals was for food, if it was a large band such a thing was common.

If bandits, then they weren't very good at their job. So assuming it was an actual army made more sense. They were cruel enough to slaughter everyone, but wouldn't partake in the more despicable acts commonly found with such barbarity.

"Should we check if anyone needs help?" Renn asked.

"No. There's a group of men on the other side of the village. I think they're scouts," I said. We couldn't see them anymore, thanks to where we had stopped our horses, but I had seen them on our approach. They had been going in and out of the village... they might not be scouts at all, but rather simple looters taking advantage of the situation. Or maybe even the survivors of the village. But they had all been dressed in the same yellowish colors, implying they were members of a legion of some kind. Either a military or otherwise.

I was in no mood to get involved with such a thing. Far from it.

"Scouts?" Renn asked.

"Either the ones who did this, or the enemies of them. Neither are people we want to get involved with," Herra said.

I nodded, and sighed. If the war really has reached this far north... then that meant there was now danger to our Society and its members.

Just great. First Lumen, then this. It really never ends.

“Let’s round it. I want to see if they really burnt it the way I think they did,” I said as I guided my horse to the right, as to circle the village a little. Not entirely of course, as to avoid the people on the other side of it... but I wanted to verify something.

“The way they did?” Herra asked. My horse trotted away upon my guidance... but did so slowly. And stiffly, as if worried about something. Maybe it was concerned over the fires. They weren’t necessarily close, but the air was thick of the smoke.

“This is worse than a simple pillaging,” I said.

“Worse? What could be worse than pillaging and burning down a whole village?” Renn asked.

“This is not just the sacking of a village... this is a containment burn. See how the outside buildings are already burnt down and embering? They set the village on fire from the outside, not from within,” I explained as we headed up a small hill.

The two women were silent as we rounded the village. There was a small river nearby, but we were heading away from it. I wanted to avoid water, since I knew from experience those involved in burning buildings usually ran to water whether they were the victims or the perpetrators.

As we rounded the village, I confirmed my suspicions.

The outer layer of the village had been set aflame first. The fires spread from there, heading inward... which was where the fires were now raging.

And even more so, I was able to get a better picture of how it had happened. All the bodies scattered around, most with arrow or spear wounds, had all fallen in an obvious way.

They had been running. And not just from their attackers. They had been running from the fires.

The people of the village had been forced into the fires. Into the center of the village. And when they tried to flee, they were culled.

A typical thing to happen during an attack on this scale... but...

Finally finding a section of the burning buildings and fires I could see through, I confirmed my suspicions even more.

Deep within the village, nearly out of sight thanks to the smoke and flames... was a giant pile of animal corpses. Large beasts, piled nearly as high as a nearby building that had almost collapsed entirely into itself.

They hadn't taken the animals. Not even for food.

“That’s not the banner of war,” I said after coming to understand what happened.

Sighing, I gestured for Herra to guide her horse away with me. To leave the stricken village behind.

“What do you mean, Vim?” Renn asked worriedly. Hopefully she wouldn’t argue with my decision. She had a large heart, and always felt the need to help people. I needed to get her away before she heard the cries of someone injured... or even worse a child.

“That village was burnt because it was infected. A cruel method, but it’s what the humans do once it becomes this bad. Those banners are not warnings to their enemies, but warnings to everyone else. To not enter, because the village contains disease,” I said.

The banners weren’t the best in their purpose. The symbol on it was likely the one of the church in this region, but usually such a thing wasn’t an outright bad thing. Usually seeing the symbol of a religion on a flag wasn’t something that instilled fear, for normal people.

Right now though, that was what it was being used for. The church had erected the banners to inform everyone who saw the carnage, as to say this was the holy thing to do. That this was done by those who knew best.

At least, that was likely their intention.

“You mean that plague, don’t you? The one the sailors talked about,” Herra said as she understood.

“Likely. They even culled and burnt the animals,” I said.

“Ah... that’s definitely what that smell is,” Herra complained.

Yes. The smell of burning horses. It also explained why our horses were walking stiffly.

“How bad is a plague, for a whole village to be burnt because of it?” Renn asked worriedly.

“It could be very bad. The stories I heard weren’t good. Lots of blood and it spreads like crazy,” Herra said.

I nodded. Plagues were bad indeed.

I’d rather war than a plague... but one usually never was far behind the other, so I suppose that didn’t matter.

Sighing, I glanced back one last time to the smoldering village. I memorized the banner, and the symbol upon it.

Before I turned back around, Renn caught my eye. She frowned at me, and I noticed the deep and troubled concern on her face.

“Let it be Renn. Disease is one thing that can hurt our kind just as easily as it does the humans,” I warned her.

“It’s that bad?” she asked.

“It is. Imagine a sickness that kills you, painfully, and no one is safe from it. I’ve heard from Merit and others, that part of the reason their kingdom didn’t succeed was because of a plague,” Herra said.

“That was a major component, yes,” I said. I didn’t feel the need to tell her the truth, but there was no harm in admitting it was one of the reasons that kingdom fell.

“And it hurts us too? Not just humans?” Renn asked.

“Sometimes even more so. Humans can survive those diseases because of their numbers. We don’t have the numbers to bounce back from such things,” I said.

“Ah...” Renn didn’t sound too happy to hear that. But it was to be expected.

“Yes. It’s not good at all. If it’s here already, that means it’s in Lumen too. What will we do Vim?” Herra asked.

“Not sure yet,” I said honestly.

Not just Lumen, it would be everywhere... though...

“If those in power here are already going to such extremes, it actually might not spread too far. It’s a horrible method, but it’s an effective one,” I said lightly.

“Killing everyone?” Renn asked sharply.

“Yes. As I said, a horrible method. But it stops the spread,” I said.

Renn mumbled something behind Herra, who chuckled lightly. “She really is a gentle one, Vim,” she said.

Wonder what she had said. I hadn’t really paid attention... “She is,” I agreed.

“Would you have burnt that village Vim?” Renn asked me.

I had expected such a question from her, so I was ready to answer it.

"I've done it before myself," I told her the truth.

She didn't make a noise or mumble this time.

How else did she think I could recognize the pattern of it so quickly?

"If my family is fine, we'll be able to learn what's going on from them," Herra said.

And you are a cold one, Herra. You actually sounded a little hopeful. She really did hold very little love for them, didn't she?

The horses' hooves were noisy against the hard stone we trudged upon. There were large rocks and boulders all around, some big enough to block out the flat land that surrounded us. I intentionally led the horses through some of the larger boulders and their clusters, as to keep us hidden just in case.

"Plagues come every so often. I suppose it was about time for another," I said as I thought of it. The last real one was indeed the same one that Herra spoke of. The one that started in that one nation, and ended up nearly destroying the kingdom Merit and her friends had tried to create.

It hadn't honestly been that bad of a disease. It killed the elderly, and infirm, but it hadn't wiped out entire populations. The main reason it had done so much damage to Merit's kingdom was the simple fact that they hadn't been ready for it.

They didn't have enough food stores. So once the disease wrought its cruel damage, they hadn't the manpower to farm and distribute enough food throughout the lands. Then of course, the many dead bodies drew out the Monarch from its slumber.

Like a spreading fire, jumping from tree to tree. The disasters had simply sprouted more, and there had been too many at once.

"I wonder if it will stop the war, if it's really that bad," I said as I pondered aloud.

"It might? Though that war is likely the very reason there even is a disease to catch," Herra said.

"War and pestilence," Renn quoted.

Herra nodded, agreeing with her.

Religious in nature? Likely not. Though the church here would definitely utilize it in such a way.

I shifted upon the horse, and decided to not criticize the church too much. After all, its methods... although vile, was likely going to be what saved the many surrounding nations. If they didn't utilize such barbaric tactics, the disease would simply spread and spread unchecked until either herd immunity came into play, or it simply killed so many that there weren't enough people to spread the disease anymore.

“Still, we...” I was about to warn the two, as to watch out if we met anyone or entered another village... but I went quiet as I turned my head to look at the sound of something scraping stone.

Hidden behind some boulders, between a crevice, trying to hide in the shadows and stay out of sight... was a pair of eyes staring back at my own.

And they weren't reflective.

Humans.

A family.

Staring into the eyes of the man who was shielding those behind him, I studied him for just a moment.

I tried to tell if his skin had spots, beneath the stain of ash and dirt. I tried to see any strange markings, or tattoos to tell me where he was from or his clan. I checked those he shielded, for proof they were his and not those he had captured. I checked for wounds and injuries.

“Vim...” Renn whispered at the sight of them, but I ignored her as I kept my eyes locked onto the man's. My horse had come to a stop, since it had sensed something was off.

There looked to be two small children behind the woman who hid behind the man. He was broad shouldered, and had the look of a laborer. Yet even with his muscles, and solid body... he looked as

terrified as the children who hid behind their parents. Their little eyes were wide, huge plates of worry and awe, as they stared at us from around their parents.

They were simple victims. There were no chains upon them. No marks or brands seared onto their skin. No obvious signs of disease, which I could see or smell. They were not a threat to me, those I guided, or the Society in any shape or form.

Just a simple family, trying to hide from the destruction that had just occurred nearby. They might have been hiding in that little crevice since their home had been razed.

Rather the only threat they could possibly provide... is if we got involved with them. Either by associating with those who might be infected, or if we got seen by their pursuers and became similar victims by helping them.

I made a clicking noise, to draw the horse away. Herra made sure to keep her horse at pace with my own, and we left the family behind.

The man breathed out a deep sigh of relief as we left them behind, and I wondered if them hiding here meant whatever group had done the ransacking and burning of that village had gone the other way. We were heading more west than south, so maybe they had gone east or north.

If so that meant they were rounding the lakes and rivers. Which wasn't surprising, since the vast majority of the villages and towns in this area were all located on said rivers and lakes.

People needed water to survive, after all.

“Vim...” Renn groaned after a few minutes.

“Let it be Renn. They’re alive. Unharmd, by the looks of it too. They’ll be fine. Once they feel it’s safe they’ll return to their homes, gather supplies and leave. They don’t need help,” I said.

“I... I understand... but...” Renn tried to complain, and I kept myself from glancing over at her. Herra had ushered her horse a little, so we were now riding side by side. She did it often when Renn and I were talking. A kind act.

“Let it be. For many reasons. The main one, we don’t know for sure if they’re sick or not. You may be willing to risk yourself, or me, but Herra and her family are not as stout as we are. There are several members at Herra’s home that are already old and ill, do not threaten their lives anymore than necessary,” I said.

“Hmph.” Herra made a noise, but I ignored her.

“Right... sorry Herra, I hadn’t thought of that,” Renn said gently.

“Oh don’t mind me. I wouldn’t lose a moment of sleep if you got those idiots killed, Renn. But I’d rather not get sick, honestly. Vim wouldn’t let me return to Lumen if I got sick, and I really don’t want to be stuck at home for years because of it,” Herra said.

Glancing over at the two finally, I noted the wry smile on Renn's face as Herra nodded at herself. "Stuck quarantined with your family. Quite an idea," I teased.

Herra shivered, which made her horse tilt its head and huff. It hadn't liked that.

Renn turned around, to look at those we had left behind. She frowned at them, and I wondered if they had hid away somewhere else. Another crevice, possibly.

"We could ask them about what happened," Renn suggested.

Before I could say anything, Herra did. "If Vim says we should let them be, that's what we should do Renn. He likely assessed them in those few moments, and decided against doing any of that. He knows what he's doing."

Turning a little, to look at the two women, I watched Renn tilt her head at Herra... though Herra obviously couldn't see her do so, what with Renn sitting behind her. "I... understand. I was just offering an idea," she said.

"A good one, under other circumstances. Though... I suppose you being the way you are is far better than the alternative. Now that I think about it, you being so gentle is actually a far better option, isn't it Vim? Usually you predators are cold-hearted and ruthless," Herra said as she thought about it.

Renn's face contorted into an odd look of confusion and annoyance. She didn't seem to like the topic Herra had stumbled upon.

“If I didn’t expect disease Renn... I might have at least talked to them for a moment. Or if I had been alone. But I’m your protector, not theirs,” I said, to keep the topic from straying too far into the territory that obviously seemed to bother Renn.

Herra nodded, agreeing with me. “Exactly. Did you see any disease on them, Vim? I didn’t,” Herra asked.

“No. But there are plagues that either don’t show well or take a long time to do so,” I said.

“Great. I need a bath,” Herra mumbled.

Sighing, I wondered if I should prepare some kind of mask for Renn. And Herra, if we didn’t drop her off at her home here in a few days.

I’d be fine... but Renn...

Another danger for her. Just by being at my side.

Wonderful.

“If something happens, we encounter people... go to a town, or we get separated, be mindful. Don’t eat or drink anything you don’t prepare yourselves. Don’t share utensils or cups and bowls, or clothes, from anyone. Don’t touch blood, for any reason, unless it’s your own. Just in case,” I warned the two.

“A good excuse to use on my family. Thank you Vim,” Herra smirked at me.

I ignored Herra and stared into Renn’s worried eyes. “Okay,” was all she said... but I could see she understood me.

She’d obey, at least to a degree.

Just great. Hopefully whatever was happening was only in this region, and not to the west where we’ll be going next.

“Vim, a horse,” Renn’s voice drew my eyes to my right. Sure enough off in the distance was a single horse. It was riding hard, and its rider looked focused. They were leaned forward a little, as if to better usher the horse.

They were headed past us, towards the village.

“News will spread,” I said.

“Oh for sure. The humans do not take kindly to their families and friends being burnt like that,” Herra said.

“Neither do we,” I reminded her.

She nodded in a way that told me she had forgotten we too were often burnt at the stake.

“Let’s go. Before I need to kill someone just because we were around when this happened,” I said, and ushered my horse into a faster trot.

“Right,” Herra agreed.

Heading not far from where the sun would be setting towards soon. I knew a few miles away was a large river. One we’d have to cross over, to reach Herra’s home.

We’d need to cross that river quickly less they’ll be able to track us by the horses’ prints. And I couldn’t allow that. If I found anyone following us, trailing us... tracking us...

I’d need to kill them all. Brutally. So that no one would follow after them.

Herra’s home was hidden, for good reason. And not just because of the wealth of gems beneath their beds.

Wars and plagues.

History loved repeating itself.

Hopefully this time I didn't have to be the one to put an end to all the chaos. The only method I had, that was proven to be effective... was a similar method to what had caused that smoldering village behind us.

I only knew how to put a stop to such things violently. And half the time those methods didn't work.

Glancing behind me, to make sure Herra and Renn were fine, I was glad to see they were doing fine. Renn was getting used to riding a horse, and Herra was adept enough to not be bothered by Renn's swaying or movements.

Which meant I could pick up the pace a little more.

Doing so, I pushed the horse into a run. A light one, but it seemed happy to finally be allowed to break out into more than just a simple trot.

Keeping the horse in check, to keep it from going too fast, I guided those with me towards the river. The setting sun eventually started to blind us, but it was nothing to worry over. I knew this path well. Had traveled it hundreds of times. And thanks to the desolate landscape and the fact that the people who lived on this land were no longer nomadic... nothing had changed. Rocks and stacks of boulders that had

been there hundreds of years ago, still remained. Untouched. And hopefully would for hundreds of years more.

We left the billowing smoke from the village behind... and continued on our journey.

Ever onward, even while the world around us burnt and fell apart.

Chapter 203 The Armadillos

The walls gleamed.

Walking behind Herra's cousin, a young girl who was as tall as me yet not old enough yet to be considered a woman, I was being led through the underground complex that made up their home.

And a mighty beautiful home it was. Most of the walls had been made of stone, or timber, but the section we were in now was more dirt and clay... yet these clay walls and floors were far more beautiful than the finely made stones we had just been in.

"That hallway leads to the mines. I can show them to you, if you like, but right now they're dark. We'll need to get torches," Brianci said with a point down a large hallway. One that had metal strips in the middle of the floor, which looked like things I'd trip on.

"It's fine," I said to her. She sounded like she actually wanted to show the mine to me, but honestly I wasn't too inclined to see it. The last mine I had been in... nothing bad had actually happened, but it had been disturbing. I had heard things I hadn't wanted to.

“Then let’s go this way. The baths are over here,” Brianci said as she stepped farther down the hallway.

Following her, I smiled at the young girl. She looked eerily similar to Herra. Just... a little younger. I’d been told she was one of the youngest members of the family, yet it was hard to believe. She was as tall as me, and had long and thick hair. It flowed untied all the way down her back and to her thighs.

For someone who had been a baby last time Herra had been here, she sure didn’t appear to be so young. Herra had made it clear that the only humans in their family right now were the husband and child of her sister, but maybe they had human ancestors. It was hard to explain Brianci’s appearance otherwise. A non-human shouldn’t have grown as large as quickly, otherwise.

“Herra mentioned you had nice baths,” I made some light talk as we rounded a corner. One that had some pointy rocks in the walls all around it.

Shiny pointy rocks.

There were lanterns every so many feet all along the hallways... and thanks to the lantern-light, the rocks stuck in the walls and floors were gleaming. Shining brightly as if a source of light themselves.

Most were about the size of my closed fist... but there were some far bigger. There were also many smaller ones, littering the walls in a way that made the whole place glitter and shine brightly. The sight was only made more beautiful by the fact that they were all different colors. Reds, greens, blues and everything in-between. It was almost mystifying... and I wasn’t sure what to think about this place. I felt as if I had stepped into some weird world that shouldn’t, and didn’t, actually exist.

They were the very gems that the armadillo family produced for the Society. And the amount of them told me clearly as to why this place had been something of a hidden secret.

There was a village not far from here. Less than a day away... but if one didn't know how to get here, you'd never find it. We had to not only circle around many cliffs and crevices, a section we had crossed had even required all of us to dismount the horses.

It was a massive building, not as big as the Animalia Guild building, but it was likely one of the biggest I've seen. It had to have been bigger than the depot, at least. Yet the main reason it was so hidden, despite being so big, was because most of it was underground. Only a small section of the house was above ground, and it was more of an empty cabin than anything else. They really didn't use it.

This place was more hidden than the Owl's Nest had been. Which was saying something.

"So what's a cat?" Brianci asked me.

"What..." I hesitated a moment, thinking the girl's question had been a joke... but she turned her head to smile at me in a way that told me it really wasn't. "Well, most cats are small animals. To most they're a domesticated animal, that's seen as a pet. There are some that are seen as a nuisance I guess. Do you know what a dog is?" I asked her.

"Yea we have dogs here. Are they like that?" she asked.

"Well... kind of but no. They're smaller. And in my experience more prideful, and solitary. Or lazy, depending on how you look at it," I said.

Brianci chuckled at me. "Must be similar enough. Your ears and tail are kind of similar to a dog's, now that you bring that up," she said.

They were. Honestly if not for my family always making it very clear I was a cat and not a dog, I'd have believed anyone who would have said the same thing.

"I actually thought the same for a long time. Cats hate me. They hiss and run away from me, usually, so I actually thought I was a dog when younger. My parents hated that," I said as I remembered the memories of them yelling me for suggesting such a thing.

"Oh? Cats and dogs don't get along?" Brianci asked.

"Not usually. No."

She hummed as we rounded another corner... and then entered a dazzling room.

I flinched at first, since the place was far brighter than it should have been. But once I blinked a few times, and my eyes adjusted... I found I couldn't take my eyes away.

The room was large, with big pillars all around. Pillars made of stone, yet just as adorned as the clay and dirt walls we had been traversing. There were half a dozen large circular tubs of water, and the room had a high vaulted ceiling, with what looked like large vents recessed into sections above the pools of water.

“The baths,” Brianci said as she gestured at them.

I gulped as I watched the still water somehow... reflect a dance of movement.

The water was... very vibrant. Shapes danced all over the walls and ceiling, making me feel dizzy.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“Right? It’s the gems the bath’s made of. The baths are giant crystals that have been hollowed and cut,” Brianci explained. She stepped up to one of the bath’s edges and tapped her shoe against the tiny ridge right before the pool of water. The sound the action made told me she was telling the truth. Those weren’t metal baths, or wooden, but some kind of stone. A hard one.

“How’d... how were they cut?” I asked curiously.

“Water. If you force water through a small hole fast enough, it can cut stuff like this,” she said.

Water...?

Stepping up to the same bath, I bent down and ran my hand along the edge.

Cut? How? It felt smooth... yet was rounded. It felt the same as the stones one would find in a fast moving mountain river. Slick and polished.

There was a small distance between the edge of the bath and the water, so I didn't need to worry about getting wet. Yet even if I did get wet, the water didn't look bad. It was... clear, and still. "How do you warm it then?" I asked her. I could nearly see entirely through the water, and the bottom and edges of the bathtub sure did look like the same material the edges were made of. Some kind of polished stone.

"The next room. There's a furnace, that heats up a series of pipes that run along the outer rims of the tubs. I... don't know how that works exactly, I just know if I put some logs into the furnace and light it, not long after the water is hot and steamy," Brianci said.

Pipes. Again with the pipes.

Probably Vim's work. Again.

Standing back up, I nodded. "These are beautiful. Thank you for showing me," I said. I didn't care if Brianci understood how it worked or not, even though she looked worried as if I would... for some reason. Maybe because of her youth. Or maybe because she had never actually thought of it herself, and just realized she didn't know either.

Brianci gave me a wide smile, and shuffled as she shrugged and nodded. "Of course! There's one last place that's pretty, if you'd like to see it."

“Oh?”

She nodded again and pointed to one of the other hallways that came into the room. One that went the opposite way we had come from. “This way!”

The young girl hurried away, and I had to hurry to keep up with her. She seemed excited now.

It took a little longer to reach the new room... because we had to delve down deeper. I wasn't sure just how far down we went, but I felt as if it was many levels. Yet the deeper we went, the darker and duller it became. The walls and ceiling stopped having gems and crystals. The lanterns went from finely crafted things to simple torches stuck into holes in the walls.

Brianci took me to a large door, and then smiled as she pointed at it.

She expected me to open it.

Smiling at her as she nodded and gestured for me to hurry, I decided to simply play along. Maybe whatever was behind this door was...

Before I even got the door all the way open, I had to remind myself to breathe.

The sight was impossible. So impossible, I felt the beginning of a flash of sweat all over my body.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Brianci asked excitedly, as we both stared at a giant crystal, glowing white.

I could only nod as I stepped into the room, and looked for the source of light. Surely there had to be some kind of lantern here too right? How else was the thing glowing so brightly and...

Yet there wasn’t. Within the large room was not a single lantern, or torch. Nor were there any windows or holes in the roof to let the sunlight in.

Sitting right in the middle of the room, emerging from the rocky ground the room was made around... was a giant rock. It was clear and I could see through it, almost, and was definitely bigger than most trees.

The glow within was a whitish color, but the thing itself had a purplish hue. It was stunning.

“Is it all one piece?” I asked softly as I rounded the thing. It looked like it split and branched out, just like trees did... yet at the same time surely it didn’t? Did rocks grow?

“It is. My family dug it out carefully, long ago. It’s precious after all,” Brianci said happily. And proudly.

Gulping as I nodded I stopped rounding it and stepped forward, to touch the thing... but hesitated. Glancing over at her, Brianci nodded and gestured for me to go ahead.

It was okay to touch it.

Stepping forward I placed my hands on an extended part of the rock, and the cool surface of the thing felt good on the skin.

It was as smooth as it looked. Yet it felt hard, and oddly cold.

“How’s it glowing?” I asked.

Within the rock, was a very obvious white gleam. It seemed to be coming from the center of the thing, yet it was definitely real. Not a trick of the eyes, or a play of the light. It was a solid glow, and didn’t change no matter where I looked in from.

“Not sure. Grandpa say’s it’s because it has a soul. But... I mean... it’s a rock. So who knows,” Brianci said.

A soul...

Glancing over at her, I wondered why they’d use such a term. Herra had made it clear those here were more atheist than theists, yet maybe she had just spoken out of emotion. Maybe they did believe in something, just not what Herra did.

"It's beautiful," I said, deciding to let those thoughts fade away. And it was easy to do, standing before this giant thing.

"Isn't it? It's an amethyst. Likely one of the biggest to exist," Brianci said.

Of that I had no doubt. This thing was...

Staring up at the top, I judged it to be nearly three Vim's tall. At least. And there was no telling how deep it went, since it was embedded into the rock situated into the middle of the floor.

"Thank you for showing me this, Brianci. This is amazing," I said as I stepped away, to take the whole thing into view.

"You're welcome! I don't get to show this stuff off, ever, so this is fun," she said happily.

I nodded. Right. Secret. Only the Society was allowed here... and it was obvious no one really came here.

"Who visits, by the way? Other than Herra and Vim, of course," I asked.

“And you?” she snickered at her joke, and then continued, “Oplar and Brandy, I’ve met. But I’ve been told there are a few others... but none I’ve ever met. Supposedly Vim comes sometimes with the Queen too,” Brianci said.

“Queen?” I asked.

She nodded. “Queen of Stone, don’t you know her? Figured you would be with Vim. She rules the land of stone to the east. I don’t know why she comes here sometimes, but I expect it’s to get some of our gems and stuff. I mean... what else would she come here for?” Brianci asked with a shrug, as if it was obvious.

Queen of Stone. A ruler. Of a whole land... of stone...?

“Honestly I wish we got more visitors... but I get it. All that’s out here are rocks,” Brianci said with a sigh.

Rocks...?

Glancing at the huge glowing gem, I doubted her statement.

These were more than just rocks.

“Other than this... I guess all that’s left are the farms, if you’d like to see them?” Brianci asked.

“Hm... actually mind taking me back to where Vim is? Although maybe I should see them... I didn't see any farms outside, were they behind the huge boulders behind the house?” I asked as I followed her out of the room.

She giggled and as she shut the door behind me once I was out. The gleam of the gem disappeared, and I weirdly noticed... something odd. As if the air suddenly got colder somehow.

“No. We grow them indoors, or well underneath. We use gems in the roof to bring sunlight down onto the plants. We also grow worms,” Brianci said.

“Worms...?” I asked as I followed her down the hall.

“Yea. We eat mostly fruits and stuff, but we also eat a lot of eggs and worms. Don't you eat worms?” Brianci asked, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

For a few moments I thought she was messing with me, but once again realized she was being serious.

“I uh... have never eaten a worm before, I don't think, no,” I said carefully.

“Really? I'll make sure we cook some for you then before you leave!” Brianci said happily.

About to tell her that wouldn't be necessary, I hesitated as I noticed she started to have a skip in her step. She was excited. Happy. Cheerful.

Keeping myself from groaning, I realized I was going to have to try and eat some worms here soon. She obviously was in high spirits at the idea of feeding me what she seemed to think wasn't just a normal meal, but something tasty and special.

Just great.

It didn't take long for Brianci to lead me upstairs to the more normal sections of the building. Clay and dirt walls became wood and stone again. Rugs started to cover the floorboards, and the walls covered in gems and fancy rocks switched to ones with paintings and decorations.

Once back in the normal house sections, the world became a little noisier. The Armadillo family was a large one. There were more people here than in Lumen, or Telmik, and not all of them were old. Some were like Brianci, although she was one of the youngest.

The only one younger than her, as far as I was aware, was the young boy who had been the reason for Herra's return. The son of her sister. The half-blood.

"Hey visitor!" an older man grinned at me as we passed one another. I waved back at him as we did, and I wondered what most of these people did most the day.

From how Herra, Vim and now Brianci had spoken... they all mined those gems beneath our feet, most of the time. Yet here they all were... seemingly wandering around and relaxing.

Maybe Vim's visit was something of a holiday for them, or Herra's.

"Brianci! Did you show her the baths!" Brianci's mother, Herra's aunt, shouted at us as we passed an open room. One with a recessed floor, that had large tables within it. She and a few others were sitting in the room, seemingly talking over tea or whatever was in their cups.

"I did!" Brianci happily answered.

"They were pretty," I said, to let them know I found them so.

"Wait till we get em warm! We'll start the fires after dinner!" she said as we walked past the room. Brianci didn't seem interested in stopping to speak with them.

"Right!" another woman, who was in the room, agreed with her.

"What happens when they get warm?" I asked Brianci as we left the room, and thus her aunt, behind.

"They start glowing. Just like the big one," Brianci explained.

Oh. My. That would be wonderful to see...

We rounded a corner and ran into Herra. Or well, Brianci did. I paused to watch as the two grumbled and stepped back from one another. They hadn't hit each other hard enough to stumble, or cause issue, but Herra did have a strong look of annoyance on her face as she stared at her cousin.

"Brianci. I see Renn hasn't eaten you yet," Herra said.

"What...? Would she?" Brianci turned, and I felt horrible as she took Herra's joke to heart.

"No... I'd not eat you," I said calmly to her.

"Regrettably. Vim's with my grandfather. Too bad he won't eat him either," Herra said with a huff as she stepped around Brianci, and then me.

She left us behind, and I realized Herra hadn't been joking.

She really didn't hide her hate for this family, did she?

"I don't remember her being so... grumpy," Brianci said quietly as we watched her go.

“She’s normally a little... abrasive. But not that bad. Maybe something happened,” I said carefully.

“Hm... who knows... Come on, if he’s with my grandpa he’s a floor above,” Brianci said.

I nodded and followed her to a stairwell. We ascended, and I found myself on a floor I recognized. It was the floor right under the house on top, the one that wasn’t hidden.

This floor only had a few rooms, and they were all large. The kind of large that would allow dozens of people to sit in comfortably, but most were dark and cluttered. Full of boxes, or crates. Used as storage instead of for people.

“She’s still a daughter. Even if she won’t ever admit it anymore,” a raspy voice said as we neared the only lit up room in the hallway.

“Ah, so you’re why Herra’s all grumpy. What’d you do grandpa?” Brianci asked as we entered the room.

Vim and the older man were sitting across from one another, before a small table. It looked ridiculous, since it was barely above the floor at all. It was so low, that Vim and Brianci’s grandfather had to sit on the floor to use it properly.

“This time I can admit it wasn’t me, but rather your uncle. How did you find our home Renn?” the elder of the armadillo family asked me.

I smiled gently at the older man and nodded. "It's amazing. I like what you did with the lower floors, leaving those gems in the walls and ceiling. It's pretty," I said.

He chuckled and nodded. "Isn't it? Brandy and the others who come complain about it. Saying we waste wealth, and whatnot," he said.

Chuckling, I nodded. Yes. Brandy would definitely say such a thing. "I prefer your methods. And I'm sure the Society won't miss a few little rocks," I said.

"Ah, I'm glad to know you're not a merchant. Brianci, would you go get us all some drinks?" the Grandfather asked.

"Sure grandpa," Brianci happily obeyed, and hurried out of the room.

Hesitating, I wondered if I should have gone with her. After all, the two already had drinks. Vim's cup was even still full.

"Please Renn, have a seat," the grandfather gestured at the table, and I nodded as I walked over to Vim's side of the table.

Sitting down next to Vim, I shuffled a little on the little padded... blanket? That I now sat on.

I tried to copy the way Vim sat, with his legs crossed underneath each other, but it was uncomfortable. Why'd we have to sit on the floor? It was so weird. There were tables and chairs around us...

"Thank you for escorting Herra here, Renn. I'm sure she... didn't make it an easy trip, so thank you for putting up with her," the grandfather said.

"It was fine? I enjoy spending time with Herra. Even when she's... bothered," I said, choosing the word carefully.

He smiled at me, and I noted the long eyebrows. He looked... oddly human, but his eyebrows were long and thick. Too long and thick. Unnaturally long and thick, to the point they almost looked fake. They even danced a little when he made any large facial expression. Like how he was smiling now.

I smiled back at him, and then glanced to my left at Vim. He looked tired.

The sight made me pause a moment... since it was very unusual for him.

He actually looked tired...! Were those bags under his eyes? Surely not... it had to just be the lighting.

The room had lanterns, but only three were lit. It wasn't... necessarily dark, but it wasn't bright either. Bright enough to have a casual conversation, but not much more.

"Did you see the mines?" Vim asked.

“Ah. No. They’re dark right now, Brianci said,” I said.

“Herra’s visits are special. No time for work,” the grandfather nodded, telling me the reason.

I agreed with him, even if Herra obviously didn’t.

“They have a huge gem, Vim. It’s bigger than you, and it glows,” I said to him.

He nodded. “The Brittle Flower. Yes,” he said.

“Oh? Is that its name?” I turned and asked the older man. Flower I understood, since the shape and color of it was similar... but brittle?

“It is indeed. It’s not brittle at all, but when it was being excavated everyone who was involved broke all their bones. Thus its namesake,” he explained.

I frowned at the information. “How’d that happen?” I asked.

“Vim woke up on the wrong side of the bed that day,” Brianci said as she stepped back into the room.

She carried a large pitcher, and in the other hand was a stack of cups. The small tower of cups tilted a little as she walked over to the table, kneeled down and began handing them out.

“What’d you do Vim?” I asked him, she sounded serious... even though she was smirking.

He nodded with a sigh. “The side of the bed I woke up on was just... wrong, that day,” he said simply.

Great. Another secret.

Brianci giggled as she went to filling up the cups.

As she poured the liquid, I noted the odd smell it gave off. “What’s that?” I asked.

“Worm juice,” Brianci said with a huge smirk.

My tail stiffened, which made me wince from pain.

The grandfather chuckled, likely mistaking my wince for something else. “She’s not lying, but it’s definitely not as bad as it sounds. Give it a taste, you’ll not regret it,” he said as he pointed to the cup Brianci was placing before me.

Staring into the cup at the light colored liquid... I worried for my future.

First meat that smelled rancid, and now juice made from worms.

"It's not really made by worms, Renn. The tea is made from the leaves that the worms eat, not the worms themselves," Vim explained as he reached over to grab the cup Brianci gave him.

He took a drink, as if to prove to me it was safe to drink... but he should know better than that.

If he thought him eating or drinking something was proof enough for me, it was far from it. After all he ate and drank weird things all the time, and now I knew even if something was toxic or bad it'd do nothing to him...

"Why spoil the fun, Vim?" Brianci asked with a sigh as she gave her grandfather a cup too.

"It's the truth. We eat the worms, not drink them. This is just made by the leaves of the trees we feed and grow the worms upon, nothing more," the grandfather said, as if to prove it even further.

Still...

Reaching out for the cup, I took a tiny sniff of the contents and was glad it didn't smell... too bad. It was a unique smell, something I'd not smelled before, but it was not something I really found pleasant or appetizing.

Brianci sat down next to me, and smiled happily expectantly at me. She was waiting to see me take a drink.

Great.

Taking a tiny drink, I was glad to find the stuff slid down the throat easily. It didn't burn, didn't make me gag... and surprisingly, tasted fine. It tasted like a sweetened tea.

"Hm... it's not bad," I admitted.

Taking another drink, a bit longer this time, I had to admit it wasn't bad at all. It was definitely not going to be my new favorite drink, and was far from that red berry juice I usually ordered... but it was leagues ahead of plain water or some of the cheaper teas I encountered in Lumen.

"Oh? You like it?" Vim asked.

I nodded.

"Good. Because I didn't tell you the whole process," Vim said.

Glancing at the man out of the corner of my eye, I did my best to not see Brianci and her grandfather's smirks out of the other corner. It was obvious that something horrible was about to happen, and they were more than happy to watch it from the front row.

Vim didn't have the same smirk on his face as they did... but he was swirling his cup playfully.

"Don't," I warned Vim. Not after I just took a long drink!

"It honestly isn't made of worms, or bugs. But..." Vim started.

"Vim...!" I warned him again, and reached over to grab his arm. As if to beg and plead with him.

He took another drink, and nodded... then told me anyway.

"It's made from the droppings of the worm. After they've eaten the leaf, not before," Vim said.

Although I surprisingly wasn't too bothered by the information, I still closed my eyes and had to collect myself. Brianci and her grandfather started to laugh, obviously at the expense of my discomfort.

No wonder Herra didn't want to live here.

Chapter 204 An Armadillo's Gem

This shipment was not as numerous as the last, yet was far richer in quality.

The large gems gleamed in their crates, shining like the literal treasures they were.

"Two crates short Vim. I apologize," Orland said again.

"You had to dedicate time and resources to the mine itself. To protect it, and secure its future production. Stop apologizing for doing your job," I said.

"All the same, Vim. I hope the Society will understand," Orland said somberly.

I wanted to sigh, but kept myself from doing so. After all, he was being very genuine in his heartfelt apology. My sigh would just insult him.

Even if it was warranted.

Two crates fewer? Big deal. The Society didn't need money. Not to the level it used to. Especially more so now that Lumen was about to become basically a money mint for us. Yet I wasn't going to diminish this man's, and thus his families, efforts and their dedication.

I mean really. Did he actually think I, or anyone in the Society would be upset with him just because they spent several years rebuilding certain tunnels and structures? To ensure they stayed safe? Ridiculous.

Yet I understood it. I really did.

These gems were their pride. Their accomplishments. Their worth. If I told him how little value these things had anymore... well...

“You’ve done a phenomenal job. Lilnik would be proud of you,” I said to him.

Orland perked up at my compliment, and smiled. His long eyebrows arched a little, thanks to the way he smirked. “You think so?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes. Definitely so,” I said.

Lilnik would have actually been rather upset. He hadn’t liked the idea of selling the gems to the Society. He had joined, and believed in the Society... but he had been something of a hoarder. A very selfish one. He had not given up the gems willingly. It took literal pleading to convince him, and his own children’s threat of deadly force. And even then he never gave in without a fuss.

But I’d never tell anyone that. Especially not the current generation of the armadillos, who revered their ancestor Lilnik almost akin to a god.

“Still Vim... I can’t understand it. What filled her heart with such hate? What happened? I’d blame the outside world, but she became like this long before she ever stepped foot out of these rocks,” Orland returned to the main topic. Herra, his granddaughter. His lost child. The only one who didn’t call him by name, or with affection.

“Every family has their...” I didn’t want to say failure, but had been about to. Which wasn’t right, and especially not fair to Herra. She wasn’t a failure. She was far from it.

“Disgrace?” Orland finished before I could think of a proper term.

“Troubled,” I finally found the best I could think of, and after saying it realized it was still wrong. But oh well, I had said it.

Orland sighed and shook his head. “Troubled...? Vim, our youngest dog is troubled. It gnaws its own tail. Brianci! She is troubled. That poor girl wants to marry her brother. That’s troubling, but a passing fancy. The foolishness of youth. Herra is far beyond that. Herra’s heart is corrupted in hate and furor, at her own blood of all things...!” Orland spoke quickly, and not quietly either.

Hopefully Herra wasn’t around. The door wasn’t closed, and we weren’t far from the main section of the underground living areas.

“Brianci wants to marry her brother...?” I asked, finding that the direst thing he listed.

He waved it away. “She’s already getting over it. It was a few years ago, while she was still young. You know what I mean,” Orland said.

Oh. Good. Just a childish passing fancy... hopefully.

Such a thing was actually a problem for our people. Thanks to the lack of population... and the very close-knit families, such a thing did happen occasionally. It usually never ended well, for many reasons. I'd hate for this family to break apart over such a thing, but honestly I'd not be surprised if it happened.

Them finally adjusting enough to let a human into their family lineage was a blessing. Far more than they obviously realized.

It would dilute their bloodline, and bring about their inevitable downfall... but it would likely keep them alive longer than the alternative.

"Still, Vim. What can be said? Do the other families also lose children in such ways?" he asked.

"More than you think," I said. I was about to tell him that Renn had killed several of her family members, but I didn't want to reveal something she seemed to think was very personal and private... and I also didn't want to put the idea into Orland's head that Herra might do such a thing. Who knows how he'd treat her if he thought she was actually dangerous.

She wasn't, at least I didn't think she was, but these people were touchy. One needed to be careful.

Orland sighed as he stepped away, as to lean against one of the crates for support. He was getting old, and not just in body. His mind was definitely starting to diminish too.

"I don't even know what to say to her anymore. She either outright ignores everything I say, or bites back with words sharp enough to cut a diamond," he said.

Her words had hurt him that deeply? He hadn't acted as if they had.

Their meeting had not been... pleasant. Once Renn had left, to be guided around the house by Brianci, he and Herra had finally greeted one another and spoke. It had only lasted a few moments, and only a few words were exchanged.

His had not been kind, honestly, but they hadn't been that bad. A snarky greeting, yet Herra had only heard the contempt in his voice.

She had responded harshly, but not to the point that I thought Orland would actually be bothered. She had only said she was here to do her duty, nothing more.

It was a difficult situation. Herra hated them. They couldn't comprehend why she did, and most of them were long past trying to understand. Now they simply viewed her as a troublemaker, an annoyance. A family member, yes, but one they didn't care much about.

Yet it wasn't as if I could do anything about it. This was a family matter. And I barely got involved in things as it was, let alone something so personal.

"She might one day return to you, Orland. Just give her time," I said carefully.

“You said that the last three visits, Vim. Thirty years,” he said.

“But grains of sand in an hourglass,” I countered, and shuffled my feet a little as to further emphasize my words. The ground here was littered with dirt and sand. Not a surprise, since the storeroom was in a giant dirt room.

“If only that was true. At least she’ll not be here long. We plan to lift the crates in a few weeks, and send them down the river,” Orland said.

I nodded. Yes. A good thing. The faster they went, so too would Herra... before anything drastic happened.

A sad truth, but one that needed to simply be accepted.

After all, eventually someone would say or do something that went far beyond their typical family drama.

I’ve had enough of people being banished lately. I was in no mood for any more.

“Where are you taking Herra’s friend, by the way?” Orland asked, changing the topic.

“Renn? For now she’s simply traveling with me. She’s not found a place to call home yet,” I said.

“Would you like her to stay here? She seems gentle enough. Brianci likes her, and there are a few sons who could use a wife,” Orland proposed.

Since I was turned away from him, to stare at the crates and their contents... I allowed myself a tiny smirk.

“You can offer it to her. If you’d like to,” I said.

“Mhm,” he made a sound that told me he had nodded, and decided to do just that.

It’ll be interesting to hear Renn’s response. Especially after all the drama lately. And even more so, when she hears his true reason for offering such a kindness.

Sons needing wives. Funny. Especially since most of those here were women...

“Which sons are you speaking of?” I asked Orland, after I realized that I couldn’t remember any of their sons being unmarried. There were only four men of age in this family, and as far as I was aware all mated and with children already.

“Hm? Arm, of course for one. And both Plondi and Birva are pregnant, either could be carrying sons,” he said simply.

I frowned, and turned as to look at him.

Arm? The half-human child? He couldn't be serious.

Yet he was.

Senile old coot.

“Well, go ahead and ask her. Let me know what she says,” I said.

“Mhm,” he nodded, content.

At least someone was.

Patting the crate, I nodded. “Alright. All looks good, Orland. Anything you'd like to ask of me before I leave? If not I'll be gone in the morning,” I said.

He shook his head, and his long eyebrows danced as I stepped out of the storeroom. He followed quickly, and I shut the door behind him.

“All has been well, Vim. Other than Herra, and the pumps needing to be fixed. But one has been handled, the other likely cannot be,” he said.

“Right,” I nodded, but wasn’t in the mood to get back into the conversation concerning Herra. Really, why couldn’t they just let her be?

Maybe if they didn’t pester her so often, she’d not feel so pressured and bothered. But who was I to know anything about family dynamics?

“I’ll go ahead and check around then,” I said to Orland.

He nodded. “If I don’t see you before you set out, fair travels Vim. May your feet always find solid rock,” he said.

“You as well,” I said as I turned away.

It wasn’t likely I wouldn’t run into him again before I left, but it’s happened. The house was big enough, after all.

Stepping away from Orland... I steadily walked around as to check the place. I checked the mines. Their entrances. The pipes and the pumping mechanisms that pulled water through them, pulling the stuff up from an aquifer below. I checked their handiwork over the last few years, as they fixed and modified it to their needs.

I checked the new floor they had added, and the stairs they had built to reach it. I checked the hallways, and the parts of the house that I knew were on softer ground than the other parts. To make sure none of the rocks below had shifted, or a sinkhole could cause problems down the road.

As I checked the armadillo home, I ran into a few of them every so often. Most simply greeted me, while others asked a few questions. Either about my journey, the world beyond, or my companion.

Renn, specifically.

None ever asked about Herra.

“Thanks Vim!” the older woman giggled as she stepped away, heading down the stairs I had just walked up. We had bumped into each other as she carried a basket of clothes. Dirty laundry.

Sighing at her, I returned to my task.

There was little need to check this place. Like always it was... fine. The air was a little stale, thanks to the rocks and dirt, but nothing was in need of attention. Everything was fine. Everyone was safe. I wasn't needed here, at least not in the way I usually was.

Like usual... the armadillo mines and home was safe. But such a thing wasn't too surprising. This place was guarded by ravines and giant fissures. There was a village within a day's trek from here, but I highly doubted any human would be able to find this place. And even if they did, it wasn't like they'd find out about the stuff underneath the house above ground. It had been built nondescript as it was on purpose. As a decoy, to hide the truth.

Anyone who found it would just assume a small family lived out here alone. People who were poor and simple.

Add all of that to the fact that the armadillos are more than happy to never go above ground, for months if not years at a time... well...

Out of all the places in the Society, this was one of the few I didn't ever really need to worry about. Not just thanks to its desolate location, but the people who lived here.

Though that might change now that humans had joined the bloodline... but I'd worry about that later, when I needed to.

For now I just needed to accept the fewer headaches whenever I could.

Speaking of headaches... where was Renn?

I hadn't seen her in a few hours, which was odd. She for some odd reason kept seeking me out every so often, even though she never seemed to have a purpose for it. Maybe she was worried I'd leave her here or something.

An interesting thought, though also a sad one. For some reason I actually could see her worrying over such a thing, even if I'd never do so willingly.

Once I rounded the whole house, and checked all the important parts and floors... I decided it was fine to stop. So I changed my focus, and went to finding the odd woman who was likely going to be with me for years.

It didn't take long to find her. Even without having to ask for her to the passing armadillos. Once I went to the upper floors, and walked down one of the main halls, I quickly heard Renn's voice and it led me to her.

Peering into the large room, I found Renn surrounded by the many women of the armadillo family. Renn had a huge smile on her face as she was pestered with questions. The room was noisy, with multiple people talking at once. It seemed they were all focused on Renn, but at the same time having multiple conversations. Brianca and a few others near the outer circle were talking deeply, as if in a heated debate.

It was a typical sight, yet also a welcome one. Renn was a predator, after all, and although armadillo were not entirely prey... they had long lost whatever predator blood they had. Most didn't even eat meat anymore, for crying out loud.

Stepping past the room, I was glad none of them noticed me as I left the noisy room behind. Although I'd not be too bothered, I knew from experience how long the armadillo's could ask questions. Sometimes even repeating them.

They liked to play pranks, even if they were always harmless... they were sometimes grating on the nerves.

Like the one earlier. The tea made from the droppings of the worms they farmed and fed on.

Such a prank was right up their alley... yet I suppose it was enjoyable for me too. I had been the one to actually partake in that one.

As I walked, I found myself heading back downstairs. There was no real reason to head deeper into the house, yet I wasn't in the mood to sit right now. So I simply walked.

And walked.

Until I ended up near the entrance to one of the mines. The one near the baths, where the coal was located.

I was about to round the hallway, and head back towards the center of the house and head upward... but I heard something. Something very particular.

Following the sounds, I quickly realized what they were... and didn't like at all what I found as I opened the door to one of the rooms at the end of the hall.

Herra was sobbing.

Slowly entering the room, I glanced around to make sure she was not only alone... but there was nothing troubling. Or rather, more troubling than a crying woman.

Luckily there wasn't. A few memories flashed through my mind as I looked around the room, expecting to find blood or bodies. Usually such a sobbing woman, one scorned and full of anger, was found with such things in my experience.

Especially when it came to family feuds.

"Herra," I said her name, and did so gently but with enough firmness to make a point.

She startled, and slowly looked up from her crouched position. Her face was wrought with grief, and I realized this was serious. Far more serious than her typical family drama.

I didn't smell blood or death... nor did she seem to have wounds or blood upon her, but...

"What happened?" I asked her softly.

"He's already a man, Vim," she barely got out between sobs.

A... "A man?" I asked, wondering what the heck she...

Oh. The boy. Her nephew. Her sister's son. The one born between her and a human.

A man though?

I thought of the young lad in my mind. He was just barely Renn's height... and was stocky. He had a lot of weight to him, somehow. Their diet here really shouldn't have let it happen, but it had. Yet his size wasn't necessarily enough to call him a man. Especially when his face had more baby fat than not. His voice was just being broken into as well. It squeaked and cracked something fierce when he talked and laughed. I could see what Herra meant, but only distantly.

He was becoming a man. Not one yet.

Yet to Herra... well...

To her that was probably a man already. Especially since her letter, that had just gotten to her a month ago, had informed her of not just her sister's marriage but his birth.

Herra had the image of a newborn baby in her mind, and came home to find a grown man.

“Humans grow quickly, Herra. You know that,” I said softly as I stepped over to her.

She had knelt down and broke on the ground. Not even on one of the little pillow things they all sat on around here. She was sitting on the dirty and dusty ground, in a rather bright and fresh dress. It was going to get ruined.

Glancing behind me at the open door, I wondered if I should shut it. Last thing I needed was for the family to come here and notice.

Why had she broken here...? Why not in her own room, or somewhere more private? We weren't exactly near the main hallway or the living areas, but we weren't far either. Just a few hallways away. Why didn't she choose elsewhere to do this?

Looking around the room again, this time for another reason, I realized where we were.

The morgue. Or well, the place where they burnt the bodies.

An oven was built into the wall nearby. There was nothing else really in the room, other than the few tables and pillow things on the ground. It was obviously empty so they could hold funerals here, and they didn't do much else here.

Such an odd place to pick. Maybe it meant something important to her. Had she come here to remember a family member she held dear? One now long gone? I could remember several who have died since she was born. It could have been any of them.

“What do I do Vim? He’s already grown. And his father... he’s...” Herra hiccuped, and I realized the real reason she was despairing.

It wasn’t just the fact that her nephew was growing so fast... it was also the very obvious fact that if the son was already almost a man, then now too the father was growing older.

And he was. He had grey in his hair, on the sides. Though he didn’t look too old yet, I’d place him in his late thirties or so.

Stepping over to Herra, I slowly sat down next to her. She curled up a little, as if to shy away from me... but after a moment she reached over and wrapped her arms around my waist. Half a moment later, she was sobbing in my lap.

Patting her back, I let out the tiniest sigh I could. “I know, Herra. I know,” I said.

And I did. After all, I felt the same thing... and thought the same thoughts, all the time. And not just about the humans either.

“If I blink... she’ll be gone...!” Herra sobbed.

Yes. She will be.

Her sister may not have much longer to live.

If her love for her husband and her children is strong enough. If she's not strong enough to overcome it. Then their deaths, either by age or something crueler... will result in her life being short too.

So few could survive it. It was why so many ran away from any human they felt even an inkling of affection towards. Because they knew what could happen. They feared it. Something fierce.

"Love hurts," I said gently.

Odds are if Herra left, as planned, to escort this package of gems... by the time she returned, not only would the boy and his father be long dead... so too might her sister be.

A blink of an eye for those like Herra. For those like us.

"Ah... my poor little sister...!" Herra cried.

"I know," I said.

Letting Herra's heart spill all over my lap, I gently held her.

I was used to this. It's been some time since this last happened... but I knew it'd happen again. And again.

And again.

"Why Vim...! Why...?" Herra begged me for answers I didn't have. But I knew she really didn't want to hear them. She wouldn't even acknowledge me if I said the perfect answer. Her heart wouldn't care even if I gave her a reason that quenched all the fiery emotions within it.

Herra hated her family. Despised them, even.

Yet... that hate. That disgust. At the end of the day, meant nothing.

They were still her family. They were still her sisters.

"No..." she sobbed.

They were still her precious gems. Worth more than all the gold in the world.

And she just realized those gems would fade to dust, far faster than she ever thought possible.

Such a thing made things like hate fizzle away, like a candle in a storm.

“Argh...!” Herra wept, clinging to me.

“I know,” I said again, gentler.

Chapter 205 On the Road Once More

“Sure you’ll be okay Herra? Shouldn’t we stay here until you take the gems to the river?” I asked Herra again.

She smirked at me and nodded. “Yes Renn. It’ll be okay. I’ve done this dozens of times,” she said.

I wanted to argue, but didn’t. Mostly because I knew she was right... and I was only arguing for myself.

I had hoped she’d ask us to stay longer, to help her, so that Vim would let us stay here longer. We were leaving already, and it had only been a few days. Days! It wasn’t fair! This place was so interesting, and the people were odd but funny and...

“You can always visit Renn!” Brianci offered.

I nodded.

“Or just stay here,” Plondi offered again.

I nodded, but smiled apologetically. “Thank you,” I said.

Plondi smiled back in a way that told me she understood what I actually meant. She and the rest had been... very nice to offer their home to me, even after hearing from Herra what had happened at Lumen. What I had done.

Yet as interesting as this place was, I had no desire to stay here at all.

Not just because I’d not be able to live underground for years, without ever seeing the sun, but because that would mean leaving Vim’s side. And something like that was not something I even wanted to consider or...

“Goodbye Renn!” a tiny voice drew my eyes down to Brianci’s legs. Behind them, hiding shyly, was a young girl. She waved at me as I smiled at her and waved back.

Kneeling down, I reached out to take the young girl’s hands. She took my hand with both of hers, and I said goodbye once again to the little girl.

She was only seven years old. Yet she was so small. So feeble. Herra had said she was so pale, because she’s never been out in the sun since her birth, but I worried for her. She was so thin and frail I doubted it was just a lack of sunlight.

“Goodbye Alexandria. Make sure you take care of Brianci for me, okay?” I said.

She nodded shyly, but smiled at me.

Giving her tiny hands a gentle squeeze, I sighed as I stood up and looked around at those before me.

There were only a few people. Herra. Brianci. Her younger sister Alexandria, and their mother Plondi who had a huge belly. An older man was behind them, leaning against the door-frame and smiling at us. He was Plondi’s husband, though I’d not ever learned his name.

A small group out of the many who lived here. Yet I knew this farewell group wasn’t small because no one else liked me, but rather because they were now busy. Half the family was back in the mines, working. Their days of rest were over, in their opinion.

“Goodbye. It was wonderful meeting you all,” I said my final farewell to them.

They waved and said goodbye as I stepped away, and went to the stairwell. Glancing one last time behind me, to Herra... I felt bad about leaving her.

She was essentially alone here. At least in her opinion. And here I was... abandoning her.

It made me feel bad. Yet I wasn't sure what to say or do about it. No idea at all.

"Bye," I said again.

"Bye bye!" Alexandria stepped around Brianci's legs to wave at me. I teared up at the little girl's enthusiasm, and waved heavily at her as I started climbing the stairs.

Kneeling and bending down as I walked up the stairs, to keep waving at the little girl, I sniffed and sighed as I finally left their line of sight... and entered the weirdly empty house on the surface.

Herra stepped onto the stairwell, and waved at me as she went to close the latches of the stairwell. I gave her one last wave as she shut the doors, separating me from the armadillo's real home.

Looking around, I studied the weird... decoy house, as they called it. It had furniture. Rugs. Windows, and even stuff all over the place. Rags and washcloths were on the table nearby. Shoes were piled over near the exit. Chairs across the room, with a large jacket laid over it.

Yet as... lived in, as they had tried to make it, it was also empty. Devoid of life. It had a layer of dust all over it, and some of the furniture looked worn and ragged. As if they'd fall apart if anyone actually tried to use them.

Walking over to the exit, I stepped out of the open door and out into the dark world.

The sky was light blue. The sun was just starting to rise, yet I couldn't see it. It was blocked by the tall mountains of boulders and rocks all around us.

"Ready?" Vim asked.

I nodded at him as I went to close the front door of the decoy house.

It latched with a clank, and I noted that the front door was... far newer than the rest of the house. It was so obviously newer, that it was obvious they had simply replaced it not long ago. This wasn't just fixed, but something new. I wonder if they just replaced stuff once it broke completely, and then ignored it otherwise.

Once the door was shut, I stepped over to Vim and smiled at him. "I'm ready," I said.

"You sure? You look depressed," he said.

"Probably because I am! We've gone to places and left quickly before Vim, but never somewhere so neat," I said.

"It's a giant hole in the ground. What's so neat about it?" he asked as he stepped away, to start our journey once more.

Following him, I wanted to punch him but held myself back. "It was so much more than that. It was a home. A beautiful home, full of beautiful people," I said.

Vim sighed and nodded, and I knew he didn't agree with me... but it was the truth.

Or well. Kind of.

I had to admit I didn't like at all certain... aspects, of the armadillos. But yet I was able to overlook quite a bit, it seemed.

"They offered to let me live here," I said.

"I know."

"But they wanted me to do so, so I could marry into the family," I said.

He smiled and nodded. "Right."

"That's... weird? Isn't it? Or is that normal?" I asked.

“It’s survival. Need fresh blood eventually,” he said with a shrug.

“It’s gross. I thought they were messing around, since they like to play pranks and stuff. But they were dead serious,” I said.

“Gross. One day you might think differently,” Vim said.

I huffed at him as we headed for the same path we had arrived upon. It was situated between massive boulders, and really wasn’t a path at all. It was littered with spiky bushes and trees, and countless rocks. I had to pay attention where I walked, less I hurt myself.

“Think Herra will be okay?” I asked.

“No. But there’s nothing we can do about it,” Vim said.

I didn’t want to hear that answer, but had expected it.

“They hate her almost as much as she hates them,” I said as I glanced behind us. The decoy house was about to leave our line of sight. It looked... out of place, amongst the massive boulders, and the red clay looking dirt.

“Hate’s a powerful word... but you’re not wrong,” Vim agreed.

"I feel so bad for her. But I'm not sure whose actually to blame, or who started it all," I said.

"Don't try to make sense of it Renn. Sometimes bad blood is just... something one must live with," Vim said.

I sighed and nodded. I didn't want to agree with him, but maybe it was for the best.

Stepping over a large bundle of rocks, I noted a weird bug that skittered out of them as I walked past. It gleamed a little oddly, as if it was polished.

"Are there any locations in the Society that are... peaceful Vim? Without all the drama and discord?" I asked.

"Not really. The few that come to mind are the ones with small populations. Tiny families, that aren't big enough for such drama to sprout," he said.

"Wonderful," I stated, as I watched Vim step through a large collection of thorny bushes.

He had pants on, as I did, but I knew from experience by brushing against some of those bushes that their tiny spiny spikes were pointy enough to pierce through the thick material of our clothes.

Yet of course Vim didn't even register any of it as he stepped through the bushes, walking ever forward.

I rounded the large collection of thorny bushes, and wondered if Vim was even able to feel pain.

Granted the spiky thorns might not... really hurt too badly, but surely he at least felt enough discomfort from them to register their poke? And why hadn't he just stepped around it, as I had? Was he lost in thought?

"I know you wanted to stay longer, but did you at least enjoy yourself?" Vim asked as he turned to look at me.

His raised eyebrow, and calm smile told me he genuinely hadn't noticed the thorny bushes he had just strode through.

"I did. I didn't like how they tried to marry me off, or the way they treated and spoke about Herra... but it was fun. Brianci and her sister especially," I said.

He nodded. "Good. Honestly here and then our next stop might be the only... fun you'll have, for awhile. So enjoy it while you can," Vim said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Hurrying a little, so I could walk next to Vim, I took my place by his side... and realized what was happening.

We were on the road again. Together. Just the two of us.

On foot. No horses. No one else. Just... Me and Vim... and the world around us, passing by slowly.

I couldn't help it; I smiled warmly at the moment.

I missed this.

But even more importantly, thank goodness it still existed.

It could have so easily been lost to me thanks to the recent events. I could have so easily lost my place here, next to him. And there wouldn't have been anything I could have done to stop it.

I wasn't sure if it was Vim's mercy or his kindness I had to thank for this... but I was going to do all I could to prove I was worth it. That I could earn it. One way or another.

"After the camels, our next stop is the Nation of Stone. There are only two members there, and... well... it's not the most pleasant of places to visit. I expect it to be difficult for you," Vim said.

“Oh? You mean the Queen of Stone? I heard about her,” I said.

“Did you?” he asked.

I nodded. “From the armadillos. She comes here sometimes to get gems I guess?” I said.

“Right. She hasn’t needed to lately... She’s a predator. A real one. One of the great ones. A badger. We’ll see if you and her get along or not. I’m betting you don’t,” he said.

“Well just for that I’ll make sure to do so,” I said stiffly.

He smirked and nodded, telling me he had expected such a response.

“What’s a badger?” I asked.

“A smaller animal, but ferocious. They’re rather solitary animals, kind of like what you are. It’s why she doesn’t let any other members join her. I look forward to the two of you meeting. You’re... different, yet in certain aspects very similar,” he said.

How interesting.

“Is she that bad? You say you’re looking forward to it, but at the same time that I’ll not enjoy it... why?” I asked.

“Because of who she is, and who you are. And she’s not bad. Not really. Not to me. But to many others... yes. She is. For reference, you’ve been banished from three locations right? Or well, really only two, I guess,” Vim said.

I groaned. “Why remind me Vim? Yes. Three locations.”

Ruindale. The Bell Church. And now Lumen.

“She’s banished from every location. Basically,” he said.

I blinked and paused... and couldn’t believe what I had just heard.

“You’re kidding...?” I asked.

He shook his head, and then noticed I had stopped walking so he stopped too. Once again he stepped into a bush of thorns, as he turned to look at me. I noted the way his pants clung to the thorns, and was pulled by them. The spiky thorns were definitely digging into his leg.

“You’ll meet her soon enough. I suppose this is where I shut up about her, as to let you form your own opinion once you do,” he said.

“Oh. Right. Yes... I’d rather do that,” I said, agreeing. He liked it too, when I did.

He nodded, and seemed glad to hear me say so.

“She can come here even though she’s banished?” I asked.

“As you know, not all banishments are pure. Just as you can visit Lumen, so too can she visit a few locations as well,” Vim said.

Ah. Right. True.

Returning to walking, I paid close attention to Vim’s leg. The one that had been sitting in the thorny bush.

Some of the thorns stuck to his pant leg, yet he didn’t even seem to care.

He was so strange sometimes.

We walked along in silence for a bit, until we left the small... path area. Exiting the section, we came to a spot I didn't really remember. To our right was a massive hill, covered in boulders and stones, and to our left was a similar hill. Though the other one was more covered by plant life than it was rocks, somehow.

It was as if the two hills were battling. Stone and plants. One type of life, facing another.

I frowned at my thoughts, and wondered if stones were a form of life at all.

Something told me I didn't want to know.

Walking next to Vim, we headed along the two hills for a short distance. Eventually we reached another path, one that was definitely a path for real. One could see the different colors in the ground, telling where feet and hooves have made a difference. This path had far fewer bushes and plants within it, and didn't have any large rocks to trip on.

Heading down the path, I couldn't help but smile happily. How wonderful. I wasn't really sure what to think of what Vim had just said, about the Queen of Stone, but I'd worry about that later.

Right now... right now this was all that mattered.

These moments. With him.

Glancing over at the man I was walking next to, I noted the tired look on his face. Once again it was showing itself.

Was he actually tired? It was such a strange thing to see on him. Emotions were one thing, but... exhaustion? Tiredness? Pain? They almost looked as if they didn't belong at all upon his demeanor. So to actually see such things on him... well...

Vim then slowed to a stop, and I worriedly stopped alongside him. Had something happened?

I glanced around, and was glad to see nothing too out of the ordinary. Some weird bushes and trees. Some purple flowers to our left, which were blooming from a weird gangly tree. The rocks and ground were darker than the reddish hues earlier. As if the sun had burnt the ground here.

"You okay Vim...?" I asked after a few moments passed, and nothing happened... and he said nothing.

For a long moment he said nothing, and then he took a deep breath and sighed. "No. I'm not."

At first I panicked, and looked down to his legs. I worried he had actually gotten hurt somehow, or maybe poisoned or something by the barbs... but after a few quick heartbeats I realized something obvious.

He didn't mean physically.

Calming myself down, I forcefully kept myself from stepping over to him and grabbing his hand. "Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked carefully.

"Can you change hearts, Renn?" he asked.

"Do you really want me to, Vim?" I asked back.

He opened his mouth, to say something... but then smiled at me and shook his head. "You know me a little too well, don't you?" he asked.

I smiled back and nodded; glad he understood what I had meant. "I'd like to, you know? Really."

Vim nodded. "We've much to talk about, don't we?" he said.

"You have no idea!" I shouted, startling myself. I heard my own voice echo a little, rolling along the hills of rocks and dry plants. I had even stepped towards him, and with balled fists I had shook oddly. It was such an odd thing to do, even I felt silly. I probably looked like I was getting ready to get into a fist fight with Vim.

Undisturbed by my outburst, Vim shifted on his feet and smiled at me. He pointed down our path, the one ahead of us. "About two days from here is a river town. The same one they take their gems to, as to deliver via the river. If able, we'll catch a boat and head south until the Ocean City. We'll stop at the Camels, then head east to the Nation of Stone," Vim told me of our upcoming journey.

I nodded, excited... and then frowned. "I rather wanted to talk about other things, Vim."

"I know. That's why I brought it up, before we got focused on other things," he said.

"Oh. Okay." I nodded quickly, that made sense.

Gulping as I stared at Vim, and he stared back... I felt oddly apprehensive.

What would he say first? What would we talk about first?

We hadn't actually spoken, for real, since before the chaos in Lumen. It's been so long. It had only been maybe a month or two, yet it felt like an entire lifetime.

Yes we had spoken since then, of course. And I had even cried, and had a heartfelt conversation with him a few days before leaving Lumen. When he had given me the news that I had been the focus of a vote. A vote I had not been invited to. A vote that had determined I didn't belong in Lumen, and wasn't allowed to settle down there.

But we hadn't actually talked much. At least not about anything serious. I had been wondering if I would ever be able to. Or if he'd expect me to just... let it be. To forget it all. To bury it down, and ignore it. I had dreaded that, and worried about it, but hadn't been sure how to face such thoughts.

After all it wouldn't have surprised me if Vim had simply... continued onward. Acknowledging what had happened, but not really thinking about it. Since he was so old, and who he was. It would have been expected, in a way. For him to have simply moved on, without a care.

Yet that wasn't something I could do. My heart was so heavy. My soul burdened. My mind wheeling.

There was so much I wanted to ask him. To hear from him. How had he fought that giant thing? What had he done? What kind of deal had he actually made with Lumen's rulers? When had he met Wool, and what was his opinion of her? Why had Brandy and the rest banished me in such a way? So much I wanted to know, so much I needed to understand...

I wanted to tell him of what happened in the sewers. After Fly and I had left him behind in that room, with that monster. I wanted to tell him of what happened while I was at the Clothed Woman's home. And then the trip to and from. Then of my last days in Lumen... and all the thoughts I had of them and the people there, and...

I had so much to say. So much to express. So many worries, so many sorrows and hopes and...

And I needed to say it all before I started crying. Before my soul became feeble and bursting.

Vim's soft smile became even gentler as he stared at me, and then he finally nodded.

"I'm sorry Renn," he whispered.

Blinking at him, my whole world went blurry as tears filled my eyes.

Before he could say anything more, I rushed forward.

Wrapping my arms around him, I broke.

Seems I hadn't been able to say a single thing before it happened.

Chapter 206 RosyIn

“Just a tiny push. Away from you,” The Boatwoman guided Renn in rowing.

Renn correctly pushed the rudder just enough to make the tiny boat list to the right. We were now more on course with the upcoming bend in the river.

My companion turned to the boatwoman, who nodded as to inform Renn she had done well, and Renn beamed a happy smile at me.

Smiling back at her, I looked away from the two women and at the river we were slowly floating on.

The water was tinted a little red, thanks to all the clay. It was... pretty, in a way, but somehow it made me feel hotter than I actually was. As if somehow the reddish water was as hot as the red sun in the sky. It was hot, in actuality. Summer was here... but usually, just like the cold, the heat never really bothered me.

“For someone who grew up in a forest, you’re doing well,” the boatwoman said.

“When I bump into something, I’ll remember you said that,” Renn said back, but I could hear her... simple joy of the moment.

She was having a blast. Which was... a little sad, in a way. For something as silly as captaining a little boat down a simple river to make her so thrilled and excited...

Maybe I was being cruel to her. Life should not be so depressing that something like this made her so gleeful. If she was a child, I’d understand, or simple minded... but she was neither. Though she did take joy in life’s simple things, often.

“Hard to bump into anything out here, dear. The river’s deep. Little to no foliage, too! Though ya’ might hit a fish or two sometimes,” she said.

“I’d say that’d be the fishes fault, not ours,” Renn said.

“Such a thing to say! This is their home, dearie not ours!” the boatwoman chided her, but did so with a laugh and happy tone. She was just making small talk.

Glancing back at the two, I studied the boatwoman. She was... honestly a little out of place. Not because she was the captain of a river boat, nor because she was a woman and not a man... but rather, her clothes.

They were far too nice to be worn by a simple fisherman or boatmen out here. She had multiple layers on, and most of what she wore was newer and finer in thread. Stuff usually found in larger cities, not out in the boonies like we were. They were so out of place out here it was almost comical.

We had hired the woman at a small fishing village a few hours up the river. There had been three people with boats on the river at the time, and she was the one Renn had called out to. Not a surprise, really, the other two had been men... but they at least had looked normal. Dressed in rags and slightly dirty from their long hours of labor.

This woman was too clean to be a laborer. Not just her clothes, either. Her nails weren't as clean cut or polished as Renn's, but they weren't jagged and stained like most.

She was as out of place as Renn's smile out here.

Though I was likely reading too much into it. She did know this boat in and out. She knew this river too, based off the way she was guiding Renn along the currents. Something that someone couldn't fake so easily. She also spoke confidently, and I've yet to hear any outright lies from her.

What was perhaps the reason for her attire was something obvious. She likely had either pilfered it from a dead corpse, from the spreading disease, or had bought it for cheap off someone else who had.

And honestly... even if this wasn't actually her boat, or she a thief or something... what did that matter?

It wasn't like she was a threat to us. And we were sailing down the correct river, towards the correct destination.

Though I'd hate to have to kill the woman that Renn was becoming fast friends with.

"Though I must admit, I'm surprised to see travelers these days. Been many moons since I last saw any," the woman said.

"Oh? Because of the sickness?" Renn asked.

"Aye, that and war. The lands here haven't joined in, yet, but a lot of the younger men have run off to join in search of glory or wealth. Nothing but us women and old folks anymore," she said with a sigh.

Likely was speaking from experience. I wonder if her husband or something had run off too.

"They can... join in the war? Even if they're not members of those nations?" Renn asked.

The boatwoman giggled. "Such an innocent one you are! Are you a nun or something?" she asked.

I turned a little, to join the conversation as to steer it as Renn was our boat. "Mercenaries, bandits, and the nations will also happily pay any able bodied man if they're willing to take up arms. Politicians don't care who dies for their cause, as long as it's their cause and not their enemies," I explained.

The woman nodded as she sat down on the edge of the boat, next to the rudder and Renn. The boat rocked a little thanks to her doing so, but not so badly that it bothered Renn. "Aye. They'd pay to enlist them, if anything just to make sure they don't go enlist with their enemies," she added.

Renn frowned as she considered everything we just told her. "Seems like it just... fuels the war even more than necessary. If no one ran off to fight, there wouldn't even be a war in the first place," she said.

Although the woman giggled at Renn, I instead smiled at her. "Yet there's always war. If not today, then tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, then yesterday," I said.

The boatwoman stopped giggling as she nodded. "Indeed. A fruitless endeavor it is, to try and reason it away. Instead we should just let them all run off to fight and die. It makes the world quieter at least!" she said.

Renn smiled at the woman's happy statement, but I could tell she wasn't sure what to think of it.

"Ah, watch the bend here. The river looks gentle on top, but it's fierce below! Hold the rudder..." the woman paused in her guidance, as Renn easily held onto the rudder even as we entered the faster stream of water.

Renn stepped closer to the rudder, as to grab it firmer just in case, but I knew there was no need for her to do so.

She wasn't as weak as she looked.

"Well, wow. Maybe it's calm today? Usually it's rather cranky," the boatwoman reasoned it away as she bent her waist as to look over the edge of the boat, and into the river.

"It does feel stronger, I can feel it tugging more than before," Renn said calmly.

"Aye. Must be a lull. Strange. Usually only happens before a storm, yet I doubt a storm would be coming anytime soon in this heat," the boatwoman said as she looked up at the sky.

Yes. The sky was clear, not a cloud in sight... and the wind nearly nonexistent.

This summer would be a hot one.

"So we can't take this boat all the way, Vim?" Renn asked me.

"Na'way. The lake this feeds into, feeds into a much bigger river. One far too big and strong for this little thing!" the boatwoman answered for me.

I nodded. "And there's no need. There's usually a few larger ships always coming and going from the lake. It's a hub for the fishermen, and other folks who live around here. Not hard to hitch a ride, usually," I said.

“Ya’ll have no problem, a boat’ll be there, you’ll see,” the boatwoman confidently said.

I noted the tone she used. She wasn’t just speaking confidently; she was speaking with the surety as if she could see the ship in question as we spoke. It wasn’t possible of course; we were still several hours away from the lake. Yet I didn’t doubt her either. There was usually not just a ship, but many ships.

The port town we were headed to relied on this lake for its many fresh water sources. Food and drink alike. The day the ships stopped sailing these waters was the day that port city, and the dozens of villages between and around it, were lost for good.

“Though... It is strange here. Why aren’t there any trees or anything growing on the banks? Or along the river?” Renn asked as she looked around.

Her mentor giggled again. “Why, the rock’s are too dry and tough! But it’ll change, ya’ will see. Fields and fields of stalks down the way,” she told Renn.

Renn blinked at the woman and smiled, and I wondered if Renn was having difficulty with understanding the woman. We weren’t just yet far enough for the languages to change too drastically, but we were starting to drift into different dialects and phrases. The type of stuff that if one’s never experienced, could lead to a lot of confusion.

“More surprised you’re not shocked over there being so much water out here,” I said.

“Oh. That too. We walked for hours and didn’t see a single puddle, yet look at this,” Renn nodded. I knew, since she was standing, she could see some of the other rivers nearby. Most were likely smaller than the one we were floating on, but more than a few were large enough to be rivers themselves.

“Water is powerful stuff. Good thing too, less we all die of thirst,” the boatwoman said.

I nodded in agreement.

It was a powerful thing.

Reaching over the side of the boat, I let my hand dip into the cold water. It was surprisingly chill when one considered the heat beating down upon it.

“Now dearie, I like ya but I don’t like ya enough to let you capsize my boat so please pull tha’ore over here,” the boatwoman waved at Renn, to tell her to put her focus back on the boat and the large pile of rocks we were about to hit.

“Oh!” Renn quickly went to fixing our direction, and I leaned back and relaxed.

Renn and the boatwoman were more than happy to talk amongst themselves as the sun crept along the sky. Renn got comfortable enough at the helm that even when the river increased in its current, and began to bend and curve as it joined other rivers and streams she didn’t even need guidance.

Though she relinquished the helm of the boat as we entered the lake, and began to approach a large vessel without any sails.

“I told ya’ there’d be a ship,” the boatwoman said happily as she steered us towards it.

Renn stepped over, rocking the boat a little, as she sat down next to me. While she did, I studied the very obvious ship with its lack of sails, and the many latches and woodwork running all along its outer shell.

Ship? More like floating fortress. It had more layers of defensive layering than actual warships did.

A ship indeed.

“Pirate are you?” I asked her.

Renn perked up at my question, and turned to look at the woman in shock.

The boatwoman gave us a toothy grin. “Former, actually! Ya see, since the war and plague it’s just become too profitable to be a simple cargo hauler to do naught else!” she said.

Renn turned back to me, and her worried and confused smile told me she was enjoying this as much as she was confused.

I frowned as I realized she was very likely being... very honest. Which was ridiculous, but made sense.

“Here’s where I should say I’ll not be paying ransom alongside my ferry fee, right?” I asked.

The boatwoman laughed giddily as some people on the ship noticed our approach. She waved at them, and after getting her laughter under control she winked at me. “I’ll not pillage ya. I like your girl, would be a shame to make her hate me.”

Renn nodded quickly, as if in full agreement.

Sighing as I stood, I went to grab the rope tossed over the side of the ship.

Holding the rope steady, I aided the boatwoman as she set the little boat up against the far larger one. Once the boat was stable, and not at risk at capsizing or going under the larger ship, a rope ladder was tossed over. It nearly hit the boatwoman as it clanked against the wooden frame of the ship, coming to a stop just before falling into the lake.

“Go on up, you two. I’ll need ta’wait for one of the lads,” she said.

Renn glanced at me, and I gestured for her to go ahead. She smirked as I went to grab our bags.

Hefting our luggage onto my shoulder, I glanced again at the woman. "You the captain?" I asked.

"Don't think I am?" she asked back with a grin.

"If you're not, you need to be. You have the attitude for it," I said.

She laughed as Renn climbed up far enough that I felt the ladder was safe enough to join her. Grabbing the ladder, I stared up at Renn's bottom. I waited until she reached the upper section of the ship, and went to clambering over the railing before actually following her up though.

Listening intently to the sounds on the deck, I was glad nothing sounded too off. Once I climbed over the railing and onto the deck, my suspicion was proven true.

The crew was all female.

"Pardon' sir," a younger girl stepped around me as I stepped away from the ladder. She hurried over the railing and down the ladder, likely to swap with the captain. Either she'd go back up the river, to find more customers, or they'd moor or latch the boat to the ship somehow.

Renn happily stood next to me, smiling broadly as she looked around the deck at all the women.

Oddly, most were well dressed. Though a few were much younger than one would think. There was even a younger girl near the bow, staring at Renn and I between some wooden railing pillars. She wasn't even kneeling or crouching, and still wasn't taller than the railing that only went to Renn's waist.

"I'll take ya'bags sir," a woman stepped forward, and was smiling stiffly.

"You know I've actually known many female pirates. Usually they aren't as young or tiny," I said as the captain rolled over the railing, landing onto the deck with bare feet.

"Ha! I knew you were a sailor. It's fine, she'll just be taking em' to your room," the captain said.

"Aye captain!" the woman stood up straighter as she stepped forward, now with new purpose.

Ah. She had intended to rob me then, at first. Interesting.

Handing her the bags, I smiled as I watched her drop them thanks to the weight.

"Wha..." the woman stared at the bags on the ground, and her hands and arms that were outstretched... and empty.

"What're you doin...?" another woman stepped forward, to help. She bent down to pick up one of the bags, and although was able to lift it... she did grunt and exhale as she did.

The captain chuckled as another woman stepped forward, to help as well.

“Want some help?” Renn asked as she too stepped forward.

I sighed as I ignored the women as they mumbled and questioned the bags, as if they were some confounded mystery beyond understanding.

They were just a little heavy. For humans.

“Come on now, get! And you three! Help Lip get that boat secured! We’re heading to the city!” the captain bellowed some orders, and quickly the entire deck went into motion.

Watching them all hurry to obey, I was rather impressed. Even the younger girl hurried to help out.

The women finally got the bags sorted away, and four of them were hurrying off to the back of the ship. There was a large double door situated next to some stairs that led up to the helm. They disappeared into the doors quickly.

“I’ll show ya to your room, come on,” the captain waved at us to follow.

Renn hurried after her like a lost puppy, and I dutifully followed said puppy... but as I did I spared one last glance around the deck.

The women were using pulleys to lift the boat we had arrived on.

They were battening down hatches, and pulling up fishing lines. I counted nearly a dozen poles tied to the side railing of the ship. Not that uncommon of a sight on ships such as these, but it told me a little about this ship and those who lived upon it.

Had the war and plague done this much damage...?

To make even pirates such as these?

They were definitely sailors, at least. But they were no real pirates. The captain was and maybe a few of the others... like the first woman, who had taken my bags and dropped them. She had the mentality needed to rob someone. But the rest of the women here were more than likely not pirates themselves, but their daughters. Or wives or sisters.

Following Renn who followed the captain down the stairs and into the bowels of the ship, I noted the stuff on the walls we were passing. Clothes were hung up on nails. Little shelves had been shaped and installed, though most were relatively bare and only a few had stuff like candles or small trinkets upon them.

Pirate ship? Hardly. This was a home.

Rounding a corner, we ended up at the last door in the hallway, right before it led down another floor. Likely to where the ship had its storage hull.

The door was already open, and a woman ran out of the room as we neared. She darted down the stairwell, lower into the ship, before anyone could say anything.

I sighed as I peered around Renn and into the room... to see that sure enough, one of our bags was open.

“Uh... If she took anything I’ll make sure to get it back for ya...” the captain said with a strained smile.

“Please do,” was all I said.

“This is rather nice,” Renn said as she stepped into the room. It was a larger room, with not just a bed but a small table and window. Based off the hastily made bedding and the rug on the floor... it was likely someone’s actual room.

There was even some trunks and a dresser, which looked full of clothes and stuff.

“Should do fine right? Just a few days, after all,” the captain asked me.

"It'll do just fine!" Renn said happily.

I waved at Renn as the captain's eyes held my own.

The captain nodded, and then coughed. "You uh... can either have dinner brought to ya, or we can eat together if you'd like?" the captain then asked Renn.

"Oh. Yes. Together," Renn stepped back out of the room and nodded to the captain.

Keeping a groan inside, I glanced down the hallway behind us. Some of the women were peering at us from around the corner of the hallway.

"Dinner it is! Hope you like fish, that's about all we got anymore lately," the captain said.

"What's your name?" I asked her before Renn could tell her an all fish meal would be delightful.

She startled, and laughed at me. "Roslyn! My daughter should be around here too, little Rosie. If I find her I'll make sure she introduces herself too," Roslyn said.

"Vim, she introduced herself when we boarded her boat. Or well, the other boat... the smaller one," Renn reminded me.

Had she? I must not have been paying attention.

Or rather I was likely more interested in her now, which was why I wanted to know.

She had gone from weird out of place boatwoman, to captain of a pirate ship. Which also normally wouldn't be much a difference in importance to me... but this was interesting.

A pirate ship, made home by a bunch of women and children.

Very interesting indeed.

"An odd man ya' got, but better than the ones who just up and die on ya," Rosyln said to Renn.

Renn sighed. "I'm not sure. His problem is he just won't die no matter what," she said.

Rosyln busted into laughter, and I glanced at Renn who smirked at me.

"Oh I'll enjoy this trip, I will! I'd even waive the ferry fee if the world wasn't so bleak, I would!" Rosyln said.

“I’ll be deducting any lost goods from your fee, Captain Rosyln,” I said as I reached past Renn and shut the door behind her.

Renn stood up stiffly, likely thanks to my action and tone... but Rosyln only nodded and giggled away as if my genuine threat was just a funny joke. “All will be well! Now,” Rosyln stepped towards Renn, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

I watched Renn’s body go stiff upon the contact, and her smile became all wiry and weird... but still one of joy, as Rosyln guided her back down the hall, heading back where we came.

“So Renn, you learnt to steer a tiny boat, how about one with more girth?” the captain asked Renn.

Renn didn’t even hesitate to nod. “Oh yes!”

The captain smirked, and I shook my head at her... and Renn.

Just great. Renn the pirate. If I wasn’t careful she’d be one before nightfall...

Slowly following the two, since they were hurrying up the stairs to the helm... I sighed as we returned to the deck.

Glancing up at the sky, I glared at the darker reds appearing.

Grow darker quicker, please, before Renn starts speaking in tongues and hears the call of the sea.

Since if she did... I'd likely drop all of my responsibilities and join her, and we can't be having that.

Not at all.

Chapter 207 A Game For The Weary

Rounding the corner, I headed for our room with a happy step.

Lunch had been a simple one. More fish, just as all the other meals had been... but this time at least there had been another snack too. I had a few on a plate in my hands, that Roslyn had kindly given to me and I was excited to share them with Vim.

He hadn't eaten with me and Roslyn. Likely because of the captain's daughter. The young girl was very sweet, but had seemed to taken a... rather odd liking to Vim. The type of liking that Vim didn't seem to really enjoy.

Reaching our room, I found the door was open. Like usual, even here on a pirate's ship, Vim never cared about privacy or security for himself. Not that it was that surprising anymore. Vim was not only... likely immune to any kind of thievery or physical assault, but he by now also knew we were in no danger here on Roslyn's ship.

Although former pirates... Roslyn and her crew were not people we needed to fear. Especially now that I've spent time with them, and learned how poor they actually were. Most of this region was seemingly suffering from an economic collapse, thanks to the plague spreading and the war raging in the nation to the west.

Inside our little room, near the stairwell that led deeper into the ship, was my people's protector. Lounging lazily.

Vim was lying on our bed, just barely sitting up on the few pillows we had, and was reading a little...

"Wait, is that what I think it is?" I asked as I recognized the familiar black cover.

"It is," he said without taking his eyes off the page he was reading.

Entering the room, I felt oddly apprehensive. I hadn't realized Vim was carrying around such a precious item. He should have told me, now I'd take extra care keeping an eye on our bags. I had thought his bag was now like mine. Only carrying basic stuff, like clothes.

"I have crackers," I said as I stepped over to the bed.

Vim lazily looked away from his book and at the plate I had lowered to his eye level.

"So they are," he said.

“Want some?” I asked.

He shook his head.

Smiling at him, I knew it wasn't just because he didn't desire tasty stuff... but also because he was kind.

There weren't many on the plate. He wouldn't eat any, so as to let me have them.

He usually ate what I offered him, after all. Even if he didn't necessarily like to eat stuff like this.

“Is it any good?” I asked him as I put the plate of crackers onto the small table next to the bed. I had to place it carefully, since there was a small jug of water on it too. The table was barely big enough for both of them.

“The book? I guess,” he said.

“You guess...?” Sitting down onto the bed, I leaned back a little as to lean against Vim's legs. They were arched upward a little, since the bed wasn't big enough for him to lay completely flat, even with him sitting up a little.

The bed, and this room, was likely for one of the younger girls. I wondered whose it had been and where they were sleeping now.

“She’s preparing for an ending. Since I know the ending, it’s a little... boring, I guess,” Vim said.

“She?” I asked. So the author was a woman.

He nodded, though most of his head was hidden by the book from my angle.

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Do you really want to know, Renn? You’ll meet her eventually, why not let it be a happy surprise?” he offered.

Ah. Right...

“True. Okay. Let’s do it that way,” I agreed.

“Mhm,” he seemed to agree... and then lowered the book onto his chest, as to look at me.

Smiling at him, I pointed to the book. "I... never got to read the first one. Even though I borrowed the second from the Bell Church, so I could read them all," I said.

"I know," he said.

"It's regrettable. But... it's okay. I'm sure I'll get to read it someday," I said.

I hadn't been able to, for the obvious reason. We had left Lumen not long after Reatti and I had returned. And the few days in-between had been... hectic, to say the least.

"Can read it now if you'd like," Vim said.

"Huh?"

He nodded and gestured to our bags. They were piled next to each other in-between the rickety dresser and wall. The only space available, if we didn't want to trip on them.

"They're all in there. Or well, the three others are. I got the fourth here," Vim said as he tapped the book.

My eyes watered, and I looked back at him. He nodded, as if to tell me he was speaking the truth.

“Why...?” I asked softly.

“Brandy’s apology. She had asked me what she could give you, before we left. I suggested the books,” he said.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and basked in the world’s oddness.

Sometimes I was so shocked by the gentle thoughtfulness of others, especially when it showed up so randomly like this.

“I have a few other things too...” Vim grunted as he sat up, and pulled his legs out from behind me as to get off the bed.

With blurry eyes I watched the man I’d come to love put the book aside on the bed and go to the bags. He pulled the larger one, his bag, out from in-between the dresser and wall. He plopped it down on the bed next to me and opened it, and began to rummage in it.

Smiling at him, I patiently waited to see what else he’d shock me with.

“Merit gave me seeds. Wynn a pen. Lawrence gave a poem, which I think is in another language so I’ll need to translate it for you...” Vim rattled off the stuff he’d gotten, but he didn’t pull them out of the bag.

“Wait...” I sniffed as I turned, as to kneel on the bed next to the bag and look into it.

There was a bunch of stuff in his bag. Mixed between clothing, and other softer materials, were indeed objects not usually seen in Vim’s bag. The other little black books were there. Some kind of scroll rested next to them. A weird brown box beneath them... and...

“Not everyone gave you stuff, Renn. But... a few did,” he said after a moment. He had stopped moving the stuff around since I had peered into the bag myself.

Reaching into the bag, I grabbed the small brown box. Stuff inside it clanked as I lifted it out of the bag.

It had a familiar design on it, though I wasn’t sure why I recognized it. A bunch of little squares with different colors and...

“Who gave this?” I asked him.

Vim shifted, and he and I stared at one another for a moment... and I wondered if maybe this wasn’t a gift. But I couldn’t imagine Vim carrying something like this around, it was bulky and...

Turning it around, I found the same square symbols on the other side too. What was this? It looked like it opened...

“Let’s see...” Vim turned as he sighed. Then he stepped away from me and the bed. I sat up straighter as he went to moving some furniture around.

He pulled one of the trunks over to the center of the room, and then moved my plate of crackers and the water jug over to the dresser. Then he pulled the little table to the bed, or rather between the bed and the trunk... then Vim promptly sat down onto the trunk.

It creaked as he sat upon it, and he smiled and held his hand out.

Handing him the box, I wondered what it was. What was he going to do?

Then he opened the box... and a small bag fell out of it and onto the table. The bag wasn’t that big, but it sounded and looked like there was a bunch of...

Taking a deep breath, I realized what it was as Vim put the now opened box onto the table between us.

It was a game-board. That’s why I recognized the squares.

Vim opened the bag and began pulling out the little pieces, and putting them into their respective positions.

His were a darker gray, mine a lighter.

“Remember this?” he asked.

I nodded as I sniffed. “I do. I played it with Rapti,” I said.

“Of course you do,” Vim said gently.

“I even remember the rules,” I said as I stood as to sit back down on the edge of the bed. As to face Vim properly.

“Of course you do,” Vim said again.

As Vim readied the pieces, I wondered who had known I had enjoyed this little game.

“Who gave me this, Vim?” I asked.

“No one,” he said.

“No...” I frowned, and then realized the truth.

Vim hadn't gotten this from anyone.

He had gotten it for me himself.

The final piece was placed, and Vim nodded. "All right. You're white, go ahead," he said.

"This is more grey than white," I said happily as I grabbed my first piece.

Moving it slowly, I noted that thanks to the smaller board... It felt a little odd. The one Rapti had was much bigger. Probably bigger than the table this one sat upon, and barely took up half of.

For a few moments... we didn't speak as we played the game.

Vim moved his pieces quickly. Very unlike Rapti had done. He sometimes even grabbed his pieces before I was even done moving my own.

And... promptly... as quick as the game had began, I had lost.

"Vim..." I whispered his name as he gently took my Queen piece. The one that signified the end of the game.

“Hm?” He paused, his hand hovering over the board as he wondered what was wrong.

“How many moves had that been?” I asked.

“Eight.”

Taking a deep breath, I sighed.

“What?” Vim asked as he sat up straighter.

“When we left. The last game I played with Rapti. She beat me in eight moves too,” I said.

Vim frowned at me, and then shook his head. “Your memory is scary. Would you like to try again?” he asked.

“Of course I do,” I said as I held out my hand for my Queen.

He returned it, and we both went to rearranging the pieces.

Although the quick defeat was upsetting... I couldn't stop smiling. Hopefully Vim didn't find it too strange. I knew I was smiling crazily, since I could feel the strain in my cheeks.

"Try to pay attention to more than just the pieces you're attacking. Think of it like a battlefield. Don't just focus on the foe in front of you, always keep an eye on the enemies behind them. You'll eventually be facing them, so you need to know how to address them too," Vim said.

Blinking at his tutelage, I compared it to Rapti's long ago. I had to ponder a moment, to remember the things she had said and how she had said them... but the memories made me only smile even more.

Moving the first piece again, I watched as he moved his own. This time he moved one of the ones on the edge of the board, not one in the middle.

Interesting, since I had moved the same piece as last time.

"In this case, I'm facing a whole army. Are you saying I should be able to know what a whole army is doing, at any moment? And plan ahead for it?" I asked him.

"You should be able to do that, and more. You're the general. You should not only know what the enemy army is doing, but yours too," he said.

Mine too...

Was he saying I wasn't playing properly? Or rather, not the sense he deemed proper.

Maybe he was saying I focused too much on singular pieces and their moves...

"Is that how you look at life?" I asked. It made a lot of sense, honestly. Especially if you considered the Society, and the world we lived in, as two opposing armies.

Or maybe smaller ones, all working together.

"I was raised to be a soldier. So you can fault my upbringing," Vim said as he moved one of his own pieces.

My hand stopped before it grabbed my next piece—the tallest piece, the King.

"What?" I asked.

Vim was staring at the board, so he likely didn't notice my sudden lack of smile. "Hm?" he hummed as he scratched his jaw. Lately he had been scratching the spot where he had gotten cut in Lumen. The cut was long gone, of course, and there was not even a thin line for a scar... but he acted as if there was.

"You were raised to be a soldier?" I asked him carefully, and went to move my piece.

Careful. Slowly. Naturally.

He likely hadn't noticed what he had said to me. So if I just... acted naturally... maybe...

Vim nodded as he went to move his own piece. He took one of my horse pieces, and put it on the table next to the board alongside the others he had taken already.

The board was quickly becoming darker, as my pieces dwindled.

"Well... to be honest maybe not a soldier but rather a general. But it's nothing special. Back then all men were raised to be generals. It was up to us to prove we could be one, but all were given the tools to do so," he said.

My mouth went dry as I tried to imagine his words.

A... culture, maybe, that raised their sons like that.

I had no clue who, what, or where such a thing could be found.

Did anyone...?

“Did you... become a general?” I asked as I moved another piece. The moment I did, and Vim moved his own piece, I realized I had messed up. I was focusing too much on our conversation, and not the game.

“The highest rank I ever achieved was praetor. In the sense yes, a general. I commanded legions. The title I held the longest, and if you were to ask for my personal opinion... the position I was the most competent at was instead more of a...” Vim went quiet as he frowned, and I panicked.

Did he realize he was telling me so much? Would he stop? Go quiet? End our happy little game?

But no, luckily he had just been pondering something. Maybe a word to use. Or a translation for me.

“A colonel...? Basically a commander for many knights. A squadron, a group, not the whole army,” Vim finished as he moved one last piece... and ended the game again.

This time he didn't even pick up my Queen. He just smiled at me, confident.

“Ten moves,” I said to him.

“Hm,” he nodded.

We went to replacing the pieces again, and I wondered what to say to him.

Maybe the reason he was being so open right now was because he looked tired. He did seem to be moving a little slower than normal, and his eyes did look heavy.

Yet although a little cruel of me... I wanted to exploit this moment. Whether it be because he was tired, not paying attention, or just in a happy mood... I wanted to learn more about him. As much as I could. But what would be the best way to do it? What question could I ask, in what way, as to get an answer and not alert him to what he was mistakenly doing?

"You didn't like being a general?" I asked... deciding that the best place to start.

"I was too good at it," he said as he finished putting his pieces onto the board.

I slowed in my own placement, and frowned at him. "You say it as if that's a bad thing," I said.

"Because it is. I didn't learn until later in my life how to... let go, as they say. I cared too much for those below me," he explained.

Vim didn't seem to mind that I hadn't restarted our game yet. I squeezed the last piece in my hand as I stared at the man who didn't seem very bothered by what he had just revealed.

"You mean... as in war, don't you? As in you need to be willing to sacrifice when needed," I said.

He nodded. "I was too good at it. I was able to wage grandiose wars without defeat. We had losses, of course. It's impossible to not have them, but my losses were... minuscule compared to others. So when the times came where I did lose, or we lost far more than expected... well..." he shrugged.

"You blamed yourself. Letting it affect you," I said for him.

Vim nodded. "A failure as a general. A leader can care, but they can't let such emotions risk everyone else."

Although I of course didn't agree at all... I knew better than to voice those thoughts. Doing so would just be an insult to Vim... it would be like a young child chastising him for his beliefs, even though they had never even left their home. Their nest.

I didn't know war, after all.

Putting my last piece onto the board, I coughed as I moved the same piece as last time and the time before.

Vim moved a different piece again. This time he moved the exact same piece as me, just on his side. My opposite.

Frowning at the move, I spent a few moments considering his move... and how to continue. I hadn't expected him to mirror me like that.

“Did the Society raise you? I thought you had been born before the Society existed,” I asked as I finally made my decision. I moved a piece near the edge of the board.

“My own people raised me. I... think the Society did exist, in a form, before me. But it wasn’t really... complete. It was more of an ideal. A theory. People were trying, but no one had the...” he paused as he tilted his head, and grabbed a piece... seemingly at random. “Wisdom? To create it properly,” he finished as he put the piece down.

Moving another piece, I nodded. That made sense. “Was Celine like you? Or... from the same people? Or culture, or whatever?” I asked.

“No. My people are gone,” Vim said as he moved the same piece had moved in the beginning... which wasn’t good. It opened up a path for some pieces in his back row to now attack my front. Great.

“What were they called?” I asked.

Vim said nothing as I moved a piece... and then a few moments passed and the silence lingered.

Whoops.

Staring at him, who stared at me, I smiled sheepishly at him.

He smiled back at me, and my heart nearly skipped a beat. I felt my face go red hot, and I had to actually look away from him.

What the heck?

"I'll tell you another day," he finally said.

Nodding, I felt silly. A part of me was upset. At both him and myself. Him for being such a weird man concerning his past, and me for not being smart enough to not ask such a question. The rest of me however was... well... falling in love. Again. Why had his smile at that moment made my heart skip a beat? He always smiled like that at me.

"I won, by the way," Vim spoke up, to remind me.

Huh?

Looking at the board, I groaned as I realized he was right. He had moved one of his back pieces and slipped through my guard. I knew I should have worried over that.

I sighed as I studied the board for a moment. Vim was kind enough to let me; he patiently sat there as I even went to move the pieces back to their previous positions. I recreated the board a move before.

Then, I moved it to the positions just before that.

“Hm,” Vim smiled at me as I studied the board, and realized what I could have done.

“Three moves. Nothing I do after that could save me,” I said as I realized it.

“Well done. I’m... very impressed. I wonder if I could do that on a whim?” he said as he stared at the board.

“Do what? Replicate it?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Hm...” I tried to see if I could go back even further. I moved the pieces again.

“Which move was this?” he asked once I was done.

“Move four,” I said.

“Was it? Didn’t I open with that one?” Vim asked, pointing at an unmoved piece on his side.

“This is from our first game,” I said.

Vim’s hand fell to his lap, and he glared at me.

“What?” I asked.

“I would have hated to face you on the battlefield,” he said.

A huge smile planted itself on my face thanks to his kingly compliment. I don’t think he’s ever said something so high-praise to me before!

Vim sighed as I went to setting the board back up again. So we could play again.

He let me place his pieces back into their starting positions as he crossed his arms, as if to ponder.

“In exchange for not telling you about my people... how about I give you another question? Or answer, I guess? Anything you’d like to ask?” he offered.

Oh...?

My mind went blank for the tiniest of moments... then it went into chaos as I scoured my mind for a question.

Did I want to ask about Celine? What happened in Lumen? Monarchs? His past lovers? His favorite fruit...?

"Hm..." I too crossed my arms, as if to mimic him as he liked to do with our little board game, and I considered it deeply.

Should I play it off and ask something silly? He was being so kind to me lately. So gentle. Maybe I should return the favor. Although Vim seemed to be... willing to tell me stuff now, or be more open, that didn't mean he actually liked to do so. It was obviously uncomfortable for him. So...

Vim smiled at me as I stared at him... and wondered which to pick. He was kind enough to let me sit in silence as I considered it.

"What does your name mean?" I asked after a long moment.

He blinked at me and frowned. "The meaning of my name?" he asked.

I nodded. "It's clear you... speak another language. Or well, many languages. But you've made a point that your birth place spoke a certain language. One that's odd. So I'm assuming your name is odd too, right?" I asked.

“Ah...” He sighed and nodded. “It means power. Energy. Force. My name is Vim Vitae. Basically I was given a name to represent my outstanding strength and resilience. Another term is vim and vigor, but that’s more a phrase than an actual name,” he said.

Vim Vitae.

“What’s the vitae mean?” I asked.

“Life. The name almost literally translates into powerful life. Vim can mean a few things, but it’s essentially just excessive vitality. I was basically named excessive liveliness, or spirit depending on how you wanted to view it,” he said.

Giggling at him, I nodded. “I see. So you were named for your strength,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m not very lively am I?” he smirked at me.

Nodding at him, I agreed. Vim although... forceful sometimes, was more of a stoic man than not. Though... he might have been rambunctious as a child.

Basking in the moment, I smiled at Vim who was smirking at me.

“My name is Rennalee,” I told him.

Vim’s smirk died a little as he blinked at me. “Is it now?” he asked.

I nodded.

He frowned and shifted on the trunk he sat on. It made an odd noise thanks to his movement, and I wondered if he was breaking it. He was heavy, sometimes. “Do you... prefer to not be called Rennalee?” he asked.

A tiny shiver ran down my tail at him saying my full name, and I smiled and shook my head. “I don’t honestly mind either way. Ginny, had lost several teeth thanks to the beating she got before I happened upon her and her brother. Before her proper teeth came in she was unable to say my name, so she shortened it. Ever since then... well... I’ve been Renn,” I said.

“I see.”

Thinking of the siblings, for the first time in a while, made me smile. I missed them.

Ginny would have liked Vim. She had always wanted a father.

“I miss them,” I said softly.

Vim said nothing. As usual he stayed quiet during the more somber moments. It was something I liked about him.

Reaching out as to make the first move, and start the game again... I enjoyed our gentle silence together. This was wonderful. I had enjoyed spending time with the pirates and their captain... and even though their lifestyle and personalities were intriguing to me... right now this was all I wanted. This felt wonderful. I felt at peace. No despair. No danger. No worry. Just Vim and me, relaxing.

I hadn't realized I had been longing so deeply for this. But now that I knew it could be found, and attained, I wanted to never let it go. I wanted to enjoy this for as long as possible.

And it seemed Vim did too, which only made me enjoy it all the more.

Chapter 208 A Leaky Ship

"Vim."

My eyes opened before I fully woke up... and the world became noisy. Noisier even than the battlefields in my mind.

Sitting up in the bed, I took a small breath to confirm what I was hearing. The familiar smell of the rain in the desert was unmistakable... and rather soothing.

"What's wrong?" I asked Renn, who had stood up straighter upon my own movement. She must have been leaning over me, as to wake me. I wonder how long it had taken her to do so... hopefully not long.

"I'm sorry Vim... I know you're tired, but I'm worried and I think you'd get upset with me if I didn't wake you," she spoke calmly, even though her words sounded dire. She even had a gentle smile on her face, which told me whatever was happening... wasn't really anything worth fretting over.

I rolled a little, to bring my legs off the bed and to the floor. Taking another breath, I noted the slight sway of the ship. The whistle of the wind finding its way through all the cracks in the wood and windows told me the reason.

"What is it?" I asked as the world lit up. Bright flashes were followed by thunder, and an even more intense downpour.

"The ship. It's... well... flooding," Renn frowned as she spoke.

Flooding...?

Firming my bare feet on the wooden floor, I focused on the feeling of the wood. It was still dry, even in the humid air, but...

Yes. It was tightening and shifting a little too strongly. The boards were rubbing up against each other, instead of having tiny little gaps like usual.

The ship wasn't just listing; it was overweight all of a sudden.

I sighed as I stood and listened to the sounds all around us. The harsh rain. The river waves. The wood creaking. Dripping sounds from water leaking just right outside the hallway. Loud voices all throughout the ship, the women and girls being noisy.

“Is it sinking quickly?” I asked. It didn’t feel like it was. We were supposed to be three levels above the water-line, and although I could hear the splash of the water it was still far enough away that I knew we’d not sunk too badly.

“I don’t know... it’s just... flooding, but Roslyn is really panicking over it,” Renn said as she stepped over to the door, to peer her head out into the hallway.

I joined her, and bent around her as to see what she meant.

Dozens of drops of water were falling up and down the hallway. Mostly lining near the walls, where the joints in the floor above us were.

Honestly the leakage didn’t seem that bad. But I knew better than to think Renn was simply overreacting. After all, I could hear the shouting coming from down the hallway and stairs past our room. It sounded like most of the women were downstairs, where the hold would be.

“It’s been storming for a bit, and it just keeps getting worse. It happened all of a sudden too, the skies were clear and then it was here. It smells weird too,” Renn said.

“That’s a desert storm for you,” I said as I stepped back into the room. I checked our bags, to make sure they weren’t getting soaked. They weren’t, but there was a growing stain on the wall near the window. The water was seeping into it... which meant over time it would likely start to leak too.

I put the bags into one of the trunks, which required taking out some of the blankets that had been inside it. It wasn’t water-tight but it was better than nothing.

“Vim?” Renn watched me as I sat back down on the bed and yawned.

A part of me wanted to lie back down. The rocking wasn’t bad at all, if anything it’d just put me to sleep faster. Plus the storm... well...

Glancing at Renn, I wondered what she’d do if I asked her to lay back down with me. Maybe she’d blush and go wide-eyed like she did when I flirted with her out of the blue... but something told me she might also glare instead.

She was very protective of those she came to favor. If she thought I was abandoning these women, even to something as non-lethal as this... well...

Stop, Vim. Not only should I not ignore the plights of those around me... even if annoyed, I definitely also shouldn’t be thinking such a thing about Renn.

“Where’s Roslyn?” I asked, as to distract my half-asleep thoughts.

“Downstairs.”

Right.

I debated putting my shoes and socks back on, but decided against it. Especially if the ship really was sinking.

Getting back up off the bed, I patted Renn on the shoulder as I passed her and headed for the hallway.

She made a noise as I headed for the stairs, and she followed me down into the bowels of the ship.

The next floor had another large hallway with more rooms. I ignored it, and the two women who were busy trying to cover a window at the other end of the hall. Looked like it had no glass anymore, so all the rain was free to fly in without resistance. They were boarding it up with what looked like misshapen wood. Honestly they weren't doing a very good job... though it was interesting that I couldn't see any broken pieces of glass on the floor around their feet. Either the windowpane had broken outward somehow, or it had never been there to begin with.

As we reached the second to last floor of the ship, and the world became a little noisier with all the splashing and shouting, I paid close attention to the designs of the ship's hull. I scoured the rather open floor, that had only a few small rooms, for any sign of a pump or ballast system.

There were none.

Descending to the last floor, I paused before the last few steps of the stairwell. They were underwater.

Stepping out of the stairwell, I stepped into cold river water. It was up to my shins, and rather dark. Between the dark water and all the stuff floating everywhere it was impossible to see the floor.

“Watch your step Renn,” I warned her as she folded her pants up her legs, nearly reaching her knees. I waited until she too stepped into the water to make sure she’d be fine. She had a huge smirk on her face as she did, but she still nodded dutifully to my warning.

Wading through the water, I made sure to walk along the center of the hold, where there was a raised section. This ship, like many river ships, was flat bottomed but there were still sunken sections on the sides. In this ship’s case it was likely for barrel storage. I didn’t want Renn stepping off the center and falling into deeper sections and hurting herself. Even our kind could suffer a broken ankle if not careful.

Women and children were busy filling buckets of water, and handing it off to others who then handed them off to someone else. The other side of the ship had another stairwell; one that I knew was likely full of women all the way to the top. They were handing off full buckets of water and exchanging them with empty ones.

I wasn’t sure if they were carrying the buckets all the way up to the top deck, but I doubted it. There should be a few places before the deck that had places for them to dump out the water. A window, or cannon opening.

A simple system, but...

Glancing around for the source of all the water, I was a little surprised to not find any. For it to be this bad already and no real hole... it must be in the floor. Which was strange... If it was in the floor, it would have gotten like this long before the rains had started.

“Careful!” Roslyn shouted at a younger woman who had slipped and fell. She had dropped her bucket in the fall, and another woman helped grab it and helped her back to her feet.

Watching her and the rest filling their buckets, I frowned in thought.

Yes. Too much water. The buckets weren't that big, but they were actually moving quite a bit of water rather quickly. Yet it seemed...

Glancing over at Renn, who was grimaced worriedly... I studied her legs. The pants she wore right now were the thinner set. The stuff she didn't usually wear while we traveled. She had pulled the ends up, curling them as to try and keep them above the water. They were now getting wet too, and not just because of her splashing footsteps.

The water was rising quickly.

The ship was sinking.

“Roslyn,” I got the captain's attention. She turned quickly at my voice, and her face full of worry was a little depressing to see.

A pirate shouldn't panic so visibly. Especially so the captain.

"We're sinking," she said stiffly. I could tell by her tone she was wondering why we weren't helping.

"That you are. Where's the hole?" I asked.

"I don't know. We've tried to find it, but..." she shook her head, and then went to grab a bucket from another woman. One that was full. She hurried away from me, to hand it off to another woman in the stairwell.

"Vim?" Renn asked worriedly as I watched the women while they all tried to save their home.

How long had they been at it? They were all soaked. Some were even naked, or nearly so. A few were even crying.

I sighed at the sight of them.

This was why Renn had awoken me. She wasn't worried for our own selves, obviously, and maybe not even the women. After all a slowly sinking ship, in a small river... even during a thunderstorm, wasn't that deadly of an event.

Rather the danger here was something a little more... practical. A little more personal.

This was their home. The home of people Renn found herself enjoying the company of.

Turning, I splashed in the cold water as to face Renn. "Go find me a hammer and sheets of metal if possible. If you can't find metal, find..." I felt my eye twitch as I heard one of the women behind me fall again. She let out a small cry of pain as she splashed around, and others went to helping her back up.

Renn peered around me worriedly, her eyebrows upturned as she watched them. At least she hadn't rushed forward to help them.

I needed her to not help down here. If during all the commotion and movement her hat fell off, or her tail got free... well...

"Renn," I got her attention again. She blinked and nodded at me, and smiled.

"Vim," she said my name, and patiently waited.

"A hammer. Preferably a flat one. I'll need something to fix the hole with. Something I can bend and force into shape. If you can't find metal anywhere, then break apart someone's furniture. So I can have the flat pieces of wood. Or a door. If you need help have someone help you," I gave her commands as I formulated my own plans.

"Hammer and metal, or flat boards. Right," she focused as she nodded.

“Nails too, if they have any. But focus on the wood and metal first,” I said.

“Right.”

“Go on then. Use that stairwell,” I said with a point back to the stairs we had taken to get here.

Renn spun on a heel, and splashed loudly as she ran off.

I waited and watched her until she entered the stairwell before going about my own task.

Stepping off the flat path in the center, I went deeper into the water. I had to push aside floating boxes and... lifting a soaked shirt that had gotten wrapped around my hand as I moved stuff out of the way, I realized most of the stuff down here was personal effects. Clothes and other such items.

Great. Great indeed.

Why's it always something? And why now? I had hoped to... relax a little, before reaching the camels and the Stone Kingdom. I had even tried taking a nap for once.

Nothing ever went my way.

This was why I never rested. It only made things worse.

I took a small breath, and then crouched and dived into the water. With closed eyes, I felt the water... and everything in it. Things bumped into me, floating past. The ship moved under me, rocking in the river... and...

And no tug or pull from any kind of real current.

Standing up, I emerged from the water and hurried to another section. I went farther away from the group of women, to the other side of the ship, and once again submerged myself.

Once again I couldn't feel any hint of pressure or current. If water was seeping into the hull from this area, it wasn't doing it in great quantities at all.

"What's he doing?" I heard one of the women ask as I submerged myself again in another section. Near the stairwell Renn had just ran up.

This section too had no signs of a hole.

Huffing as I continued searching for the hole, I tried to deconstruct the ship in my head for a moment. The ship was flat bottomed. The hull rounded. A few hundred feet long, half that wide... The wood it was formed out of used rope and other things as lining for its water-tightness.

A typical river ship in this region. Shaped similar to a trireme, yet I didn't see any sections or spots for oars. There weren't any shelves or gangways along the sides either, where usually men would sit and oar. Though a calm river like this likely didn't need such a thing.

The keel was underneath the center, where one could walk. The rudder's ropes and the tiller weren't visible... so they were likely on the floor above. There was only a single pillar in the room, the mainmast, which meant the other masts were behind the stairwells out of sight... which meant...

Stepping out of the deeper water, I returned to the center of the hold... and realized the water was now up to my knees. It had gone up quite a bit while I had been searching for the hole.

Considering the size of the hold, that was an insane amount of water. This ship would start sinking very quickly if I didn't figure it out.

But I had a good idea now, after checking most of the sections and not finding the hole.

Stepping between hurried women who were struggling to fill their buckets faster than before, I rounded them and went to the stairwell they were using. The women in the stairs stared at me with weird gazes as I studied the stairs... and the walls around them.

There.

Stepping around the stairwell, I stepped deeper into the water and walked along the wall for a moment until I found the latch. It was half-submerged, but even with it being under the water it was easy to open... and as I did, more water rushed in.

Lifting the panel, I watched as a lot of water flowed out of the foremast's room. The section in the bow of the ship, behind the stairwell. A part of the hold, but not.

"Do you hear that?" someone behind me asked, and I knew it was because they could now hear the loud flow of water I had just released.

Tearing the panel off its hinges, I wondered if this thin piece of wood would work for now. I'd need to find the hole first, but...

"Vim?" Roslyn splashed her way to me as I pushed the panel into the section of now opened wall. It was difficult to get it through the hole, since the panel was a little bigger than the hole itself, but I was able to angle it through.

"Vim, did you find the hole?" Roslyn asked as she reached me. I ignored her as I crouched and stepped through the hole, and entered the dark... and basically flooded section.

The water in here was up to my waist, and luckily that seemed to be all that was in here. In here there was no debris or floating junk.

"Yes. I sent Renn to find a hammer and nails, go help her," I said to the captain.

“Aye!” Roslyn hurried away, shouting orders as I went to finding the hole.

The room behind the stairwell was small, but not because it actually were. A large timber pillar took up most of the room, the foremast. The ceiling was also low, so low that as I walked around I bumped my head against one of the beams.

Kneeling a little, I quickly felt the flow of water. It was coming from behind the pillar, near the direct front of the ship.

As I rounded the pillar, and started to feel and hear the rush of water pouring in from the large hole... I panicked for a tiny moment. It felt as if it was coming from the stem, which would mean the ship was toast and nothing I could do would fix it... but as I reached the hole, and found it, I was able to calm down.

A hole about the size of Renn’s rear was in the hull next to the stem. I wasn’t sure how it had happened, since it was actually right under the waterline... but the cause of the hole didn’t matter.

All that mattered right now was to plug the hole, or else the ship was done for.

Pushing the panel I had ripped off earlier up against the hole, I just barely got it over the hole before it cracked and snapped in two. The water pressure was too strong for such a thin thing. I tossed the panel pieces aside, and quickly went through my memories for something suitable. It’d have to be large. A few wooden boards weren’t going to work here. The hole was too big, and it was in the front of the ship. It was rolling into the water... so it’d need a little bit of sturdiness...

Was I going to have to tear apart a wall or door to fix this? Could I do it in time, before the whole ship just... sunk? The rocking from the storm was starting to soften, and not because the storm was dying down. The ship was mere minutes from capsizing.

“Vim!”

Renn’s voice called for me from outside the little flooded room. I stepped around the pillar, and found the hole was almost flooded completely. I could just barely see Renn over the water line through it.

“What’d you find?” I asked her as I waded over to the hole.

A mallet looking thing was held out to me. I smiled as I took it, and realized I should have told her to focus on the materials to block the hole over the hammer. I could force things into shape and push nails into wood with my bare hands; I didn’t actually need this...

“Fretta gave me this,” Renn then said as she pushed a shiny piece of metal through the hole.

Taking it from her before it was tugged out of her hands from the water flowing out of the room, I frowned at the platter.

It was a fancy... bronze food platter. The large thing was more than big enough, and heavy enough that it might just survive the pressure.

“This should work. One second, let me see,” I said.

“What about the nails?” she asked.

Oh. Right. I held my hand out under the hole, and I felt a bunch of nails get pushed into my hand.

I felt a few drop as I grabbed them, and I frowned at them. There were nails of all shapes and sizes, and more than a few were already bent askew.

Had she pulled these things out of the boat? I’d need to have her show me where she got these, lest another hole simply became another problem.

“Want me to come in there?” Renn asked as I stepped away.

“No,” was all I said. The water in here was high enough, and splashing around enough, that her hat would just get lost.

Renn grumbled something, but her voice was lost in the sounds of the sinking ship as I went back to the hole.

Pushing the metal platter up against the wall and hole, I was glad to see it withstood the force of the pressure. The water still spewed out from the sides of the platter, sneaking in-between the designs grooves etched onto it, but the amount of water spraying in was nothing compared to earlier.

Without waiting I went straight to hammering the thing into the hull. I knew this was in a way only making the situation worse. The nails I used to hammer the metal piece to the hull were a little too thick and big. They were likely going to result, in time, the wood hull cracking and failing even worse than it was already.

Instead of doing it this way, I should be nailing other pieces of wood over the platter instead. So that the nails only went so far into the wood, not all the way.

But...

Hammering the platter firmly into the hull, I then went to hammering out the edges. To flatten the spots where the river water was spraying in from. In most instances, my hammering sent the edge of the platter into the wood itself... and in little time at all the hole went from a giant spigot to a tiny trickle.

Admiring my work, standing in waist high water, I listened for any other sounds. To make sure there were no other holes in this room.

It didn't seem like there were, so I went back to the exit.

Ducking through the hole, I emerged back into the hold and smiled down at Renn who smiled up at me.

"Did you fix it?" Roslyn loudly asked, stepping towards us. She even stepped up against Renn, bumping her shoulder in worry. Renn didn't seem to take offense, but it bothered me.

Roslyn grabbed me by my arm, and I noted her chilled fingers and hands. They were freezing. Their cold, worried, trembling were the only reason I had not pulled my arm free of her grip.

“For now. I’ll check the rear too, there should be another room where the rudder is, with the mizzen mast,” I said.

Renn sighed in relief, and Roslyn actually sobbed, although only a single time. As if a huge weight had just been dropped off her shoulders, she slumped and hung her head for a moment.

Glancing at Renn, who was smiling at the pirate captain, I gestured for her attention... and then gestured with the mallet at the woman holding my arm.

Renn nodded, taking the hint, and went to get Roslyn’s attention.

“Let’s get the water out now,” Renn said, reminding the woman she still had a job to do.

“Ah. Right. Let’s hurry!” Roslyn finally released me, and with Renn in tow she hurried back to the rest of the women. She told them of what I had done, and they cheered before returning to their task.

Sighing at them, I went back to my own. To make sure no other holes were threatening Renn’s... little adventure.

After all that was all this was. A small stop along our way. A tiny... forgettable moment.

Wading through the water, passing the women still filling buckets and Renn who had joined in their little line of bucket hauling, I wondered if I was grumpy because I was tired.

Usually helping out didn't bother me too much. I may not be the kindest man, but usually I'd...

Pausing before the latch to the rear room, behind the rear stairwell, I realized I was actually annoyed. And not just because my clothes were soaked now, or that Renn was too.

"Maybe I'm still upset over Lumen," I wondered as I opened the latch.

I didn't break this one off, and entered the small room... to find only a little bit of water.

The water barely went above my ankles, even with the swaying ship, and I sighed as I took in the little room. The pillar in this one was much smaller than the other, small enough I'd be able to wrap my arms around it and touch hands. It let the room be more in view, but it also made the place feel...

"I miss the ships of the empire..." I whispered as I walked around the area, looking for any signs of holes or leaks. Those had been ships. These weren't even worth being called such. Those had been works of art... weapons of war and...

Hitting my head again on what was likely the mirrored beam I had hit in the other room, I growled at it. I really was tired still, for me to not be paying attention.

Coughing, as to keep some potent words from escaping through clenched teeth, I finished studying the room.

There were no holes. This room was fine. The water wasn't even leaking in too badly from the hold, which was surprising... since parts of the wall were just thin planks of wood.

Yawning as I left the room and went back to the hold, I tapped the mallet against my head as if to knock myself awake. It didn't help, but it did make Renn pause mid-bucket dunk.

She stared at me, as I stared at her... then she scoffed a laugh and handed her now full bucket off to Roslyn. She said something to the women, and then hurried over to me.

Walking back to the center of the hold, I went to the stairwell... and sat down. A little above the water, I left my feet and legs in the water as Renn hurried over to me.

"No more holes, I think," I told her as she approached.

"That's good. Thank you Vim," she said.

"Mhm," I nodded. It was good. It'd keep her happy, after all.

“You’re soaked. Make sure your hat doesn’t fall off,” I warned her.

She nodded.

Studying her soaked clothes, I frowned at the way her pants hugged her legs and waist. I could see the outline of her tail, somewhat wrapped around her waist and right thigh... but I knew anyone else who saw it would just think it was her pants being oddly scrunched up.

“How’re the broken bones?” I asked her.

“Huh? Oh... it still hurts, but not as bad as before. I actually brushed it this afternoon, and didn’t want to yelp,” she said.

“Brushed...”

She smirked at me. “With a comb,” she said as she made a combing motion with her hand.

Ah. Interesting. I mean, it was obvious she might brush her tail but I hadn’t ever noticed her doing so.

Maybe I should buy her a proper comb for it.

Wait. She had brushed her tail? Really?

That meant she had done it in our room. She'd not risk letting her tail be seen elsewhere on the ship, after all. Our room was the only place we could close the door and be... well... left alone. Especially since Roslyn's little girl was so nosey.

But... that meant she had brushed her tail. In our room. And I hadn't really left our room since we boarded.

Had I actually slept through that too? I had missed such an adorable sight?

"Will the ship stop sinking now?" Renn asked, tugging me out of my upset regret.

I nodded. "For now. I've only done a temporary fix, Renn. This ship needs... serious attention. I don't know how that hole was made, but something tells me it was just the result of years of neglect," I said.

It could have been hit by a floating tree or something... but something like that shouldn't have punctured the hull to such a degree. That meant the hull was not being properly tended to. It was rotting, from age and wear.

Though that might not be the fault of the women. They very well might simply... not have the tools needed to fix the ship, or keep it healthy. It took resources, time, and money to keep a ship like this outfitted properly.

All of a sudden my mind went down a list. On what was needed to fix this ship. To refit it. To add the necessary additions, like a pump, to make sure this didn't happen again.

Blinking, I let Renn's smile become the focus of my mind, stopping me from going too deep into thought about this ship and the people who lived upon it.

They weren't worth worrying or thinking about.

Standing up, before Renn could say anything, I gesture for her to go back to her friends. "Go help them, Renn. They're getting exhausted. I'll check the rest of the ship for holes while you... work the buckets," I said.

Renn smirked at me. "Work the buckets. I'm surprised they have so many of them, to be honest!"

"How else would they get rid of refuse?" I asked her. Didn't she realize we had a similar bucket for us? In the room next to us? Odds are they all had a personal bucket, then there were likely many more scattered throughout the ship for other reasons too.

She blinked, and I couldn't help but smile as I watched the understanding dawn on her face.

Renn groaned as she looked down at her hands in disgust, and I patted her gently on the cheek before turning and heading upstairs.

Seeing that adorable look on her would keep me calm enough for the next few days, at least.

Chapter 209 A Pirate's Daughter

Handing Vim another board, I watched the way he smoothly went to cutting the board into shape.

The wood shavings from his scraping fell onto his lap, and to the floor around him. I liked the way his hands and fingers moved so... slowly, even as they worked quickly. It was obvious how skilled Vim was even to my eyes. He was shaping the wooden board perfectly, and sure enough after a few moments... he put it into its place. The board slid perfectly between the others, sliding into place with such precision Vim didn't even need to hold it to nail it in place.

"Could you make a whole ship, Vim?" I asked him.

He nodded as he plucked a few more nails from his mouth, and finished hammering them into place.

"Why don't you have a ship yourself then?" little Rosie asked him.

"Because then I'd never leave the sea, and I can't do that," Vim said plainly as he waited for me to hand him the next board.

Giving the next board to Rosie, who smiled happily as she handed it off to Vim, I noted the way his eyes lingered on her as he took it from her.

He really didn't like her, it seemed.

I wonder why. He was usually so even-natured with children... and not just the children of our kind. I'd seen him interact with many human children during our travels, and I'd never seen him so bothered before.

Though... it might not really be Rosie herself that was bothering him...

Vim sighed as he went to scraping the board with his little steel knife. The thing gleamed in the lamplight, and it kept Rosie's attention as if it was a precious jewel.

No... he wasn't angry, or bothered by Rosie. Not in the way I was thinking.

He was simply... annoyed. Upset.

Tired.

"Rosie, you still in there girl?" Roslyn asked from the other side of the wall.

"Yes Mom!" Rosie jumped at her mom's voice, hurrying around me and the large pillar of wood.

Watching her, I stepped around the pillar as to keep an eye on her. She ran up to the weird hole in the wall, that we used to enter and exit this room. It was in the middle of a weirdly thin wall, and was high enough off the floor that Rosie was just barely able to see over it. The thing was more a window than a door, to be honest.

Roslyn's hand entered the room, passing the hole, and she roughly brushed her daughter's head. Ruffling her hair, and making the little girl giggle.

I smiled at the sight. Roslyn was... a little stern with the girl, but moments like this showed the truth. She loved her. She was a good mother.

I was jealous.

"Come on. It's time you helped with your chores," Roslyn said as she reached in as to lift Rosie out of the room and through the hole.

"But mom," Rosie complained, but wasn't able to do it for long. Her mother whispered something to her, and the girl giggled and ran off. Her tiny footsteps were audible even as she ran up the stairs, especially since the wood she ran on was moist and made odd sounds.

They, or rather we, had gotten most of the water out of the bottom of the ship... but a tiny layer remained. And a lot had seemingly soaked into the wood too, surprisingly.

Roslyn leaned into the hole, resting on the bottom section as she smiled at me. "How's it going Renn?" she asked.

Glancing behind me, at Vim who sat before the hole he was messing with... I smiled at the lack of sunlight peering in anymore. "I think he's almost done, actually. It doesn't look bad at all," I said.

"Oh? I'm getting very jealous, Renn. It's not fair you get such a handy man all to yourself," she teased me.

"If you had any idea how much I actually have to share him, you'd not be saying such a thing," I said with a sigh.

Roslyn giggled as she rolled forward, and slipped through the hole and entered the room. The already crowded room... became a little more cramped as I stepped back to let her walk over and see Vim's handiwork.

"Oh my. You... need to talk more confidently Renn. That's far better than I was expecting, be more proud of your man's work," Roslyn praised Vim's work, and I stuck my chest out more as I nodded at the compliment.

Hearing Vim get such a compliment felt good.

"This is still just a temporary measure. Your hull is decaying. It's to the point that I don't think even constant maintenance will do any good. You have only a few years at best before another hole opens up," Vim said as he went to hammering another board into place.

“If we can get even a few more months out of this thing, that’s enough,” Roslyn said softly.

I wanted to ask why she believed with such confidence that all would be well if they only lasted a few more months... but I didn’t... because I kind of knew why.

She didn’t actually have a solution, or a plan. A few more months for her were just that desperate of a hope. Something that she didn’t take for granted.

Another part of me wanted to ask Vim why he couldn’t... just fix it. But I knew it wasn’t that he couldn’t, but rather that he simply wouldn’t.

It would take too long, likely. Too long for him to comfortably allow. He didn’t mind spending a little time helping, especially since we were still sailing along the river... even if slowly.

An odd silence filled the tiny room as Vim hammered away. I noted the weird dull thumps his hammer made. They sounded... heavy, but not. He was obviously not putting much strength into the hammering.

“The other holes can just be patched normally. They’re all well above the waterline,” Vim then explained.

Roslyn nodded. “Thank you for checking them, too,” she said.

Honestly I wanted to complain. He had spent the whole morning going over the ship, checking the many places the girls had pointed out to him. From holes in the wall, to the ones in the roofs. Doors not on properly. Stairs broken, risking horrible falls if one didn't pay attention. Latches and hatches missing, or stuck closed...

This whole ship was in far worse shape than I had assumed. I hadn't even realized ships like this could have such problems. This ship was their home, yet it was as decrepit as if it wasn't. Even old homes, lived in by old families unable to fix anything thanks to a lack of knowledge, still knew how to keep stuff in some semblance of usable shape. This ship however had many issues that went beyond just simple neglect. Some of the floors and sections of the ship were actually dangerous. So dangerous that they had just... sealed those sections off, as if the problem would just stop being one thanks to it being out of sight and mind.

Vim had pointed out many major faults in the ship. To me and little Rosie who had been with us most the day. It bothered me how he had pointed out a major issue, yet walked past it without a thought. He hadn't fixed anything he pointed out... the only thing he had actually addressed was the one he was fixing now. The main hole that almost sunk the ship last night.

This ship was falling apart. And the inhabitants had no idea how to stop it from happening.

Within a single night and day, I had gone from being jealous and envious of their lifestyle to pitying them.

Quite a feat.

"You wouldn't happen to need thirty two prostitutes, would you Vim?"

The pirate captain's question made my heart flutter as I turned to stare at her. She wasn't even looking at me... and instead was focusing on Vim's back.

"Not that I know of," Vim answered calmly.

Roslyn sighed gently, in a way that told me she had not been joking at all.

That sigh had not been one of relief but resignation.

"Is it that bad, Roslyn?" I asked softly.

"Can't you tell? Our ship is falling apart. There's nowhere safe to dock anymore... and what little stores of food we had left... well..." she didn't even finish her sentence as she shrugged.

Oh. Right. The flooding...

That was why they had freaked out over those barrels and boxes in the hold. Where it had flooded. I had thought maybe it was just... personal affects, like clothes or something. But no. Most of them had been their food stores.

It wasn't as if they had much in the first place, honestly. There were now many barrels and boxes up top, on the deck, and they barely took up a quarter of it. Many women had been going through them all day, making sure things weren't ruined or spoiled now.

Roslyn sighed as she leaned against the pillar in the center of the room. She rubbed her eyes as she groaned, and I shifted as I stared at a woman who looked as exhausted as Vim was.

"The few villages along the rivers not destroyed by war or plague won't accept us. I go to trade for food sometimes, but lately even that's become impossible. No one wants a whore when there's a terrible disease spreading around, after all," Roslyn said.

I felt my tail go stiff, and it hurt enough to make me wince. I looked away from the woman who had suddenly become very... fragile. A woman who had been anything but in my eyes now looked as weak as my heart felt sometimes.

"Could always go back to being pirates," Vim said as he messed with one of the boards. He leaned closer to the ship's wall, as if to study it closely.

"Pirate what? No one has anything to steal, Vim. The few villages or homes we could steal from have so little it'd not even be worth it. No one sails these rivers anymore. The only town nearby that even has a warehouse left is guarded by a navy, and two mercenary bands. Nothing me and my girls can handle. And this ship can barely survive a storm, let alone the sea, so it's not like we can sail elsewhere," Roslyn said.

I glared at Vim's back as he sat back down on the little stool he was using. He shifted as he studied his handiwork, and I wondered what he'd say next.

He was acting cold-hearted, and I knew he likely was a little distant thanks to his exhaustion... but I knew Vim wasn't actually a heartless bastard. I'd not have fallen for him had he been such a man. Yet...

Yet Vim said nothing more.

"Can you go elsewhere? Up north maybe?" I asked, since Vim didn't seem to be willing to add his own opinions to the conversation.

"Yes. But... how many would we lose? Several are too weak or sick for any kind of long journey. And how would we feed ourselves the whole way? It takes weeks to get to any real city up north, and who knows if they'll even let us in," she said.

Right. The plague. Vim and I had passed by a whole village getting burnt to the ground...

If they were doing something that extreme, then it might be likely they would stop anyone from the south from entering their lands.

Couldn't feed themselves. No work. No opportunity. Their home, the only home they had, was sinking slowly. No one around here was willing to let them join them, and there was war, famine, and plague circling all around.

What... what could they do? If they can't escape or hide away until all the danger passes... what did someone do? What could someone do? What did normal people, normal humans more so, do in such a scenario?

The only thing I think I could have done in their situation would be to run off to the nearest forest and survive... but...

There were no forests out here. Not in this desert.

"Are there not enough fish in the river?" I asked.

"There used to be. Lately though we're only catching a few a day... and bait is getting harder to acquire, too. Even the worms in the river bank are disappearing. It's like the whole world is poisoned and drying up... How is that possible?" Roslyn asked with a dry laugh.

"It's not," Vim said simply as he stood. He turned and his eyes met mine for only a few moments before he looked at Roslyn, who's back went straight upon his gaze.

Oh? Did he know something then? Or...

"You may have to abandon your crew, to save yourself and your daughter," Vim said to her.

Roslyn flinched and her head lowered as her gaze fell to the floor.

“A harsh reality, but one you’ve must have thought of by now,” Vim added.

“They rely on me,” she whispered.

“So does the little one. What’s worth more? Their loyalty or her life?” Vim asked her.

Shifting, I wanted to glare at Vim and say something... but didn’t. After all... as much as his words, and the tone he used while saying them, hurt to hear...

They weren’t wrong. Even I realized that.

Vim and I could survive this. And Vim could likely save any of our members suffering from such a thing.

Yet they weren’t our members. They weren’t part of the Society.

So he had to speak in such a manner, because it was the only reality they had.

They didn’t have a protector, or others to rely upon. They only had themselves.

Grabbing my arm, I felt cold all of a sudden.

"Hearing the truth hurts," Roslyn said softly.

"It usually does," Vim said.

"There are other children, Vim. Some Rosie's age," I said, to remind him.

"I know, Renn," Vim said.

Biting my tongue, I glanced at Roslyn who sniffed as she wiped her face with an arm. The sight of such a proud woman crying made me very uncomfortable. She was... she was a pirate. A captain. A strong woman, able to do the unthinkable for her people... yet here she was sobbing.

What could I say? Or do? Would Vim get upset with me if I gave her some of the money we had? I still had that little bag full of Lumen marks and Telmik Scripts. I wasn't sure if any of them would do her any good way out here, but...

"They'd do her no good out here Renn. This nation does trade with those in the north, but through intermediaries. They don't actually recognize the coins of the north," Vim said.

I startled, and stared at Vim in shock for a moment... then regained my train of thought.

“How the heck did you know what I was thinking?” I asked him.

“I know you, Renn, regrettably a little too well,” Vim said with a sigh.

Although I didn’t like how he had said that, I still smiled at him. So he did, didn’t he?

“I’d really like you two to not flirt so blatantly while my whole world breaks apart, please,” Roslyn said with a small laugh.

Smiling at her, I nodded. “Sorry.”

“I’m not,” Vim said.

“He is too. But really Vim, I have so much... can’t it help them somehow?” I asked him.

He sighed as he thought about it. “Maybe. If I found someone willing to exchange them, but the ratio would be so bad it’d almost be pointless. They’d take advantage of the situation, what with the chaos and stuff. And if they tried it... well... I could only imagine how badly they’d be treated,” Vim said with a gesture at the frail pirate.

“But it might be possible?” I asked, ignoring Roslyn’s look.

Vim frowned but nodded. "It is. If you'd like to give them some, go ahead. They're your coins, Renn... you're free to do as you please with them," he said.

I nodded. I had expected him to say such a thing, but I still wanted his permission all the same.

"Coins?" Roslyn asked.

"I have Lumen Marks, which I can give you. I don't know how much there is, but... it should help a little," I said.

Roslyn smiled at me, and I didn't like the type of smile it was.

That was the smile of someone humbled, but about to say something very...

"Not going to help, I'm afraid. Keep your coins, girly. The only place I can get those exchanged for anything usable... well... I'd just get arrested if I went there, as would most of my girls," Roslyn said.

Frowning at her, Vim sighed. "You're as problematic as most of my people," he said to her.

Roslyn frowned back at him. "Not sure what you mean by that... but I've only done what I've needed for my own people. Not that it's a proper excuse, I guess," she admitted.

"Of that I'm sure," Vim nodded.

"Arrested?" I asked.

"She likely killed someone, or got caught prostituting. This region doesn't take well to women selling themselves," Vim answered for her.

She nodded, but said nothing. The sad look on her face told me that Vim had been right on the mark... and his tone had hurt her more deeply than the truth had.

I sighed at the two of them. "Vim... are you done with the hole?" I asked the man who was starting to speak... a little too callously. Even for him.

"Hm? Yes. It's fine now, and should be... I bet that section of the ship will outlast the rest of it," Vim said as he glanced at his work.

"Good. Now, stop being mean to her and go... fix something else," I said as I went to push him out of the room.

"Excuse me?" Vim didn't budge. The only thing that shifted as I tried to push on his back was his shirt.

Grumbling at him, I wondered why he couldn't take a hint. "I want to talk to Roslyn. Alone," I said.

"And if I said no?" he asked me.

"Going to force me against my will?" I asked him back.

Vim's eye twitched, and I nearly stopped trying to push him away at the sight of it. His eye actually twitched! I've only seen that happen a few times and... usually it was other reasons.

"I can't believe you'd say such a thing to me, Renn," Vim said stiffly.

"You haven't answered my question," I said.

Vim opened his mouth, to argue... then glanced away from me to the woman who had gone silent and wide-eyed.

Roslyn looked... rather interested in our conversation. She was smiling, even with red and watery eyes, and looked as if she was about to laugh.

“Oh, go on Vim. I’ll come find you shortly, and I promise I won’t... promise anything. Yet. Not before talking to you,” I said.

“All that does is make me even more worried, Renn...” Vim grumbled as he finally budged. He stepped away, towards the hole.

Pushing him, I liked how he pretended my pushing was actually working. Even though I was pushing with all my strength, his back felt as firm as a giant rock. This man wouldn’t budge even if my life depended on it.

Actually... he would. But only because he’d do anything to protect me.

Vim crouched as to sneak through the little hole in the wall, and I tried to push him over when he was only standing on one leg. It didn’t work, regrettably, but he chuckled at my attempt.

Once he was out of the room, he knelt a little as to peer at me through the hole. “What are you up to Renn?” he asked me gently.

“Not sure yet. Oh. Wait here,” I hurried back into the room, stepping around a smirking Roslyn as I picked up the tiny stool and some of the tools he had been using. Vim still had his little silver knife on him, so I only needed to gather up the hammer and some loose pieces of wood. I didn’t bother with all the wood shavings, or the small pile of nails.

Handing the stuff off to him, Vim sighed at me. “Really, Renn?”

“Really. Think of it this way; if she won’t take our coins because they’re useless then actually you need to go work and fix stuff. For payment,” I reminded him.

“I have some of their currency,” he mumbled as he stepped away.

Oh? He did...?

Watching the protector leave, I smiled at his back as he rounded the wall... but before he did he turned and glanced back at me. He didn’t say anything, but I could tell by his eyes that he was worried.

I gave him a gentle wave, to tell him it would be okay.

He sighed and nodded, and then rounded the corner fully... heading upstairs.

“I’m jealous of you two. I wish my husband had been like him,” Roslyn said behind me.

Turning around to face her, I nodded. “He’s... a pain sometimes, but he means well,” I said.

Roslyn’s smile was a pained one. “If that’s him being a pain, then you... you probably have no idea how lucky you are. A part of me hopes you never learn,” she said.

Since I was still near the hole, I was able to grab onto the little edge of it... for emotional support, as I stared at a woman who had obviously suffered abuse throughout her life.

She reminded me of Lamp now. Lamp was also... prideful. Strong. Both Roslyn and Lamp had strong spines. The type that bent, but never broke.

Yet for as high as they held their heads, or how strong their backs were... they still flinched. They still cried. Even if they did it somewhere no one could see.

Nory had been like her too... but she had never grown a spine. She had always been so timid.

It was interesting to think of what Nory would say to the woman before me. Nory had been very... devout. Very pious. Yet she had hated the church, and would have likely pitied Roslyn more than hated her.

Though Nory wasn't here to make a decision. I was.

"What happened? To the men?" I asked her.

"Isn't it obvious...? Your husband realized it already," Roslyn shrugged as she spoke.

"I'm not as... experienced as him, in these things," I said honestly.

"It doesn't matter. They're gone. It's a good thing too, so don't pity us for it," Roslyn said.

Right. I nodded at that... I knew that sometimes a man missing in a woman's life wasn't always a sign that something bad had happened. Sometimes his absence was a good thing. A positive, not a negative.

"Well? Was that what you wanted to ask? You hadn't needed to chase him out for that, I doubt he would have been bothered by such a question," Roslyn said.

I shook my head. "No. I wanted to ask about Rosie," I said.

"Ah... yes. My next request was the same," she said softly.

Huh...?

Roslyn smiled at me, and then gulped. "Would you?" she whispered the question.

Would I...?

My eyes went wide as I realized what she was implying.

“Roslyn...” I whispered her name and very lightly shook my head.

“What...? Weren’t you going to suggest it?” she asked stiffly.

“I was going to ask how far you’d go for her, not if you’d give her to me,” I said.

Roslyn’s eyes hardened and I realized my question would have been pointless.

She’s already gone farther than most would dream for her daughter. Our conversation so far has made that clear.

She’s not just stolen, she’s killed. She’s sold her own body, and who knows what else... all for her daughter, and the women she commanded.

I hadn’t needed to ask that question, not to this woman.

“Well... since it’s already been said... How about now? Would you take her? With the two of you she’ll at least eat and survive,” Roslyn asked me.

I gulped and wished I hadn't sent Vim away. Not just because this conversation had taken a terrible turn... but also because I knew he'd be able to do what I couldn't.

Vim could say no. Even if it hurt him to do so.

I...

I... could...

Could I?

Can I?

Opening my mouth to see if I could, I felt the awkwardness as the moments lingered... and no words came.

Roslyn smiled at me. A gentle smile, full of kindness. "Have you been a mother? Are you? You look twisted and torn. I didn't realize a woman who hasn't had children could show such an expression," Roslyn said.

Squeezing the thin piece of wall I was using as support so I wouldn't fall to my knees, I shook my head. "I've not had children... but yes. I've... raised them, in a way."

“Really...? You don’t look old enough... but I guess that’s the world we live in. Where even the children have children,” she said with a sigh.

I wasn’t going to tell her about Lujic and Ginny. There was no point. And I didn’t want to dredge up their memories right now, since all it’d do is make it harder for me to deny Roslyn her request.

Vim would never allow me to take Rosie. Even if it meant her life if I didn’t.

Because she was human. Not a member.

And...

Shifting, I took a deep breath and held it in for a moment. Releasing it slowly, I nodded at myself.

Careful Renn. Don’t create another Lumen. Don’t cause issues. Not already. Not right now... not...

“Sorry Renn. For asking such a thing of you. I’m just... getting desperate, I think. It’s one thing after another. We’ve lost three people this week. Only one left the ship alive. Now this storm... and these damned holes,” Roslyn said as she turned to look at the spot Vim had fixed.

“Don’t feel bad, Roslyn. I don’t think any mother would blame you for trying,” I said softly.

“Yes they would. I’d hate myself forever if you took her from me, even if it meant she would live. Which is horrible of me, isn’t it? Right after asking you to take her... I actually thought about tossing you overboard. For no reason other than to stop you from actually doing what I had asked you to. I’m disgusting. I’d let my own daughter starve to death, just out of selfishness,” Roslyn whispered.

Selfishness...? Was that really what that was?

Vim would likely say it was.

“It just shows how much you love her, Roslyn,” I said.

“Love,” she said the word the same way Vim did. With scorn.

Studying the pirate captain, I quickly contained the disturbance within me.

Her question and her reaction afterward bothered me. I hadn’t been expecting her request concerning her daughter at all. I should have. I should have been smart enough to realize where she had been leading towards.

She had entered this small room, and sent her daughter away on purpose.

We were alone. Out of earshot. This was the perfect opportunity for her... and she had taken it.

It was a little sudden, but it made sense.

In her eyes... Vim and I were likely something of a miracle. We were healthy. Well fed. Wealthy. Happy, even... and she knew for a fact I was from the north. In other words, she knew I'd eventually head back that way. Escaping the violence and plague when I did.

So for her to ask me to take her daughter... well...

Even if she was obviously having second thoughts now, I could see where and how such an idea came from.

Staring at the woman who was... very respectful in my eyes, I noticed what I hadn't before.

She was showing signs of starvation. Similar to Lamp and her people when I had first met them, parts of her body were starting to become sunken and shallow. Arms thin all the way to her elbows, and then up to her shoulders. Legs similarly thin, and cheeks a little sharper than they should be.

Why hadn't I noticed before...?

Why did I never notice such things until it was too late...? Was it because I wasn't perceptive, or was it because I simply didn't want to see such things?

So that was why she, a captain of a ship, had been in that little fishing village we had found her in.

She hadn't been there to fish. She had been looking for work.

It was also why our... meals had been so light. So little. And why Rosie had been so happy to eat with me. It wasn't just because she enjoyed spending time with me, or Vim, but because she got to eat more often thanks to us.

They had food, just not enough. Not enough to last. Not enough to eat their fill.

She nodded at Vim's handiwork, and then gestured at me.

"He did good work. Thank him for me. I'd offer my body, but he has you and you're far prettier than I ever was," Roslyn said with a smirk.

Blushing at her self-depreciation, I shook my head. "He's been grouchy. It's good for him to have something to do. Maybe if we're lucky before we reach our destination he'll fix most of what's needed," I said.

She chuckled at me. "You're as odd as he is. Are you some kind of princess?" she asked.

Princess? "No?"

"Hm... I bet you are, or something like it. Too pampered, maybe. Probably his fault. He spoils you, doesn't he?" Roslyn asked.

"I uh..." Did he? Maybe. Sometimes he did... sometimes I wished he did it more.

Roslyn stepped forward, and wrapped an arm around me. She squeezed my shoulder, holding me close as if in a hug. "Sorry, Renn. For making it all awkward... just... forget all about it? Okay? Just consider it a moment of weakness. Please," she said.

I nodded... but knew I'd not be able to.

"I can do that. But... before I do, mind if I get to ask my question?" I asked her.

"Hm? What I'd be willing to do for my daughter...? Renn... I'd do anything," she said seriously.

I nodded, and gulped. Here we go. I'm doing it again.

Vim was going to get upset with me.

Hopefully his love for me would survive all the headaches I'd bring him. Especially if fate was going to keep forcing me into these positions.

Staring into Roslyn's eyes, I decided to just give it a shot.

She was facing death in the eye anyway. Starvation. Plague. War. Her ship was sinking, not just figuratively, and that was the least of her worries.

So... maybe risking her life wasn't as big a deal as I was worried about.

She was willing to ask Vim and I to take her daughter... so surely she'd be willing to risk something else.

A pirate should be willing to risk their lives, right? For their daughter? If she was willing to do all she's done, then what was one more thing? One more promise? One more life risking trial...?

"What... would you be willing to do to enter a Society? One that could fix all of your problems, and save your daughter?" I asked the pirate captain.

Hopefully I wasn't overestimating her... otherwise I just doomed her and this whole ship.

Chapter 210 A Pirate's Bucket

Bending the metal slab, I wrapped it around the joist to better support the new layer of wood I had installed.

The window that had been there was now gone. Now there was a new section of wall. Once the metal piece was firmly situated, I went to hammering the last few boards in place.

As I worked, I ignored the woman behind me. She had arrived a few boards ago, and hadn't said anything yet but I would recognize that happy smirk she was wearing anywhere.

Though lately I hadn't gotten such a grin from a woman. Not even Renn, regrettably.

To be honest I had kind of expected Renn to get a little more... personal with me during this trip.

Yet she hadn't. Even though we'd been having more conversations lately, even more personal ones, she still felt a little distant. As if she was afraid to get too close to me for some reason.

We had opened our hearts a little to one another that night in Lumen... before all the chaos. So I had expected a little progress, yet here we were. Tip toeing around each other.

I knew it was likely because she blamed herself for what happened in Lumen. Her heart was still reeling from the shock and pain.

Not everyone was like me. Able to get right up and keep going as if nothing had ever happened. If anything I should be happy that Renn was actually not doing too bad. She was definitely trying her best to be up-beat and joyful, but it was far better than the alternatives. Her heart although bruised and broken, was still beating.

Hammering the last nail in place, I stepped back a step to admire my handiwork.

Yes. It was fine. The window was gone, so they'll need to use another lamp around here... but now they'd not get soaked by rain. And it'd keep the temperature down a little too.

It was only one of many holes and broken windows I had fixed, and luckily the last one. The few other spots on the ship that needed attention could honestly be ignored, they were that minor. Little stuff like cracked boards, or hinges that wouldn't move properly. Stuff that would break even more down the road, but nothing that would make the entire ship sink.

"You're pretty handy," the woman finally spoke.

"Sometimes," I said as I bent down to grab the leftover pieces of wood and the few nails I hadn't used. The children ran around this floor barefoot, didn't want them stepping on these things. They were so old and rusty they'd definitely get infected, being human.

"You uh... want to rest?" the woman asked as I turned to look at her.

Frowning at the woman who was smiling at me in a very obvious way, I wondered how long it's been since any of these women had a man in their midst.

Considering this was the third woman who was offering me her bed today, it must have been some time. Maybe this region really was as bad as Roslyn was saying. If it was so bad that they were even asking me of all people for such a thing...

I mean, I've never had any real problems with women, but usually they didn't just throw themselves at me like this. Especially not when I wasn't even trying to attract their attention.

The weirdest part was they didn't even seem to be doing it in hopes of money or food. The last woman that had asked made such a thing clear before giving up.

She coughed and smiled a little brighter. She gestured down the hall, likely towards her room. "I'm really good. I promise it'll quick," she said.

It was too bad Renn wasn't here. I'd have loved to see the look on her face upon hearing such a thing.

"I'm sure you are. But my companion would chop me into shark bait if I even thought of it," I said to her.

For the tiniest moment... the pirate woman glared at me. But then she erupted into laughter as she stepped forward and patted me on the chest. "She probably would!" she shouted happily.

She laughed as she stepped away, and I shook my head at her. What a way to take rejection.

I sighed as I stepped down the hallway, heading the other way. I had found a storeroom earlier full of supplies, like the wood and metal pieces I had been using, so I planned to go and put them back properly.

“Vim!”

I paused as the captain’s daughter ran down the hallway towards me. The little girl was a bundle of energy, even though she was thin and always hungry. She had long hair, which right now was all tied up into little bows and pigtails. I noticed Renn’s handiwork in the braids, sometimes Renn tied her hair in similar ways. She happily ran up to me, bounding up to me and extending her little hands in expectation.

Kneeling down, I put aside the hammer and nails and helped her onto my back. She giggled away as she wrapped her arms around my neck, clinging to me as I stood back up.

“You’re going to make Renn jealous,” I said to her. I made sure to bend a little as I stood up and returned to walking. She was not riding on my shoulders, but she was still a little higher than my own head. If I wasn’t careful there were spots she could bang her head against the ceiling or door frames.

“She’s always jealous, so that’s not a problem!” Rosie said.

Well... she wasn’t wrong.

“Speaking of Renn, where is she?” I asked the young girl.

“With mom,” she said.

Right. Great.

I... didn't know yet exactly what Renn was scheming, but I had a very strong suspicion. It was obvious after all.

It wasn't like Renn knew any method as to feed a bunch of women out in the middle of the desert... so it's not like she had many options available to her.

But until Renn or Roslyn actually came to me and addressed me concerning that matter... I had to play the fool. I had to play along, and let it be.

Hopefully Renn knew what she was doing...

“Maybe I should start forcing my will upon Renn,” I mumbled as I rounded a corner.

“Don't rape your wife, that's weird,” Rosie said as she patted my head.

I frowned at the little girl's words of wisdom. “You've been spending too much time with pirates,” I said to her.

She giggled, and then her giggles turned into full on laughs. She obviously found that hilarious.

Yet I hadn't.

This little girl was likely not even ten years old. What was the world coming to? Saying such a thing...

"Look at'er," some of the women giggled and teased Rosie as we passed them by. Most didn't seem to have any qualms with her being so close to me, which was odd.

They obviously had done something drastic to separate themselves from the men in their lives... so it was a little odd they were so comfortable with me being around their children.

Though maybe it was because of Renn. They all saw how happy she was and comfortable, so my presence was... less dangerous, in a sense.

Rosie squeezed some of my hair as I entered the storage room. I had leaned back a little, which made her lean back too, as to make sure she didn't thunk her head on the door's frame.

She laughed as I kept leaning, even as I put stuff away. "I'm going to fall," she said while laughing.

“Please do,” I said, and leaned the other way.

The young girl reminded me of Lomi. They had a similar laugh, one that came from the nose more than not.

“Where are you guys going, Vim?” Rosie asked as we left the supply room.

“South. To the sea,” I said.

“Ah. It stinks there,” she said.

Did it? Maybe she didn’t like the smell of the sea. Some didn't.

“Where you from, Rosie?” I asked her.

“Huh? Here?” she asked back.

I see. So she had been born on this ship.

Interesting.

Though... was it? I really didn't want to get too involved with these people. Even if Renn, especially if Renn, was doing her damndest to do so.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"The moon," I said.

She laughed and ruffled my hair. "Come on!"

"Fine fine... I'm from the bottom of the sea," I said as I headed down another hallway. One that led to a stairwell that would take us back up to the deck.

"Gosh. You're as bad as mom," she grumbled.

"What's this? Little Rosie, did you grow taller?" a woman paused before us. She had been about to enter a room, but had noticed our approach.

Rosie giggled as she shuffled around, nearly falling off my back in the process. "I have! I told you I'd get taller!" Rosie declared.

“Why yes you did. And you, if you’re in the mood to play horsey later just let me know,” she winked at me as she stepped into her room.

“Horsey?” Rosie asked as I stepped past the woman’s room.

“I worry for your future Rosie,” I said honestly.

“Eh, don’t. I’ll be a pirate like mom,” she said proudly.

That’s what I’m worried about...

Rounding a corner, I carried Rosie up the stairs to the deck. I made sure to duck so she’d not hit her head, but she kept trying to grab the beams and door frames as we passed them. Luckily she didn’t hurt herself, since most of the wood this ship was made out of was still prickly and not smoothed, but she was a little hardier than most little girls her age.

“Hm... Maybe they’re downstairs,” Rosie said as she looked around, and found both her mother and my Renn missing.

“Probably. I wanted to check the masts and anchor though,” I said as I headed for the nearest mast.

“Only the left anchor works,” Rosie told me.

“That’s good to know,” I said as I walked around the mainmast. It looked... fine... except for the large crack forming a few dozen feet up its center.

It was simply old. If Rosie was telling the truth, which she likely was, and she had been born on this ship... then well...

It was likely a decade or two old. At the best. Although this river was a fresh water one, it was still a river in the desert. A hot, humid place. And if it hadn’t been receiving any maintenance then... well...

There was no wonder as to why the ship was falling apart. It had reached the end of its short lifespan, and was barely hanging on.

The other two masts were in better condition, but their rigging and sails weren’t so lucky. The mizzen mast’s sails were haggard, to the point I doubted they really got much worth out of them even while fully unfurled.

Such a state would have gotten the whole crew whipped back in my day.

“See? It’s stuck,” Rosie pointed at one of the anchors as I took us to the bow.

The anchor chains were in the floor of the deck. They both had their own levers and pulleys, and the chains were rather small. Likely a good thing, since it meant the women of the ship could probably work it without much issue. The left anchor was fully wound, calmly sitting a few feet over the edge of the

ship's bow. It didn't move an inch as the ship swayed and floated, telling me it was fine. The right anchor however was dangling off the side of the ship, rocking and scraping against the hull.

It wasn't hanging low enough to have been the cause of the hole, but it'd not surprise me if it created another hole all the same.

"Can you fix it?" Rosie asked as I studied the mechanism that held it in place.

It looked fine on first appearance. All the chain links, the pulley, the rotating wheel that the chain wrapped around... nothing screamed broken in my eyes as I studied it.

"Depends on what's wrong with it," I said as I reached over to grab one of the metal bars that controlled the mechanism. I tugged on it lightly, to see if it'd engage or not. It didn't budge at all.

I could tell I could tug hard enough to free it, but I refrained. Last thing I needed was for the chain to snap or flail and kill the little girl on my shoulders. That chain, even though a small one, had enough tension in it to tear a normal person in half. These things didn't hurt when they malfunctioned, they killed. Brutally.

"Well?" Rosie asked as I stepped back from the lever, and knelt down as to get a closer look at the section in the floor where the chain disappeared into, past the wheel mechanism.

"I might be able to. I'll check it tomorrow," I said. The sun was starting to set. And although I was willing, and able, to work through the night... I honestly didn't want to. I'd rather spend the night with Renn.

“Can I watch?” Rosie asked.

Reaching up, I picked Rosie up off my back. She fought me for a moment, complaining, but eventually settled down as I put her onto the ground.

She huffed at me. “Rude,” she said.

“I am,” I agreed, as I went to stand up.

“You’re not as soft as Renn. Maybe that’s why you don’t have ears,” Rosie said with a sigh.

The ship creaked and jolted. Rosie let out a tiny cry as she fell forward, grabbing my leg right before she fell to the floor.

Calming myself, I stood up fully as I stared down at the little girl. Her bows and pigtails danced in worry as she looked all around, looking for the source of the ship’s sudden jolt.

There was none of course. The river was calm, the only reason we could hear splashing right now is thanks to the ship suddenly listing as it had. We were far away from the banks. All was well.

Or at least. It should have been.

For the smallest moment... I weighed it.

This girl's life.

Her mother's.

All of the other women and children.

The entire ship.

A ship I had just spent two whole days fixing and repairing... I was now debating sinking. Destroying and burning, sending it to the depths alongside the crew.

But before I could make the decision, and before my hand grabbed the young girl's skull... she looked up at me in worry. "Vim? What did we hit?" she asked me. She clung to my leg, for safety. For comfort. For surety.

My hand reached her head, and I sighed as I patted her bundle of hair in an effort to comfort her. "Nothing. All is well," I said to her.

She frowned at me in a way that told me she didn't believe me.

Taking a deep breath I glanced around. The deck was still empty... for now. I knew soon the other women would come up top, to see if we did in fact hit something.

I shifted a little and Rosie swayed a little, as if in conjuncture with the ship's. She tilted her head at me in a way only children could do, and smiled at me.

"I don't have ears, or a tail," I told her.

Rosie blinked and smiled as she stepped towards me, grabbing my elbow excitedly. "She has a tail too?" she asked.

I nodded. "I'm more like you, than her," I said.

"Oh...?"

"Not scared of her?" I asked the little girl.

"She's nice. She even shares her snacks," Rosie said.

“She is nice, isn’t she?” I agreed with a sigh.

Too nice.

Had she shown the little girl on purpose? Or had it been an accident?

Did it matter...?

What was I going to do with that woman?

No matter what I did, I needed first to address my own self. After all I had known she would have done something stupid. The way she had pushed me out of that room last night had made such a thing obvious.

But...

“I have rules,” I whispered.

“Rules?” Rosie asked, and I realized she was focused entirely on me. I shouldn’t ignore her and get lost in thought.

“Have you told anyone, Rosie? About Renn?” I asked her gently.

She frowned and shook her head.

“Why not?”

Rosie opened her mouth, then hesitated. She looked around, as if to make sure no one else was listening... and then hesitated.

Kneeling down, I got on her level and held eye contact with the young girl. She shuffled a bit, and then sighed.

“Last time I told mom... bad things happened,” she whispered.

“What kind of things?” I asked.

Rosie’s eyes began to water, and I realized I should probably back off. The little girl didn’t need to be traumatized any more than she already was and...

“Daddy was going to sell us. To the Nation of Stone. I told mom,” she said softly, revealing it without a fuss.

Cold understanding washed through me, and I regretted hearing it.

Great. Just wonderful.

It's never one thing alone, is it? It's always something worse.

Taking a small breath I nodded. "It's okay. Thank you for keeping her secret. I'll let her know you're someone she can trust," I said to her.

Rosie perked up at my words, taking them as the great compliment that they really were. She nodded happily, and smiled at me.

I stood as some people stepped out onto the deck. They walked slowly, wearily, and were looking around. Likely brought onto the deck thanks to the sharp movement of the ship from earlier.

"Rosie? What happened?" one of them asked.

"No idea!" the little girl hurried away, running over to them.

As she explained to everyone that we had been checking the anchors when the ship suddenly jolted wildly, her mother stepped out onto the deck. She looked around, and Rosie ran into her mother's arms before she could really come to any conclusion.

Stepping away from the anchors, I sighed and debated my next action.

If the little girl had honestly not told anyone... there was no reason to kill her. Especially so if Rosie didn't find anything strange about the situation. We were only a few days from our destination, and odds are the girl was young enough that she'd simply... forget about Renn and her ears. Or at least, the memories would fade and become just a distant dream. Something she'd never know if were real or not.

And even if she did tell the rest... well...

Studying the women as they talked amongst themselves, and to their captain, I noted the scrawniness of the group.

Yes. Malnourished. Weak. Broken.

"Won't last long anyway," I whispered.

Roslyn put her daughter on another woman's back, and then after a few words sent them all back into the ship. Rosie complained as she was carried back into the ship... and eventually the only ones left on the deck were I and the captain.

Oh? Was she going to try again to ask for help?

Maybe Renn hadn't agreed to anything yet. If so I'll need to praise her. I had honestly expected her to roll over for them already.

Cats usually weren't so sympathetic. If not for the Chronicler making it clear she was a pure-blooded one, I'd think she was more a dog than not.

Roslyn coughed as she walked over to me, her eyes scanning the deck as she approached. I noticed the way she studied the few spots I had messed with throughout the day. A railing I had fixed to be better secured, and not fall off. The pulley they used to lift the smaller boat, so that it'd not get tangled as often as it had been. A hole was now missing near the bow of the ship. The spot I had fixed wasn't far from where I now stood.

"You've been busy," Roslyn said once she was close enough.

"Better for me that way. The busier I keep myself, the less opportunity I have to get in trouble," I said.

Roslyn smirked and nodded. "Renn says the same thing."

"She's smart," I said.

"That she is..." Roslyn whispered.

Studying the pirate captain, I patiently waited for her upcoming request. Her begging. Her demands, maybe, even.

What would she offer? She had in a way already offered her body and the bodies of all the other women on board... so what else could they possibly have to give? They had no wealth. Little food. Less water.

Honestly the only thing she, or any of the women, had that was worth anything were their children... and if she offered them, then... well...

I doubted Renn would have remained silent if they had done such a thing. Even she wasn't gentle enough to forgive such a thing.

"My husband and the rest... had planned to sell us," Roslyn then said.

Ah. An attempt to tug at my feelings is it? To make her pity her?

It worked, but I never allowed it to change anything.

"So I've heard," I said.

“Renn told you?” Roslyn asked, surprised.

“Your daughter,” I said.

Roslyn’s surprise melted into a gentle smile. “I see. Yes. The poor girl blames herself. She thinks she got her daddy killed,” Roslyn said.

“Children see it that way, yes.”

She nodded. “They can’t comprehend that their fathers would actually sell them. They never do, until it happens. Sometimes even afterwards they still don’t believe it,” Roslyn said.

I noted she was speaking from experience.

A harsh life you’ve lived, pirate.

“He was stupid enough to plan it while she slept in his arms. Men can be so stupid,” Roslyn said.

“We can be,” I agreed.

“Do you find it wrong?” she asked.

“What?”

“What we did?” she specified.

Shaking my head, I frowned. “No? But I’m not... normal. So don’t expect such moral standards from me,” I said.

Roslyn smirked and nodded. “Right. Not normal at all.”

Ah...

I shifted again, and the boat listed.

Roslyn noticed immediately and went white in the face. “How the hell...” she mumbled as she stared at me.

“Choose your next words very carefully, Roslyn. More than your life rests upon them,” I warned her.

Roslyn started to shake in fear, and stepped away. A part of me expected her to turn around and run away... but instead... miraculously, she regained her composure.

Color swiftly returned to her face, to the point it went beyond normal. She actually became flushed, as if suddenly embarrassed or heated.

“Your wife says I have a choice,” she said.

“So make it,” I said.

Roslyn gulped. “How do I know you won’t hurt my people?” she asked.

“Any more than your failure's have already, you mean?” I asked back.

The pirate flinched as if I had just slapped her across the face. She looked away for a moment, and then nodded before looking back at me.

“You’re right. We had over fifty people a year ago. A year before that we had a dock, near the Crumbling Cliffs. Two years before that we had two ships more,” she admitted.

“Everyone stumbles eventually,” I said.

“If that was all it was, I’d not be so scared Vim,” she said.

Well... that was true. They weren’t stumbling. They were drowning. Nearly had done so literally the other night.

Roslyn gulped. “I’m worried I’m doing what my husband failed to do all those years ago,” she said.

“I do think Renn would have doused such worries by now,” I said.

She nodded. “She has. She’s... made it clear we’d not be slaves. But more like employees. Workers, even,” she said.

“Renn’s many things, but a liar is not one of them,” I told her.

“I can tell,” she said with a smile.

I sighed as I looked away from the pirate captain and to the nearby riverbank. There was a small group of trees alongside it right now. They were thin, dry things that looked as if something had eaten all the leaves off them.

“Where’s Renn anyway?” I asked.

“Gathering our dinner. She’ll likely be here in a moment,” she said.

Our dinner...?

Roslyn stepped towards me, but hesitated. “My mother. She knew of your kind. Told me the stories. Well... she told lots of stories. About all sorts of things. I never believed them... until now,” she said.

“All legends have a grain of truth,” I told her.

She smiled and nodded. “Yes. It seems so.”

The pirate then gestured behind her, to the door that led into the ship. “Make sure you tell your wife not to smile so happily around these parts. This land has become so desolate and full of sorrow that anyone who sees her smile like that will want to steal it from her,” she warned me.

“It’s a fault of mine. Yes. I’m never able to crush my people’s spirits,” I said.

“Might seem like a fault to you, but I find that very pleasing to hear,” Roslyn said.

“Also... she can smile as much as she wants. The whole world may try to take it from her, I’ll not let it,” I said to make sure she understood.

Roslyn studied me for a moment, and then nodded.

“You have been given the option. Renn has invited you. I can’t do anything until you make your choice. But know this...” I turned to watch Renn. She had a wooden bucket in her arms, and was hurrying up the stairs to the deck. “Compared to the struggles of my people, yours are not worth worrying over. If you join us you will have new worries, yes, and some will be dire... but you’ll never again need to worry over your daughter having food, a warm bed, or a long life,” I said.

“Vim!” Renn shouted at me as she hurried onto the deck. The bucket she carried splashed wildly, and not just because of her haphazard running... were those fish in the bucket?

“She’s lovely. I can only pray that my daughter grows up to be like her,” Roslyn whispered.

“You can have that chance, if you’d like. You must only make the choice,” I told her.

As Renn hurried up to me, I found myself relaxing a little. The tense worry that had been building in the back of my neck immediately disappeared as she skidded to a stop in front of me, showing off the contents of her bucket.

“Vim! Look at these things! They’re slimy and wiggling so hilariously!” Renn was laughing as she showed me the eels.

Smiling at her I nodded as I reached in and grabbed one of the wiggling things. It tried to slip out of my grip, but couldn't. "They're tasty too," I said.

There were at least twenty or so eels in the bucket... which was surprising. Weren't they running low on food?

"They snuck in during the flooding. We found them in a barrel!" Renn explained.

Huh... really.

Studying the squirming eel in my hand, I smiled and debated taking a bite. But I knew if I did, Renn might yell at me.

"Well let's get to cooking them. Over dinner we can talk, pirate. Maybe before Renn gets a stomach ache you'll be able to convince her why you should be allowed to join our Society," I said as I dropped the eel back into her bucket.

Renn's eyes went wide as she turned to Roslyn, whose eyes were locked onto my own.

Roslyn nodded without hesitating, and didn't even notice when one of the eels flipped up and smacked Renn in the face.