

Non Human 211

Chapter 211 A Pirate For a Fleet

The world outside the window was dark, but off in the distance a bright moon was peeking behind dark clouds. It looked, and smelled, like another storm was heading our way. I hoped if it was, the ship wouldn't try to sink again.

Though, if Roslyn made the right choice... even if the ship sunk it wouldn't matter. Vim would protect them. Since they'd be members then.

Right now though I was starting to doubt he'd do anything else to help them. Ever since our dinner he's become... almost lethargic. Even though there were still things he could help with, he was just...

"You don't have to do what I do Renn. You're free to try and convince them further, if you'd like," Vim said from beneath me.

"I know. But... you obviously do what you do for a reason. All the years you've been doing this, I'm assuming you figured out it was better to... stay back a bit, and let them decide for themselves," I said as I studied the back I sat upon.

He wore a shirt still, but just the thin undershirt. He usually wore another layer or two, especially when he wore the leather set that matched my own. He'd taken it off the other day, when he had fallen asleep, and ever since he hadn't put it back on.

The shirt he had on now was the one usually hidden beneath the leather and other layers. It was... a little thin, and old. It had holes and tears in it, which made me wonder when and where they had occurred.

As far as I was aware the clothes he had worn while fighting that creature in Lumen had all gotten destroyed. So... did that mean this set was just another he's had the entire time, or did he just pick up a random set of clothes from somewhere? They were worn and tattered... Even the old clothes we had handed out in Lumen as disaster relief were better off than the one he had on. And...

Sticking my finger into one of the holes, I noted the feeling of his muscular back beneath it. Yes. This hole wasn't just from casual wear. Something had cut it there... The fibers were too finely sliced. This wasn't a rip at all.

Vim was so odd. Why didn't he just get new clothes occasionally...? Maybe I should start doing so for him, since he obviously didn't seem to notice or care. I knew it wasn't like he actually cared about it, nor did it affect him in any way... but sometimes people noticed.

"For some it's better to step back and let them reach their own conclusion, yes. But if you're looking for my own opinion... these people would benefit from a small push," Vim said.

"You sure do like to offer me advice, even when it so obviously goes against your own desires," I teased him.

Vim sighed, and I noted the way I barely moved... But that was more-so because I was sitting on his lower back, not his chest area.

He was lying on his belly, and his arms were crossed beneath his head and pillow. It was an odd sight, honestly. Vim has laid down in bed with me on many occasions, but he's never really... laid so lazily

before. On his side, sure, especially when we were talking... but this was him being strangely defenseless.

It was one of the main reasons I was here with him in the room, and not with Roslyn and the rest... doing exactly what he was telling me to do.

"Tell me Vim, you believe in free will so strongly... yet sometimes you voice an opinion that contradicts it. Why is that?" I asked him.

"Free will is something I believe to be a right. But just because it's a right, doesn't mean it's always the correct choice," he said.

"Yet you've never gone against it, as far as I'm aware," I said.

He nodded, and I noted a section of hair along his neckline. A small line of skin was visible, running up his neck and into his hair. An old scar, stopping hair from growing properly. I'd never noticed it before, likely thanks to the angle I usually saw him from. "I don't go against it. But you're free to do so, Renn. That's part of the free will mandate. You have the right to impose your own will on others. I don't," he said.

"But... if I want to be like you, don't I have to see it the same way?"

He tilted his head, and I wished he hadn't been laying the way he was. I wanted to see his facial expressions. "I'd rather you did what you felt was right. Don't do anything just because you think it's what I would do. Especially so, Renn. Half the stuff I do makes no sense, not even to me."

“Hm... I did go against your wishes, didn't I? By telling Roslyn about us the other night,” I reminded him.

Vim's shoulders shifted as he shrugged. “You did. But that's fine. I had expected it, I guess.”

He guessed.

Leaning back, I rested against the wall. The bed was a smaller one, small enough that I could do such a thing. But it was mostly thanks to the fact that Vim had actually laid down on the bed near the wall, as to give me room to lay down next to him. He had not expected me to sit on him instead.

It was his fault though. How could he not realize I'd not be able to pass up such an opportunity?

“Did I make a mistake Vim?” I asked him.

“You make many mistakes Renn. But... most of them are ones I'd have made too, so don't worry about it,” he said.

Raising an eyebrow at him, I wondered which he had in mind when he said such a thing. Stuff like Lamp and Roslyn... or those that had actually hurt, like the ones in Lumen or Ruvindale?

“You brought Lamp to me, Vim. I hadn’t done that one,” I argued with him.

“I still gave you the right to decide, Renn. You and her, during your conversation and... ear touching? Made the decisions, not me,” Vim argued back.

Was that how he saw it? Did that mean that Vim didn’t see the match that started the fire as the cause, but instead the kindling that spread it?

An odd viewpoint, honestly. Especially from him.

Though he was likely instead just... looking at it from a loophole. One that let him dance around his strange rules without breaking them.

“This one worries me though,” I said honestly.

“As it should. You’re choices, words, and actions are affecting lives. Many lives. And not just of the humans either,” Vim said.

Right. My stomach knotted again in worry, reminded once more.

Vim chuckled beneath me, and I couldn’t help but smile at the feeling of it. He let his laughs vibrate through his whole body; it was a rather childish trait.

“Why the second guesses Renn? You had been rather gung-ho about it during the dinner,” Vim asked.

“Gun what?” I asked.

Suddenly the muscles beneath me went stiff. I quickly put a hand onto his lower back, near where I was sitting... to feel the way his muscles were coiling around. I felt them tighten... then slowly loosen and relax.

Huh.

“You were enthusiastic. You were doing your best to convince Roslyn to join... honestly you did so well I half expected her to agree before we even finished eating,” Vim explained. I noted his tone. He knew I had felt him tense up, and based off the... distant voice he was speaking with, he didn’t want me to bring it up.

“Vim... why do you get so worried when you say things I don’t understand, or know about?” I dared to ask him.

For a few moments Vim didn’t say anything... then he lowered his head into the pillow. At first I wondered if he was going to pretend to fall asleep, or something equally childish, but instead Vim raised his head back up again with a sigh.

"It's not the words that bother me, really... you can learn them if you wish... it's the meaning of those words that bothers me. Whenever we talk... and I say something like that, it's proof that I'm becoming far too comfortable in your presence. I'm too relaxed. Your presence is becoming so natural to me that I'm saying things I shouldn't," he admitted.

"That sounded like it hurt to say," I said gently.

"You have no idea," he said.

Smiling at him, I patted his back, as if to thank and comfort him. "Why is... getting comfortable with me such a bad thing, Vim?" I asked.

"We've talked about it before Renn," he said.

We had. That night in Lumen, and a few other instances... but...

"I still don't see why that's such a horrible thing, Vim. If anything it should be... a good thing," I said.

"One day you'll understand. Regrettably," he mumbled.

Would I? Although a part of me was excited to do so... I knew he wasn't just being coy.

I very likely would understand one day... and it was also very likely that such understanding would not come without pain or sorrow.

Deciding to change topics, and return to the main one at hand... I coughed and shifted a little. Vim wasn't uncomfortable, but for some reason I felt as if he was so. Maybe I was just a little too conscious of what I was doing.

"Roslyn isn't exactly a good person, Vim," I said.

"Oh yea?" I could hear Vim's smile in his voice.

I slowly closed my hand, forming a fist on his back. As I did so I slid my fingernails along his worn shirt. "Yes. Don't tease me over this, I'm trying to have an honest conversation," I said.

Vim chuckled. "We're having one Renn. My teasing of you is me being more honest than you know," he said.

Pondering his words for a moment, I decided to tuck them away for later.

I wasn't foolish. I knew that Roslyn and her people weren't... the most moral people.

They killed. Stole. Sold their bodies. Yet they did such a thing to survive... so I wasn't really willing or able, to judge them too harshly for their actions.

But...

"She... and the rest of the women on this ship would not be accepted by many of our members," I said.

"Let me guess, you're thinking of the feeble ones. The pious ones," he said.

"Well... yeah?"

"Then I think you're... slightly misunderstanding my intentions or rather my plan for them, if they decide to join," he said.

"Oh?" I leaned forward, pushing on his back as to support the motion. Even while leaning over I still couldn't see his face...

Vim nodded. "I plan to place them under Ronalldo's supervision. These women may not be pirates in the truest sense, but they're closer to pirates than not. Why place them where they don't feel comfortable? On a ship they'll be at home, and Ronalldo can use both the help and the responsibility," Vim explained.

Ronalldo. The young pirate boy I never got to meet. "Is he a good man, Vim?" I asked.

“Ronaldo? I believe so, yes.”

High praise, and since it was coming from Vim I knew it was honest too.

“Do you know what they did? To their husbands?” I asked.

“Killed them, right? They were going to sell them into servitude,” he said.

I nodded, and then remembered he couldn’t see me. “They all agreed to do it. They all killed each other’s husbands. I’ve been told that only Roslyn killed her own husband,” I told him.

“She is a proud woman,” he said.

It was more than that... but at the same time he was right. “Should you really put such women under the authority of another man? A pirate no less?” I asked.

“If you knew how many of them have tried to pull me into their beds since we’ve been here, you’d not be so worried over such a thing,” he said.

“Oh?” I perked up at that, and felt a tiny tinge of pain as my tail thumped against his thigh.

“They’ll be fine under Ronaldo, Renn. If anything it’ll put them to good use.”

I wanted to groan at him, but knew better than to do so.

Vim wasn’t as bad as some of our members... but he was still... well...

An ancient non-human.

He sometimes saw humans the same way those like Lawrence or Gerald did. Tools. Resources. Things to use, and if they couldn’t be used then... well...

“Humans are people too, Vim,” I whispered at him.

Vim at first said nothing, nor moved... then he shifted.

I had to sit up a little, and push against him as he rolled over. One moment I sat on his back, the next I was sitting on his belly.

Smiling at him, I felt a strange rush of blood color my face as I suddenly became very aware that I was sitting on top of him.

Vim remained lying down, but instead of crossing his arms under his head he instead crossed them on his chest.

“They are human. And yes. They’re individuals. They have lives. Stories. Hopes and dreams. Just like we all do,” he agreed.

“Yet you’ll use them. Making them like the very thing they had killed their husbands to stop themselves becoming,” I argued.

Vim smiled at me, and I grew even hotter. Hopefully he mistook my blush for anger, but I knew he probably saw through it.

“I’ll use them. Abuse them. If I can, yes,” he admitted.

“You’re not supposed to be that cruel,” I whispered at him.

“Cruel... yes. I am. Often. But in that cruelty, is kindness,” he said.

Kindness...?

“What if they do survive the trip? What if they do survive Ronalldo’s assessment and tests? And then Lawrence’s and Brandy’s? Then instead of dying or wasting their lives here on this river... slowly dying from starvation or disease, they instead join our Society. They work. Live amongst us, and survive. They adapt. They become another regiment in our ranks. They’ll not need to worry over food or disease. They’ll be able to have homes, and futures. They’ll be able to raise families and children, and settle down as they grow older. Who knows, maybe I’ll get lucky and Ronalldo will pick one of them too. Roslyn or her daughter, or something. Thus not only saving many, but ensuring a continuation of the bloodline that has proven itself to me many times over,” Vim told me his thoughts.

Breathing evenly, I did my best to ignore the footsteps outside our room. Someone was walking past our room, and heading down the stairs. Although I ignored them, I still waited until I heard them descending before speaking.

“Where is your free will Vim? You’re deciding not just their lives, but even the lives of their future generations. How is that free will?” I asked him.

Vim chuckled. “You think too highly of me. I only hope. I hope they make it to Lumen. I hope they pass Ronalldo’s and the other’s tests. I hope they make no mistakes, and follow the rules. I hope they live long, prosperous lives. I hope they co-mingle with the other humans we’ve taken under our umbrellas, and give birth to more studious and devout bloodlines. But at the end of the day Renn... it’s all just a hope. They’re free to do as they wish. They can get there, argue against working on our ships and instead ask to work in the company instead. Or just... disappear after a few months. You don’t actually think we enforce our desires on them, do you?” he asked.

“Well... no, Vim. I was just arguing over perspectives,” I said.

“Perspectives. Semantics,” he said with a huff.

“Another word, Vim,” I said with a smile as I poked him in the stomach.

He frowned. “So it was.”

Giggling at him, I shifted... and realized the front of his shirt had a huge hole. Right where his heart would be.

“Vim, why do you wear such... decrepit clothes? Are you pretending to be poor?” I asked as I poked at it.

“Sometimes, yes. Haven’t you noticed how people treat you funny Renn? It’s not just because you’re beautiful, it’s because of how well you dress. And the fact you’re so clean. Look, not even a speck on your nails,” he said with a small tap on my hand.

Smiling at his touch, I nodded. “I’ve noticed. Roslyn asked if I was a princess, before... all this happened,” I said.

“Hmph,” Vim shook his head, and I wondered if he found the idea ridiculous, or the fact that I was speaking of such a thing fondly.

Probably both.

“So you’re not worried then. You don’t believe they can harm the Society in any way?” I asked.

“Of course they can. But that’s a risk we take. And before you say anything, I don’t like it at all... but Lumen has made their choice. They voted in favor of growing with Lumen, and getting involved in all the politics. I do not like it. If I had it my way I would have put a stop to that foolishness decades ago... but nothing goes my way. So since they seem so hell-bent on getting involved with all the humans, then I figure I may as well take advantage when I can,” Vim said.

“Advantage...?”

He nodded. “These women. Pirates. Southern pagans. Part of the reason Roslyn and her daughter weren’t shaken by your ears, or what we’re offering, is because they have many legends and stories of our kind. Non-humans, demons, and whatnot. Plus they’re surrounded by nations with fairy tales and mysteries. Like the Nation of Stone ruled by an immortal witch,” he said with a smirk.

“Oh!?” I grew interested in that, but Vim continued before I could ask more.

“They’re like Lamp and her people. They’ll be able to blend in well. Conforming easily. Plus, thanks to their harsh lives... they’ll be very gracious for all we can give them. For a few generations at least, they’ll be loyal beyond doubt. It usually takes three or four generations before they forget where they came from,” he said.

“I... don’t like how clear it is how you know this so well. It’s unsettling,” I said.

He shrugged. “I’ve been doing this a long time.”

A little too long, maybe.

“Plus... with Brom dead, and Reatti on the brink... another layer of added security would be a godsend. I plan to make Ronaldo a commander. A naval powerhouse. With them under his command, he'll have a very loyal and deadly crew. Especially so if he falls for one of them and starts a family,” he said.

Ah. So the real truth finally came to light. He planned to make them...

“I didn't think of that...” I barely got the words out as my mind rushed wildly.

Brom died. Reatti was broken. He was right... she was on the brink. She could disappear at any moment, without warning, because of what happened.

They were Lumen's protectors. Without them... they only had Merit. Merit, Brandy and Lawrence, were the only ones capable or willing to fight and kill... as far as I was aware. And Brandy didn't stay in Lumen all the time. Just like Vim she usually was traveling around, and Lawrence I've heard never stands and fights unless his own life was at stake.

Which meant Merit was the sole defender left...

“Renn...” Vim sighed as he reached out. He took my hand gently, and I realized he was doing so because I was about to cry.

“I know,” I said, and did my best to stop the incoming burst of emotions. My eyes were already watery and...

I let Vim hold my hand as I got my emotions under control.

How embarrassing. I was trying so hard to not get like this. I thought I had been doing really good too... other than that day when we left Herra's home, I hadn't broken or...

“And here I thought you'd cry over the girls, not the past,” he said softly.

“Why the girls?” I asked and coughed. I wiped my face as he smirked at me.

“I was worried you'd fall in love with them. You seem to have a penchant for downtrodden women, so...”

Smiling at him, I felt a little... naked before him. How long has he known?

“I think it's because I see myself in them,” I said.

“Mhm,” he raised an eyebrow, but didn't seem willing to argue with me. And I knew he could.

Me? Downtrodden? Hardly.

I was happier, healthier, and freer than I ever had been. Broken bones and scarred heart included.

And pretty much all of it was thanks to him.

"I've... decided to not get too close to humans anymore," I said.

"Oh?"

I nodded. "They die," I said.

Vim's small smile softened... and died. "We all die, Renn."

I nodded again. "I know. But they... they go so quickly. My heart can't take it anymore. It's why after a point I started distancing myself from Lamp. So I'd not... fall in love with her more than I had, and end up staying with her," I told him.

Vim's eyes held my own, and I wondered how his eyes were always so... steadfast. I had seen him cry before, but only twice. Once when he had burnt all those paintings in Ruvindale. And then once again, because of paintings, in Lumen. When he had seen the painting of Rungle and Stumble for the first time.

Although I've seen grief and sorrow several times since... he had not cried for any other reason.

And in honesty, neither of those times had Vim actually sobbed or broken. He had simply shed a few tears, nothing more.

He being able to grieve in such a way told me he was more than just a warrior, or a simple man. Yet... it worried me that the only things he showed such emotion for were so...

So what...?

He cried not for the deaths of his friends, but the burning of their memories. It was an odd thing... but somehow gentler.

Vim didn't break even upon seeing Brom's dead body. But... surely he had cried after, right? Or at least shed a tear...?

Or was he so numb that he'd go years before even registering it?

Maybe that was why Vim kept such a distance. Maybe it was more than just him trying to not display favoritism. Maybe it was something much simpler.

What if his aversion to our relationship was the same thing I now had for humans?

“Is this what you feel for the rest of us, Vim?” I asked him.

Vim’s mouth opened, to say something... but nothing came out. His eyes narrowed, and suddenly the man beneath me was lost in thought.

Squeezing his hand, I waited patiently as the man sorted his thoughts and emotions. It didn’t take him long, it never did, and after a moment Vim slowly nodded.

“Yes. I believe it is,” he accepted.

“Does it ever get easier?” I asked him.

“No,” he whispered.

Taking a sharp breath, I once again had to fight back the sobs. I had expected such an obvious answer... but it still terrified me to hear it.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the man I would likely hurt very deeply some day.

Vim's smile returned and he squeezed my hand. "Sometimes one must hurt, to be reminded why they live," he said.

"A very warrior-like thing to say," I said.

He shrugged.

"If they say no, what will you do?" I asked him.

"Nothing. Unless they threaten us for some reason. Even if they went to someone with authority and tried to tell them about us, no one would believe them. Especially in a land ruined by war and disease," he said.

"Kind of you," I said.

"I try, Renn," he said softly.

I nodded. He did. In his own way.

"Consider it an apology. I had almost killed the girl on the deck earlier... I feel bad about it," Vim said with a sigh.

Squeezing his hand for a different reason, I dug my nails into the back of his hand. Or well, as much as I could. It was interesting that I couldn't feel my nails actually cut into his skin, even though I was squeezing rather harshly.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked him.

Vim sighed and nodded. "She revealed that she saw your ears, or knew about them. I... reacted on instinct. I stopped myself, but it almost happened. Usually I'm not so touchy," he said.

Ah... wait... when they had been on the deck together...Before dinner? "Is that when the ship moved sharply?" I asked. I had almost dropped all the eels when that happened.

He nodded.

Really...? How had he done it? The girls had said it had felt like we hit the bank of the river.

"Why have you been so agitated lately, Vim?" I asked him, choosing to focus on that instead. He'd not tell me how he had done it, anyway. Vim kept many secrets, and his abilities were one of them. Maybe even one of if not his biggest secret.

It was interesting he'd be so honest about it. Granted Vim had never really seemed too prideful to me. He was usually willing to make self-deprecating jokes and admit his faults, but...

For him to be so bothered that he had almost killed a little girl for such a reason was... well... concerning.

“Usually I’d tease you as an answer, but...” Vim’s eyes slowly went down, and I realized where he was looking.

Blood rushed to my face again, and I knew this time I had no chance to mask it with anger. It was too obvious.

“Don’t see why you’d complain. You have plenty of opportunities on this boat, don’t you?” I asked him, even as my face got hotter.

Vim’s smile turned into a smirk. “Why would I care about them, when I have such a promising one on top of me already?” he asked back.

Clenching my jaw, I squeezed my hand again. This time I actually tried to dig my nails into his hand, and... well...

After a few moments of glaring into each other’s eyes, I frowned and leaned forward a little and spun my hand... as to bring Vim’s hand into view. I angled it so I could see where I was trying to dig into the back of his hand.

“Hm?” Vim let it happen as I stared at the spots where my nails had tried to dig into his skin. There were very slight indents, but nothing else. No cuts. No bruises. His skin wasn’t even red with irritation.

It was as if I hadn't just tried to dig into his skin with all my might.

Which was very strange. My nails were smooth right now. I had cleaned them and brushed my tail yesterday, so they were recently filed. But... even with that taken into account, I knew my strength. I knew what it could do. Not only should I have been able to at least slightly cut into his skin with my nails, I should have also left red marks and bruises.

"You're an oddity, Vim," I said softly.

"So are you, Renn."

Frowning at him, I wondered what to think of him. I knew he was strong... it was obvious... but...

But he was still a man right? Still flesh and blood?

His skin didn't feel any different. Maybe a little thicker than mine, and rougher... but...

"If I grabbed one of your little steel knives... would I be able to stab you?" I asked him.

"Hm, maybe I did take my teasing a little too far," he mumbled.

Laughing at him, I smacked his chest with my free hand. "Shut it!"

Chapter 212 A Port of Worry

"We can waive the fee, if you'll accept the offer," the man in armor said.

"I've already paid the fee," I said, ignoring his fifth attempt at recruiting me.

The man grimaced as if losing my aid was really that big of a loss.

Honestly it was... but there was no way he would ever find out as to why.

"You'll also be exempt from the monthly tax," the knight said. The four other men behind him, not in armor like him, nodded quickly as if to imply how big of a deal that was.

Which was ridiculous. The fee for entering the city had only been three coins. Three bronze ones, from the Nation of Stone. A pittance. Not even a days wage. For them to think waiving such a thing was worth enough my enlistment into their knight order was... well...

And the monthly tax? Usually that was only a few coins too. It had to be, else even the serfs couldn't afford to live.

“Sorry, we’re only passing through,” I said, then turned to Renn. “Come on Renn,” I said guiding Renn away with me with a hand on her back.

“Sir?” the knight’s fellows asked for guidance as I picked up our pace. From behind I heard the armored knight step forward. His metal boot was noisy against the wooden dock, thanks to all the nails and metal brackets all over.

Would they be stupid enough to try and actually force my compliance? I wasn’t too worried over myself or Renn, there were only five of them, and the man in armor didn’t even have a weapon. Only one of the men had a sword for crying out loud. Though that sword might be the knight’s, and he simply carrying it for him. A squire of some sorts, maybe.

But I had planned to let Renn sight-see in this town for a bit. If I went and killed a bunch of their knights upon entry, that’d become impossible.

“Come on. Just had to be with a woman... where’d he get someone like that anyway?” the knight complained behind us.

Renn smirked and huffed as if she had been given a mighty compliment.

Ignoring Renn, and the knights behind me complaining and whining about me, I looked around the port for the reason that they’d try so hard to recruit me.

The port was rather busy, for the little town that this place was, but it was obvious something was wrong. Most of the people walking around weren’t loading ships, or moving cargo... but instead fishing. Hundreds of fishing poles littered the piers and docks, of all shapes and sizes. There were more poles

than people. Renn and I passed by a group of men cleaning crab pots, and I noted the state of both the pots and the ones cleaning them.

Those pots looked decrepit and about to fall apart. And the men cleaning them didn't look any better.

This town was a faint memory to me. I usually passed through it on the route to the camels, but not always. And when I did... very rarely did I ever stay it in very long. Most of the time I never even stayed the night, and just passed through. A few times I had met an Animalia Guild ship here, as to deliver cargo or people... but even then those visits had been short and uneventful.

Yet even my lacking memories were loudly telling me that this place was facing a serious crisis.

Only two seafaring ships were docked in the port. One looked decommissioned, what with the thing being torn apart. Likely for its wood and resources. The rest of the ships were all small fishing vessels. Even Roslyn's ship had looked mighty compared to the ones here. Now I understood why she hadn't wanted to dock, and had instead sent us to the harbor on her smaller boat instead.

This wasn't normal at all. This was one of the main ports between the Nation of Stone and the north. It wasn't a massive city, or the wealthiest, but it shouldn't be this barren. And the fact there were so many people fishing for food was... alarming. I couldn't remember seeing a port covered in fishing poles to this degree in many years.

Had the war and plague created a famine? It wasn't impossible but...

I had thought Roslyn had simply been exaggerating. I had thought her lack of capability to feed her people had been more of a personal failure than actually because there simply wasn't enough. If there

were this many people fishing this inlet, then yes... the rivers around here would indeed start to lose their fish populations. Especially if it has been like this for months or even years.

"I'm glad Roslyn decided to sail back up the river. Look at this place," Renn said as we headed for the main road.

"Yes. I don't know if they'd have been raided, but this town isn't far from such a thing being a possibility," I said, agreeing with her.

Renn nodded. "Look Vim, the buildings are all boarded up," she pointed out one of the multi-floored buildings we were passing. It looked like an inn or tavern, and was indeed boarded up completely. Not just the windows, but the doors too.

I sighed and wondered if from now on we should avoid towns. If it was this bad here I could only imagine how bad it was in the smaller hamlets throughout the coastline.

Leaving the port, I guided Renn towards the center of the city. There should be a market, more inns and even a temple there. Under a normal scenario, Renn would have enjoyed seeing her first temple. They were similar to the churches in the north, but far more decorative and colorful.

"Do you think they'll make it to Lumen Vim?" Renn asked as we rounded another boarded up building. This wasn't the first time Renn's expressed concern over Roslyn and her people. Ever since the pirates agreed to join the Society, she's been concerned. Luckily her concern... was so far, just audible worry. She hadn't acted on it yet.

Nor likely would... what with Roslyn and her ship many hours upriver by now.

“They should. But that’s part of their trial Renn. Think of it like a test, to see if they’re capable enough,” I said.

Luckily Renn hadn’t asked to let them accompany us, or us them. I had worried for it, but even when Roslyn came to declare her intention to join the Society... Renn hadn’t seemed to even let such a thing enter her mind.

She had spent the last two days on the ship with Roslyn, telling her all she needed to know about Lumen and who to seek out, but I had noticed Renn made sure to keep a small distance with them. She expressed her concern and worry to me, but it went no farther.

Likely the source of such control came from her decision to not fall in love with humans anymore. As well as her recent... failures, as she claimed to call them.

Although I was glad for it, since it meant I’d not need to worry over her doing anything foolish... it was still a little sad.

The world shouldn’t be so difficult for us that something as simple as becoming close with a human was so dangerous.

Passing a street full of houses, I noticed what hid between them. Hidden, barely, out of sight in the alleyways.

The city stunk... but it didn't smell as if it was full of corpses.

"Vim..." Renn slowed a little, and I had to push her a little. My hand was still on her back, and I was glad for it. Not only had she hesitated upon seeing the dead, or almost dead, people in the alleyways... There were people who were still alive who were now noticing our presence too.

Glaring at a group of men, I made a decision to not allow Renn to sight-see here. We would be leaving shortly.

Still...

Glancing up at the sky, and the bright sun beating down upon us... I wondered why the city didn't smell.

In this heat, even with the ocean breeze, so many decaying corpses should really...

"Vim," Renn worriedly said my name again, and stepped closer to me. We had neared the market, and instead of finding a bustling lively city center... we instead found a scene the exact opposite.

A pile of bodies had been gathered in the center of the city. All of the market stalls and buildings were broken down, widening the center section... and there were people praying around the pile of bodies.

The colorful robes they wore told me the religion of the south was still prevalent... and I tried to remember if such prayers were common for their religion. They, like all religions, prayed... but why were

they praying to the dead? Or maybe they were getting ready to set the pile aflame, and this was the last rites.

Renn and I stood motionless for a moment as I studied the scene. She jumped when someone stepped over towards us. I allowed the older woman's approach, thanks to her skin looking relatively unblemished. She didn't look sickly, but...

Glancing at the pile of bodies, I noted the rather lack of any hint of plague or disease upon them.

Rather, most of the bodies were just...

Skinny.

"Travelers, welcome to Port Midas. Regrettably... I suggest you leave as soon as possible," the old woman greeted us, and warned us at the same time.

"Why?" Renn asked.

The old woman smiled at Renn as if she was a child, and then pointed at the pile of bodies. "Many reasons. Right now there are sixty seven, but as I'm sure you've noticed there are many more still scattered throughout the town," she said.

"Is it plague or starvation?" I asked her.

“Both. But regrettably... right now the main killer is the famine,” she said.

Renn shifted and glanced at me, and I realized I had done a slight disservice to Roslyn and her people.

I had not expected it to be this bad, at all. I hadn't really argued with her, or claimed she was lying... but a part of me had not believed her.

“I do hope you are simply passing through. If you're here for some other reason, then I'll be willing to take you to the Captain. Otherwise I fear for her,” the old woman said with a glance at Renn.

“We are just passing through. Thank you for the warning,” I said and was about to dig out a few coins... but noticed the people staring at us.

From behind buildings, or windows. From down the street, both the one we had just come from and the others connecting to the city center.

Not all of them were dressed in the religious garb. Nor were they the knights of this town.

Most were younger men, and looked hungry. In more ways than one.

Coins, even when given in charity, would do more harm to the woman than not. Based off the way the onlookers were glaring at us.

Plus... when it got this bad, money didn't change anything. All the wealth in the world couldn't buy you a loaf of bread in an empty market.

"I suggest leaving before the sun falls. There are many here who are on the brink, and reason no longer will work with them," she said gently, then turned away.

Renn thankfully didn't stop her from leaving, but she did frown at the older woman worriedly.

"Let's go Renn. Before I give this town another reason," I said.

"Sheesh Vim..." Renn complained, but nodded and obliged me. I didn't have to pull her along.

Stepping away from the pile of bodies, I guided Renn towards another road. One that led eastward and a little north. Away from the sea.

"I'm hoping this means our people aren't here, Vim," Renn spoke softly, and I knew it was because she too noticed the people watching us.

So far none seemed to be following after us, but I knew that such a thing might change. Especially if people here were as desperate as the old woman had made them out to be. Or looked to be.

I wonder how long this has been happening. Lumen had noted a large influx of immigrants lately, but I had simply assumed it was due to the wealth of the city. Maybe it had been more than that.

How come no one had mentioned it was this bad? Or had they, and I had simply not realized it. My attention too focused upon the Society, and thus ignorant to the world beyond my little bubble.

Maybe this was why those southern merchants had declared war on us. It hadn't been about profit, but livelihoods. Lives.

I'll need to send a letter to Brandy, in case she doesn't know.

"Vim? Are any of us here?" Renn asked again.

"No. They're a few days east," I said.

"Good... Vim, how do people run out of food? I know there's a war and disease but..." Renn asked.

"Very easily. It's hard to grow crops here, even along the rivers. Most of their food comes from the sea... and well... trade. Trade that isn't coming," I said as I thought of the empty ports.

“Oh. Why didn’t they prepare for this?” she asked.

“No one ever thinks hard times are coming. Even when the signs begin to show themselves,” I said.

“Great.”

I nodded. It was. To a point.

Although a sad thought... this was actually a good thing.

Most of our members lived solitary lifestyles. Far away from humans, or detached from them.

There will be some who die from the disease, and the wars, but few if any will die over the lack of food. They all had their own sources of such things. Or those who didn't, could survive much longer on far less. Starvation really wasn't something we usually lost anyone to.

That meant... although a harsh reality, that a vast majority of those who suffer will be the humans.

And the more of them that died, the safer my people became.

Usually...

"I wonder if this is why they wanted to enlist you as a knight? Though I'm not sure what another sword would accomplish," Renn wondered.

Ah. I had almost forgotten that those men had tried to recruit me.

"They didn't want me to help them grow food Renn. They wanted me to kill the ones who tried to steal the food, or maybe kill the ones who have the food but will not share," I said. They hadn't said as to why they wanted to enlist me, but after seeing the state of the city it was rather obvious.

Only reason to hire more swords was if you had a purpose for them.

"But... they were knights," she argued.

I smiled and nodded. "They were."

She grumbled in annoyance, and I wondered if I'd need to teach her that there were many different types of knights and soldiers. And even more so, that some of those knights who she seemed to slightly revere... well...

They were as bad as the ones they fought half the time, if not worse.

“Why are they letting so many bodies just... lay around, Vim? Won’t the disease spread?” Renn asked. The number of bodies in the alleys we were passing was decreasing drastically, but there were still a few here and there.

“Well... to be honest I don’t know. I don’t know the religion of this region well enough; maybe it’s a religious thing.” Which honestly made no sense. Usually religions had their own beliefs, but even those beliefs were still grounded in reason.

“Oh. They were praying near them,” she nodded, as if it made sense.

“It could also be that most really have died from famine instead. Look at how scrawny some of them are? They’re worse than Roslyn’s bunch,” I said as I gestured with a nod at a woman not far from us. She was sitting in front of her house and messing with a bucket of water. Likely washing clothes or something.

“I don’t know if I could... just live normally with a bunch of dead bodies nearby like this,” Renn whispered.

“Which probably means it’s been like this for some time. Maybe months. Humans become very... resilient in weird ways during a crisis,” I said.

“Is this resilience though? It’s more like... foolishness,” Renn mumbled.

Well... that was true.

It was odd. Even humans without any understanding of the sciences behind such things knew better than to just let bodies decay nearby.

Even discounting the disease, there was no reason to leave them all alone. They gave birth to more, and worse diseases. Even the illiterate knew such a thing. So why...?

But there was no point worrying over it. None of our members were here. We were leaving, now.

Let the humans be foolish and wallow in their own mistakes.

My eyes were drawn between a pair of buildings as I noticed a small group run past. I counted four men before they disappeared out of eyesight, heading past us towards our destination.

"I wonder how long it's been since I've seen anarchy," I said as I thought about it. At least a few decades. Maybe since the great wars of the north? At least if I didn't include the Monarch incidents since and before... though were in a sense chaotic too, but not in the sense of entire civilization unrest and collapse.

"Anar-what?" Renn asked.

"Chaos," I told her the meaning of the word.

There were of course better ways to describe it, but for Renn that was all that was needed.

“Hm... you mean those men who just ran past?” Renn asked.

I nodded.

“Think they’ll actually try something?” she asked further.

“If they’re desperate enough. Regrettably I sometimes don’t look very threatening. It helps when I want to be ignored, but doesn’t in times like these,” I said.

She giggled, and I felt the little laughs through her back. “Yet those knights tried to recruit you on sight,” she said.

“They likely try to recruit any man who comes to town, Renn. Anyone who hasn’t chosen a side yet,” I said.

“Still!”

She continued to giggle as we headed for the edge of the town, and I wondered why she found it so funny.

Oh well, at least she was happy. I was worried she would have cried or grown somber with us parting ways with Roslyn and her people.

Or be bothered by all the weirdness around us. Like the piles of bodies.

But such a thing was likely foolish. Renn acted childish sometimes, but she really wasn't. She was far older than she looked.

"Though... it is true. You don't look like some fearsome warrior at all," Renn then said.

"I do believe you've said so before, yes," I said.

She grinned at me... then her grin died away. "I've been meaning to ask you something Vim..."

Glancing at her as we passed a pair of younger men, two lanky boys who looked hungry enough to eat my boots, Renn nodded at me and smirked.

"Am I ugly...?" The question made my mind go numb for a moment. Before I could even remind myself to start breathing again, Renn continued. "I mean, in the general sense. I've never really thought I was

too bad looking... But... I've realized that maybe all the attention I got was because I just... looked young. Young and healthy," she said.

Frowning at her, I nearly paused mid-step... but contained my shock enough to keep walking.

This again? Really? Why? Why now? Here?

And more importantly...

She... didn't realize? She didn't know? Was she genuinely asking me this, or was this her weird attempt at teasing me or something? And why now of all times? In a dying city?

But no... Renn's eyes were rather serious looking. Her tiny smirk was playful, but also...

Yes. I could see it. She was worried. Worried over my answer. There was a tension hidden behind her smirk. The type of stiffness that accompanied her worries often enough to be recognizable to me.

This wasn't her playing around at all. If anything she was just smirking and laughing, as to try and mask how serious her question was for her.

"What brought this about Renn?" I asked her.

Her smirk instantly died and she glanced away from me, and I realized I had made a rather foolish mistake.

I had just basically told her she wasn't pretty. Even if I hadn't meant it that way. Since I hadn't argued in her favor immediately.

"Well... sometimes people say stuff, which I normally don't put much weight to... but lately I've been noticing people whispering and saying stuff when they think we're out of earshot. Praising me or complimenting me, but... well... So... I guess I was just wondering... If I was ugly or not, since... well... um..." Renn spoke quickly, and went to mumbling by the end of her spiel.

Keeping a sigh from escaping, I wondered how I was going to fix her now bruised ego.

Even if I told her the truth now, she'd just think I was saying so as to be kind or polite... so...

And if I took it too far, she'd just use it as an excuse to pounce on me.

"You mean what those knights had said, don't you?" I asked.

"And the old woman," she added.

Ah. Right. She had mentioned in an indirect way Renn wasn't safe because of what she were.

Pretty.

"I've called you pretty before, Renn," I told her.

"Well... yes... but that's you. You're gentle like that. Also... even if true, that's just you yourself. You find me pretty. I mean... am I? In a more broader sense," she mumbled and lifted her hands, as if she could wiggle her fingers in a way that somehow gave her strangeness reason.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "I know what you mean. Before I answer though, I'd like to know why you would think you're not." I asked her.

"Why I'm... not? Well..." she hesitated a moment, and I could tell it wasn't because she didn't know the reason. She just was... hesitating to share it.

She coughed and nodded, gathering her nerve. "No one tried to bed me, Vim."

My feet finally stopped, and I frowned at the woman who was deadly serious all of a sudden.

"What...?"

She nodded again. "No one... No one in Ruvindale, or Telmik, or Lumen, or anywhere in-between! Not once!" she raised her hands in exasperation and shrugged, blinking wildly... as if she was about to cry. "Even you! How many times have we slept together now? I sat on top of you for hours and you didn't do anything!"

"Renn you can't be serious..." I stepped away from her, as to take her into view completely. She noticeably frowned at my hand leaving her back, and my stepping away... yet she remained still before me.

"I am... A few mentioned I was pretty or attractive... but most were women. Like Merit. I was just thinking maybe they were being nice, and... I mean, Vim... even you get offers! And not just from those pirates either, don't think I don't notice! In Lumen too, you had that banker girl and..." she fumbled her fingers as she twirled her thumbs around each other, rambling on and on.

Banker girl...? I had no idea who she was talking about. Or at least, I couldn't remember her.

Sighing at her I shook my head. "Renn... you're absolutely stunning. Isn't the... reason... obvious?" I asked her.

She brightened up at my compliment, but it didn't seem to do much else. She shook her head, expectant of my next words.

I held up two fingers, to tell her. "Two reasons. First... Renn, you're a predator. Most of the men you've been meeting are not. I know that to you it isn't that big of a deal, but for them it's huge. Dramatically huge. Many have told me you're beautiful. I won't mention who, since they said it in confidence with me, but trust me they did not find you ugly or unattractive or anything," I said to her.

Renn was entirely focused on me. To the point she didn't notice anything at all around us. It was almost terrifying how I was almost just as focused as she.

"Second reason?" she asked, stepping forward.

"Renn..." I groaned and realized I shouldn't have informed her there were two main reasons.

"What...? Now I'm worried!" she said.

Yes. You were. Why? Why did she look as if her whole world was suddenly collapsing around her...? She looked as desperate as she had the other night, while hearing Roslyn's plea.

The sight of her desperation hurt me. Especially since it was my own fault she was so worried.

Renn was beautiful. To the point it was a problem. And somehow even though I was willing to admit that... she didn't seem to believe it at all.

She stepped towards me again, and her eyes were noticeably more blurry and watery than before. Their reflective gleam was so enthralling, I almost didn't notice the shadows moving behind us.

Renn didn't notice. She was so focused on me and my words that...

Damn it...!

"It's because of me, Renn! Surely you're not that oblivious!" I said as I started to tug my eyes off her.

Renn blinked and went wide-eyed.

Although her face was adorable, and I wanted to engulf myself in its glow and bask in it... I instead had to look away as I turned and faced the man charging at me. He and a small group had run out from between two buildings as Renn and I had shouted at each other.

He had a large axe. One used to cut wood, for firewood. It was rusted, likely meaning it had been used either to harm someone else already or had gotten dunked in seawater before.

Renn made a noise but I ignored her. There were four men charging at us, but they were all in front of me. Heading straight for me, intent to deal with me long before they focused on Renn.

I took a quick few steps forward, to put more distance between Renn and them. I made sure to keep my own self between them and her, for an added layer of security... and attacked.

The man with the axe, the first in formation, was easy to deal with. He was so shocked I had actually stepped forward, to fight without hesitation, that he hadn't even lifted his axe to attack. I broke his neck by hitting him in the side of the head, and stepped around him as his body crumpled.

"What the...!" the next man had a large spear with a hooked end. Likely for pulling pots or ropes out of the water. He at least tried to ready himself on my approach, but he wasn't able to do much more. I slapped the hook away and grabbed the man by the neck.

Squeezing the man's throat, I dragged him along behind me towards the other two men. Both of them had skidded to a stop at the sight of their comrade's deaths, and failures. One had an actual sword, but it was made of bronze. The other only had a small knife... likely for cutting up fish and game. Although a tenth of the length his little knife was undoubtedly far sharper than the bronze one.

"Wait!" the man with the sword shouted out, but I ignored him. Once I had squeezed the man's throat in my hand enough to be sure he was dead, by feeling the ligaments and collapsed windpipe, I tossed the now dead man. Flinging his body towards the one with the sword, I rushed forward and stepped into the man who had the small knife.

Punching him deeply in the solar plexus, I felt the bottom of his rib cage and sternum shatter, he bent forward and contorted over my forearm. By the time I pulled my arm away he had coughed up a large blotch of blood and collapsed.

"Oh my gods!" a woman screamed from somewhere behind us. Maybe the one who had been washing clothes earlier. I ignored the scream and stepped over to the man with the sword. He had just finally gotten himself untangled from the dead man I had thrown onto him. He was crouched down, thanks to having almost fallen over, and his sword was out of position. Still stuck on the dead man's clothes.

“No...!” the man raised his free arm, helplessly, in an effort to stop me. My foot didn’t even register his arm. It crushed it, and snapped his head back with a loud pop.

Before his cry stopped echoing, he too crumpled and fell to the ground.

Taking a small breath I looked around to confirm that there really had only been four men. First I checked Renn. She had retreated a few feet from where I had left her. She was staring at me, and the scene around me with wide eyes. And other than her...

We were alone. There were a few onlookers down the road, both ways, but none looked to be in any hurry to rush to their fellow’s aid.

“Let’s go Renn,” I said as I glanced down at the bodies around me.

The man I had hit in the stomach was twitching, but he was puking globs of blood. In amounts that told me I had done more than just crush the bottom half of his ribs. I’d likely ruptured lungs, his diaphragm, and more. The first man I had hit was still, and so were the two others closest to me. Their legs were tangled up oddly, but both were dead.

Stepping away from the bodies, I reached around to make sure my bag was fastened still. It had shifted a little with my brisk movement, but was fine.

Renn hurried to my side as we left the scene, and I wondered if this town would be gone by the time I returned here in a decade or so, on my next trip. If it was this bad then it was likely... unless a military force took it over.

Scanning between the buildings as we increased our pace, I was glad to see that although there were others watching us go... none seemed willing to try their own hand at dying too.

The edge of town came into sight. Old buildings surrounded by decrepit fences and walls. Old farms and storehouses, no longer being used.

Glancing at Renn, who had a weird smile on her face as she hurried to keep up with me... I frowned at her.

"And you think you're ugly? Tell that to them," I said.

Odds were they hadn't attacked entirely for her. They had most likely wanted our food and wealth more so... but...

Renn's smile contorted as she took in my words and it was obvious that she was trying to decide if she should be depressed or ecstatic over what I had said.

For now, her believing that they had attacked for her and her alone... was my way out of that dangerous conversation.

I'll need to thank those men, someday. For laying down their lives as to save me from making a mistake.

I had almost wanted to prove to her right there and then why she was being so foolish, after all.

I knew it'd happen eventually... but I really needed to fight against such a thing for as long as I could.

This would be a battle of attrition... which thankfully, I was damned good at.

Though...

"Haha!" Renn started to laugh happily, showing all her teeth as she gleefully smiled.

Ugly...?

Ridiculous.

Looking away from her as we left the port city, I realized thanks to that smile that I likely wasn't going to last very long. At all.

Chapter 213 Riz

The world had somewhat returned to a familiar setting.

The ground was still dry, and the soil was more... rock and clay than actual soil, but there was now green all around us. Trees. Bushes. Grass even!

Though most things, even if a lively green, did still look pointy.

“Right around this bend. If you ever have to get here without me for some reason, just follow the sea until these gorges. After a few hours of searching you should be able to find this path,” Vim explained how I would find this place while walking in front of me.

I nodded, and although dedicated his teachings to memory... I had absolutely no plans on ever going anywhere without him.

Even if he didn't want to admit it yet... or ever would, my place was next to him.

“Is it a big family? Like Herra's?” I asked, hopeful.

“Not really...” Vim then paused, coming to a stop in front of me.

I too came to a stop, and smiled at the sight of his face. He was lost in thought, and then he frowned as he remembered something.

“The Chronicler said the lad died, didn't she?” he asked softly.

Ah. "Yes. The one who was infirm," I said as I tried to remember what she had said.

Vim sighed and nodded. "Yes. Bound to a wheelchair. He had been born infirm. Unable to walk," Vim said.

Unable to walk... maybe they had made him a chair that let him move around? Thus the wheel? That would have been very interesting to see. Probably another Vim invention.

He scratched behind his ear as he frowned. "So... should be six members. Plus just as many if not more human workers. Though here, they don't see them as members. They're employees, not members of the Society... so watch what you say and who you say it around," Vim warned me.

I nodded. "Okay."

Vim turned back forward and we returned to walking along the rocky path.

We were between two large... what were they called? There were these giant rocks all around us, but they somehow formed little cliffs. Large tree roots littered between the rocks, seemingly holding them in place. Off in the distance I could hear the sea crashing upon similar stones.

It has been three days since we left that port city. We hadn't gone through, or seen, any other towns since leaving that port... but a few times in the distance I had seen buildings. Houses. Single solitary

things out all on their lonesome. Some had been right along the sea-line, on beaches, while others had been hours away from the sea.

We hadn't gone near any of them of course, but it was interesting that out here in this strange desolate place... there were still people all over the place. It reminded me of the north. One could go days without seeing a town, but hidden away there were usually homes and small communities.

"So they have human workers here?" I asked.

"Yes. I know. Weird. They're hidden, but not like the armadillos. Most of their employees come work here for a few months then go home," Vim explained.

"Huh..." That was interesting. "Isn't that dangerous?" I asked.

"It is... but it is how they've operated forever. They're just used to it. Set in their ways," Vim said.

Hm... Places like Lumen I understood, it being in the center of a human's capital. But out here...?

We were days from any real towns... and if that port city was the standard out here... well...

I shivered at the thought of that town. Its weird smell still lingered in my mind, and...

As Vim and I had run out of town, I had glanced back to the bodies. The ones Vim had left behind in his wake.

There had been people around them. Kneeling. At first I had thought they were weeping, but it became clear very quickly it was the opposite.

They had been scavenging from the bodies. Taking their clothes and items.

Such a weird thing. I distinctly remembered those men. Their thin arms. The sunken faces. The torn and dirty clothes.

One of the men hadn't even had shoes.

Vim killing them had actually made me pity them. Even though I knew they had been fully intent on harming us, it was still... a little disappointing.

"And... here we are. Secca. The dye houses," Vim's voice brought me out of my thoughts.

Walking up next to Vim, we were suddenly standing on top of a small hill... overlooking a small canyon.

Inside the canyon, a short distance below us, were many buildings. Some were built into, or along, the rocky cliffs surrounding them... but there were a few standing solitarily away from the others. A few were large, several floors and wide, but others were small. Too small to be homes... and...

“What is that?” I asked Vim as I stared at colorful smoke bellowing out of a few chimneys.

“Steam. Come on, she’s waiting for us,” Vim said with a small tap on my arm.

She?

Hurrying after Vim as we rounded a large rock and found another path, we descended. This path was a little smaller... and we were now walking in a cramped section of rocks. I stepped a little to the right, as to not brush my shoulder against a large rock.

This felt weird. It was like walking between two very close trees... yet it continued forever.

After a few minutes of walking amongst giant stones, the rocks diverted away and we stepped onto a larger path. One that wasn’t as steep, and led straight down to the houses...

Peering around Vim, I smiled at a young girl.

So this was she. Had he seen her from up above? I hadn’t noticed her.

Which was very surprising... since her clothes were all bright colors. Her shirt was some kind of bright orange; it was almost blinding to look at in this sun.

The girl looked about my height, and appeared to be my age... but I knew better than to assume she was as young as she looked. She strolled up towards us, and Vim came to a gentle stop as he waited for her.

As the girl got closer, I noted the way she glared at Vim... and... Did she have something under her shirt? Her shoulders looked a little odd, as if she had large muscles.

Eventually the girl came to a stop before us, and she placed her hands on her hips and raised her chin at Vim. "Well?" she asked.

Oh? This was interesting. Very so. She looked upset with him! I wonder what she'll say or do... and...

Vim then stepped aside, and gestured at me. "May I present you Renn, one who shall do what I don't want to," he said to her.

"Huh...?"

Standing up a little straighter at being introduced in such a way, I couldn't help but smile expectantly. I had no idea what was going on but it seemed fun.

The girl shifted and then started to laugh. She nodded and stepped forward, crossing her arms as she studied me.

Going still, I patiently waited. She was cute, her clothes were a bunch of different colors, and although her hair was shorter it was still braided in a neat way. Her skin tone wasn't as dark as I had expected to find out here, since so many of the humans were a tad darker than those I found in the north. But she did have a lot of freckles, and... was that paint on her cheek? It was a bright white in color, a blotch marring her smile.

"Well... I guess she'll do," the girl then said after a moment.

"Will I?" I asked happily.

The girl snorted loudly alongside a laugh, and I found myself smiling even more. Yes. I was going to like her.

She stepped forward, and didn't even hesitate to wrap her arm around my shoulder and neck. "She will! My name's Riz!" she introduced herself while smiling at me.

Smiling back at her, I returned the weird hug she was giving me. It was easier for me to do, since she wasn't carrying a backpack, but upon my doing so I noticed her shoulders were a little... off. They felt a little harder than the rest of her. A little bumpier.

Most importantly though, with her this close... I was able to see her eyes. They definitely were not human. Not only were her pupils... oddly shaped, somewhat like a goat's or sheep's, she also had what looked to be another set of eyelashes? Maybe even two layers of eyelids?

"Renn. Nice to meet you Riz," I greeted the camel.

Riz nodded happily and then tugged me along, taking the both of us down the path towards her home.

"Where you from Renn?" she asked as we stepped past Vim. He smiled at us as we left him behind, and I realized Riz was going to completely ignore him.

How interesting. I really was going to like her.

"The north. A mountain of snow," I said.

"Snow? Never seen it. I've heard of it though, from my mother. I'm told it tastes good," she said.

"Well... some snow does, I guess," I admitted.

She giggled, and I liked how she let her joy fill her whole body. She was a delight.

“Come, come. Let Vim talk to the old humps while you and I become friends,” Riz said.

I nodded, agreeing with her. “Yes, let’s.”

It didn’t take long to reach the buildings, and upon reaching them I realized there were more than I had thought. Hidden behind, and sometimes under, large rock formations were other buildings. Some looked a little too... plain or out of place, but others were rather detailed and large. If Vim was telling the truth and there were only six of our members here, then each of them must have their own house it seemed.

A dog barked at us, running out from behind a house. It paused a bit; studying me... then ran off behind us. I turned to watch it run at Vim, barking the whole time.

Before Riz and I entered a building, I saw Vim kneel down and greet the dog. He pet it happily as the dog rolled and danced around him.

“Here, put your bags here. They’ll get in the way otherwise,” Riz went to pulling off my backpack as we entered into a small room. One that seemed to be only used for putting shoes and other such things aside. Like my bag.

I let her take my bag off me, and I reached up to take off my hat... but paused.

“Uh... Riz?” I whispered softly. She tilted her head as she put my bag down. I stepped over to her, and leaned up against her as to whisper. “I heard there are humans here...?” I asked softly.

“Oh. Not right now. It’s the break month. It’s just us here, you’re fine,” Riz said calmly.

Oh. Good. Taking off my hat, I breathed out a sigh of relief. Honestly although I wasn’t too bothered by the heat... I was very glad to get the opportunity of taking my hat off. My ears relished the air and freedom, even if the air was warm.

“Wow!” Riz stepped closer, and I knelt a little to let her study my ears. “What the heck! How cool! Is this why Brom barked at you?” Riz asked as she reached up to pat my ears. I was thankful she did so gently.

My heart thumped a moment, before calming down. “Brom...?” I asked.

“The dog,” she said.

Oh. Okay. Sure...

Wait really...?

“Uh... maybe? I’m a cat,” I said.

Riz frowned at me as she leaned back, lowering her hand. “A cat...”

I could tell by the way she was in thought that she had no idea what that was. "A small animal. It's... I guess it is kind of like a dog, in a way," I said, even though it felt really weird to say that aloud. After all they really weren't, but... how else did I explain it?

"I see. Neat. Well Brom's a perv, so don't let him get all weird on you. Just smack him if he does!" Riz laughed as she stepped away, heading deeper into the building.

Smiling at her as I hurried to follow, I wondered what to say to that.

Riz giggled a snort as I followed her into the building. Upon passing a cloth door... I had to cover my nose.

The smell in this place was... weird. It made my nose itch, but it wasn't so bad that I wanted to run away or not breathe.

A large open room revealed itself... and in the floor, a sunken pool of water. A large pool of water that was littered with plants and planks of wood. And they were...

Stepping past Riz, who had gone to a large bucket near the wall, I stared down at the pool of water and boards.

"Snails...?" I asked as I tried to understand what I was seeing.

There were thousands. Maybe more. The massive pool of water was covered in them. I could barely see all the plant life strewn all over the place because of them.

“Hexaplex Trunculus! Yes. Snails. Here, it’s time we feed them,” Riz stepped over to me and held out a weird shovel looking tool. I took it carefully, since there was a... bucket type of thing at the end of the long pole, which was open. And within were what looked to be... grains or something.

“Just shake it over the pool. I’ll get this side, you do that side,” Riz pointed to my right, and she stepped away to grab her own bucket stick thing.

Frowning, I held the shovel bucket out over the pool... and shook it a little. Sure enough some of the stuff in the bucket fell out, scattering all over the pool of water and snails.

Ah. I see.

Feeding... the snails.

Smiling at the ridiculousness of it, I decided to just go along with it. Stepping around the pool, I mimicked Riz as we both went to spreading the food all over the pool.

“I thought this was a dye house,” I said as I watched the snails perk up and begin growing active with their food falling around, and upon them.

“It is! These snails are one of our pigments,” Riz said. She was nearly half way done already, more than twice outpacing me.

Picking up the pace a little, I did my best to not dump too much food in one place at a time.

Pigments... “I’m assuming that’s a color?” I asked her.

Riz grinned at me as she paused in her feeding, and shifted the shovel like tool under her arm. “I’ll explain it all to ya! Basically these little guys are how we make certain colors. We crush them and boil them. This is one of five nests,” she said.

Five...?

As I continued to feed the snails, I wondered how many snails were here. If there were five more of these pools... then...

“The pool is lined with a type of metal that they don’t like. Keeps them in. Sometimes we still find a few that sneak out, but it’s rare,” Riz continued to tell me about her families specialty... and I suddenly realized I was very jealous.

Herra’s family had gems.

Riz's had... snails? Or rather colors?

Lumen had money.

Telmik had religion.

Twin Hills, where Lomi and her new family resided had wheat.

Lellip and her family had the smithy.

Tor's village was a farming one.

Ruvindale had... or rather once had, paintings.

Blinking watery eyes as I continued feeding the snails, I did my best to focus.

I was jealous. Of them. All of them.

What I would have gave for my family to have been a part of the society from the beginning. What I would have gave to have been born amongst them.

Though... I suppose if I had, I'd never have joined Vim.

Riz finished first, and waited patiently for me with a smile as I distributed the last bit of food in the bucket.

"Four more," she said to me once I was finished.

I nodded. Yes. Four more.

We put the shovel-bucket things away, and Riz led through the building... and into another. We passed outside only momentarily, entering another building that was so close there was barely any room to walk between them.

This building had two pools inside. Both roughly the same size as the first.

"You take that pool. You'll need to refill once, make sure to do your best to spread the food evenly," Riz guided me as we grabbed new shovel-buckets and went to work.

"How often do you feed them?" I asked as we both went to feeding the snails.

“Once a day. But once a week we need to pour some water in too.”

Water... “The water smells like the sea, or is that just the snails?” I asked.

Riz giggled at me. “It’s the sea. These things are sea creatures. Good thing too, would probably use up all our fresh water otherwise!”

Sea creatures...?

The sea had snails?

I have seen many weird animals and creatures in the sea. Thanks to spending so many years along one... but I didn’t think I had ever seen a sea-snail before.

Maybe it was a regional thing. This place was far hotter, after all.

“How old are you Renn?” Riz asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m over a hundred at least,” I said as I went to refill my bucket.

“Oh...? Wow. You look good. I’m only thirty,” Riz said.

Thirty...?

Glancing at Riz as I went back to my own pool, to return to feeding the snails, I wondered what age I’d place her by looks alone.

Maybe early twenties, by human standards. Maybe even younger. I had thought her a young girl, not a woman, upon first glance.

“I’m the oldest daughter. Or well, I am now. My older sister ran off years ago and never came back. So one day I’ll be the head of the family! I’ll be something, you’ll see!” Riz said proudly.

It was a little weird for her to be telling me so much so quickly... but I was starting to realize that this was... standard, for our kind.

Herra’s family had been the same. Happy to just talk and talk, sometimes telling me their whole life story without rest. Those in Lumen had done similar, before all the chaos had happened.

Maybe it was because I was with Vim. They knew we came and went, so...

“I don’t have any family... or a um... job?” I told her, and hesitated after doing so. Should I tell her I wanted to be like Vim? Some people found it interesting but others didn’t like the idea at all.

“Oh...? Well don’t worry; I’m sure you’ll find somewhere and something soon! That’s why you’re with Vim huh...? Must be fun. Mother has traveled with Vim before, she told me the stories,” Riz said.

“It is fun. Sometimes,” I said. Hopefully she’d not ask about Lumen.

Riz snorted as she giggled again. “I bet. Vim can be such a pain. I’m glad you’re here, at least now his visit won’t be wasted entirely,” she said.

“Wasted...?” I asked as I finished feeding my pool. Riz had finished long before me, and was patiently waiting near the door. I hurried to put the shovel thing away, and joined her out of the building. We walked around the building, passing a large well with colored wood and stone.

“Everyone is supposed to work. No work, no food. But Vim always runs off before helping, he’s such a pain,” Riz complained as we entered another building. This one was situated under a large outreach of rocks.

I frowned at the camel as we walked down a short hallway, and then entered a room with another set of pools. Two more. The last two, of snails at least.

“Vim... doesn’t help?” I asked. Surely not... I mean...Vim always helped. Even when no one asked for it. Was she making a weird joke that I didn’t understand?

Riz nodded as she went to fill up the buckets. She handed me mine, and I took the pool on the right this time. Just to change it up.

"I mean... he does. Don't get me wrong. He also helps fix and build things when we need him to. Like right now I bet he's being asked to build another vat, and move the rocks that fell down a year ago," Riz said.

"Then...?" I paused in my spreading of the food, and Riz smiled at me as she nodded.

"I'll show you what I mean. Once we're done feeding the snails," she said.

"Oh... okay," I nodded and wondered what she was going to show me.

He didn't help, she said... yet did. Must be something else then.

I knew Vim wouldn't actually... not help. No matter how much he disliked or was bothered by someone, he'd never be so cruel to our members in such a way.

"You the only child Renn?" Riz then asked.

"Huh? Oh. No. I had several siblings. Though they're all dead now," I said.

“Oh... I’m sorry,” Riz paused a moment, to look at me with sorrow.

I smiled at her and shook my head. “It’s okay. It was a long time ago,” I said.

Riz shifted, and tapped the handle of her shovel-bucket for a moment. “I lost a brother recently,” she said.

Hesitating, I wondered if I should tell her I had heard of him. But decided against it upon seeing her scrunched up face.

She looked as if she was about to weep.

“He was... a poor boy. Born in pain. Lived in pain. Died in pain,” she said softly.

Gulping, I realized that Vim had... not been very good at explaining just how sickly the boy had been. I should have known better though. Vim sometimes didn’t mince words, but he also usually told more by his tone than the words he used. He had spoken curtly and short about the boy... but he had spoken gently, and with a sad expression. I should have read between the lines.

“My little sister had been the same. She too suffered,” I told Riz.

Riz looked up and sniffed, and then smiled and nodded. "Such is our fate huh?"

"Regrettably," I agreed.

The camel nodded and returned to her work. I dutifully joined her, and hoped her happy demeanor would return soon. Such somber sadness didn't suit her.

A little before we both finished, nearly at the same time thanks to Riz's slowdown, she took a deep breath and waved to get my attention.

"It's the snails, you see," Riz then said.

"Hm?"

She bent down, and picked one of the larger snails up. Even from across the room I noticed it was wiggling something fierce. She smirked at me and turned the snail to show me. "Haven't you noticed? They stink right?"

Ah. I nodded. "Yes. It's not... too bad, but there is a smell to them," I said.

"Vim hates it. So much so he refuses to enter these buildings unless absolutely necessary," she explained.

Huh...?

Glancing down at the things I was feeding... I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Vim...? Hates the smell of these things? To the point that he refused to help feed them, or deal with them?

"You're kidding," I said. The smell was strong, but even I had grown accustomed to it swiftly. It wasn't even that bad!

Vim... the stoic warrior, bothered by a smell? Such as this? It was almost so ridiculous I didn't want to believe it.

Especially since I'd seen so many other smells do nothing to him before. From that weird well beneath the Animalia Guild building, to that pot of rancid meat he had cooked on our way here. He'd never even flinched...

Yet these? This smell? I think the sea water and plants had more of a stink than the snails did.

"You're joking," I said again, not believing her.

“Not at all! I don’t know why either... he doesn’t mind the smells of any of the other pigments or anything... but yep. The smell of these things? Makes him disgusted, I guess. Maybe one crawled up his butt once or something,” she said as she put the snail back down, and frowned in thought.

It was my turn to snort a laugh.

Chapter 214 Secca

The old camel gave me a toothless smile... and then bowed.

He was sitting on his knees, and his bow looked ridiculous. It was the same bow the devotees of the southern regions did to their gods.

“How’ve you been Mordo?” I asked as I sat down in front of him. Crossing my legs underneath me, I grabbed my knees and waited.

Mordo remained bowed, his head just a sliver of a hair from touching the floor. “O’ Protector, I welcome you. I’m glad to see you well,” he said.

Mordo spoke evenly, but sounded... distant. As if he was talking in a sleep-like state. But I knew it was only because he was so old. This man was so old I had stopped wondering when he’d finally pass away. I used to bet on it, with myself of course, and was tired of losing so I had stopped.

It wasn’t fair that such a frail, ancient and decaying old man kept living. It was as if he only kept living even though he should be long dead just to spite and annoy me.

He didn't even eat or drink anymore. Just die already.

Waiting patiently, it didn't take long for Mordo to finally sit back up. He smiled at me, a calmer one as he relaxed a little. "Welcome back Vim," he finally greeted me for real.

Or well, his first greeting had been real too. So I suppose that wasn't the proper way to phrase it.

Mordo was just... old, I guess. A little too stuck in the past.

"I see the buildings look fine, and the sea sounds calm. Yet... I hear you have bad news for me," I said to him.

The old man took a deep breath and then nodded. "Yes. My grandson passed a few years after your last visit. Leval died young, before his prime. He died in the middle of the night, during one of his fits," Mordo said.

I squeezed my knee, and wished I had been here. That poor boy shouldn't have suffered like that.

But it had not been up to me.

Neither his family... nor he himself had been willing to let me take him where he needed to go. To receive proper treatment.

He had chosen his life. And his death. Although it upset me... it was also the epitome of a man. To choose one's life and death was a great honor.

"I will miss the boy. I enjoyed telling him stories," I said.

Mordo nodded gently. "As do I. Sometimes I still hear his squeaky wheel, just around the corner," Mordo said.

Yes. His wheelchair had squeaked noisily sometimes. I fixed it when I came, but I was always gone for so long at a time... a few times I had even returned to find him without a chair at all. Although the camels weren't foolish, far from it, they just didn't have the penchant for such finely detailed work. Their patches and fixes never lasted long when it came to the more complex stuff.

"And the rest of the family? Riz seems well," I said.

Mordo nodded. "I hear her now. Is she with a woman? Her age?" he asked.

"Her name is Renn. She's a large predator, a cat. She's... a little older. But similar in personality. She has a big heart, that is very easily bruised," I said.

“Ah... a good friend then. I’m glad,” Mordo said.

Yes. She was a good friend to have.

“Vim, would you like anything to eat or just a drink?” Mordo’s daughter, Celine, called out to me from down the hallway.

“Just a drink please. Something fruity, if you have it,” I said.

“Fruity? What!” Celine laughed at me, and I nodded even though she couldn’t see me.

“For my companion,” I said.

“Oh. Right. Okay!”

“Let me guess... she’s not accustomed to our heat,” Mordo guessed.

I nodded. “Somewhat. It’s actually not bothering her anywhere near as badly as I thought it would. She’s hardy. She comes from the snowy mountains in the north... so it’s actually surprising,” I said.

“Huh... interesting,” Mordo frowned as he pondered the woman he hadn’t met yet.

Celine walked into the room, and smirked happily as she knelt down next to me. She had a small tray in her hands, with a pitcher and some empty cups.

“Is she cute?” Celine asked.

I smiled at her question, and thought of the conversation Renn and I had a few days ago. The one at the port city.

“Yes. She is,” I admitted.

“Oh-ho?” Mordo grew more interested and I took the cup Celine offered me. She went to filling it, and I noted the blue liquid. Yes... she’ll like this one.

“We’re all fine Vim. Other than little Leval... Nothing odd has happened. Even our workers are fine. None of them have been bothered by the plague or famine yet,” Celine told me. She remained kneeling next to me, even after she put the platter down next to us.

I noted she didn’t give any to Mordo, but it was no surprise. The man never did eat or drink anymore.

“I’m sorry, Celine,” I said to her.

She smiled and nodded. "It is... sad, Vim... but he was in pain. I'm glad he's not hurting anymore," she said gently.

I didn't like that perspective, but I understood why a mother would believe so.

"When do the workers return?" I asked. I had noticed their lack of presence, even though I had yet to actually walk around.

"A few weeks or so. And yes, we'll make sure to turn away any who are sickly. This isn't the first plague we've lived through," Mordo said.

"First that you've lived through," I corrected him.

He frowned but nodded as Celine laughed.

We all went silent as Riz and Renn walked by the building. This room had an open window, which made it easy to hear them. They were chatting loudly, and sounded as if they were close friends already. Their voices faded and eventually disappeared as they rounded the building and headed to the north side of the compound. Likely to where the vats were.

"They'll be stirring for the next hour or so," Celine giggled.

“Put her to work. She likes to, oddly,” I said.

“Oh? Interesting. Maybe we can get Fival a wife yet,” Mordo said.

Celine huffed. “Leave him alone, Mordo. Not everyone matures the moment they can walk,” she said to her father. The tone she used told me this was likely a current heated topic.

“How old is Fival?” I asked. I hadn’t seen the boy yet, or his father. They were likely together somewhere, working.

“He’ll be twenty this year,” Celine said.

Twenty... only a few years younger than Riz. And only a few years older than poor Leval.

And before Riz had been Liz. Though the age gap had been a little bigger between those two, it was similar all the same.

So weird. Celine and her husband had gone decades without children, and then suddenly they were having them one after another... though...

Glancing at her stomach, I wondered why the lack of any more. Based off the age differences it was time for another.

Was it because of Leval? Had he being born infirm scared her? It wasn't a surprise but... it was regrettable.

"Not yet Vim," Celine said softly.

"Sorry..." I shifted and realized how obvious my thoughts were.

She smirked at me. "I know you mean no ill will. You always seem to forget how much time I've spent with you!" she said happily.

Yes. I knew that. Celine wasn't as good as reading my expressions as Renn, but she was still much better than most. A result of all the years she had spent with me.

The trip to find her husband had been a long one. She had been picky. Too picky...

"Where is the horse?" I asked, thinking of her meeting with him. He had fallen for her at first sight, and literally walked right into a wall since he was so enthralled by her.

Celine chuckled. "At the cave. He's found a new squid that he thinks can give us a brighter green than what we got," she said.

A... "A squid?" I sighed and wanted to tell her that was impossible... but didn't.

Let the man enjoy his hobby.

"Honestly Vim... I was hoping to send Riz with you this time," Celine then said.

"Oh?" I perked up at that. Although it'd be... slightly annoying, I'd actually not be adverse to it.

She and Renn would be quite a pair. They together would be noisy, but their attention would focus on each other and relieve me of some unnecessary headaches.

"She refuses. She's not interested in finding a husband yet," Mordo said.

"Tell him why, though," Celine added.

"Why what?" I asked as I took a drink.

Yes. Renn will like this.

“She’s still fascinated with Brom, Vim. She thinks she can just go pick him up whenever she feels like it. Poor girl hasn’t realized that although we women far outnumber the men, we can’t just take any man we want without effort,” Celine said with a laugh.

Lowering the cup slowly... I suddenly remembered it.

Riz had come with me to deliver that shipment. Two trips ago. Her and her father had come with me. We had met Brom and Merit at the port city, to hand them off the dyes. For the company.

She had indeed been infatuated with Brom. I could now remember his awkward efforts at trying to avoid her. She had been far too young for him at the time. Still just a little girl. The few days we had spent together had been composed entirely of Brom and Riz’s antics as she basically declared her love for him, and he doing all he could to not break her little heart.

Even if Riz hadn't been a child at the time, it wouldn't have worked. Brom had fancied older women. And not just old in the sense of our people who aged slower either.

But that didn't matter. Even if none of us had taken Riz's affection seriously, it had obviously been real... and...

And she was still infatuated with him. Even after all these years. How many? Twenty odd years maybe?

“You’re kidding,” I groaned as I closed my eyes and tried to comprehend what was happening.

“Vim...?” Celine reached over and grabbed my arm. As if she could support my soul as it broke.

Taking a deep breath I gulped and nodded. “I’m sorry. I was going to tell you. But I hadn’t realized it was this important. A disaster happened in Lumen. I was there when it happened, but several members got hurt... and...” I hesitated, and Mordo lowered his head. He already knew what I was about to say. His age let him parse my words for the truth.

Shaking my head I glanced over at Celine and felt horrible. “I’m sorry. Brom is dead. He died during the chaos.”

Celine’s face contorted, and she looked away from me. She took a deep breath, heaving as she realized the truth.

“The rest?” Mordo asked.

“They’re all fine. A few got hurt, but only Brom died. Renn, the one here with me, was actually hurt the worst out of all of them. Of those who survived, at least,” I said.

“Ah... my poor girl...” Celine began to cry, and I realized with her tears and sobs... that this information had changed a lot.

If Celine was crying to such a degree... that meant Riz wasn’t just still infatuated with Brom. She loved him. Deeply.

“She woke up a few months ago. In the middle of the night. Crying out. In a panic. It must have been his death,” Mordo said dryly.

Frowning at that, I wondered. Had it been a few months ago? Maybe it had. Time sure passed without care, didn't it?

“Had she cried out for Brom?” I asked.

“No... but she just sobbed all night. She said she had a horrible dream, but couldn't remember what happened. Ah... the souls and their tricks...” Mordo lowered his head, bowing to the floor again.

I ignored Mordo as he began to mumble a small chant of a prayer, and instead looked over at Celine. She had regained her composure, and was wiping her face with a small cloth. Where had she gotten it?

“This will break her little heart. She loved the boy. So desperately. She still talks about him almost daily. She even named that dog after him...!” she said.

“What...? The dog?” I asked. The one that had ran up to me earlier? It had been a little older than a puppy... it hadn't been here last time.

“Ah... what will I say to her? How do I tell her...?” Celine wondered.

"I'll do it," I said.

Celine startled and slapped me with the cloth she had been using to wipe her tears. "You'll do no such thing!" she shouted at me.

I frowned at her. "Celine... it's my job. To tell people the news. Good and bad," I said.

"I don't care. Don't you dare, Vim. You're a kind man, but when it comes to news that breaks the heart you are not gentle. Let me do it," she said.

I was going to argue with her, but decided to not. At least... not right now.

"Fine. For now. But if she asks, Celine..." I said.

She raised the hand that had the cloth, threatening to smack me with it again. "Just. Don't."

I sighed. "Fine. But only if she doesn't pry. And... I'll be honest, Celine, Renn might tell her before I do. She was there," I said.

Hell, she was kind of the cause...

Startling at that realization, I shifted... and wondered if I should hurry and tell her. To warn her.

Or maybe just...

"Vim. I swear. If you go and tell her right now I'll never talk to you again," Celine warned me, likely seeing my thoughts on my face.

"Celine..." I grumbled. How did I explain this to her? Would she understand? Celine had always been a more level-headed member. Wiser than most. But when it came to her family...

"Vim... please. Give me a day. Just a day... let me ponder how to break it to her properly. That's all I ask," Celine begged me.

Mordo finally finished his prayer as he sat back up. The old, wrinkly man, nodded in agreement. "Let her have her wish, Vim. Mothers know these things," he said.

Giving up, I sighed and nodded. Fine. But if I have to...

Damn... what would I do if Riz attacked Renn or something, if Renn told her she was responsible for the boy's death?

She blamed herself. She'd not hesitate to say it.

Rubbing my eyes, I wished I hadn't forgotten about Riz's fascination with Brom. But honestly... she had been a little girl! Why was she still so infatuated with him?

No. Of course she was. Our people weren't normal. We didn't think like humans when it came to such things...

Hopefully Renn didn't bring it up before I had a chance to warn her.

Celine sniffed and stood. She smacked me again with the cloth as she left the room with a huff.

The cloth had hit me in the eye, but obviously didn't hurt.

"Such is life Vim. Fate is never gentle," Mordo said.

"Fate's gentle to me. It's just never gentle to any of you," I said.

He smirked at me. "Only because she's scared of you, not us."

Well... that was probably true.

“Gosh!” Celine shouted in anger, but I knew it wasn’t because of anything I had done or said. She was just upset at the news.

“Any other startling news you’d like to share?” Mordo asked.

“Hm... I killed a monarch not too long ago,” I said.

“We heard. We received letters from the Chronicler, after we sent ours telling her of Leval’s passing,” Mordo said.

I nodded. That was typical of the Chronicler.

“Oplar never visited?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Last time Oplar visited was with you... oh... four? Five visits ago?” he asked me.

I shrugged. Why ask me? These visits blurred, especially when nothing drastic happened.

But that meant Oplar had not come south. A good sign... maybe. She hadn’t gone to the Armadillo’s either...

Hopefully she didn't perish on her way down here somewhere. Chasing stories and dreams right into the fires of war or pestilence.

It was always the weak ones that had such free-spirits. Strong enough to venture forth into the world, but too weak to keep themselves safe.

Renn was very similar. She was strong... but she'd not last long in certain scenarios. Not for long at all.

Strength meant little when one's heart wasn't in it.

"Vim! Should I put her bag with yours?" Celine shouted at me from somewhere in the house. Near the front door maybe.

Oh...? Oh. Renn's bag. "Sure," I said.

"You forgot about her?" Mordo asked with a small chuckle.

"Well... I had to ponder what she meant for a moment, yes," I admitted.

Which was weird. My mind had been on Renn hadn't it? Still was, in a way...

Maybe I was getting old too. Like Mordo.

“You plan on living much longer?” I asked the old camel.

“Not sure. Do you?” he asked back, repeating the same sequence we’ve exchanged many times over the decades.

“Maybe not. If I go before you, will you pray for me?” I asked.

Mordo sighed and shook his head. “No one will pray for you Vim... but I will ask the abyss to welcome you gently, at least.”

“Thanks,” I said as I stood up.

“Mhm. Do you plan on staying long?” he asked, ending our foolish back and forth.

“Not sure yet. Let’s see if Celine tries to make me a eunuch or not before I decide,” I said.

Mordo chuckled as Celine mumbled something down the hallway. I heard a few insults alongside my name, but not much else.

"I'm going to check on Renn and Riz, do you want to join me Celine?" I asked as I stepped out of the room, leaving Mordo behind.

"You...! Don't you dare! You promised!" Celine appeared down the hall, hurrying towards me and pointing at me.

Did I promise...? I think I just nodded. I don't think I actually agreed...

"I'm just going to check on them, and the compound. Well? Coming?" I asked.

Celine came to a stop before me, and after a moment of glaring at me... she sighed and nodded. "Yes. Fine."

I nodded at her and waved a light goodbye to Mordo as I headed for the door.

Putting my shoes back on, I waited for Celine before stepping out into the arid ocean air. Once outside, the pungent smell of the snails attacked my nose... but I didn't let it make me stumble or hesitate. I strode out proudly, like always.

Celine closed the door behind us, and I spent a few moments to look around again. Off in the distance, near the dry house, was the dog... sniffing around.

“Brom?” I asked again.

“Yes. I know. Jeez, don’t bring it up,” Celine complained.

Shaking my head at Riz’s naming sense; I decided to let it be. Poor dog was going to need a new name soon.

“How’re the snails?” I asked as we rounded the main building.

“Growing well. In a few years we’ll have enough to make another batch. We plan to build another pool someday too. Maybe in the next two or three batches,” Celine said.

“What about the other greeneries?” I asked. The greenhouses were past the snail houses. Only a few had glass roofs. The rest only had small sunlight openings, and were more enclosed terrariums than actual greenhouses.

“Nothing’s changed Vim. We only harvest what we should, we always give room for growth... and lately we’ve been focusing on the yarn dyes anyway,” she said.

I nodded. That all sounded good. It was good to hear similar news from them as I had from the Armadillo’s. Just... constant normalcy.

I liked normal. Normal didn't make my head or heart hurt.

"The Armadillo's have a few more daughters. If you're looking for a wife for your boy," I said, remembering.

I'd not tell her that they were looking for a wife too... since they were looking for one for the mixed kid. I'd not be able to calmly send Riz off to marry a mostly human boy. Riz would outlive him many fold. It was a cruel thing to suggest.

"Please. Like I'd allow that," Celine huffed.

Ah. Right. She didn't like them.

"What did they do to you again?" I asked.

"Really Vim...? That idiot tried to buy Riz when she was still in my belly. With rocks! Rocks!" Celine complained.

Frowning I nodded. Right. That was rude. I guess.

Usually I'd completely agree... but Celine wasn't complaining over the fact that they had tried to buy Riz's birthright... but instead she was upset over what they had offered as payment.

She would not have gotten so upset had it been something else. Something she had seen value in, or wanted.

“Oh?” I paused in front of one of the paths that led deeper into the gorge we were hidden in. What was usually a rather open path, that turned into a winding one, was abruptly cut short. Large boulders were blocking most of it, obviously coming from above.

“They fell about a year ago. Scared one of our human workers something fierce. She passed out, we thought she died at first,” Celine said.

I tried to find the spots that the boulders had fallen from, but couldn’t. It almost looked as if they had not fallen from anywhere, and had simply appeared.

“I’ll remove them before I leave,” I said.

“Please do,” she said.

They were big. But not so big that they couldn’t remove them with their own efforts. Especially if they broke them into smaller sections first... but I knew there was no need.

They rarely used that route. Nothing of import was down there, and so... they simply waited until I showed up.

Why waste time and effort on something I'd handle swiftly, after all.

"Anything else you'd like me to do before I leave?" I asked her.

"Build another vat? For the blue pigments," she asked.

"Sure," I said. Another vat? Already...?

Hadn't I made one when I was here last time too? But I couldn't remember what color it had been for...

Walking past some pens of sheep and llamas, I noted the number. "Lose some?" I asked.

"They're rutting. In the barn," she pointed at the barn we had passed.

Oh. Right. Sure.

The damned snails were messing with my nose. Usually I'd have smelled the animals better.

“She did!”

The loud laughter drew Celine and my attention away from the animal pens. To one of the dye houses. There was steam flowing out of its chute, and I could hear not only Renn’s happy giggling but Riz’s snorting.

“How sweet. They’re friends already,” Celine whispered.

I nodded as I headed for the building.

“Remember Vim...” Celine warned as we approached.

“I know Celine. I know,” I reminded her as I nodded.

She grumbled but said nothing else as I stepped up to the open door. Past the initial entrance was a small room, which led to another small hallway. Past the hallway were multi-colored curtains, containing the room within and its contents.

“She did sneeze a lot!” Renn shouted happily.

I could hear the sound of liquid being stirred between the giggles. They were likely just stirring the dye liquors.

“Not going in?” Celine whispered quietly.

Should I...?

Deciding not to, I stepped away and nodded.

Celine breathed a sigh of relief, and I wondered if she actually thought I was going to break her little girl’s heart so maliciously.

She should know me better than that. But... maybe she didn’t.

We’d spent years together. While she traveled around looking for a husband. But that didn’t mean she and I had actually gotten close.

To be honest... now that I thought about it, most of our members rarely grew too close to me. Or I them.

Renn was the odd one out. Even from the beginning I always seemed to tell her more than necessary. I’ve been with Renn nearly two years now, I think, and that was just above a tenth of the time Celine had traveled with me on her search. Yet I knew Renn knew far more than Celine did about me, or the Society even. To a rather startling degree, too.

I should ponder it a bit later. When Merit had traveled with me, after her kingdom's destruction... Had I been open with her? I felt like Merit knew quite a bit about me, but did she? Honestly?

Maybe all this time I had misunderstood how well some of our members knew me.

It was a sad thought, but one I needed to ponder.

Renn seemed to know me well. Yet even she misunderstood me sometimes. And if she, a woman who seemed to know me better than most or maybe even anyone anymore... well...

If even Renn didn't fully know me, then how could I expect any of the rest to?

"Ah, there's Fival," Celine pointed off in the distance. I turned, and saw the young boy walking towards the compound. From one of the hidden paths that led to the sea not far from us.

Not far behind him was Celine's husband. The horse. He was carrying a pair of fishing poles, and it looked like there were fish and...

Yes. Squids were tied to the line too.

Shaking my head at him, I decided to greet them alongside Celine.

They were all good distractions. From my mind. From my heart.

And from the terrible thing I was going to have to do soon.

Renn was not going to forgive me.

Breaking Riz's tiny heart was going to hurt her as much as it hurt Riz.

But it had to be done.

Celine may not know me as well as I thought, but I knew her. I knew she'd not be able to find it within herself to tell her daughter. And her husband, although a kind man and a devout father... he too wasn't going to be able to do it.

And Mordo was no help.

And there was no way we could ask little Fival. The young boy was nearly Renn's height, but he was still just a boy. The younger brother on top of it.

So it was up to me.

The act of telling her of what happened, and all the pain and sorrow it will bring... will fall upon my shoulders.

Always me.

Again.

Chapter 215 To Be Taught

The giant boulder rolled off Vim's shoulder... and promptly fell down the cliff below, crashing loudly as it hit other boulders and rocks all along the way.

Vim leaned over the ledge, and I was half tempted to reach out and grab him... but knew there was no need. Not only would Vim likely not fall, he probably wouldn't get hurt even if he did.

I stayed back, although I kind of wanted to see what I was hearing too. But the cliff was so big and high that I couldn't bring myself to actually step up to it. The ground here was hard, too hard, but there was this odd feeling of... well...

Looseness. My ears kept hearing things shift, and rocks scrape against one another. It made me feel as if the whole ground beneath me could open up and swallow me without warning. I didn't like it. At all. I missed grass, and compacted soil. It wasn't right for the ground beneath my feet to sound as if it could shift and gobble me up without warning.

“Hm,” Vim nodded, pleased with the results as the sound of the large boulder came to a stop. There were still plenty of sounds of other rocks, the smaller ones dislodged and bothered by the larger one, but the roaring and banging of the big one was over.

“Can I ask why you toss them over? And not just... put them somewhere else? Like right there, for instance?” I asked him with a point nearby. To the side of one of the large cliffs behind us. There were already dozens of similarly large boulders along it. He could have placed it, or the half dozen other ones he’d tossed over the ledge, next to them and no one would have ever noticed. It would have not blocked any paths either, so...

“Hm... for fun maybe?” Vim then said.

For... fun...?

Frowning at him as he stepped over to me, I reached up to brush off some of the dust and rubble off his back and shoulder. The rocks hadn’t looked filthy at first glance, but they sure did leave a bunch of traces whenever he carried one.

“Fun? Really?” I asked. Was it fun to throw rocks off a cliff?

“Well, no... Rather it’s on purpose. There are always some rocks whenever I visit. If I piled them up like that every time, anyone sailing past along the shore will notice. Too many piled up in a similar fashion stands out, so got to make it look like a natural rock fall when I can,” he explained.

Oh... right...

As I brushed him off, I glanced past him to the ocean just past the edge of the cliff. The world became an odd dark blue, with white waves spanning endlessly. Below the edge of the cliff, was actually still quite a bit of land... but thanks to how high up we were on this cliff, and the angle, all I could see was ocean.

Yes. I could understand what he meant. There were no ships out there now, but it was obvious there would be. We had just been to a port city only a few days ago, so there was no doubt that ships sailed these waters.

Finishing with Vim's dust, I turned and glanced upward behind us. To the rocky cliffs and gorges that the Dye Houses were hidden within.

"What about the steam?" I asked. I couldn't see any hint of any of it, but I knew it had to be visible at least to a point. The steam was thick, and white. It looked like a dense cloud sometimes.

"It dissipates enough, thanks to the ocean breeze. They've never had any problems with that before," Vim said.

"Then... what about the human workers? If they're trying to hide, why go through such lengths if they're letting humans come and go?" I asked further.

He chuckled at me and patted me on the back, as to guide me back towards the path. To head back to the houses.

“The humans who work here are mostly descendants from others who worked here in the past. And most live solitarily lives too; they’re not the type to go telling anyone because they don’t want anyone to know either. And even if they did... well... Mordo is here,” he said.

“Mordo? That old man?” I asked.

He laughed. “Yes. That old fossil. Don’t let him fool you, he’s dangerous,” he said.

Although hard to believe... I wasn’t going to doubt Vim. Even if it was ridiculous.

That old man was tiny. Smaller than me. Thinner. Feeble looking. He looked so decrepit that I had almost thought he was a corpse before he had greeted me. Even his skin looked old and dry, like leather.

And the oddest part of him was he just... sat in his room. Never leaving or moving from where he sat.

“What’s a fossil?” I asked after a moment.

“Hm... the remnants of something long dead. A relic that time forgot. Usually the term refers to bones, or the calcified or petrified remnants they leave behind. They’re things usually from eras long past. I basically called him something that looked, and is, so ancient that he should be in a museum,” Vim explained.

I liked how he was starting to describe his words to me. He didn't even seem to hesitate anymore. I wonder if he even noticed that he's been getting a little more forthcoming with me.

It made me happy. It meant in some little way... I was finding my way into his heart.

"And... what's a museum?" I asked for another.

Vim frowned, and then stopped walking.

I too stopped, and wondered if I had just taken it too far. Was that one of the words he didn't want even me to know?

He sighed as he looked at me, and then crossed his arms. When he did, I noticed a spot on his sleeve I had missed. I stepped towards him to brush the rubble off.

Vim didn't stop me, and even patiently waited until I was done before he spoke.

"Other than that Renn, there's something we should probably talk about before we go back," he said.

"Hm?" I perked up and nodded.

“Have you told Riz what happened in Lumen?” he asked.

Frowning I shook my head. “She’s not really asked. And... to be honest Vim, I really don’t want to talk about that... so I’d not bring it up if I can avoid it,” I told him honestly.

“Figured. Well... don’t. Not until I talk to her about it, okay?” he asked me.

I nodded. “Sure... can I ask why?”

“Well... maybe. Let me see how it goes first,” he said, and then he turned and returned to walking.

Joining him, I wondered what was wrong. He seemed worried, which for him was a little concerning.

“Should I worry?” I asked him.

“No. Not in that sense. It’s just... a painful matter. Other than that, how are you faring with the smells?” Vim asked.

I smirked at him and nodded. “They’re odd, Vim, but they’re not anywhere near as bad as you seem to think they are,” I said.

He sighed. "I know," he said.

Oh...? That had been a rather somber tone from him. So he knew...? Was there something else at play then?

He helped out in other ways, but he didn't seem willing to help the camels in any of the buildings related to the snails. Neither the pool habitats, or the steam and boiling building where they crushed and mixed the snails... though right now that one wasn't really being used. We had arrived in-between batches, it seemed.

It was interesting he'd help with the dye process of the other methods... just not anything that used the snails.

"Why do snails make ink, Vim?" I asked him as we went to walking back towards the dye houses.

"Some animals just... do. Either with their blood, or mucus in the snail's case. In a certain sense plant based inks or paints are the same. It's the ones made from rocks or gems that are bizarre, in my opinion," Vim said.

"Rocks..." I'd not seen those yet. I wonder which building housed those colors. I'd only seen the snails and a few of the plant based ones so far.

"You and Riz getting along?" Vim asked as we passed by a rather large boulder. One nearly twice the size of the ones that Vim had just carried moments ago.

“Yes? She reminds me of Lellip. Though oddly, a little less...” I hesitated as I wondered how to properly say it without making Vim think me odd.

“Less...?” Vim slowed a little to look at me.

I grumbled and nodded, unable to figure out how to properly say it. “Girly? Lellip, even though her job was... more manly, was more feminine. She liked to make designs, and sewed cute things into her clothes. Yet Riz, even though surrounded by beautiful colors, doesn’t really seem willing or wanting to let it distinguish her. When we met her she was wearing a bright shirt, so I had expected her to be a little more...” I struggled to continue, since I wasn’t even sure what I was saying.

It wasn’t like I wasn’t happy to spend time with her. Nor was it as if Riz didn’t act like a girl her age, or something. She and I have actually had several interesting conversations, and I had enjoyed dinner with her and her mother last night. I felt bad to, even if not intentionally, speak bad about her.

Vim smiled at me as he watched me struggle. “Flamboyant. You expected her to be dazzling, and are disappointed to find she’s just like any other woman her age,” he said for me.

“I regret saying it. It’s horrible of me. There’s nothing wrong with her, I just...” I took a deep breath and wished for Vim to chastise me for saying, let alone thinking, such a thing.

“Mhm. A result of our travels. You’ve continuously been meeting the odd or unique, and now that you’re starting to meet the more normal ones it’s bothering you. Do you not remember how normal most in Lumen were?” he asked.

"I do. And yes, I get it. I don't even know what I'm complaining about... Riz and her family are wonderful people. I shouldn't even be thinking what I'm thinking," I said to him honestly.

Vim nodded, seemingly agreeing with me. Yet... he said nothing more.

"Vim... why would I think less of her? Just because she's normal?" I asked him, in an effort to understand.

"Well... do you honestly think less of her for it?" he asked back.

Opening my mouth to say no, I realized that'd be a tiny lie. "Slightly," I admitted.

Vim smirked at me, in a way that made me flinch. He found this amusing. Better than being angry, I guess, but honestly I'd have preferred his anger instead.

It made me angry at myself, for crying out loud.

"You'll find Renn, most who we meet are simple. They're born. They live. They die. Not everyone has a grandiose story, or purpose. I'd think by now, being as old as you are, you'd not only understand this... but actually desire it. Do you really want everyone to have terrible pasts or turmoil filled lives? I'd rather everyone be like Riz and her family, not like us... or those like Merit or Tosh," Vim said.

Ah...

I blinked a few times as I not only understood what he was saying... but realized the truth of it.

He was right.

Like always.

"That's true, Vim," I agreed.

He nodded in a way that told me it had been obvious, and I had just not seen it.

"I guess I just expected weirdness, or the unique. This place is, I admit, but the people living here don't match it. But if I think about it, Herra's family hadn't been any better," I said as I thought of them too.

"Hm. Why do you desire the unique, Renn? The unique usually bring chaos. Like Lumen," he said gently.

"I'm not sure..." I said honestly.

"Doesn't explain your attraction to me, Renn. I'm rather boring, aren't I?" he asked.

Smiling at him I nodded. "You are! But... in a good way," I said.

He nodded as if he somehow understood. Which I hoped he did, since I really didn't.

"Though... I guess I'm not very unique either, am I?" I said as we passed an odd looking rock. It was flat and smooth, it looked like a perfect place to sit and rest. Maybe that was why it was a little bit away from the other rocks, more alongside the path than not.

"In my experience the more unique one is, the crueler fate is to them," Vim said.

"Would explain our people's suffering, at least," I said softly.

Vim nodded as we rounded a small bend. The ravine we were walking through was actually a little straight, but the many large rocks littering the path made it curve and bend.

"Does this place flood?" I asked as I noted the stain marks on the rocks we passed.

"It's happened, yes. The driest places flood the worst," he said.

Huh... I wonder what they did with all their paints and dyes, and the things that made them, when it did. The buildings were not only leveled with the ground, several had dusty dirt floors, not wooden or stone ones.

As we drew closer to the camel's residence, I noted the smell in the air. It was unmistakable now. "I've been told the smell bothers you," I said as I tried to figure out why it bothered him so much. It did smell, but it honestly wasn't that bad. The only real bad part of it was how it overpowered the smell of everything else, once you noticed it. It wasn't so strong it was blatant, but when you focused you realized the smell was just... a tad stronger than anything else. Not just the other dyes and paints, but even the animals and dusty rocks all around us. Even the smell of the sea was somehow pushed aside by it, oddly... especially since the smell had a faint tinge of the sea within itself.

"It does," Vim said honestly.

"Is it really that bad to you? I admit it's... odd, and overbearing, but it's not that bad. I think that stew you made a little bit ago was way worse," I said.

"Something like that," Vim said, and I noted his absentminded response.

Studying him as I walked alongside him, I realized he was indeed lost in thought. I wonder when it had begun. Was he still thinking about what I had said earlier? Or maybe before? Something else? Had he seen something?

I looked around for a possible source of his focus, but other than rocks and the brownish plants and trees...

Nothing seemed too out of the ordinary. For a place that looked as hot as it felt, it was honestly a little plain.

Actually it wasn't too hot here. Likely thanks to the ocean. There was a gentle breeze, which seemed endless thanks to the ravines and caverns we were in. It flowed in from the sea, and seemed to make it continuous and steady. At night it was a little noisy too, whistling and blowing between the rocks and cracks.

Remembering the wailing of the wind at night, I noted that I had slept in the only empty room in the main building. Alone.

"Did you sleep in one of the other buildings Vim?" I asked as I thought about it. After a point I had stopped seeing him and hearing his voice.

"Hm..." he mumbled an answer and shook his head.

No...? So he hadn't slept then. I wonder if this is one of the places that he didn't sleep at.

It was interesting to find that there were places he felt comfortable enough at to sleep, while others he didn't.

"How long will we be here?" I asked. It's only been a single day, but based off the way he and the others have been talking it might be some time.

“The workers are scheduled to return in the next month. I plan to stick around until a few of them arrive,” he said as he glanced at me.

Ah. I had his attention again. I wonder what he had been thinking about.

“Is it okay to stay so long? You were worried we were off schedule right?” I asked.

“We’ll be fine. After here the only other member in this area is Landi. There are a few other members, but I only visit them when they request me to do so. As long as we’re heading back north before the summer ends all will be well,” he said.

Oh...? There were that few members down south?

I thought of the map I’d seen back at the Cathedral. I remembered a few other places and names, some with double digit numbers, near here. Near Secca.

Maybe they were like Trek, who just... didn’t need or want people showing up without being invited first.

“Landi? Is that her name?” I asked as I realized he had told me her name.

“Hm,” he nodded. At first I thought he was lost in this mind again, but he glanced at me and smiled. “Her true name is actually really long, and in another language. Landi is the name of the person who placed the crown upon her head,” he explained.

“Oh...? So she’s like the Clothed Woman then?” I asked.

“Yes and no. Look at that,” Vim paused, and pointed in front of us.

I too went still as we went to watching a massive... spider? Beetle? Walk across the path in front of us.

“What is that?” I asked him.

“A scorpion. And a rather big one, too. Usually they’re about half that size. That thing’s lived a long time,” Vim said, impressed with it.

It was huge. The thing was likely as big as my head, but it was hard to tell its real size. It seemed to have some kind of stinger curled upward onto its back.

The thing scuttled away, not too quickly but fast enough that it made me weary of it. It disappeared into a crevice, and for a few moments I heard its tiny little feet as it clattered...

“It can climb walls?” I asked as the thing emerged again, walking up the cliff wall.

“Hm. Bothered by it? We’ve seen bugs before, you’ve never seemed weary of them,” Vim asked.

“Well... I know those bugs. I’ve never seen that thing before. Is that a stinger?” I asked.

“It is. Venomous too... some people are also allergic to them, so try not to get stung by one. They’re actually all over the place, not just deserts... but your home is often covered in snow, which would explain why you’ve never seen one before,” Vim said.

I huffed at him. “Are there... any other things here I should keep an eye out for?” I asked as I looked around.

“Certain snakes. Other spiders. A few other insects, and animals... I’ll point them out as we see them. Honestly your lands are the same, just different species and types. Actually... I’d almost say your lands are more dangerous, in a way. You have large predators. Real ones. The deserts down here really don’t,” he said as he returned to walking.

“They don’t?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Not really.”

“What are camels, by the way?” I asked, since it was a good time to do so.

He smirked. "Large beasts. They're... unique. Imagine them as sturdier elk or... like a moose maybe?" Vim seemed to lose confidence in his explanation as he spoke.

He frowned after a moment, and I realized he was still thinking of a better way to describe them to me.

"Sturdy elk," I said and nodded, to let him know that was enough for me.

"Well... yes and no. They have no horns. Actually, they have llamas here. Did you see them?" Vim asked.

I nodded quickly. Riz had me help her feed the animals this morning. Some of them had been things I'd never seen before either. "Oh! So they're like that?" I asked. That made a lot of sense then. So they were odd deer looking things.

"Well... kind of. Camels are bigger. They're considered good workhorses. But they're more closely related to the llamas than not..." Vim sighed as he spoke and then shook his head. "You need an education," he said.

It was my turn to frown. "Am I that dumb?"

Vim paused and glanced at me. I stopped too, and blinked at him.

“I meant I was doing a disservice to you. You’re smart enough that you’d benefit greatly from an actual education. You’d put it to wonderful use. I was simply regretting the state the world is in Renn, one where people don’t really get to enjoy such a luxury. Not that you’re not intelligent. You’re far from dumb,” he said to me.

I smiled at him, and not just because it was adorable how quickly he had come to my defense... from himself. It felt silly, but good, to receive a compliment from him in such a way. “Can’t you give me it?” I asked him.

Vim shifted and frowned. “I suppose...” he admitted.

My smile grew into a mighty one. “Really?”

Drawing closer to him, Vim actually leaned back a little... but he didn’t step away. “Well...”

“Well what? Don’t pretend you can’t teach me Vim. Not when half the places you take me to are built by your own hands, and you’re the one who taught them how to do it all,” I said with a gesture down the path. Some white smoke was visible, past some large rocks and cliffs. We were near the houses.

He took in a sharp breath, likely to argue or say something... but instead he said nothing and only made an odd noise as the deep breath he had just taken slowly leaked out.

Vim held my gaze. His eyes dug into me, making me want to squirm. I felt my tail and ears slowly become rigged, and the hairs upon them go stiff. My own focus became stronger, as I held his gaze... and waited.

And waited some more.

Then he nodded.

Grinning up at him, I nodded back. "Good. We'll alternate it. One day we'll train, the other you can spend time teaching me," I said as I decided.

Him teaching me on the days we couldn't train, such as here where it'd get us or rather me in trouble, would be better... but I knew he'd not teach me in such a way for the same reason he'd not train me. If he didn't want people seeing us train, or me being taught to wield weapons, then there was no way he'd be willing to teach me anything secretive with them in earshot either. If anything, Vim would likely see such a thing as an even bigger danger...

"A proper education requires books, and tools, Renn..." Vim tried to come up with an excuse. I enjoyed the way his eyes squinted and his head tilted ever so slightly.

He was struggling. Mentally. Likely stressing over what we were talking about.

"Books? Really?" I asked him, dared him to change his stance now.

"Well..."

Looking away from him, I nodded as I returned to walking. "You can teach me what you can. Honestly Vim... stop acting so bothered over it. You're always telling me stories and teaching me stuff, what's the difference?" I asked without looking back at him.

"Renn..." Vim groaned at me, and I couldn't help but giggle at his tone. He sounded absolutely distressed!

"Come on! I'm supposed to help Riz with the green dyes today," I ushered him, turning just enough to catch a glimpse at his face.

Vim was scratching the back of his head, and looked defeated. He was staring down before him... nearly at the same angle he had been earlier, when I had been leaning up towards him. He was likely staring at the very spot he had been earlier, where I had been.

Maybe my forceful actions had actually bothered him. It looked like they did.

Although it was a little rude of me, I couldn't help but feel excited.

It was bothering him... but he was also willing to indulge me.

He had mentioned once, that he had... several others of him inside, always arguing. Over me.

One wanted to deny me. Not just my love, but my very presence.

The other loved me, and wanted to indulge me completely.

Well...

If he wasn't able to let the one inside that loved me win, then I just needed to... give it a helping hand, right?

A little assistance. A little help. That's all.

Surely it wasn't so wrong to do that, was it? Surely he'd forgive me for it, right?

Vim finally sighed and nodded, to himself. He stepped forward as to join me back onto the path. I turned away before he looked back up at me, but I knew he had seen me staring at him.

"You're more bothered by this than teaching me how to swing a sword," I teased him.

"The pen is mightier than the sword Renn, I've told you that," Vim said from behind me.

Frowning at his odd statement, I wondered why he seemed to believe that so strongly.

I mean... I guess I understood it. Knowledge was dangerous. It was powerful. And that was what it meant, of course... but...

Glancing down to my hand, I imagined the sword that I always swung. It wasn't here or on my waist. It was with the rest of our packs at the house. Yet I could envision it clearly. Its gleam. Its dullness. Its weight.

I could even feel the strange ring that vibrated down it, when it collided with Vim's sword.

I could feel it, even though I hadn't held it in several days. Not since after we left that port town, where we saw that pile of dead bodies.

And most importantly... I could feel...

Its deadliness.

With it I could kill. I was growing comfortable with that thing in my hand. I was growing accustomed to it. I was learning, and becoming familiar, with what it was capable of.

I knew now what a sword could do. I knew how I could use it to kill people. Many people. One after another.

And that was in my hands. Not even his.

I was far from a great warrior. Not even a shadow of what Vim was.

His little phrase made sense in a normal way... Like if one compared it to me or another common person. But when it came to Vim himself...

Glancing behind me, Vim tilted his head at me worriedly. Was he worried I was going to wring something else out of him?

Right now he was safe. Since I couldn't get his statement out of my head.

If he had a pen, he'd be dangerous. Yet if he had a sword... well...

"Could you conquer a nation with a pen, Vim?" I asked him.

"I've done it before," he stated.

Of course he has.

“Will you teach me how to do that too?” I asked.

He took another sharp breath and flinched. “That’s what I’m afraid of,” he groaned.

Chapter 216 A Camel’s Eye

Fival was a quiet boy. His eyes were vivid, telling me his mind was vibrant... yet he hadn’t said a word since I had started on the new basin for the vat dye.

I was almost done with the basin, and although I’d been teaching the young boy the entire time... it was a little worrying he wasn’t even asking questions.

Though that might just be because Renn was asking enough for the both of them.

“You’re saying little creatures are in there?” Renn asked again, staring into another basin vat a few feet away. Since the basin I was working on was almost done, and nearly ready to be put to use, I had been teaching her... and Fival and his sister Riz, the inner-workings of the tool. Namely about the bacteria they used here to convert the dye into a soluble product.

“There is. They... basically eat and expel tiny little pieces of the dye. Making it go from something we can’t use on wool and yarn, to something we can,” I said again.

It was so hard to say this stuff. Not just because they weren’t really capable of understanding the chemical process... but because of who was listening.

Riz and Fival listening wasn't a big deal. They didn't really need, or care, to know the whole underlying process. They only needed to know how to do it properly, and that it worked. They didn't care about the science behind it.

Renn on the other hand...

"Vim, there's nothing but sludge in there," Renn said as she looked away from the vat.

"I know Renn. As I said. They're tiny. Not visible to the naked eye. Not even ours," I said.

"Imagine them as tiny little mites, Renn! Like fleas!" Riz tried to get Renn over the fact in her own way.

"Fleas..." Renn groaned as she leaned away from the vat, as if it was now poisonous to touch.

Fival leaned forward as I bent the final layer on the top of the vat basin's opening. The metal sheet was thin, and I was curling it around the lip. Using my thumb, I bent the metal and curled it inward; forcing it into a shape that would ensure it'd never separate even after years of use.

I noted the way Fival focused on my handiwork. He was quiet, but perceptive. He was noticing how I was creating a seamless juncture between the metals, allowing me to add several layers of thin metal without needing nails or rivets.

“So... do you need to feed them though? You said you don’t open those for months at a time?” Renn asked as she glanced at the other vat basins. The ones that were sealed.

“We add yarn and water, that’s it,” Riz said.

I nodded. “The micro-organisms feed off the... well, not the wool and stuff, but the chemical reaction between the wool and the solution. Imagine when you add spices or another liquid to a bubbling pot of broth, Renn. Sometimes it froths up right?” I tried to explain to Renn, as well as I could.

“So they eat the byproduct,” Renn said.

“Well,” I stopped, and blinked. Looking away from the metal I was messing with, I turned to nod at Renn. “Well, yes.”

So she did understand. Amazing.

Renn hummed as she stepped over to us. She leaned between Riz and her brother, to get a closer look at what I was doing.

“What are you doing now?” she asked.

“The layer of metal I’m forcing around the lid opening will let them secure it without letting pressure out. The lids get pushed inward, being too big for the opening, and so they slide into the basin itself and seal into it by size alone without needing clamps,” I explained.

“Then how do you get them out?” Renn asked.

“We break them. With a hammer,” Riz said.

Renn frowned, and I waited for the obvious next question... and oddly, it didn’t come.

She remained quiet as I finished up, and slowly spun the large basin around as to make sure the lid lip I had just made was smooth and finished.

It was.

“Fival, get the indigo. Riz, the bacteria,” I said as I stood from my little stool and lifted the basin.

Taking the basin over to the open end on the racks, next to the others, I carefully put the steel basin into place. It wobbled a little as I got it into position, and pushed the little wooden bars around its bottom as to better situate it in place.

The camels quickly stepped over to me, each carrying their perspective ingredients. I stepped aside as to let them go to work.

Although young, they'd been doing this since birth... so didn't need me to teach or show them how to do it. Riz poured the small bucket of bacteria in carefully, then hurried away to get another bucket of water. Salt water.

"Indigo dye goes last. If you do it first, the bacteria dies," Fival spoke up for the first time in awhile, and did so to teach Renn. He gestured with the block of blue to her as he spoke.

Renn smiled. "Why would it die?" she asked.

"The dye alone is poisonous. It's actually poisonous to us too, to a point. When we pour it in a little bit of steam and stuff will come out, make sure to not breathe it in," I warned her.

Fival nodded as his sister returned, and went to pouring the salt water into the basin.

"Want to do it?" Fival asked Renn, holding out the block.

"Can I?" Renn asked, yet stepped forward and took it before anyone could say otherwise.

We watched Renn study the block of indigo first, frowning at it, then she stepped over to the basin and glanced into the thing... and after obviously not seeing anything, she simply dropped the indigo into the basin.

Once she did she had to quickly step away, as a plume of blue smoke flew up out of the basin.

Renn swatted the air away as Riz laughed at her. Fival smirked, but didn't make a sound as he went to bend down and pick up one of the lids.

Since Renn was still stepping away, and mumbling complaints, Fival went to pushing the lid into the basin. He had to really lean into it, and push with all his might, but he was able to get the thing to slide in and pop into place.

"And done. We'll open it again in two months, to stir it," Riz said.

"Why go thru such lengths? Wasn't it already really blue?" Renn asked.

"It was. But it won't properly attach to anything. It'll just... seep out, if you try to add it to wool or anything right now," Riz explained.

I'd offer to show Renn what they meant, but I knew they'd get upset with me. It took them months to make even a small block of dye. Wasting it like that would just be an insult.

"Hm..." Renn hummed as Riz walked over to a shelf. One that had a few dozen smaller pots on it. After clanking around with them for a moment, she returned with a large brush that was coated in blue paint. The same blue color that the indigo would eventually become.

“Want to mark it?” Riz offered the task to Renn, who accepted it without hesitation.

Renn went over, knelt before the basin, and went to writing upon it with the brush. She wrote the word blue upon it, then went and drew a small image next to it.

“What’s that?” Fival asked.

“The symbol of the guild up north,” Riz said.

“Ah...” Fival studied it for a moment, and I wondered if he had been that young when I had last been here. He had seen the symbol before, during that visit, hadn’t he?

Maybe he had been younger than I remembered.

“Add the date, too,” Fiz said.

“Oh... I don’t know it.”

As Fiz guided Renn on how to properly mark the basin, by marking it not with today’s date but rather the date when they needed to open it, I glanced around at the rows of basins.

There were three. One alongside each wall, and then another in the center of the room. The bigger pots were in the center, since they would have stuck out too much along the walls.

Renn finished quickly as I stepped over to one of the larger basins. It was nearly twice as big as the one I had just crafted for the camels and it had an upcoming date marked on it, and was written with red.

Tapping the basin lightly, I wondered how long ago I had made this one. Years ago, decades even... but honestly, how long ago?

This family has been making dyes since Mordo was a young boy. His parents were the ones to settle down and begin the process, but they hadn't lived to see the fruit of their labor. They had died before the first batch of snails had matured enough to be used.

Hundreds of years, at least.

I frowned as I thought of it. Were they one of the oldest families? Maybe not the oldest in terms of age, but definitely one of the oldest families in the Society. Especially so when one took into account their task.

They, like the armadillos, were what originally had funded our Society and its people. Its ventures. There had been a few other things before that, which Celine had formed, but they hadn't been reliable or long lasting.

“Jeez Renn...!” I turned to watch Riz step away, giggling away as she wiped her face. Renn had brushed her cheek with the paint.

Fival stood a little awkwardly watching the two as Riz laughed and Renn put the brush away.

Riz and Fival weren’t full-blooded camels. Their father was a horse.

That meant once they had children, if they took another step away... well...

The camels would be gone, soon.

It wasn’t by any fault of their own. And who could blame Celine for choosing Lial. He was a good man... but he himself had been a half-breed. Although luckily he had inherited his mother’s lifespan, at least.

Yet the mixture of bloods would mean the eventual dilution of the non-human aspects of it.

Riz and Fival would live longer than humans... but their children won’t. Even if they were born with the help of another non-human.

Many families over the years have fallen in such a way. Losing their non-human traits and slowly becoming... lesser. It didn’t mean their purpose in the Society would disappear immediately, but it meant it would be inevitable.

Same with the Armadillo's daughter. The one who had married the human boy.

"I do have a request, Vim."

I turned my attention to the young boy, and realized he had likely been standing next to me for awhile now. I had been lost in thought.

"Hm?" I nodded as I ignored Renn and Riz. They were now on the other side of the room, whispering about something near a box.

"I'd like to learn how to put ink into skin. As Grandfather Mordo has," Fival requested.

Oh...? "Tattoos? I do not mind, but Mordo should..." I stopped talking as I realized that Mordo might have denied his request, or...

Fival shifted and glanced away, to the other side of the building. Riz and Renn were still lost in their conversation.

Ah. I see. "I understand. Mother said no?" I asked as I got the gist of it.

Fival's placid expression turned into a tiny frown. "My father," he mumbled.

"Really...? What was his reasoning?" I asked.

"He feels it'd make me less likely to find a wife," Fival explained.

A wife... "What kind of tattoo do you want, Fival?" I asked him.

"None in particular. I just... want to be like Grandfather Mordo, eventually," Fival said.

I nodded, understanding. Mordo's tattoos weren't very visible anymore, thanks to how... rough and thin his skin had become. But they were still there. Still visible.

Lial likely worried if Fival covered his body in those intricate little designs, he'd be seen as something unusual. Too unusual for a woman to overlook.

Funny since if one traveled just a few months to the east, you'd encounter a land where it'd be weird to not have such tattoos as the one Fival wanted.

"Does Mordo know?" I asked.

“He told me to ask you,” he said with a nod.

So Mordo had simply not wanted to get into an argument with his daughter’s husband.

“Mother?” I asked.

“She does, but I don’t know if she approves or not,” Fival said with a shrug.

I doubted she'd say no, but I'll need to ask all the same.

“I’ll teach you Fival. You have a few pigs don’t you?” I asked.

“Pigs...? Yes. Five of them,” he nodded and frowned at me.

“We’ll practice on them. Before I leave I promise you’ll know enough to tattoo as you wish, but I’ll not tattoo you... I...” I stopped talking as I realized something.

Looking over, I found Renn and Riz staring at us. From across the row of basins.

“Rather, maybe Renn should. She’s very artistic, much more than I am,” I said.

“Huh?” Renn perked up, her ears twitching as if a fly had buzzed into one.

“She did write on that basin very cleanly,” Riz nodded.

Fival shifted, and I could tell by his quiet stare at Renn that he wasn’t sure about this.

Reaching over, I patted the young man on the shoulder. “We’ll start tomorrow,” I said.

He blinked at me... and then after a moment nodded. Unsure of himself, but not to the point that he’d complain.

“Do you want any Riz?” I asked.

“Would Brom complain if I did?” she asked back.

I flinched, and Renn’s happy expression immediately died.

Before I could say anything, to... change or divert the conversation, Riz turned and saw Renn’s face.

“What the heck?” Riz stepped back at the sight of it, and looked around... expecting something to be wrong.

Renn turned to me, and was about to say something but couldn't find the words.

Celine was going to be furious with me.

Funny. She hadn't been named after the Celine from all those years ago, but she was definitely going to end up hating me for a similar reason.

Fate was cruel sometimes.

“Renn...?” Even the quiet Fival said something, also bothered by her look.

Renn's face furrowed, and then she looked down. To her feet... and closed her eyes as she groaned.

She had realized it that quickly. Likely thanks to the fact I had asked her earlier to not say anything. She had put one and two together, instantly.

She really was too smart for her own good.

“Fival... why don’t you go show Renn the blocks?” I turned a little to beg the boy for a tiny favor.

Fival frowned at me, but didn’t say anything.

“Why...? Why Vim? Vim? What happened? What’s happening?” Riz was now fully aware that something was wrong. Something horrible... and it wasn’t just because Renn was crying.

“Please. Let me and Riz have a moment alone,” I asked the boy again, and Renn indirectly.

“Vim...!” Riz shouted at me, stepping up towards the basin that separated us. She grabbed onto the lip of the basin, as if she was about to clamber over it.

Glancing at Renn, I noted the way she glanced at Riz. The pained expression on her face made it clear... that wasn’t just sorrow and disappointment.

That was regret. That was blame.

She was internally hating herself.

“Renn, please,” I asked her directly this time.

Renn looked to me, and I held firm as her watery eyes bore into me. They looked as if she was pleading with me. Begging with her entire soul.

“Renn...?” Riz turned, and I noted the emotion in her voice. She was about to start crying too.

Had she realized it? Maybe even if instinctively...?

I sighed and stepped away from Fival. Since neither he nor Renn seemed to be willing to oblige me at the moment... I decided to just accept that they'd be here to witness the poor girl's heart break.

Thanks to the size of the basins nearby, I had to walk a bit until I found one I could walk in-between. I wasn't going to jump over them or anything... not because I couldn't, but because the extra few moments of rounding the basins gave me time to prepare myself.

This was my fault. In more ways than one.

But it had been inevitable. Even if it hadn't happened this way... Riz still would have asked. It was actually very shocking it had taken this long. Renn and I had been here for three days already. For Riz to not have asked me about Brom at all by now was weird.

Riz stood up straighter as I approached her. Renn stood behind her, and was holding her stomach... as if suddenly sick. Likely was.

The young camel glared at me with watery eyes. Her right cheek was twitching a little oddly, as if she was trying to decide between snarling and smiling.

Nodding down to her, I decided to just say it.

“A tragedy happened in Lumen, Riz,” I said to her.

Riz’s jaw clenched and a single tear slid out from her right eye.

“Vim...” Renn groaned, but I ignored her.

“During the chaos, the man you treasured... Brom... He perished,” I said.

Riz’s pupils went wide. Unlike a humans that were circular, hers were more oblong. A trait from her mixed blood. Their widening was more at the top and bottom than the sides. Nearly the opposite in shape and form than Renn’s.

I nodded again. “I am sorry. Brom is dead.”

Fival stepped up to the basin, grabbing the lip as to pull himself up a little. To see better. The look on his face told me he was as shocked as Riz.

“But...” Riz found her voice, but it was distant. Quiet. A whisper. She stepped back, and I reached out to slide an arm under hers as she went limp.

Holding her up, Riz clung to my arm, as she blinked and shook her head. She was acting as if she had just been stunned. Though, I suppose she was.

“I’m sorry, Riz,” I said again, a little softer than before.

“But Vim...!” Riz shouted at me as she looked up, her eyes blinking wildly at me. They were starting to really leak now.

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

Riz’s face scrunched up, and then she turned. Just enough to look behind her. At the woman who somehow looked even more distraught than she did.

“Really...?” Riz asked Renn. The pleading tone in her voice hurt to hear.

Renn sobbed as she nodded.

“Riz...?” Fival asked softly, sounding worried... and before Riz could turn to look at him, she began to sob.

Kneeling down, I slowly lowered the young girl to her knees. She still clung to my arms, but she had lost all strength in her legs. It didn't take long for her to start curling up into a tiny ball on the floor, sobbing loudly.

“Sis...” Fival squeezed through one of the basins. In a spot I hadn't been able to fit through earlier. He knelt down next to his sister, putting his hand on her back... but she didn't seem to register it. She just kept sobbing, heaving and weeping.

Patting her back as well, I sighed and resigned myself to my fate. I'll likely be sitting on this floor for hours now.

Glancing upward, at the woman who was blaming herself for all of this... I studied the expression on her face.

She was staring at Riz as if she was witnessing something world-ending in seriousness. She had a look of terror mixed in with sorrow and regret. She was clinging to herself, her arms coiling around her stomach and chest as if she was about to haunch over and throw-up. She looked...

Well...

She looked the same way she did when I had found her back in Lumen. Sitting before that pile of rubble. Before Brom's corpse.

I knew I should have just told Riz right away.

News like this when not shared right away... only caused more harm than good.

Sighing softly as Fival bent down to hug his sister, who was still curled up and clinging to my arm, I wondered if their mother would hear us before she stopped.

We were a few buildings away from the main house... but...

A mother's hearing never failed them when it came to the cries of their babies.

Fival clung to his sister, resting his head on her back as he held her. He stared up at me with worried and unsure eyes. The boy had to obviously know of Riz's fascination with Brom... but that didn't mean he understood it. Or maybe he did.

His eyes weren't like his sisters. His were more like Mordo's. Elongated, like Renn's, just sideways instead.

It wasn't too rare for the children to inherit different traits in such a way. But it was rare for the son to inherit the mother's bloodline more than the father's. At least for our kind. Humans were sometimes the opposite.

What eyes had the other boy inherited? The one now gone.

Why couldn't I remember his brother's eyes? Had they been like his, or like Riz's?

Riz sobbed even louder as she shifted. A pair of tiny hands wrapped themselves into my own, and I realized she had shifted a little more than I thought.

Holding her hands with my own, I reached over to pat her on the back again. Fival shifted a little as to give me room to do so, since her back wasn't really that big in the first place, and suddenly another hand joined my own.

"I'm sorry..."

Looking at Renn, who had whispered with the tiniest voice ever, as she too patted the poor girl's back... I hoped she didn't tell Riz the truth.

Riz did not need to know how or why Brom died. All it would do was torture her.

The three of us sat here, surrounded by the basins, engulfed in the scent of dyes... for what felt like hours.

Riz's sobs slowly died. Renn's tiny whispers, begging for forgiveness, became few and far in-between. Fival remained quiet the whole time, unbothered.

And I only kept hold of the young girl and her trembling hands.

Even when Celine, their mother, finally noticed and found us... the silence didn't get broken.

She simply hurried over, and bent down next to her daughter. She said not a word. No one did. Yet Riz instinctually noticed her mother's presence. With her appearance, the young girl switched positions. From curled up on the floor, to curled up onto her mother's lap... and eventually into sleep.

Riz fell asleep quickly once in her mother's embrace. Celine said not a word as she stood, lifting her daughter up off the ground. Without even glancing at me, or Renn, she stepped away... and left the basin building.

Fival sighed and stood after his mother left. He brushed his jeans off, and glanced at me.

"Brom was the scarred one?" he asked.

I nodded as I slowly stood, leaving Renn the only one left on the ground. "Yes. The meerkat."

"I barely remember him," Fival said honestly.

“You were young. You rode on his shoulders while we had been in town,” I said as I remembered it.

“Hm...” Fival shifted and glanced down at Renn. “You okay...?” he asked her.

“No,” Renn mumbled, and kept her head low. As if afraid to look up.

Fival glanced at me, and I could tell he was genuinely worried.

“She’ll be fine. As will your sister, Fival. Her heart will hurt and be... fragile for awhile, but she will be okay,” I said.

Fival nodded but I could tell by the way he did so that he didn’t entirely believe me. At least he was willing to try, or pretend to.

“Dinner’s going to be awkward,” Fival mumbled as he stepped away, leaving the building as well.

I sighed and agreed with him. Luckily I didn’t need to eat.

Glancing down at the ground, at Renn who still sat where she had knelt down next to the heartbroken Riz... I noticed the way her long hair not only hung all the way down to the ground, but even along it for a bit. It was time she cut some of it.

"You warned me," she whispered.

"I did." Many times in fact.

"Why didn't you say anything...?" she asked and looked up at me.

I smiled down at her angry glare. That was far better than one of heartbroken sorrow.

"Because I knew you'd cry. As you're doing now," I said.

"But...!" she leaned forward, putting her hands down onto the ground as if to start crawling towards me. She didn't though.

Shaking my head at her, I gestured to her. "You blame yourself. Unrightfully. I knew if I brought it up, you'd react like this. And might even go to her and tell her, before I did, and possibly even say it was your fault," I explained.

"But Vim...!"

“No buts. You can blame yourself. We’ve talked about this before. You have the right to. But it’s wrong. You’re not the Societies protector, Renn. I am. It’s not your duty to save or protect our people. It’s mine. Not yours.”

Renn’s face scrunched up and she finally looked away from me, but just to shake her head a few times. Her glare quickly returned, and this time she stood up alongside it.

“We should have done that better. That poor girl...!” she said.

“Yes. But it happened. There’s nothing we can do about it now,” I agreed, but made it clear there was no point dwelling on it.

“That shouldn’t have happened like that,” she argued.

I sighed and nodded. I agreed, but as I had said...

Renn groaned as she wiped her face. “She loved him?” she asked.

“Yes. I... hadn’t known either. Her mother told me, after I updated them with what had happened.”

“Did Brom even know...? He never even mentioned her,” she said as she sniffed.

“If he did, he didn’t put much stock into it. In fact I remember him being... a little odd around her. Bothered. But he was older than her Renn, by quite a few decades too,” I reminded her.

“Ah... right...” she nodded, and I wondered if she remembered the conversations we had with Herra not too long ago, concerning the same thing.

Yet even if Brom hadn't known, or hadn't returned her feelings... it didn't change the fact that Riz's heart was now broken.

Renn sniffed as she wiped her face again. As she did I noted the way her lips clung to her teeth. Was she not drinking enough water...? Or had the long hours of crying and whispering apologies dried out her mouth? They didn’t look cracked or anything... I'll make sure she drinks water more often from now on.

“What can I do for her, Vim? What can I say?” she asked me.

I blinked and stopped focusing on her lips. “Just... be her friend, Renn. Be there for her. Be gentle, but not so gentle it becomes awkward. And don’t tell her the details, even if she asks. In my experience, people never really want to know the true details. The knowledge hurts them more than not,” I warned.

She nodded. “Okay...”

“And I don’t know what else to do or say, Renn... I’ve had to relay such information countless times before... and it never gets easy. I honestly don’t think I’ve ever done it at the right time, or in the right way,” I admitted. Was there even a right way to do it?

“Mhm... you did fine, Vim. You spoke gently, and were there for her. You would have even held her, wouldn’t you have?” she asked.

Well... yes. That was the plan. She had curled up into a ball instead though...

Instead of saying anything I simply shrugged and nodded.

“I’m the one who failed. She only realized because of me. Because I was shocked. Then all I could do was cry alongside her...” Renn groaned and went to wiping her face again. Surely she wasn’t going to start crying again?

Renn sniffed and I realized she was indeed shedding a few more tears.

A predator. Crying not because of pain but because of emotions. Because she felt for Riz. Because she blamed herself, and regretted the past and all its sorrows.

Although I’ve long known Renn was emotional, it was still... weird to see it so blatantly obvious.

When was the last time I had seen a pure-blooded predator weep so... openly? So purely? Especially so for the suffering of those other than themselves?

My mind raced for a moment, and I had to stop pondering it as I realized I honestly couldn't remember any.

A few wept. A few broke. Many did so in anger, not sorrow... yet... No. I couldn't think of any like her. Not to the same degree.

Surely there had been others? More than just Renn?

There were a few who came to mind, but they weren't true predators like her. There were those like Merit, or Brandy, but...

Renn sighed as she finished again, and sniffed. After a few blinks of the watery eyes she actually smiled at me, as if happy to have cried.

Happy. Over tears.

She was better suited to this than I was.

When was the last time I had actually wept alongside one of our members...? When was the last time I had so openly shared in such emotion?

I had, and did still, feel bad... but I was a far way from crying because of what just happened. I tried so hard to be understanding and gentle, yet the truth was visibly obvious. I was callous.

“Next time you hold them as they cry,” I said as I stepped around her, as to leave the building. If she was going to prove herself to be so efficient at it then... why not let her handle it? If anything maybe the Society would be better for it. Maybe Riz would have preferred to be held by her than me, for example.

Though maybe not. Would Renn’s heart survive such a thing? Maybe a few times... but...

I tried to think of the hundreds of people I’ve had to tell bad news. Or the hundreds who had given me similar news themselves.

Could Renn endure? She seemed to be doing somewhat fine... even if she sobbed and broke, she wasn’t doing anywhere near as bad as I had expected.

She was already back on her feet, after all. Maybe it was her predator side. Letting her be gentle enough to cry but firm enough as to not break entirely.

Maybe she could do it without becoming cold-hearted. Maybe she could do this while retaining her humanity, and not become someone like me.

“I accept, though... I really don’t want to even think about this happening again,” she mumbled behind me.

"It will," I said.

Regrettably. It will.

Chapter 217 Colorful Hearts Dyed by Words

Peering into the room, I found the same thing I'd seen the last four days.

Riz in bed, curled up and sleeping.

Studying her for a moment, and her room, I wondered if I had done the same thing when Nory died. I remembered just... sitting on the porch of our little cabin, absentmindedly. It was part of the reason I had waited so long to leave, even though I had wanted to leave right after burying her. Maybe I had done so for days too, even though I didn't remember how long it had been.

Quietly stepping away, I went down the hallway back towards the front of the building. This house was large, but only a single level. This hallway only had bedrooms in it, and I was a little bothered by the... empty rooms within it.

Four at least. The rest were closed doors, and I didn't want to be rude and just start opening them to check. I knew where Celine and Lial's room was, but I wasn't sure where Mordo's was. If he even had one.

He hadn't left the little sitting room since I had arrived, as far as I was aware. Which was weird. We'd been here for over a week now. Surely he had to at least... use the restroom, or want to get some fresh air?

Rounding a corner, I passed the kitchen. Celine was in there, quietly humming as she cleaned the dishes.

I had offered to help, but she didn't seem to enjoy it when I did. It seemed she didn't even let her children help her, as if she was very proud of her duties and didn't want anyone to take them from her. Sometimes I heard her telling her husband to stop and leave her be, when he too tried to help her. At first I had thought they were simply being an odd married couple but now I knew she was being... a little serious about it.

Walking past the kitchen, I waved lightly at Mordo as I passed him and his little room. His weathered and sunken face made it hard to tell if his eyes were even open, but I thought I saw him nod lightly.

Reaching the house's front door, I opened it slowly. The sun had set, but it wasn't too late. A few torches were lit; some were positioned on the buildings while others were genuine torches, standing alone out in the darkness. One of those torches had a figure standing next to it.

Closing the front door behind me, I walked slowly over to Vim. He was staring out into the dark world beyond the torchlight. Oddly he was looking down, not up at the sky that was quickly being littered with vibrant stars.

This wasn't the first time I had found Vim out here, just... staring out into the dark, but it was still just as concerning as the first time I had seen it. What did he see? I could barely make out the cliffs and rocks not far off in the distance, but nothing more than that. The torchlight made it harder to see in the dark from here.

Stepping up next to him, I tried to once again search for whatever had Vim's attention. Squinting a little, I realized the stars and moon were a little brighter than the last few nights. I could see a tad bit better tonight than I had been able to. I could now see the rocks and cliff walls surrounding the buildings and us a little better. A little clearer.

Yet even with the better vision, I still couldn't see anything worth focusing on.

"Did you have dinner?" Vim asked after a moment.

I nodded. "Celine is upset... but you need not avoid her so blatantly Vim," I said. He hadn't joined us for dinner again. For the sixth night in a row.

Vim sighed. "I'm not avoiding her. I spoke with her a few hours ago," he said.

Smiling at him, I remembered their so called conversation. She had simply asked him to go get her husband and son from the ocean, since she had started dinner. Hardly a real conversation.

"She knows it's not your fault. She spoke about it during dinner. She asked me to tell you that it's okay, that she's not upset. She knows it would have happened this way, no matter who told her," I told him.

Vim sighed again, and shifted a little. As he did some loose rocks and pebbles he stood on crunched... and actually cracked and broke. I glanced down at his feet, and wondered if he had just crushed rocks into powder. It had sounded like it.

How did he do that? It was as if he suddenly got heavier without warning sometimes.

“Riz isn’t sobbing anymore at least. I’ve been listening, she’s just... been sleeping. She hasn’t sobbed or cried in at least three days,” I said, in hopes of making him feel a little better.

The way Vim’s eyebrows narrowed told me I hadn’t done a good job at all.

He crossed his arms, and I studied the way his loose shirt became tighter upon him. “Like humans, our people all are different. Some can move on quickly... and others never do. Like Kaley, they... break. In ways I don’t understand,” Vim said gently.

“Love is a powerful thing, Vim,” I said.

“You were able to move on after Nory, that doesn’t mean your love wasn’t as strong or pure. It’s not the love that causes such a fracture, it’s something else. Something deeper,” Vim said.

Oh...? I turned my head a little more towards him, so my ears could face him directly and not at an angle. I had enjoyed that odd tone he had just spoken with, and wanted to hear more of it... if it’d come.

“I didn’t mean it that way Vim... I just meant, it’s understandable. You can’t fault them for becoming so forlorn during such tragedies,” I said.

“Maybe I’m just... old. She barely knew him. Only had met him a few times, and hadn’t gotten too close to him during those moments either,” Vim wondered.

“You are old, but I think it’s because you don’t allow yourself to feel such things more than that. You don’t, can’t, allow yourself to weep and break over such things else it endangers the rest of us who still live,” I said.

“Did I cry for Lughes and the rest, or the paintings?” he then asked.

The question caught me off guard, and I had to calm my now quick heartbeat. It took a few seconds, but I got it under control. “Can it not be both...?” I whispered a barely acceptable answer.

Vim smirked and shifted again. This time though his feet made no sounds, even though I knew there was now lots of tiny grains of sand and rocks beneath him. He should be noisy.

“A very sly answer,” he said to me.

“It was, wasn’t it?” I smiled a little as I nodded.

“Well... all will be well. She’ll recover. And hopefully in time will find someone else to love. She obviously has a great heart, it’d be a shame for it to be wasted,” Vim said, deciding to... in a way, end the conversation.

I nodded, and shifted. "I overheard that Celine traveled with you. To find a husband," I said.

"Yes. It happens sometimes. In fact most of the time the reason I have company is for such a thing. Oplar was, or is, the same. She decided..." Vim went quiet as he thought about it. "Oh thirty or forty years ago, she wanted to find a husband. So she's been traveling around, sometimes with me while other times alone," he said.

Huh...! "Forty years and she still hasn't found one?" I asked. Surely by then you could go to all the locations in the Society?

Vim frowned. "She's picky. Has a certain... desire? Requirement? Either she'll wait until she finds the one who fulfills it, or will simply pick someone who is as close as she can get, I guess," Vim said.

I wanted to ask what that supposed requirement was, but the way Vim had phrased it told me I probably shouldn't pry. He didn't like telling me about secrets as it was, let alone someone's private life.

"Is it usually that difficult?" I asked, choosing to focus on that instead.

"Sometimes. Most... well..." Vim shifted again, and this time once again he made no sound as he did. I even glanced down as he moved, and I noticed a few rocks that were moved because of his feet. How come I didn't, or hadn't, heard that?

Was his weird silence something he did consciously or was it just... innate? Like an ability or something? Did he even know he did it?

“You think you’re two hundred, don’t you? Where’s your mate?” he then asked me.

Oh...? I smirked at him, and was about to say something that would probably make him flinch... but decided against it. Especially since he was looking at me with a rather serious expression on his face.

“Not everyone needs to be with someone to happy,” I defended not just myself, but many others.

“Hm, good answer. Honestly... such a thing has become a serious problem in the last few hundred years. Too many of the larger villages have been destroyed, or scattered, and now children are becoming... rare. Too rare. And most of the children being born, are those like them,” Vim gestured behind us.

I turned, but only saw the house. It had no windows, likely to combat the heat here, so I saw no sign of anyone or anything. One of the torches near the front door had gone out, but it was still embering lightly.

“Riz and Fival?” I asked. “What’s wrong with them?”

“They’re not pure-blooded. Lial is a type of horse. Celine is, and will be, the last pure blooded camel... that we know of,” Vim said gently.

Oh...

It was my turn to shift, and I wondered what to say about that. I knew Vim wasn't actually upset over the idea of someone mating with someone different from themselves, but rather the underlying truth to it.

Celine had chosen Lial because there had not been any camels to choose from. And now her children would... be less inhuman, and continue becoming more human as the generations went on.

"How many generations does it take?" I asked. I've thought of such a thing many times before, especially lately ever since joining the Society and seeing so many of our kind who were... more human than not.

"Regrettably very few. Riz and Fival will live a long time, hundreds of years, barring a disaster... but odds are their children will not live half that. Even if they didn't have children with humans," Vim explained.

Just... one or two generations? "That quickly?" I asked.

He nodded. "It's why people are so awed by you, Renn. You're very... human in appearance, but it's obvious you're pure-blooded. Young, yet old. Yet you should be much older. Those like you, like Lilly, are far older. Lilly..." Vim went quiet a moment, and then nodded. "Lilly is as old as the Society. That's usually what one expects when they think of a pure-blooded non-human," he finished.

Lilly was? "She's that old?"

"She is."

“Well... there were those in Lumen right? Fly’s people? Surely there are others out there too? Maybe the next group won’t be so...” I gestured lightly with my hands, afraid to say it aloud.

“Hm... odd isn’t it? We go decades, hundreds of years, without meeting new blood...” Vim mumbled lightly.

“Were they all... not worth saving, Vim?” I asked gently. I knew from experience, from all the ones who had attacked and hunted me that many had not been the kinds of people we wanted in our Society... but there had been those like Wool. Simple, but deep down not evil.

“Reatti and I had gone down there after to search for any survivors. The few we found attacked us on sight, and hadn’t listened to reason. I believe a few survived... like Wool, but chose to stay in hiding. Or maybe even ran away, fleeing away,” Vim said.

I huffed, and a slight wind blew past. My ears fluttered as the torch near us made noises, growing hotter thanks to the burst of air.

Glancing over at the torch, I noted the metal tip that held all the burning stones within it. “Is that coal?” I asked. They looked oddly orange as they burnt, and smelled a little weird.

“No. But it’s similar. It’s a chunk of resin soaked in a sea creature’s fat. It burns a very long time. They’ll last for weeks if not months sometimes,” Vim said.

“Fat...?” I thought of all the times I had cleaned an animal. Like a deer. Did he mean... that weird substance? That stuff burnt?

“Before we leave I’ll find a torch that needs to be reset, and I’ll show you,” Vim said.

Turning back to him, I smiled. “Thanks.”

“I agreed, regrettably,” Vim mumbled.

“Does it honestly bother you that much? Most the stuff you’ll be teaching me, Vim, doesn’t seem that bad,” I said, teasing him a little.

“Only because you’re too pure for your own good.”

“Pure...?” Was I?

“Hm... one moment, here it is,” Vim then uncrossed his arms, and bent down.

Going still, I hurriedly scanned the world beyond our little torch... and eventually found what he was talking about.

A tiny creature, a small mouse looking thing on two feet... jumped out from between some large rocks. It bounded towards us, at a rather quick pace, and because of how fast it approached... I had to consciously keep myself from stepping away and startling the thing. My ears and tail went still and stiff as it bounced up towards us, and came to a stop a few steps from the thicker shadows casted by our torch.

Vim reached into a pocket and then held his hand out, lowering it to the ground. There were a bunch of little seed looking things in his palm, and the creature had obviously been waiting for them.

It jumped forward, bounding like a rabbit, over to Vim's hand. With it entering the lit up area, and drawing closer, I found it was kind of like a rabbit... just standing on two large feet and with a weirdly shaped body. It was like a mix between a rabbit and a mouse. Its ears were cute, though its whiskers looked oddly scraggly compared to the rest of it.

The tiny thing made a noise as it made tiny little bounces over to Vim's hand, drawing close enough to nearly rest against it... and then it began to eat. It stuffed its mouth quickly with little arms, feeding without worry.

Smiling gently at the tiny creature, and the mighty man who was feeding it... I wondered if this was something he fed every time he came here... or if he had simply seen it from a distance one of the recent nights, and was now feeding it.

It didn't take long for the small thing to stuff its cheeks with all the seeds. Once done, it patted around on Vim's hand for a moment... likely looking for more. Once it didn't, it squeaked and then bounced away. Hurrying back into the darkness and over to the rocks it had come from.

"Was it some kind of mouse?" I asked.

“A hopping rodent. They’re kind of like kangaroos, which are...” Vim went quiet as he tilted his head and frowned at himself.

“Another animal I’ll need to learn about,” I said with a smirk at him.

He sighed and nodded. He was still crouched next to me, and it didn’t seem like he had any intention of standing up just yet.

“Usually animals, especially smaller ones, completely ignore my presence. So when I encounter those that don’t, I try to be gentle with them,” he said.

Oh...? Right...

“That is odd. Was it able to smell you?” I asked.

“Who knows? It came over and patted my foot the other night, which isn’t... too strange for an animal to do. They can’t sense me, so they sometimes come up to me as to try and understand what I am. Usually though they get scared and run away once they realize I’m a living thing, and not just a weird rock or something,” Vim said.

Smiling at him, I stepped closer to him and then reached over and placed my hand on his head. “Some rock,” I said as I felt his hair.

“Hm...” Vim didn’t seem to mind or even register I was messing with his hair. He kept staring out in front of us, which told me he could see more... or maybe that very little creature still. I couldn’t. The world became too dark, or blurry, past the nearby rocks. Even with the bright sky above.

Moments passed as I focused on his head, and hair, I wondered what would happen if I shaved all of his hair off. Would it grow back? It never seemed to grow at all, always being the same length... so...

“Will you be able to endure, Renn?” Vim then broke the weirdly comfortable silence, and I tugged lightly on a small flock of hair because of it.

“Endure what Vim?”

“This life we live,” he said simply.

Ah...

Half tempted to wrap his head in a hug; I decided to not torture him that way just yet. Instead I only lowered my hand to his shoulder, patting it lightly. “I’d rather live this life, than the one I had been. Better to sob and weep, than to never experience this,” I said to him.

Vim sighed but nodded. “Are you upset yet over Fival?” he asked.

“Huh? Why would I be?” he was a quiet boy, but nothing he’s done or said had bothered me. He was actually very nice, and seemed willing to teach me when he could.

Vim turned his head just enough to smirk at me. “Hasn’t tried to bed you yet, right?”

Oh.

Smiling at Vim, I kept myself from laughing as I poked him in the cheek. “He’s just a boy.”

“Hm. He is I guess,” Vim admitted.

As I poked his cheek, I noted the feeling of his jaw beneath it. Pushing a little harder onto his cheek, I reached up to touch my own. In the same spot.

“What are you doing Renn?” Vim asked gently. When he spoke, I could feel the muscles and stuff beneath his skin coil and move. It felt weird.

“Just... comparing us, I guess,” I said.

He gave me an odd look, and I couldn’t help but smirk at him. “You have more muscles than I do. I can feel my jaw bone easier, yours... feels like it has extra layers of skin on it or something,” I said, telling him of my findings.

Vim smirked at me, and because of it I was able to feel those very muscles again. Yes. He definitely had more muscles than I did.

“Some of those are because I’m a man, and you’re not,” he said simply.

“Hm... and those that aren’t?” I asked.

“Well...” he frowned, and I changed my attention to his ear.

Vim let me poke and fondle him for a moment, and I realized our ears really were different. Our human shaped ones. My own were smaller, and rounded, and... soft and malleable. His were rather firm, to the point that I felt I’d be able to break something in them if I pushed and pulled too hard.

“Do you have bones in your ears?” I asked.

“It’s cartilage, like yours. Just... stronger,” he said.

Stronger... was that all it was?

For a long moment I stood there, with eyes closed, as I touched my own ear and his at the same time. To compare the two.

“You’re... an odd one, Renn,” Vim said.

“No one’s ever really let me touch them like this, so...” I defended myself as I stopped messing with his ear and wondered what else I could touch. His neck maybe? It was much thicker than my own, and...

Before I could though Vim stood. I wanted to complain, but decided to just do it next time. There’d be plenty more opportunity, after all.

He turned to me, and gave me an odd look.

“What?” I asked, waiting for him to say something.

He smiled and shook his head. “Didn’t you raise children?” he asked.

“Lujic and Ginny? Yes... but...”

“And Nory? You’re telling me you didn’t touch her in all those years with her?” he asked.

Frowning at him, I hesitated. I knew why he was asking such a thing. He wanted to know why I was so fascinated with our differences, and wanted to touch him as I had when I surely should have had similar opportunities like it before in the past.

He was right. I had. Not just the children, and Nory... but even recently. Reatti, Merit, and the many that I had gotten to spend time with. Like Lomi or Herra's family. Several of them, mostly the children like Lomi, I had gotten to touch often. I had been able to feel their ears, their hands, and such. So I knew relatively the answers but...

"Yes... but..." I started to speak, but couldn't continue.

"But?"

Unable to figure out how to answer without lying, and... really not finding anything wrong with it, I went ahead and answered him honestly.

"I want to know more about you Vim, not anyone else," I said.

He blinked at me, and frowned. He looked away, over to the house. I knew from listening that no one had emerged. We were alone still... so...

Was he upset with me...? He didn't really look it... but...

“She’s not named after Celine,” Vim then said.

I gulped and realized he had forcefully changed the conversation.

“I figured...” I said gently.

Next time I’ll be more careful. I’ll not be so blatant or...

Vim then sighed and scratched the side of his head. Near the ear I had been messing with.

Tilting my head at him, he shrugged and gave me an odd smile. “Sorry. That was awkward. I wasn’t sure what to say, so kind of just... tried to change the topic.”

Smiling back at him, I nodded. “You do that a lot you know?”

“I do?” he asked.

I nodded, firmly. “All the time! You should know by now that if you just... don’t want to talk about something you can just tell me, you know? I promise not to cry too much over it,” I said.

Vim shifted, and his smile turned into a wry smirk. "You're more than I can handle," he said.

"Of that I doubt, Vim... I've seen you flirt, you can do it just fine," I said.

"Have you?" he asked with a frown, and I could tell he was quickly searching his recent memories.

"Do you not even notice when you do it?" I asked him.

He must have remembered a few instances, for he smiled worriedly. "Well I mean..."

"This goes back to what I was saying Vim. You get women to flirt with you all the time. You even have had men try their luck! The least you can do is flirt with me, since no one else will," I said, reminding him of that weird old merchant in those mountains.

Vim flinched, and I knew he remembered it too. "That had been weird."

"It is weird! You're not even that handsome..." I complained as I glanced him up and down.

Really. What did women see in him?

Vim chuckled at me. "I'm starting wonder if you're imperceptive or ignoring it on purpose," he said.

"Imper-what?" I asked. Another weird word.

"It means obtuse, basically. Renn... you've had many men try to flirt with you recently. Even just in Lumen, don't tell me you forgot because you don't forget anything," he said.

Oh...

"That's not the same," I said.

"How so?" he asked.

"Well..." I struggled for a moment, and realized he was right. It was the exact same.

The only reason I hadn't seen it that way, was... well...

Because those men hadn't been him.

Thankfully it was night, but I knew even in the dark Vim could see my blush as my face got hot. I'd not even be able to blame the nearby torch fire, since I was facing away from it.

Vim smirked softly, and my face got even hotter as I realized he really could see it.

Great.

"I admit. Yes. I guess... I have had a few try," I admitted.

"Hm. Good. I was worried your flawless mind had finally started to crack," he teased me.

"Oh shush..." I mumbled and wondered what to do or say now.

Vim's smirk grew, and I hated how much I enjoyed seeing it on his face.

"You should have pretended to not notice my hypocrisy," I said stiffly.

He nodded. "Sure, sure. Promise not to belittle yourself anymore then?" he asked.

Belittle...? "My point still stands Vim, though," I argued. He tilted his head at me, so I went ahead and sighed and continued. "None of our members. No non-humans. The only people who have... even hinted or tried have been humans. And they'll flirt with anything," I said.

Honestly it was a horrible argument, but it was what I was going to cling to at the moment. My ears were burning in embarrassment, and I wanted something to blame it on.

Vim frowned as he glanced away. To the darkness. This time I knew it was not so he could ponder, or distract himself, but instead out of instinct. He was just... doing his job. Making sure we were safe.

"And don't try and say that Herra's family asking me to join them as a wife is the same thing. That's just them taking an opportunity. They'd have asked any woman," I said quickly, before he could.

Vim glanced back at me and a tiny smirk told me he had indeed been about to bring that up.

Fumbling with my hands, I realized my hands and fingers didn't know what to do. Hold each other? Cross my arms? Stay limp at my sides? They couldn't decide.

And I knew my ears and tail were also fluttering and puffed up. I bet I looked awful right now.

I was such a mess.

“And yes...! I know that you mentioned some of our members said I was pretty or whatever... but... That’s also just them being nice, isn’t it?” I added.

I knew I was now rambling, and probably looked... distraught, but honestly I was just excited. I was glad he was willing to talk about this a little more, even if it was super embarrassing for me. “Then every time I think you’re about to try something, you just... stop. And change the conversation, or run away, which makes me feel like you think I’m ugly or something and,” I continued to rattle on, and realized I had just revealed a hidden worry of mine.

About to groan, and turn away as if to hide the shame, I panicked as my mind went numb. What do I say now? I needed to keep talking, as to try and help get him to ignore and forget what I had just said and...

“Rennalee, I suggest you stop saying such things and acting in such a way or I’m going to prove you very wrong,” Vim then said.

My fidgeting stopped, and I looked up at his gaze. It was a firm one. A real one. There man before me had no smirk, and...

He nodded. “You’d think someone so good at painting would realize all the colors she was dyeing me in,” she said.

Smiling at him, I laughed at his weird attempt at a joke.

Vim let me laugh, and I felt the cold desert night’s wind cool me off as I wiped an eye. “That was good,” I said.

“Wasn’t it? Fit this place perfectly,” he agreed.

Yes... it did...

Feeling a little calmer after the laugh, I realized my shoulders were kind of stiff. I relaxed a bit, and felt a lot better.

“Sorry...” I apologized for going off on him. I hadn’t been rude, but I knew it had been... odd and likely unusual. Vim rarely had any members actually shout or say such things to him. Weep in his arms? Sure. Ask for help? Of course... but...

Did any ever do what I did? Babble on about weird things like affection and flirting, and complaining to him about his lack of attention?

“For being adorable? Sure. Apology accepted.”

My face got hot again as I groaned at him. “Who’s dyeing who?” I complained.

Chapter 218 Workers, Heat, Heart, Broken.

Overlooking the small cart, I studied the three people upon it.

A man. A woman. A younger woman, likely either a daughter or younger sister. She had the same curly hair as the older one.

I'd been watching them since they entered the canyon. They were traveling a little slowly, but it was because the mule pulling their cart was old. Tired. Weathered. It wasn't struggling it was just taking it slow.

Their cart was loaded with a little more luggage than seemed normal to me.

Here at the dye houses, the employees had living quarters. They came for six month periods, and worked while living here. So it wasn't uncommon that the human employees brought supplies... but...

"Almost looks like everything they own," I whispered.

The assumption was easy to validate. They looked... tired. Exhausted. Yet hopeful. Glad to be done with their journey.

I'd wonder if maybe they had been assaulted on the way here or something, if not for the fact their cart was half full of stuff.

Hopefully they weren't hoping to find refuge here, away from the plague and the chaos it wrought.

Though...

I stood, and brushed off my knees. The edge of these cliffs were oddly dusty. They left a light red stain on anything that rubbed against them.

Renn was going to get upset with me. For some reason she kept on brushing and cleaning my clothes whenever she noticed such dirt or stains.

When... when had that started? I could remember a conversation with her concerning my attire, and how she didn't really like how I let my clothes get so raggedy and dirty but...

Stepping away from the ledge, I decided to take her to the weaver on our way back west. She'd not only enjoy it, it was likely time I did get a new set of proper clothes.

Even if they rarely lasted long. Especially lately with all the stuff happening. That Monarch with Oplar, and then those beasts in Lumen...

It was too bad I couldn't just wear my standard issue armor anymore. That had not only been durable, but there had always been plenty in the armory if I needed more. Even if those armorers had always whined and complained every time I needed a new piece, or entire set. You'd think they'd have worshiped me for the job security I gave them, not complained.

But if I walked around in such a uniform nowadays... all it'd do is draw attention.

Turning a little, I glanced out to the nearby horizon. I was up on one of the largest sections of the cliffs, and as such was able to overlook most of the surrounding area. To the north and east, there were endless flat-lands and crevices. The opposite was the expanse of the great blue ocean.

Though... that ocean wasn't very pretty right now. Oddly, uncharacteristically for this time of the year, there was a massive storm brewing and heading towards us. Judging by the way the dark clouds looked, and the far off waves, the storm would make landfall in a day or two.

There was nothing wrong with a storm. Especially in a desert. But... here it could be problematic. Not for the dyes, or the camels, but rather the humans. If I remembered correctly, they had lost several workers before during such summer storms. These caverns and crevices flooded during them. And when the workers came and went, they weren't able to keep themselves out of harm's way.

And right now just happened to be when they were all arriving. Or should be, at least.

I'll need to keep an eye on the surrounding areas during the storm. It was difficult for the camels to find trustworthy workers, so we couldn't afford to lose them. Especially right now when there was a disease and that war going on. It'd be painfully difficult to replace any of the human worker families during a moment like this. If possible at all.

It was too bad Celine had been the only child of Mordo's to survive. They could have used a few more hands here, like the Armadillo's place.

Walking along the edge of the crevice, I stayed far enough away from it that my shadow wouldn't get seen by the humans below. I was following them, but only absentmindedly.

I had no doubt they were workers of the camels. I couldn't make out most of their conversations, thanks to being so far away and their voices echoing oddly in the canyon cracks, but I'd heard them mention familiar names and words. Like Celine, and Riz.

Plus...

What would humans be doing here otherwise? Especially so with all their stuff?

There were only two paths into this little canyon system. One couldn't be used while on a cart, or horseback. Only foot. It had been the one Renn and I had used. The other was viable for carts and horses, but it was a system of twists and turns. The only reason the humans even knew how to use it without getting lost, is because they had been told what to look for.

The little red markings on the rocks. The ones that on first glance looked natural, and nondescript. It was only when someone pointed them out, and made it clear they were basically little arrows that anyone would care to realize it.

I sighed as I picked up the pace. I wanted to get back before they arrived. Not because I was worried, but to make sure that Renn didn't accidentally reveal herself to them.

The camels only had oddly shaped backs. Slight humps, as if having a third shoulder. And it was barely noticeable, honestly. Renn however was a different story entirely. And lately she'd been walking around without a hat or hiding her tail.

Not that it was an issue, when alone with our own people... but...

It didn't take long for me to find a suitable section of a crevice to use. It was not the same crack the humans were using, but it was nearby. I knew if I was too loud, they'd likely hear me... but I doubted it mattered. They might just think it were rocks falling or something.

Stepping over the ledge of the crevice, I began to slide down the side of the wall. Most of the crevices were nearly straight drops, but a few were angled at just enough of a downgrade that I could more slide than straight on fall.

The issue with sliding though...

Hitting a loose rock, I had to push it out of the way as it dislodged from the cliff face and began to fall alongside me. I pushed it aside, and once I hit the ground... so did it. Only a few feet away from me.

The large rock caused dust and dirt to fly into the air, and dozens of other tiny rocks to shatter and bounce around. The impact of the rock echoed in the crevice I was in and then out and into other crevices around me.

Stepping over to the large rock, I patted it with a knuckle. It had had landed hard, and gone a few inches into the solid ground... and yet still was up to my thighs in size.

"Boulder O' boulder," I said to it as I glanced around and then up the side of the cliff, to make sure no other rocks were falling.

There was a lot of dust, and a few small pebbles bounced down the side of the cliff... but nothing else.

“Well, they definitely heard that,” I said as I stepped away from the rock.

And it seemed, so had Renn.

Exiting the connecting crevice, and stepping into the main crevice that led to the Dye Houses, I found Renn standing right at the opening. With her large ears pointed.

She visibly relaxed at the sight of me, and I was glad I had decided to beat the humans here.

Walking up to her, I kept myself from smiling too strongly. She had a huge grin on her face, as if seeing me for the first time in years.

Really, what was with her? What was I going to do with her?

“Was that you Vim? Did you trip and hit your head or something?” she asked.

“Yeah. I accidentally made a rock fall,” I said as I stepped over to her, then up next to her and around. She turned with me, but it took a small nudge on her back to get her to join me in walking towards the buildings.

“Hm. Maybe you really do like throwing rocks off cliffs,” she teased me.

“Sometimes. Some human workers are heading here. They’ll be here shortly,” I told her. My hand was still on her back as we headed for the main house.

“Oh? I’ll get my hat,” she said with a nod.

“Hm. The humans here know of the Society, but only distantly. They’re not real members, nor do they really know who or what we are. They only knew we’re special,” I explained.

She nodded. “I know. Riz told me about them. They’re employees,” she said, understanding.

“How is Riz?” I asked as I scanned the area. Brom was near the barn, sniffing around. A large rooster was pecking outside the pen, wandering freely. Yet I saw no one else.

“She’s in the snail-house. She said good morning to me today,” Renn said, excited.

Good. A good sign.

It had only taken her a week, but she had finally gotten out of bed. She was being distant, and quiet... but...

“She’ll be okay Vim. She just needs time,” Renn whispered.

“I hope you’re right Renn,” I wished.

Reaching the main house, I opened the door for Renn. She smirked at me, but didn’t go in right away. Instead she stepped up to me, so I bent a little so she could whisper whatever she wanted to say into my ear.

“She asked where you were. She wants to talk to you,” Renn said quietly.

Ah.

I nodded, and Renn nodded back. She gave me a sad smile as she did so, but her eyes looked excited. It was honestly a little peculiar. Like a smirk, that wanted to be something different. As if hopeful, at the prospect of something good possibly happening... yet full of sorrow all the same. She then stepped into the main house, leaving me behind. I shut the door behind her and sighed.

Hopefully she didn’t want to yell at me, or hear the whole story. I didn’t want to tell Riz how Brom died, or why he had died. But I’d long ago made the decision to never lie, or obfuscate the truth to any of our members... At least, concerning things such as this.

My history? Sure. But their own? That history was theirs. I didn't own it, they did. I only protected it.

Stepping around the building, I hesitated as I remembered something.

Renn had said she was in the snail houses.

Great. Wonderful.

Maybe that was why she had been smiling so weirdly. Maybe it was some plan nefarious to get me to go into that building...

The dog noticed my presence as I rounded the house. It ran up to me, and barked. The thing was big enough I didn't really need to bend down far to give its head a good pat and pet, but the damned thing immediately fell over and rolled onto its back.

"You're namesake suits you," I mumbled as I knelt a little as to give the dog a good belly rub.

It was some kind of mutt. Long haired, and honestly rather big. A little too big. Maybe some kind of wolf-breed. Which was very odd out here this far south. It was likely something that got thrown overboard a sailors ship, or sold in a port. I wonder how the camels came to have it.

The armadillos had some dogs too, now that I thought of it. When had they gotten them...? They've had dogs for the last few visits I've made.

Brom's large tail wagged like crazy for a moment as I pet him, and then I stood and nodded.

It rolled back onto its feet, and went to following me excitedly as I headed for the snail house.

As I walked past the other buildings, I listened intently for Riz. Maybe I'd get lucky and she was in another building or doing something else and...

But no. As I neared the largest snail-house, I heard her. I could hear her humming lightly as she made water splash. She was likely pouring more water into the pools. It had to be done carefully. With small buckets, and in small quantities at a time. Too much too quickly and the snails could actually drown or go into shock. They were fragile like that.

Brom's snout bumped my hand and drew my attention to it. The dog was panting a little, but not because it was hot. It was just happy. And it was looking at me as if I it couldn't understand why I wasn't giving him my full undivided attention.

I went ahead and patted the animal's head, and wanted to groan. "Riz?" I called for the girl.

A small foot squeaked inside the building. She was barefoot, and the stone slabs were slippery when wet. The kind of slick that made such sounds.

For a moment there was no more sounds... but then I heard the sound of a bucket being put away onto a shelf. It clunked on the metal.

A few moments later, and one of the large drapes that covered the wooden doors was pulled aside as Riz poked her head out.

“Are you really not going to come in? Even right now?” she asked me.

I crossed my arms, much to the dog’s annoyance. “Are you dying?” I asked her.

“Well... I am dyeing,” she said with a frown.

I couldn’t help it. I had to nod and accept defeat there. That had been a good one. Set myself right up for it.

Riz then stepped out from behind the drape, and out of the building. A few feet in front of the entrance were stone bricks, ones dug into the solid stone and dirt. It was actually the foundation of the buildings. I had made all of the buildings a few feet lower than the ground itself, as to make sure they’d never collapse over shifting rocks, and also to keep them slightly cooler during the summer.

“You’ll have help soon. One of the worker families is here,” I said.

Riz frowned, and peered around me. As she did Brom stepped over to her and snouted her hand as he had done mine. She went to petting him, but only absentmindedly. “Which one?” she asked.

"I have no idea. It's one with a younger woman," I said.

Riz smiled at me. "Three of the human families have daughters right now. So that doesn't help me," she said.

Figures. "They're in the canyons still. They'll be here before nightfall," I said.

She nodded and then looked down to the dog, who was getting rather desperate for attention. He had even leapt up a little, to get her to focus on him.

"Yes, Brom. I know. It's time I threw the stick," Riz said with a sigh.

"Renn played with him, while you were in bed," I said. It had been funny to watch her. She kept trying to throw that odd shaped stick he seemed to love with all her might. A few times she had thrown it so far, and hard, I had expected it to snap or break.

It hadn't.

"She's a kind one. For a predator," Riz said with a small smile.

Yes. She was.

Riz then took a deep breath, and sighed.

Hopefully she'd not make me sigh like that. I was doing everything I could to not breathe right now.

Then she looked up at me, and her eyes locked onto my own. "Brom's dead," she whispered.

The dog, which had started to walk around and sniff since Riz had gotten lost in thought and had started ignoring him, perked up and looked at her.

"He is."

"I... I honestly thought I'd marry him. So I didn't think about any other possibilities. What am I going to do now?" she asked me.

"You mean... in the sense of having a husband?" I asked her, trying to understand.

She nodded. "I need one. Don't I? Isn't it time I got one? It won't be long until I need to start having children," she said.

I shifted a little, and wondered why some of my people were like this. So... odd.

Or well, was it odd? It was natural wasn't it, to have children? To see it as a goal in life, and something to desire and expect?

Rather what I found odd was their strange sense of desiring it, yet not seeing it as anything more than a simple task to fulfill.

"You're still young Riz. What are you? Thirty?" I asked.

"Thirty three, yes."

"In human terms... yes. I suppose you could think, and should think, like you are. But you're not human. You have hundreds of years ahead of you," I said. Actually... excluding a horrible accident, she had much more than that. Mordo was well over a thousand, as far as I was aware. And although their bloodline was mixed, it hadn't diluted that badly just yet.

Riz groaned. "My mother and grandpa won't shut up about it. Though they might be quiet about it for awhile, thanks to... what happened..." Riz said softly. Then she sniffed.

My eye twitched as I studied her, and waited for her to start crying. Luckily... she didn't.

She took another deep breath, but let it out quickly. As if she wanted to scream or something.

“What did Renn say? When you told her such a thing?” I asked her.

“Renn...? I haven’t told her. Or asked. Is she married? I thought that was why she was with you, to find a husband. Like how my mom did,” Riz asked.

“Renn’s looking for a home. A place to live and stay at. Not necessarily a husband, or a family,” I said carefully.

“Oh...?” Riz then frowned and thought for a moment.

Right as she made the decision in her head, I realized Riz was a far better person than I had given her credit for. Far wiser, and kinder, than most.

Riz nodded. “She can stay here? She’s fun. I can tell she’s older than me, so it’d be like having an older sister or something,” she offered.

I did my best to not let her confident offer worry me as I nodded. “You can offer it to her. But remember you need to get your families approval first. Don’t invite Renn before you do, it’s not kind to have to rescind such offers after giving them,” I warned her.

“Huh... true. That’d probably make me really sad. Okay, I’ll ask the herd,” she said with a smile.

Great.

“Still Vim... any ideas? Weren’t there other men in Lumen?” she asked me, returning to her topic.

Studying the woman who had just spent a week in bed, broken-hearted and sobbing her soul out, I wondered if this was some kind of... defensive mechanism, or her instead just... giving up.

“There are,” I answered honestly.

“Any that need a wife, I mean,” she specified.

“Well... a few I guess. Yes,” I answered honestly again.

She studied me for a moment, and then Brom barked at her... and then ran off. Heading for the house. Maybe it had heard something. Renn might have left the house, as to find us.

“What is it Vim?” Riz then asked me, likely noticing my concern. My unsettled worry.

Opening my mouth, to tell her... I realized I probably couldn’t. I shouldn’t.

I wasn’t supposed to give my real opinions. Not when they could change the course of a life.

If I told her that searching for a husband so quickly, after being so heart-broken, was odd to me... or wrong, even, she might actually take my words incorrectly. It could cause issues. And not just for her, but for the whole family. For the Society.

If her mother found out I had tried to dictate her decision to search for a husband...

But...

Riz was staring at me with a rather serious look. She was being genuine. Serious.

Was this... her way of fixing her broken heart? Or facing it? Or running from it?

Did I even have a right to question it? Did it even matter?

There were worse outcomes. There were far worse ways to deal with it.

But... did I want another Kaley to worry about?

Riz's eyes narrowed and I realized she was noticing how long I was pondering it.

“Ask Renn. What she thinks of you needing a husband,” I said, after debating it.

Riz blinked, and then frowned. “Right. She’s been traveling with you. She might know,” she said.

I hadn’t meant it that way, but sure.

Maybe I’ll get lucky and Renn will set Riz on the right path. Or at least, a safer one.

Riz then sighed and crossed her arms, similar to as how I was doing. As if to mimic me, or mock me.

“Could I come with you? To find a husband?” she asked.

“That’s one of the things you could do, yes. Though if that’s the case, you’ll need to be prepared to journey for a long time,” I warned her.

Riz nodded. “I know. Mom tells me all the time that it took her forever to find dad. And he had been so close too, the idiot!” she smirked as she likely remembered the many stories and re-tellings of them.

I nodded. “He had been. If we had gone another route, she’d have found him in no time at all,” I said.

Though that might have also meant she may have never chosen him. Maybe her meeting him first would have made her choose another elsewhere. People were odd like that. Sometimes it took meeting many different people, and their many traits and personalities, as to overlook the few flaws one needed to truly find love.

No one was perfect, after all. One must simply find someone that they could love, flaws and all.

“Have you ever married, Vim?” Riz then asked.

“No. The last woman I had thought of marrying ended up trying to kill me, so I’ve actually made an effort to avoid such repeated mistakes,” I said.

Riz grinned and snickered. “I don’t blame her!”

Of course you didn’t.

“Me either.”

I kept a small smile on my face as I turned a little, to look at Renn. She now wore her hat, and her tail was hidden away. Brom was sniffing around Renn’s feet, wagging his tail happily.

“Oh... I see. You have to hide your ears huh? That sucks. I bet it gets hot,” Riz studied Renn as she spoke.

“It’s not that bad honestly. It does get hot, but usually when we’re traveling Vim let’s me take it off and only put it on when people get close. So I only have to endure for a short time,” Renn explained.

“Right...” Riz nodded and frowned, and I realized she was likely thinking of what we had spoken of earlier. Not marriage, or whatever, but rather her invitation for Renn. To stay here. To make this place her home.

She was now likely thinking of Renn having to suffer by hiding her non-human features for months at a time. Since the humans here didn’t know about us, not to that degree.

I could tell Riz was now having second thoughts.

Which for some reason, made me a little relieved.

“Why are we talking of marriage?” Renn then asked, returning us to the previous topic.

“Riz wants children,” I said.

“Well...!” Riz started to say something, as to argue... but stopped herself. “Well, I guess I do. Maybe...? Surely...” she began to mumble as she went into thought, pondering her own wants and desires.

Smirking at her, I turned to Renn. She was glancing at me with a raised eyebrow, concerned and confused.

“Why not give her some pointers?” I said to Renn.

Renn’s raised eyebrow became lowered, and pointed. “Me?” she asked me, with a stiff voice.

Oh that was cute. She was actually upset with me.

I nodded. “About those you’ve met. Potential... husband candidates?” I said, as I wondered how to phrase it.

Renn’s glare instantly flashed into surprise, and amusement. “Oh! Yeah!” she turned to Riz, excited.

Riz frowned and nodded, and grew excited too.

With a nod, I realized my job was done. For now, at least.

Turning away as Riz and Renn began to talk; I made a small noise with my tongue as to draw Brom's attention. The dog startled, and then barked as it ran to follow me.

Heading for the main building, I decided to let them be as I overlooked the humans arriving. I could smell them, in the air. They weren't far now.

With Brom following by my side, I left both the girl's talk... and the terrible stink of those snails behind.

Chapter 219 A Cart of Exhaustion

Now this was new.

The reins I held were little leather straps. Thin things... which felt like they could snap if either I or the donkey pulled on them too tightly.

It was a good thing the donkey was very calm mannered, and I didn't really need to pull or tug on them. It seemed to know the path we were on by heart. I didn't even need to guide it around bends in the road.

Glancing over to my companion, I smiled at the man who looked bored enough to cause trouble. He was sitting back a little, leaning against the back of our bench-like seat. It was rather big, too big for me to rest an arm on in leisure, but Vim was able to do it.

Behind us, was a covered wagon. The canvas material covering it was angled in a slight point, not rounded like other covered wagons I had seen before. It looked more like a makeshift tent than anything else. But... it worked. It covered the pots and boxes that we were escorting, keeping them out of the sun and any prying eyes that might glance upon them.

Though I wasn't really sure who'd be doing such peeping out here in the middle of nowhere.

Glancing around at the odd trees and piles of rocks, I wondered how this place was so different than my home. The sea wasn't far still, I couldn't see it or hear it anymore but I could still catch a whiff of it on the breeze every so often. And it rained too, as proof of that storm a few days ago before we left.

So... if the ocean and the weather could be so similar to the land I had been born in, in comparison at least, why was it still so different? Was it just the lack of water? Back at home there were lakes and rivers all over the place. Surely that wasn't all it was, right?

The ground here was hard. Brittle. The plants and trees prickly and... oddly naked. Not as covered in leaves or fruit. The little grass here and there was also sharper, although sometimes just as green.

And piles of rocks, stacked as tall as the cliffs and hills we had just left.

Somehow.

It was almost unnerving. I mean... I knew that mountains were basically just lots of huge rocks stacked on top of each other, but...

Studying one of the rock formations we were slowly wheeling past, I tried to imagine how so many huge rocks had gotten... piled on top of each other in such a way. Some of the stacks looked so wobbly a

strong gust could topple them, which was funny since most of the rocks and boulders were bigger than the cart we were riding.

Honestly... if Vim told me he had been the one to stack all of these rocks long ago, I'd genuinely believe him. They didn't look natural at all.

If this had been some kind of mountain or canyon at one time, like the one we had just left, and these piles of rocks were just the rubble left behind... why then did they look so neatly piled on each other? Wouldn't they all have collapsed? Evenly? Like a mountain slide did? I had never seen rocks, no matter their size, piled up on top of each other so perfectly like these ones here. No matter how they had fallen...

A bird flew overhead, drawing my attention away from the weird world around me, and I wondered how such a huge looking creature fed itself out here.

Likely the sea. Though, I guess there were animals out here... even if they were rare and hard to find. Like that little mouse thing Vim had messed with back at the Dye Houses.

"What's on your mind, Renn?" Vim asked.

I followed the bird on the horizon for a little more, and then turned to grin at Vim. He was leering at me with a lazy expression.

"A world I've never known before," I told him honestly.

“Hm... I guess. We’re in the Nation of Stone. Soon these piles of boulders will turn into giant monoliths. Massive, towering rocks cut into odd shapes and forms. You’ll be able to start making them out in the distance here in a day or two,” he said.

I frowned at him. “You mean... mountains?” I asked.

He smiled at me and shook his head. “No. You’ll see soon, no need for me to spoil it.”

Huh.

I tried to ponder what he meant for a bit, but gave up. It was likely something I’d only believe or understand by seeing if he was going to say it like that.

“Why do we take dyes and stuff to a Queen, Vim? Shouldn’t she have enough of such things already? Or able to get them?” I asked him as I glanced behind us, at the covered cargo.

“She likes them. And it helps her in a way, by letting her sell the dyes and threads. To keep her coffers full,” Vim said.

“What do the camels get in return? You didn’t give them anything,” I said.

Vim shifted, and I felt it through the seat. The whole cart made noises, and even the donkey seemed to tilt its head and flick its ears as if in complaint. He turned a bit, as to face me, and pulled his left leg up and on his other knee as to cross it. "I'm surprised it took this long for you to ask such a question."

Oh...? I tried to remember all the other places we'd been. And sure enough, he was likely right. I'd never really bothered to notice or question it before, for some reason.

"Well... it's true. The smithy, Lumen, Tor's village, the armadillo's gems and now the dyes..." I said.

He nodded. "They give and give, and what do they get in return?" he asked me.

Opening my mouth to ask the same, I realized he wanted me to answer for myself.

Rubbing the leather reins with my thumbs, I pondered it. "Well... I guess one could say they get protection. Thanks to you. Or support, from others. And community, too," I said as I tried to think of the best answer to such a question.

"Hm. Community," Vim said the word as if in doubt.

Which... doubting wasn't wrong, was it?

Honestly, had I not recently heard and been told that some of these places rarely if ever got visitors? Even the Smithy seemed to be somewhere rarely visited, if even known by others. It was a location that most didn't know about at all, let alone had ever been to...

"What do they get, Vim?" I asked him worriedly.

"You weren't wrong. I was just scoffing because of how sad the reality is, is all," he said.

I didn't want to hear that. That meant what I had listed had genuinely been the answer.

The only answers.

Like the armadillo family... the camels had spent months and years making what was in the pots and boxes behind me. Literally many families worth of hard work, over the course of years... to just... hand off to someone else? A Queen? Someone who was already powerful? For what? Why?

The gems being given to Lumen at least I understood to a point. They could sell them. Process them. And then send some of that wealth they got from such transactions back to the armadillo family... but...

"What does the Queen give the camels?" I asked him.

"Water."

I blinked, and then glared at him. Vim noticed, and frowned at me.

“What?” he asked.

“What the heck. You just tried to make me feel horrible, why didn’t you say they actually got something in return?” I asked him.

“Oh... I meant in the grand scheme of things. Plus... honestly Renn, the water they get from her isn’t as valuable as this cart is. Not at all. This cart is a fortune. If properly handled and sold to the right people, you could amass a genuine fortune with these dyes... Honestly that's underselling it. There's a genuine mountain of wealth behind us,” he said as he tapped the canvas flap.

“How does she give them water?” I asked, focusing on that instead. They had something of a well at the Dye House... it was in its own little building... and seemed to draw water from far beneath the stone ground. It used a system of pumps or something.

“There’s a large fresh water lake beneath the canyons. That lake system is fed by a spring in the Queen’s land, not far from here. It actually runs underground about a mile that way. She’s the one that helped build the aqueduct system for it. She actually spent... oh a few thousand lives I think, to build it,” he said as he thought of it.

“Wait... she built it? Not you?” I asked.

He shook his head. "I had been too busy at the time for such a long project. I helped her and the camels with some plans, but hadn't been able to dedicate much time to it. It was back during the beginning of the Society. Celine had me on other, more important, tasks," he said as he blinked a few times, staring off in the distance. He was getting lost in thought.

Was he thinking about her? Celine? Or this water system he spoke of?

"What do you mean she spent thousands of lives on it?" I asked.

"It's very dangerous. Making an underground aqueduct. A lot of people died creating it, and then she killed all of the people who had worked upon it once done. So that no one would ever know where it was or how to access it," he said absentmindedly.

I flinched at the knowledge... and almost wished he hadn't told me.

Great. I didn't want hear that our members, or even our Society as a whole, had used such cruel methods.

"So... she continues to receive the dyes for what she had done. Back in the beginning," I said, doing my best to tuck away and not think too deeply on what he had just told me.

"She still helps often. If something happened and they needed help, and I not around, they'd go to her. Same with the Armadillo family. She's the cornerstone of the Society out here. Or at least, she is now, with that kingdom being gone," he said.

Kingdom... “Merit’s kingdom?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Had it been near here?” She had mentioned it was in the south, and where it was hot.

“It was much farther east. It was still the desert, but more of a tropical one. One with sand, and forests mixed together,” he said.

Sand and forests...

“What about those like Lellip and them? At the smithy? What do they get in exchange for their ores and metals?” I asked.

“Similar assistance. They’ll never need or want for money; they just need to ask for it. Somewhere beneath the house is a huge pile of coins, as far as I’m aware. Every so often I take a pouch full of money to them, though I doubt they ever spend any of it. They make their own clothes, tools, and food. In the past, before Nebi’s family became so small... the Society used to give them tasks. They wanted to be challenged. To be pushed to the brink of their skills. They saw such feats as payment, since it was all they cared about. Today such things are few and far in-between,” Vim said.

That was almost as painful to hear about as our Society wasting thousands of lives for no reason.

“There are many who give far more than they take. But there are even more who take a lot, but give practically nothing in return. No one notices or cares though, but that’s mostly because we’re not human. We don’t see money or goods the same way humans do. Which is likely why you noticed, but at the same time why it took you this long to do so,” Vim said with a gesture to me.

“I wasn’t really complaining... just trying to understand,” I said.

He nodded. “It bothered you, or rather it does, doesn’t it?” he asked me.

Well...

He chuckled, obviously seeing my answer on my face.

“I’m not really bothered by it... Rather I just worry. I worry we’re taking advantage of people who don’t deserve such treachery,” I said.

Vim’s eyes studied me for a moment, then he turned away to stare at a huge mound of rocks and boulders. One we were nearing, and would need to round. The path made a large berth around it.

For a short while... we were silent. The cart creaked noisily. The donkey huffed and its footfalls made strange noises as it pulled the cart. Some of the pots and boxes clanked and shifted. The light wind blew through the many crevices and cracks in all the piles of huge rocks; making odd noises... sometimes I heard a bird, or some other weird animal sounds. Every so often Vim would move a little, and his clothes

complained. They weren't too tight on him, but thanks to how he was sitting they were taught and tight. They were noisy beneath his leather pieces.

Actually...

"Why have leather armor if you don't wear it to battle?" I asked him.

Vim returned his attention to me, and he frowned. "What do you mean?"

I gestured at him with the reins. "You didn't wear it. To fight those things in Lumen," I specified.

"Well... because I hadn't been wearing them once the need arose. Good thing too, they'd have just gotten destroyed," he said as he slipped a thumb under one of his thigh bracers.

"That's... kind of their point, Vim. To be sacrificed, to keep you yourself safe," I said to him.

He smirked and nodded. "That is true."

I huffed at him... then he reached over to grab my own leather piece. The one that overlaid my shirt. I felt a little odd as he tugged on it lightly, making my whole body shift to and fro as he did so. "Vim?" I asked, and then laughed as he stopped.

“You hadn’t been wearing yours either, Renn,” he said gently.

Ah...

Well...

I smiled and nodded. He was right. I had been kidnapped that moment... while with Merit. While out walking.

“In my case I wish I had been wearing them. I might not have these new scars, if I had been,” I complained as I tapped my left chest. A little below my collar bone was a new scar. It was all healed now, but it hadn’t faded like most of the others. It was one of maybe a dozen I knew about, from the incident in Lumen.

A small white line that ran along my collar bone, to my armpit.

“Didn’t Tosh patch you up?” he asked me.

I nodded. “He had. He put herbs and gunk on the bad spots, which made my nose itch. But...” I shrugged, since there was no point complaining or worrying about it.

Scars were scars. They weren't the first I'd get, and likely not the last.

But like most, they'd fade. Slowly, and never completely, but they would. My face was proof of that.

"Hm..." Vim made an odd humming noise, so I glanced at him. He was staring at me with a weird look... something similar as to when he was staring at something he wanted to make go away.

"What?" I asked.

"Was just thinking that Tosh likely saw you naked," he said.

"That's what you got out of that?" I asked, a little shocked.

"Well... yeah?" he frowned at me, and I was half tempted to slap him with the reins. They'd reach, since they were so loose, but then I'd probably lose them. He'd likely take them from me if I did such a thing, and I was having fun being the one to command the donkey.

"Not even going to worry about my scars?" I asked him.

"I've already seen them. Do you not remember you changed in front of me several times on that pirate ship? Since you got soaked and stuff?" he reminded me.

I hesitated a moment as I thought of those days. Although it hadn't been long ago, it for some reason felt like it had been...

Yes. I had. Three times...

"You saw? I even tried to keep my back to you," I complained. The room had been small. Too small to actually do such a thing, but I'd genuinely tried. Plus he hadn't been looking at me, if I remembered correctly. I'd kept an eye on him the whole time, each time, to see if he'd take a peak or not. He hadn't. He had either focused on one of those books, or lazed in his half sleep state.

"If you believe a woman like you can just get naked in front of any man on this planet and not have the man take a look, then I have a very fancy bridge to sell you," he said with a smile.

"But..." I complained. He hadn't... had he? I even remember getting a little upset he hadn't even glanced at me.

"But nothing. You're stunning... and if you must know, I really did notice the scars. You have a new one on your left cheek. It makes me want to run my finger run along it," Vim said.

I frowned and reached up to touch my cheek. I had a new scar on my face? Really? I hadn't ever noticed...

Vim chuckled at me as he pointed downward. "Different cheek, Renn."

Oh...

I shifted, a little away from him. Not too far, since I wasn't actually upset with him... but...

He found that amusing as I tried to imagine what he meant. Was it a thin line like the ones on my arms and chest? Likely from those spine things that had cut and pierced me? Or was it something else? More jagged maybe...?

I didn't remember any real injury on my rear. Bruises, yes. I had felt those. Like my tail being tender for so long, so too had my butt... but...

"Was it from a cut?" I wondered.

"Probably. Looks like a thin slice. Like from glass or something. It runs along down in a straight line, nearly following your tail," Vim slowly swiped the air with an open hand, as if to show how straight it was.

I definitely didn't have such a thing before. As far as I was aware, at least. Something like that Nory would have mentioned.

"You sure it's a new one?" I asked.

He nodded. "Definitely."

Studying the man next to me who looked far too confident... I tried to think of all the times I'd been naked in front of him.

Honestly it was more than a few. But most had been like those moments on the ship. Quick moments. Of me moving around and usually changing clothes. Half the time it wasn't even with me fully naked, but instead while wearing undergarments or nightgowns.

"You... memorized my body? That quickly? From our bath?" I asked, understanding how he had done so.

"I want to hear complaints. Though I shouldn't, since coming from you that's likely a very comical statement," he said, with a happy tone.

Smirking at him, I nodded. Yes. I had... to a degree, memorized his body too. "Not my fault my memory is so good," I said happily.

"Sure it isn't."

"And... you want me to complain? Really?" I asked, noting the way he had mentioned it.

"Yeah. You don't complain enough. When you do your face scrunches up and you get this adorable tone in your voice. So I've been thinking I should start making you whine more often," he said.

Giggling at the strange man, I wondered what to complain about for him.

“It is a little too hot for my liking,” I said.

He nodded, smiling at me.

“And I really didn’t like how you tried to tease me earlier. During Riz’s questions about marriage and stuff,” I added.

His smile softened. “What do you mean?” he asked.

I pointed at him. “You made it clear you’ve debated marrying others before. You said it right before I walked up, on purpose. I don’t mind a little teasing Vim, but making such a joke not long after I just opened my heart to you and told you how much I worried over your lack of attraction towards me... or any man’s, is a little mean,” I said.

Vim started to chuckle, which only made me want to complain even more... but before I could... Vim turned and laid down.

A little startled, I had to raise the reins up and over his head as he shifted and laid onto his back. Putting his head on my lap, he sighed as he got comfortable.

“Uh...” I wasn’t sure what to say or do at all. What the heck was he doing? Was this more teasing? Was he being serious?

Glancing along him, I noticed the way one of his legs was dangling over the side of the wagon’s edge. The bench like seat didn’t have rails on the sides to stop someone from falling off. Likely so one could hop on and off with ease. But...

Gulping, I shifted a little awkwardly as I made sure my tail wasn’t stuck underneath him. It wasn’t, I was able to sneak it out from under him thanks to the little divot where the seat and the backrest met.

“Vim...?” I asked for some kind of guidance. Was this some joke? Was he actually going to... go to sleep? On my lap? Like this?

Out in the middle of nowhere?

The donkey didn’t even notice my panic, which was rude of it. I even flipped the reins a little, as if to beg for help. It didn’t even register the movement, it kept trotting along the trail without worry.

“You didn’t like my comments on that ship either. Or how I acted, did you?” Vim asked from my lap.

He crossed his arms on his chest, and suddenly looked... far too comfortable and relaxed. To the point it almost wasn’t fair. His eyes were barely open, and not just because the sun was likely glaring in his eyes. He looked half a moment away from falling into a deep slumber.

“To Roslyn and her people? No. Not at all,” I quickly said, unsure of anything else to say.

Vim smiled at me as he closed his eyes... and took a small breath. Only to release it as if in a content sigh.

Huh...

“I also don’t like how you’ll so readily tell everyone that I’m looking for a home... even though you know I’m not. You don’t need to lie Vim. You can tell people why I stay with you. Why I want to be with you,” I added, and decided to just go ahead and... let it all out.

The only thing that moved was an eyebrow. It raised a little.

“And lately you’ve been trying so hard to not make me feel sad or worried. I know that’s why you gave in concerning Roslyn and her people so easily. You were worried I’d break or grow irate or something, but you hadn’t needed to Vim. It’s sweet of you, but I’m not as fragile as that. I want you to rely on me. To trust me... not treat me as a child. I’m not Riz, or Lomi, or Fly. Nor am I as fragile as our other members, like Herra or all of those in Lumen. I’ll not run away or shy away just because something bad happened. I’ll not hate you or stop loving you just because you’ve made mistakes, or failed once or twice,” I continued to ramble on... and on and on.

Guiding the donkey as we slowly headed on a path I had never been on before, nor even knew where I was going... I went ahead and told him all of my grievances. No matter how small or petty.

As I did, I calmed down a little and grew used to the fact he was resting on my lap. I lowered my arms from their outstretched state, to just above his head. Close enough I could even occasionally feel his breath. It was oddly cool in this hot summer heat.

Eventually I ran out of things to complain about concerning him... so I went on to the others. I complained about Lumen. The people who lived there. The humans. That idiot King, who had wanted to make me some kind of concubine or something. The way they had treated the Clothed Woman while we had been at her mercy, using her home for sanctuary. How the Bell Church had banished me without even hearing my side of the story... or how...

It didn't take long for tears to start sliding out of my eyes... but it my voice never joined them in sorrow. I spoke happily, as if I was still in the middle of teasing and being teased by Vim.

Vim said nothing. Nor did he seem to even be awake.

With eyes closed... Vim remained on my lap. Not waking even as the sun grew hotter, the wagon jolted or shifted from rocks or a hill, or as my tears fell onto his face.

Chapter 220 Vim – A Day Slept

Renn yelped as I sat up.

I felt my face bump into her arms as I did, and I flinched as a pain shot through my right eye and up my skull. My right eye burned as I felt it begin to well with tears, since it had been scraped by one of her nails.

Quickly looking around, I took in the dark night all around us.

My heart thumped a little loudly, but not in a quick rhythm. It remained steady, but... heavy.

Blinking, I tried to realize what had just happened. I tried to comprehend it. I tried to... understand how and why...

How had I been staring at a bright sky, gazing at Renn's happy smirk as she complained to me... and then the next hear nothing but the wheels of the cart, and the bugs in the night?

"Vim...? Are you okay? What happened?" Renn asked worriedly as the donkey slowed to a stop. She was pulling on the reins, but not on purpose. She was holding them close to her chest, and looking around.

She too felt as I did. As if something was amiss, and she needed to be on guard.

But...

She had reason for it. I didn't.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and went to rubbing my eye. The one stinging something fierce.

As I touched it, I realized it was wet. And not just because of tears.

Pulling my hand away, I glared at the familiar gleam of blood. It was oddly clear in the moonlight.

“Vim...? Is that blood? Are you hurt? What happened...?” Renn inched closer, worriedly reaching out for me. She sounded almost desperate.

“I’m fine... I’m sorry, I uh...” I coughed as I realized exactly what happened.

Nothing had startled me.

No smell. No noise. No presence.

We were alone. As much as one could be in the desert... with a donkey a few feet away.

No... the issue, the only issue, was instead something much more serious. More drastic.

More dangerous than if I had awoken to us surrounded by Monarchs.

“I’d fallen asleep,” I admitted.

Renn stopped drawing closer. She was nearly crawling towards me, with her hands on the seat of the wagon's driver bench. She made an odd noise at me, and then scoffed. "Vim? What!" she obviously hadn't believed what I had just said.

Which was understandable.

I couldn't believe it either.

Coughing, I sat up a little straighter. A little more naturally. I had been on edge upon sitting up earlier...

Grabbing a sleeve, I went to wiping my face. I could feel the blood starting to drip down the side of my face.

"Vim what... you really are bleeding? Why? What happened?" Renn drew close, and I had to shy away a little as she reached over to grab at my face. At where I was pushing my sleeve up against.

"I cut my eye. Sorry," I said quickly, to stop her from questioning it.

I didn't want her to know it had been her nail that had done it.

“Your eye? You cut it?” she asked worriedly, and I wanted to kick myself. She had sounded genuinely bothered. As if she couldn’t believe it.

“How long had I been asleep?” I asked, hoping to change her attention.

“Vim what’d you cut your eye on...? You’d been sleeping! On my lap!” she didn’t let me. She stood a little, making the cart wobble as she drew closer.

I sighed, and lowered my arm and sleeve as to let her look. I’d not be able to get out of it now.

Damn me.

Not only had I actually fallen asleep, I was now going to make her upset with herself.

She’d never let her nails get long again. Which was too bad. I kind of liked how they got a little pointy. Even if I was the one who had bought that damned set for her to keep them short and filed...

“What the heck...! Vim, you’re bleeding really badly!” she touched the side of my face, worriedly. I could feel the apprehension in her touch, and see it on her face. She looked as if she was about to cry.

“It’s fine,” I said, and I glanced away from her worried eyes. To the sky beyond her.

The moon was at its zenith. In this region, during this season, that meant the night was only a few hours from being finished. The air would begin to grow cold. Much colder. Then it'd get hot again as the sun rose.

"Geez Vim..." Renn groaned as she wiped the side of my eye and face off with her hand. I was going to pull myself away, so she'd not get herself bloody, but I knew if I did she might just stab me in the other eye.

"There's a shirt in my bag," I suggested.

"Ah... right. Is it going to be okay? It looks like you actually punctured your eye. There's even white stuff in the blood," she asked.

Oddly although worried, she didn't sound too panicked.

Maybe she was finally learning that I was beyond the realm of normalcy.

"Yes. Eyes heal very fast. There're few things that heal as fast, honestly," I said.

She glanced at me oddly, and then wiped her now bloody hand on the side of the bench. Near my legs.

After she did so she sighed as she went to pushing aside the flap of the wagon's canopy. It didn't take her long to find my bag, open it, and pull out one of the shirts. Even in the dark she made it easy.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she held returned her attention to my face. Seemed I wasn't going to be allowed to treat myself.

"For letting me sleep...? I forgive you. But next time please wake me... at least before it gets dark," I said gently.

She paused, right as she went to tug apart the shirt. To rip it into piece. I tilted my head at her, and she sighed at me.

"I'm sorry for poking you in the eye Vim," she then said.

Ah...

Shifting a little, I nodded as she tore the shirt. I took a piece she tore, and wiped off what little blood still remained and was leaking out. It didn't feel as mushy this time, as I rubbed the eye.

Yes. Healing already.

"Want some water?" she then said.

“Not yet,” I said.

Once I finished, I let Renn wrap the bandage around my head. She did so a little awkwardly, but I didn't complain.

Nor did I mention she really didn't need to do this. I hadn't wanted the shirt for an actual bandage... but rather just to wipe the blood. So as to not become a bloody stained mess, for when we eventually reached the capital.

“It's my fault. I was resting my hands on you. I should have known this would happen,” she mumbled.

Resting on me? Ah... likely because she still held the reins. I had lain on her lap in a rather inconvenient way for her, hadn't I?

“It's fine Renn. It's my fault for sitting up so quickly,” I said.

“It is! Why'd you startle like that? I've been messing with you face for hours, you didn't seem to mind,” she asked as she finally finished wrapping my head... and then sat back and admired her handiwork.

“Messing with my face?” I asked worriedly. What had she been doing to me?

She smirked at me. "Your eye will heal, right?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes. By midday I'll be able to see out of it," I said.

Usually. Now that I focused a little, I could feel the throbbing of a lost organ. She hadn't just cut it... she had actually punctured it. Tore most of it out, by the feel of it too. That meant I'd have chunks of eye falling out for a few hours, as it detached and re-grew.

It might be a few days before I could actually see out of it. I'd be able to see blurry shapes by tomorrow and colors, but little else.

"I'm so sorry Vim. I knew they were long. I've been neglecting them. They even got in the way back at Secca, while I was working. I'm sorry," Renn apologized, and I didn't like the way her eyebrows were so shaky. She looked as if she was about to start sobbing.

"It's fine Renn. Really. It's about time you drew blood anyway," I said.

Her wobbling eyebrows shot upward, and then she burst out into a happy laugh.

Smiling at her as she reached over and grabbed my forearm, as to shake and squeeze it happily... I relished in her joy.

She really was beautiful.

Glancing around, I made sure once again we were fine.

We were. I even was able to figure out where we were. Not far from us was one of the giant stone monoliths. The one that looked like an old dead tree stump. The first monolith on our path.

“Wow... you did good. We’re still on the right path,” I praised Renn.

“What...? Vim please, this is the only path. I’ve not had to take a turn once,” she took my compliment and tossed it away like I did my eye.

I nodded, since I knew that already. “Still. Did you ever stop to let the beast rest?” I asked. Although hardy, these donkeys still needed to drink and eat.

“Yes. I even fed it and gave it a drink several times. You’re a heavy sleeper when you want to be Vim, you never even noticed me crawling out from under you,” she said.

Oh...?

I shifted a little as I realized what that meant.

She giggled, and then went crawled behind us and into the wagon. I ignored her rummaging as she grabbed one of the few water canteens we had. She popped the canteen open, and poured a little on her hand. The one she had gotten bloody. She used one of the remaining pieces of the torn shirt to wipe her hand, and then offered it to me.

I took it, but there wasn't much a need for one. "Want me to wipe you?" she asked.

"It'll be bleeding for awhile. No point until it stops," I said.

She stared at me for a moment as I too used the wet cloth to wipe my hands.

Once she realized I had been serious, she sighed and put the water canteen back. Renn then went to grab the reins again. She had dropped them in the commotion.

So... not only had I slept through her stopping the cart, and messing with the donkey... but she had also returned to the cart... and put me back on her lap?

"I will say though, it's a little weird how you don't even really move. Your eye doesn't twitch, you don't snore, and your breathing and heartbeat remain... the same. Somehow," Renn said as she picked up the reins, and then went to hand them to me.

I hesitated a moment, and wondered if I should instead jump off the cart and run away. The ocean wasn't far from here. Just over that pass to our right. A few miles away.

Renn tilted her head at me, smiling happily. That smile was more dangerous than her nails.

Taking the reins, I sighed. "You want to know what the weirdest part about sleeping like that is?" I asked her.

"Hm?"

"Waking up from such a long slumber, and not needing to piss like a racehorse. A part of me is glad I don't feel such a thing anymore, but at the same time not feeling it makes me... uneasy. As if something's wrong, and I don't know what it is," I said.

Renn hesitated as I flipped the reins. To put the donkey back on track.

It huffed loudly, likely tired, but I didn't care. We weren't far from the Nation of Stone. Or the little oasis I usually stopped at along the way. The donkey could rest once we got there.

Plus it wasn't as if it hadn't gotten rest, per Renn's words, and...

We weren't really traveling quickly either.

"You do relieve yourself though..." Renn mumbled as she studied me.

"I do. Just not as often as I used to. How're you feeling Renn? Hungry yet?" I asked her, to get her off her train of thought. Not only was it silly, it was dangerous. I didn't need her to start noticing those things just yet.

"Huh...? Oh... not really. I've been snacking," she pointed behind us. I followed her finger, and the nail which I knew was the one that had just been inside my eyeball, to the wagon's canopy. Or rather, the small slit opening which hid a bag.

The bag of dried meat that the camels had given Renn. Not long before we showed up they had killed a pig. One of the bigger ones. They had been kind enough to gift her a large portion of the meat. Her payment for weeks of labor. Alongside that meat were bananas. Two whole bushels.

In fact she did smell of those bananas. I had noticed them on her breath when she had been messing with my bandage.

I chuckled at her. "I have no idea how you can eat so much of them without getting sick," I said.

"It is starting to lose its tastiness," she admitted softly.

Well... that's good. Maybe...?

"Tired?" I asked.

“Hm? Not really. I’ve just been sitting. We had a weird little dog thing follow us for a short time, but other than that it’s been quiet,” she said.

Dog thing. Maybe a coyote or something. Nothing that would try its hand at us, or rather Renn... or a donkey even more so. If anything it had likely just been following her as she ate. Lured by the smell, and the hope that she’d toss it some food.

Knowing Renn she might have.

Especially if she’d been bored out of her mind. Without anyone to talk to.

Since her only companion had been lazily asleep. On her lap. Without a care in the world.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized.

“Hm? For?” she didn’t seem to notice, or care... but I did.

I’d make it up to her.

Then Renn scooted closer. Suddenly the world became a little warmer, as she leaned against me.

“You were tired, Vim,” she said.

I wanted to shift. Not just to move my arm, which she was oddly leaning a little too much onto, but also my whole self. But even if I did, there wasn’t much room left on the bench.

Plus she’d not be happy with me if I did.

But... the reason I had wanted to move away, wasn’t because I didn’t like her touch. Nor because of its implication.

Rather... because I didn’t want to answer her question.

“Exhausted? We could have spent longer at the Dye Houses, Vim. I’d not have minded. It was fun working with Riz and the rest,” Renn continued the conversation, even though I hadn’t answered her first question yet.

She was growing... far too used to me. She had noticed I hadn’t answered, yet hadn’t let it even phase her. She even leaned closer.

“Do you dream, Vim?” she then asked me. Once again realizing the question she had asked before had not been one I wanted to answer, and so as such changed it. Happily.

It didn't bother her at all that I'd ignore her in such a way. Even though it should.

Even though it did me.

"Yes," I said. Nightmares usually.

Renn grinned, and scooted even closer. Any closer and she'd be sitting on my lap.

"Did you have a dream just now?" she asked.

I blinked, and wondered if I did or not.

Had I?

"I did," I said as I vaguely remembered it. "Islands. I dreamt of islands," I told her.

I missed those islands. I wonder if they even still existed or not.

“Islands... which ones? Where?” Renn further delved herself into that which was me. It was rather concerning how... I didn't seem too upset or worried over it.

“A long time ago I spent time on some islands. In the distant sea. There's a chain of them right before the sea turns into ice. Although near the ice... they were actually nice. Warm. Pretty. Quiet,” I told her.

“Huh... Why were you there?” she asked.

“To be alone.”

One of my answers finally bothered her. Which was funny... I'd have thought one of the silent ones had done the deed first.

She shifted a little, and I felt her tail wiggle in-between us. It was squished between our thighs. Why'd she not pull it free? Or make it lay the other way, around her side instead of against me? Didn't it being squeezed in such a way hurt it? It hadn't been that long ago she'd have yelped out in pain just by someone looking at it wrong.

I was very glad it had healed enough for her to not care or notice, but it meant she'd once again start letting it touch and lay on me in weird ways. Ways I couldn't help but notice, and see not just the tail but the emotions within it as it wiggled and swayed.

A bit of the shirt wrapped around my head shifted. Some blood had started to leak out of my eye socket again. The blood seeping into the makeshift bandage was weighing it down.

Taking a small breath, I decided it was better to talk about what had happened rather than the past.

"I can't rest," I said.

Renn paused, since she had been about to ask something else. About the islands. About my past.

"Yes you can Vim," she said gently.

I shook my head. "No. Especially not at our people's homes. And not in that way," I said.

Renn was silent as I pointed at my face. At the eye that still bled. Or rather, was now being expelled. My body was rejecting it, as to start forming a new one.

"It's one thing to rest and heal from terrible wounds. Since then they'll see those wounds heal. They'll see limbs re-grow. They'll see holes fill, and burns fade. It reinforces the belief that I'm suitable. That I'm what I say I am... It's another thing entirely to sleep just to sleep," I told her.

"So if you become exhausted without any visible wounds, they'll question it. They'll question if you're still able to protect them," Renn's quick mind didn't hesitate to make quick work of my meaning.

I nodded. "I know it sounds ridiculous Renn... but..."

She shook her head. Her long hair danced along both our shoulders. "No, Vim. I get it. I do."

For a tiny moment I wondered at her. Not in disbelief... but admiration.

She really did, didn't she?

Renn smiled at me, but in a way that made me feel bad. That smile looked painful for her, as if she was the one with a punctured eye and not me. "I understand Vim. I do. I also want you to know it's very lovely you'd be willing to sleep on my lap, after telling me that you're not comfortable with sleeping elsewhere. It means a lot to me," she said.

I was about to tell her I had originally not planned to fall asleep at all. At all. But...

That somewhat sad smile became a proud one. Beaming at me, as if she'd just been told she was the loveliest woman in the world. And had believed it, for once.

"I shouldn't be tired," I said softly as I looked away from her. To the dark stone monolith in the distance. It'd not be long now and Renn would be able to see it. She probably could right now, if she'd only take a moment to look away from me.

"Yet... you are? And why is that so strange Vim? We all get tired," she asked.

“Not me,” I whispered.

When had it begun? For some reason I didn't think it was Lumen. Even though that should have been the source. I had actually endured a lot of damage there. I had been punctured by teeth and sliced deep by barbs. I had inhaled toxic fumes. I had been crushed.

But for all that damage... it wasn't the healing that had tired me out. It was something else.

“You've been sleeping a lot more lately. I've noticed it. Though... honestly I was hoping it was just because you'd gotten used to me. Not that there was actually something wrong with you,” Renn said with concern.

“I am more comfortable with you Renn. Even if you still refuse to see it. Look at what you're doing, you're nearly on my lap,” I said to her.

She giggled. “Not yet I'm not,” she teased me.

Thankfully she didn't actually prove such a thing, but after her few giggles she went quiet... then nodded. As if happy. Suddenly content.

“It's a fine line isn't it? You let many of our members touch you in many ways. But you don't get affectionate. The hugs and touching aren't too personal,” she said softly.

“I used to not let anyone touch me,” I said.

Renn’s ears fluttered as she perked up. “What? Really?”

I nodded. “In the beginning. I let the children touch me, of course... but beyond that I did my best to not become too... touchy feely,” I said.

“Touchy feely,” she teased my choice of wording, and then her hand fell upon my thigh.

Glancing down at it, I was glad she didn’t do anything weird with it. She was just trying to tease me.

My eye twitched. The one that was still in one piece. Then I turned and noticed she was staring intently at me.

Then she lifted her hand, and looked away. Even in the dark of the night I could see her face growing several shades deeper in color.

“Why do you even try when you can’t follow through?” I asked her with a chuckle.

“Shush! I know... jeez,” she complained as she lowered her head. Her face got hidden by her long hair, except when a small breeze blew past.

Smiling at her, I realized I didn't need to worry too much just yet.

If she got so embarrassed so easily, I didn't need to worry about making a mistake any time soon. I had a little bit of time, at least.

Though how much time? Women became very bold. Very confident... very quickly. Sometimes too quickly.

I sighed as I wondered who'd break first. Her or me.

"I usually do get tired. After I get hurt. Especially when I sustain a lot of damage quickly. But... this is more than just the damage I sustained in Lumen. To be honest I think I had been getting tired even before that. I remember a few moments before... like at the Cathedral, where I noticed I felt strangely tired," I spoke aloud, to not only distract the both of us from what had potentially almost happened... but also to let Renn calm down a little.

She soaked up my words, using them like a sponge against her blushing face. She returned to normal, and hummed as she cupped her chin with a finger. "So... you get tired when hurt, but this degree isn't normal for you? What is normal?" she asked.

"I usually sleep a little more. I can usually expect me wanting to sleep almost every night for a week or two, after healing completely. But it's been months now," I said.

“Is it maybe because... you haven’t slept enough? Every night for a couple weeks is a lot. For you. I bet you’ve only gotten a few days worth of sleep since we left Lumen, Vim. Your naps are short, and not often,” she said.

“Maybe...” I said, and hoped that I could agree with her theory.

Please let it just be that.

“Want to... stop somewhere? Before we reach the Nation of Stone? We can spend a few days somewhere if you want,” she offered.

“Don’t tempt me Renn. I’ll be fine. The Queen is usually an easy stop. She usually has a few requests for me, but they’re easily handled. I’m normally there and gone within a week,” I said.

“Hm... but...”

I shook my head. “If I’m still tired after this stop... we can talk about it. But I’ll likely be fine. The nap I just had might have handled it, anyway,” I said.

Honestly it should have. I had likely slept almost ten hours...

I’d not slept that long in one go in years. Decades even.

Reaching up to dig out a piece of flesh that had started to seep and slide beneath the bandage, I grabbed it and tossed it aside. I ignored Renn's odd look as I wiped my now bloody hand on my shirt. It was already ruined anyway.

The issue though was my only other spare shirt was now on my head. Or rather, pieces of it was.

"You can lay down, Renn," I said to her.

She startled. Her back went straighter, and her tail became stiff. It was trying to curl around me for some reason.

"You noticed?" she asked sheepishly.

Glancing at her, I resisted the urge to kiss that mischievous smirk on her face.

"I promise not to mess with your face as you sleep. I'm not weird like that," I said.

Her smirk grew into a wry smile. "Oh please! You might regret not doing so, you know? Do you know how many people would give anything to touch these lips?" she asked as she started to lay down. Unlike me she was small enough; thin enough, that she could easily lay on her side on this bench.

Lips...? Is that what she had been messing with? Why my lips of all things?

"I don't know. How many?" I asked her as she went to putting her head on my lap.

As she shifted around... she eventually came to a complete stop. Going still.

Looking down, I frowned at that weird look on her face... then I realized what I had said.

Oh.

Woops.

Right...

"This is where you say only one that matters, Renn," I said to her.

She blinked a few times, and then her ears fluttered as she laughed. Such a thing felt odd on my lap, and made me smile.

“Well, I guess an eye for a heart is a fair trade, I guess,” she mumbled as her laughing turned into giggles.

Sitting back, I patted Renn’s head as she stared at up me. I made sure to do so with the hand that wasn’t bloody. She didn’t look ready or willing to sleep at all, based off that happy smirk.

It was a good thing she was here. The desert night was actually a little cold.

And she was warm. And not just physically either.

“Give me some compliments, Vim,” she then whispered.

“Hm?”

“I gave you complaints as you fell asleep. So it’s only fair.”

Was it...?

I smirked, and decided instead to tell her a bed-time story.

One of the past. Of my past.

I had meant to tell her a boring moment. One to lull her to sleep. It instead kept her awake until the sun rose from behind the far off monoliths.

My fault for telling her about when I had met Celine and Lilly. I had originally meant to just tell her of those islands. Of the peace I had found there... and the eventual loneliness that had followed. I should have chosen something else instead.

Oh well.