

Non Human 221

Chapter 221 A Stink of a Memory

The giant... rocks were split in two.

That was the only explanation.

Vim didn't seem to even realize how impossibly terrifying the sight before us, and around us was. He just... kept on guiding the donkey into the massive fissure. The gorge that separated two giant rocks that towered into the sky, taller than anything I'd seen before.

Even mountains weren't this big.

"Vim..." I worriedly reached over, to grab his arm. He let me, and didn't even glance at me oddly as I did so. He was gentle in moments like this. He never turned aside someone actually seeking comfort or safety.

For me though it was more for surety. I wanted to be told that...

"They only look so big Renn, because there's nothing leading up to them. They just shoot straight up. No hills. No climb. So they seem bigger than they are. They're actually not as high as most of the mountains we passed over back north," he said calmly.

Surely not.

On both sides of us, blocking out the whole skies and even the hot sun... were giant rocks. They were flat faced, and although I could see the colors of the earth upon them...

"This was one big rock," I said as I looked left and right. Even though a massive distance, likely far enough that it'd take me many minutes to run from one to the other, I could see the truth. You could actually see where the rocks could... join together. The massive indents. The same coloring and formations. It was as plain as day that these weren't two massive mountains, but a single one. One that had been split right down the middle. Cleaved in two.

"It had been at one time. Yes. It takes about an hour before you start seeing light from the other side," Vim said with a point in front of us.

Yes. I couldn't see the end of it either. And...

Looking up as we rode deeper and deeper into the mountain itself, I felt sick to my stomach.

"Vim... what if they fell? Or closed on us?" I asked worriedly. I could see the blue sky up top, but it was like a thin line. A thin line of bright blue, amongst the reds and browns.

"It won't Renn. I've been going through this gorge since before you were born. Maybe even before your parents or theirs, too," he said lightly.

That didn't make me feel any better. "That bridge had been sturdy too, you had said," I said to him.

Vim chuckled, and I felt something in my grip. Looking down, I watched as he shifted a little, turning his hand and arm. The one I held.

The muscles underneath his shirt shifted. Reminding me that he was more muscular than he appeared to be. I'd not have even noticed had I grabbed him a little lower on the arm, where his leather bracer was.

"All will be fine Renn. I promise. If something does happen, somehow, I'll keep you safe."

I nodded. I believed him. I honestly did. If anyone could protect me even as a mountain tried to eat me, it'd be him without a doubt.

But...

I glanced up again at the giant pillars of stone... and once again felt helplessly tiny.

I was but an ant to them. An insect. A tiny bug, not even worth the moment to recognize that I existed.

"Surely this is how gods feel," I said softly.

“Gods used to tremble just like you, yes. I’m glad you realize it,” Vim said.

My focus left the daunting world around me, and narrowed on the man who had a weird smirk on his face.

“Did they?” I asked him.

He nodded. “They did. Though... that might just have been because I was in front of them, so...” Vim stopped talking as he frowned.

Did... did he realize what he was saying?

“Vim...?” I barely got his name out of before I saw it. He blinked, even with his half-closed eye of white. He turned away, to pretend to focus on our path ahead. Even though there was no need. Although now heading between two massive pillars of stone, and down a gorge’s path, like the last two days our route has been straightforward and simple. You didn’t need to focus too hard on where we were going.

Would he give in? If I pushed?

Studying the way he... became more normal. More still. More calm. His face hadn’t lost all emotion, but had lost most of it. That happy smirk and general easiness was gone now.

He now looked like he did when in front of many of our members. On guard, but not much more.

No. Now wasn't the time.

"Did you split these rocks?" I asked instead.

Vim, like usual when I swiftly changed topics, blinked a small surprise as he tilted his head.

"No... I did not," he answered without worry.

"Could you have?" I asked.

He smiled softly. "Yes. But not through pure strength. It'd require machinery, and explosives. Something this big would have taken me weeks to do," he said.

Oh...? "Really?"

He nodded and leaned back a little. The cloth canopy of the wagon shifted since it was half-open and flapping around. Thanks to my earlier rummaging not too long before we entered this gorge. I had searched for the other water canteen. Since the other two had emptied. I hadn't retied and properly fastened the flap back into place so it had been loosely sitting behind Vim's back this whole time.

“Even the biggest rock can be split. It just takes a lot of effort. You basically drill a bunch of small holes, in a line, along a weak point. After drilling enough you just slam a thick rod into a vital point with enough force and...” Vim lifted his hands and opened a palm as he spoke. He thumped a closed fist against the open palm, as if to display what he’d do.

“Why’s it seem a lot of things break easily when thick rods are forced into them?” I asked him.

“You have a way with words, Renn,” Vim said with a smirk.

I squeezed his arm, and remembered I still held it.

Huh... how had I forgotten?

Letting him go, regretfully, I returned my attention to our path and not the incomprehensible things on either side of us.

“You said there’s a place to rest up ahead?” I asked.

“Yes. A little oasis. A large spring, with a tiny little forest. I think we might just spend the night there. We’re fine, but the donkey sounds like he’s about ready to bite me,” he said.

I giggled and nodded. Yes. Its breathing has become rather haggard.

"His name's Fred by the way," I reminded him.

"So you've told me."

"You never call him by name," I said.

"I once was kicked by a donkey. So I don't like them anymore," he said.

Judging from how he said that, it had been the truth... but not entirely. It had likely happened, but he wasn't being genuine in his distaste for the animals. He was just trying to tease me.

After a moment of smiling at him, Vim turned to look at me. Once again seeing his healing right eye, I wondered if it itched. It looked like it did. It was somewhat swollen... and although half open, it was also oddly gleaming. As if he was crying.

"Does it itch?" I asked him with a point to my own eye.

"A little," he answered honestly.

"I'm sorry," I apologized again.

He sighed at me. He was growing tired of me trying to apologize for quite literally gouging out his eyeball.

I wasn't sure how his... body worked... but I was starting to figure it out.

Vim's eye hadn't healed.

He had grown a new one.

All yesterday tiny pieces of the old eye had fallen out. Just... literally. They plopped out as he talked, or looked around. Sometimes he didn't even seem to notice. Then it'd bleed a little, which he would notice, and then the process repeated.

And now there was already a brand new eyeball. Although it was... all white, and didn't have a pupil yet. It was fully formed it seemed though, although still swollen around the socket.

"So... if I stabbed you... would you grow a whole new stomach or something?" I asked him.

Vim smirked at me. "You know that's not the first time you've spoken about stabbing me. And not in a jokingly matter, either," he noticed.

“I’ve only thought about it, a few times,” I admitted.

His smirk turned into a grin as he chuckled. “Why do you want to stab me Renn?” he asked.

“More than I already have you mean?” I teased him.

His smirk turned into a wry frown, and then he smiled again. “Right?” he agreed.

Smiling happily at him... I did my best to not smile too weirdly. Since I knew it was somewhat ridiculous.

“Well... I’m just... trying to understand you, I guess. Or rather, your body.”

“It won’t be long and you’ll know my body very well. Why rush it?” he asked.

I felt the blood rush to my face, and had to look away from that smirk. Gosh how he could he say things like that so swiftly? Without warning or seemingly even a thought?

It wasn’t fair. At all.

Vim chuckled in triumph, and I squirmed for a moment. My tail thumped against the side of the wagon, since it was laying over the edge, and I sighed.

“Honestly Vim... I originally just wanted to know more about your abilities. So that I could properly react, when able,” I said, doing my best to completely ignore my burning cheeks or ears.

“React properly...?” he asked softly.

I nodded, and took a small breath. Although the air and world was hot, the rush of air still felt cooler than my own body.

“Yeah... I mean... like in Lumen. Vim, if you had gotten that hurt in front of me and... let’s say, fell into the sea or something, I’d genuinely think you were dead. What if you passed out and needed help? I need to know when your injuries are something I should be actually concerned about or...something I shouldn’t,” I started to explain my reasoning.

Instead of laughing or smirking at me, Vim actually frowned and nodded. “I see. Yes... that makes sense.”

“It... it does?” I asked both him and myself.

He nodded again. “You’re right. Actually, very so. There have indeed been situations where members have gotten hurt, or even died, because they panicked or mistook my condition. It’s why nowadays I try to make it clear to everyone that I’m basically immortal. Even if I’m not. I do imply it even though it’s a lie, to both bolster confidence in everyone but also so that such mistakes don’t happen in the future. Like Lumen... the others had seen my injuries too. A few had even panicked. The ones who’d never seen

me so hurt before. Yet they didn't run away at the mere sight of me like that, and those monsters, because the rest there had been able to tell them not to worry. That they'd seen me endure such before, and even worse. So they remained calm," Vim explained.

Oh...

I nodded, understanding perfectly. So many of our members were so fickle. So meek. So it made absolutely perfect sense for him to have such a reason.

If them seeing such wounds upon their protector wasn't properly prepared for, or explained, then... yes. They'd run. They'd flee. In fear.

That was why he always acted so confidently. So brazenly. Because it instilled confidence even into those without any.

"Well... firstly. You've just witnessed a perfect showcasing," Vim said with a point to his eye. The one healing.

Ah...

"See Renn? Even a little moment like that had been enough. Your nail sharp enough. This tells you Renn... you actually can hurt me. Now your nails might not puncture my skin, as it had my eyeball, but if you wielded your sword or a spear it'd be enough. You could run me through, if you wished it," he said.

“But even if I stabbed... you in like the chest... it’d be the same right? You’d not die?” I asked.

“No. I wouldn’t. Just as my eye is healing so too would any similar injury. I suffered far worse in Lumen and only a few days later I was walking around as if it’d never happened. The more serious an injury, the longer it takes, but barring some very unique injuries... I heal nearly completely in a week or so,” Vim explained.

“But... how? Surely there’s... a limit, or a point of no return?” I asked.

“There is... There is...” he nodded as he spoke slowly, as if pondering something.

Oh...? Was he actually going to tell me?

Impossible. He had just grown quiet and distant over something so much less important. Why would he change so quickly?

Before I could prepare another, different type of question, he stopped me. By telling me.

“Let me tell you a story,” Vim then said.

I nodded, intently focused on the man sitting next to me. Honestly he was too far away. I wished it wasn’t so hot, then I’d be able to lean against him as I had done during the night before.

“There was a legend. Of a warrior. One not from my people, but a similarly great civilization. The man was named Achilles,” Vim began.

I nodded as he glanced at me... and dedicated both this supposed warrior’s name to memory, and Vim’s expression. He looked excited to tell me about this.

“This warrior was considered to be one of the greatest warriors ever born. His feats unbelievable by most. And, yes, he was considered for the longest time to be even immortal,” Vim continued.

“Considered,” I noted.

He nodded. “The legends say that his mother dipped him into a river. Think of it like... well, the legend is basically that the river itself is, or was, a god. A goddess. But although a god, it was also considered a literal river so...” Vim frowned, and I realized that he realized he was struggling. Either he was trying to tell me of this legend without telling me the whole thing, or was trying to properly... translate it. “Anyway, Achilles was dunked into the river of the underworld. A river of oaths and power. This river, being... magical, enchanted Achilles. Granting him basic immortality. However, because of how she dipped him into the river... he had a fatal flaw.”

Transfixed, I watched as Vim held out a hand. It was cupped and angled... and I realized what he was implying.

“She dipped him like so. By holding his heel,” he said as he pretended to dunk a baby into a river of power.

I gulped, and looked down. To the little plank of wood our feet rested upon.

To Vim's.

"Thus a section of his body that wasn't immortal," I said, understanding.

Vim nodded out of the corner of my eye. I was still focused on his feet. Or rather, his boots. Had they always looked so thick? Is that why he always wore thick shoes? "And so his inevitable downfall. He was eventually struck in that very heel. There are many versions of the story, on how it happened... either by spear or arrow, or by a man or god, but the basics of it is that nothing could defeat him... until someone accidentally and unknowingly hit him in the only spot where he could be harmed," Vim finished his little story.

"It'd rather hear the whole legend, Vim," I said stiffly.

He chuckled. "I know. I'll tell you it later. Maybe over dinner. Basically though Renn, that's my whole thing too. I have an... Achilles' heel," he said lightly.

Too lightly. For how serious of a thing he was saying.

My breathing became weird as my eyes blurred... and I looked again to his feet.

“Oh... wait. Renn... it’s not actually my heel. I was just using that as an example,” Vim said quickly.

“What? Huh?” I worriedly looked at his face for conformation.

Yes. He hadn’t lied. He was actually looking at me with a rather distressed look... and not because he had just realized he told me something serious and important. But rather because he was worried for my own self. He was worried I’d be distressed, so he was.

“Really. I cherish how much worry you just had for me. Not many would even think to worry over me in such a way... even after I told them about it. But honestly, yes. I do have a fatal weakness... but other than that singular weakness, there’s really not much I need to fear.”

“But... you do get hurt,” I said, glancing at his eye. It was moving now. I couldn’t see a pupil yet, but it was definitely moving. It hadn’t been before this conversation.

“Yes, but I heal quickly. Like so,” he pointed at his eye.

Although... a little relieved... and also very happy that Vim had told me, I still felt oddly worried.

I felt as if I’d just been entrusted with something. Something important... yet...

“Wait... so what is it? What’s your weakness?” I asked as I wondered what it was. Something else maybe? Between his thighs? Under an arm?

He chuckled at me. "Well... I'll not tell you. Sorry."

Although I tried to stop myself from frowning in such a way as if I was about to cry... I still did so. At least I didn't cry outright. Vim shifted a little upon seeing my expression as I sniffed. "Someday you'll trust me enough, I promise."

"Ah... no..."

I nodded. "You will. It's already starting, so..." I wiped an eye, even though I really wasn't crying just yet. It had just gotten a little watery.

"Rennalee... The reason I won't tell you is not because I don't trust you, but because of your mind," Vim said quickly.

"My... mind?"

He nodded and sighed. "Renn, you remember everything. In scary detail. Even little things, that have no importance. What then would you do with knowledge such as this? How would you treat the information of my one fatal weakness?" he asked me.

"Well... I'd hide it. Forever. Never to even dare whisper it," I said sternly.

He nodded. "I believe you. I really do... I don't think you'd tell anyone, even under horrible duress. However..." Vim shifted a little, as to better face me. He sat with his leg half laying on the seat again, as he had before. He then lifted the reins at me, as if to point at me with them. "What would you do if say... we were sitting. At a table. With our members. And eating dinner. And then suddenly, without warning... my weakness revealed itself?" he asked.

"I'd... stop it? Or keep it away from you?" I leaned forward a little, to hold his gaze and answer with all my heart.

Was his weakness something that common? That it could show itself under such a scenario? Did that mean it wasn't necessarily a body part, but instead something... else? Like a weapon, or item? Maybe a creature?

Was it a food or drink...? Was that why he so rarely ate in view of others?

Vim's smile became warm and gentle as he nodded. "Exactly."

"What... what does that mean? How's that a reason to not tell me? How's my concern and effort to protect you a bad thing, Vim?" I asked worriedly.

"That you'd help me? Or try to keep me safe? Not a bad thing at all... in fact it's sexy beyond all hell. But, Renn, remember... I mentioned that we'd be sitting with others," he reminded me.

"Our members, you said."

He nodded.

“People who we cherish. Our own people,” I further described them.

He nodded again... but did so much slower. “Some members are as much my enemy as those who hunt us, Renn,” he whispered.

I gulped as I leaned away from him. Not too far, but enough to make him blink and frown.

Cold understanding swept over me as I realized exactly what he was trying to say.

He nodded. “You’d react. Upon seeing it. Or realizing it. And even if you were... able to keep your fear and worry inside, and not try to intervene, you’d still react all the same. A tiny twitch of an ear,” he reached out to gently touch the tip of my right ear.

I tried to keep it from flickering, but wasn’t able to. The moment his finger touched the fur upon it, it moved.

Proving his point.

“A flinch of an eye. The pupils widening,” his finger then slid slowly down, to slide along the side of my face.

My eyes narrowed at him as he labeled the things that not only would I do... but likely did even now. Today. In the past. And would in the future.

He'd seen it. He's noticed it. He knew the things I did when I noticed something amiss. When I saw threats, or felt in danger.

He spoke of what I did innately. Instinctively. Beyond my control.

“Vim...” I mumbled as I shook my head softly.

“Then of course... they'd notice it too. Maybe not right away. Not at first. But... over the course of hundreds of moments? Hundreds of years? Thousands, even? Renn...” Vim shook his head as he stopped talking, his point made.

I shook my own head as well, but couldn't find the words to say. Nothing to argue against his point could come to mind.

He nodded back though, unafraid to admit it. “I won't tell you, Renn... not because I don't trust you, but because I'd never be able to forgive myself. I'd hate for the last thing I did in this life to be causing you such sorrow,” he said.

“Sorrow...?” I asked. What’d he mean?

“If I died because of something you did... even indirectly in such a way, I know what it would do to you. You’re the type of woman to never forgive yourself. And I’ll not be the man to wound your soul to such a level. I’d rather you hate me for not telling you than you live for an unknown number of years with such a scar on your heart,” he said.

I gulped as I tried to find it in me to argue. To debate him. To tell him he was wrong... that he was wrong about me.

But...

I couldn’t.

He was right.

I’d not be able to hide it or ignore it. Not only was it nearly impossible for me to not try and help those who needed it, especially when right in front of me... I loved him.

I loved him, so of course I’d panic over him being in danger.

And I couldn’t even hide my thoughts half the time anyway. My expressions were vivid. My emotions obvious. And many of our members were... old... and wise. Cunning. Some were even vile.

Like Brandy who would scheme hundreds of years ahead. Or this Queen of Stone, who would sacrifice thousands.

Those like them would notice. Since I'd not be able to hide it.

And if Vim was telling the truth then...

Then...

Some of them might use that information. Against him. Against me.

"Please understand, Renn. I wouldn't mind dying by your hands... even if indirectly... but please, don't make me the one who tortures your soul in such a way. You deserve better," he then said.

Without hesitation I crawled forward. I didn't give Vim a chance to dodge, or say anything, as I wrapped him in a hug.

Squeezing him tightly, I groaned as I fought back the sobs.

For a moment Vim didn't do anything. He didn't even breathe... but after a second he relaxed, and sighed. Then he returned the hug, although only gently. He patted me on the back as I held onto him.

"I'm sorry, Vim," I whispered into his chest.

"It's all good Renn. Really."

"Mhm..."

Keeping hold of him, I wondered just how far ahead Vim has thought about our relationship.

For him to have thought of this already... or rather...

I might not be the first. He may have had to explain such things to others before. Like Celine.

But that didn't matter.

I'd prove it. I'd be the one.

I'll be the one to find out how. I'll figure out how to become someone who could learn such secrets about him... and not fail.

I wasn't sure how I'll do it. Nor how long it'd take.

But I'll figure it out.

I swear it.

Squeezing him tighter, I groaned again as I pushed my face right above his leather breastplate. Near the his neck.

"I love you Vim," I told him.

"Mhm. I love you too. Stink and all," he said.

Smiling between the emotions... I slowly blinked, and then leaned back a tad as to look up at him.

"I stink?" I asked worriedly.

“Yeah... I’m glad we’re finally here. See the oasis?” he asked with a gesture of his chin.

Turning, I found we were suddenly surrounded by greenery.

Real green too. Not the pointy brownish stuff.

There was grass. Trees. Bushes. Even flowers... and...

Not far from us was water. It glistened a little, even though shielded from the hot sun by both the massive stone pillars and the canopies of the trees around it. It looked like a small pond, with many small streams flowing in and out of it.

“Oh...?”

Laying my head back against Vim, I sighed as we neared it.

“Do I really stink, or are you just trying to get me to let you go?” I asked as Fred started to slow down.

“You do. You smell like the snails,” he said stiffly.

Blinking wildly... I tried to understand what he had just said.

And I barely comprehended it, too. I had an easier time with the earlier conversations and stories... but...

Slowly unhooking my arms, I released Vim as I sat back. "What...?" I asked in disbelief.

He nodded, and then looked away from me. He acted as if he was studying the trees we were now passing, but I knew better.

"I'm sorry. I've not said anything till now, but I have to. Especially if you're going to start really clinging to me so often. You need a bath, Renn," he said.

"I wiped myself several times a day while we were there!" I shouted at him. Yes I hadn't bathed or cleaned myself since we started out, but there was nothing I could do about that. The little water we had was for drinking, not bathing... and...

Growing quickly upset with him, I thought of all the times we'd gone weeks without baths. He's mentioned a few times I stunk, but never to such a degree as this or rudely!

"I'm sure! But..." he glanced at me, and likely saw my rising anger... so he looked away and coughed. "Renn..."

“Renn nothing! Not everyone can just... not smell at all, Vim. It’s not fair. Normal people get smelly, and sweaty, and!” I started to go off on him, but he raised a hand. One without reins.

I nearly bit at it, but he turned to me and grabbed one of my hands. One I had left on him. One that had balled into a fist.

Glaring at the man who better choose his next words carefully, I watched as he took a tiny breath for confidence... and then looked me in the eyes.

“Those snails. The reason I don’t like them, is because a very long time ago... I did something horrible. Painful. Disgusting. The smell reminds me of that. Every time I get a whiff of it, the memories play back real quick... and it hurts, so...” he slowly stopped talking, and I felt my whole body go limp.

Tense shoulders slumped, and my balled fists became gentle hands as I stared at the man who looked hurt.

My numb was oddly numb as Vim nodded. “I know. It’s rude. It’s very rude. But... I don’t want to look back on these moments with you and have them tainted by those damned snails. Just now I might have even kissed you, but the smell is just...” he stopped talking, because I tugged my hand out of his.

Pulling away, I leapt off the wagon. “Renn!” Vim shouted, and I could hear the concern. He thought I just jumped away out of anger. Out of disgust.

Well... there was disgust.

But not at him.

Fred tilted his head at me as I passed him, going faster than him. I ignored the sound of Vim also leaping off the wagon. I heard the soft dirt squish upon his landing. "Renn...!"

Hurrying to the pool of water, I quickly began to undress. I'll need Vim to bring my bag, for the soaps and washcloths, but for now my only goal was to dunk myself in that water. First I needed to really soak my hair... then... scrub and scrub. I wasn't sure how I'd get the smell out of the clothes... but I'd try.

One way or another.

I'll never again go into those buildings.

Those damned snails had cost me a kiss.

Chapter 222 Checkpoint of Stone

I tugged on the reins a little to bring the donkey to a stop. It hadn't wanted to, so I had to tug just a bit harder.

As the cart rolled to a stop, one of the armored soldiers clanked over to us.

He had a thick layer of sweat covering his face, and not even his deeply tanned skin could hide the flush of heat exposure. "Merchants are ya?" he asked as he stepped up to us.

"Aye. We carry dyes," I said, and reached over to pull over the flap of the canopy. I had already unfastened it upon noticing this checkpoint from a distance.

The armored man, and two others, stepped up and over to the side of the cart as to peer in. I stood from my seat, and reached over to pop open one of the jugs closest to them. Upon doing so the man peered in, and then whistled.

"What wealth. And... no guards?" the man frowned worriedly as he glanced around. I noticed his eyes linger on Renn for a moment, but not long enough to be weird.

"You either have the devil's luck, or you're a stone of man," one of the other knights said as he studied me.

Renn made an odd scoff, but I ignored her as I went to putting the lid back onto the jug.

"Honestly we've been on the road for awhile, and it took a few months to get all the product ready... Is something going on?" I asked innocently as I looked around. Past this little guard station was a road full of people.

Carts. Tents. An encampment.

I had thought it to be the army, but it wasn't. At least not entirely. Only one section of the tents were the colors of this nation's military. The rest were random mismatched colors and sizes.

This wasn't a military encampment but something worse.

"Indeed there is. I guess if you've been out of society so long to not know, which means you might be safe... but the rules are the rules. No matter how wealthy you are," the one who had commented on my luck huffed as he spoke, and then stepped away. Leaving us and the first soldier alone.

The heat burnt man nodded at me. His metal armor clanked, reminding me he was likely sweltering alive inside of it. Poor guy.

"There's a plague. A bad one. You two look healthy, and as he said you've likely not contracted it being away from people... but the Queen has laid down the law. You must quarantine. You can take up camp on either side of the road, but you can't cross the next checkpoint until we give you permission," the man said with a point down the road.

I could see the next checkpoint. It was a distance away, likely on purpose. It looked nearly a mile or two away, and there looked to be more soldiers there than here.

"How long?" I asked as I sat back down on the cart's bench.

"Five days, at least. If you show no signs by the sixth, you're free to enter the Stones," the man said.

“And what fee is there for this wonderful experience?” I asked.

The man smirked and laughed at me. “Nothing, you merchant! Now get going. Pick a spot to set camp. A man will be by as the sun sets to take your names and marker, as to start the process,” he said as he stepped away. To join his fellows back to the shaded tent they had been sitting at.

I didn’t blame him. Not only did he want out of the sun, he likely didn’t want to spend any longer than he had to with someone who might be potentially sick.

But...

I sighed as Renn offered me back the reins. She had picked them up when I had went to deal with the border knights.

With a light flick, I sent the donkey into motion. The cart began to wheel away, and we entered the...

Quarantine zone.

Wonderful.

Glancing around at the many tents and people on either side of the large road, I wondered if I should make Renn a mask. Did we even have enough cloth for me to do so? I’d torn the only other shirt I had...

“What’s a quarantine?” Renn whispered her question as we were stared at. Most of the people in their camps were sitting around fires, but distantly. They didn’t want to sit too close to the flames since it was hot. But it was nearing dinner time. They were cooking and boiling water.

“It’s a way to keep disease from spreading. We’ll have to spend the week here, before they’ll let us enter the city. If we don’t show any signs of sickness by then, they’ll think we’re safe enough to let in,” I said.

Glancing ahead of us, down the road, and past the other checkpoint... I studied the massive stones in the distance.

This area was a flatland. Basically a giant prairie. Yet in the center of it were massive towering stones, similar to the many monoliths we had been passing through and around on the way here. The Kingdom of Stone was built into those massive stones. Not just around and upon them, but inside them. Half the city was built inside the giant rocks, in hallowed out sections.

“A week...” Renn mumbled a complaint, and I noticed the diverse crowds we were still passing. There had to be at least a few hundred people here. Some of the tents were massive, likely housing dozens inside of them.

There were merchants. Citizens of this land. A mercenary band had a huge tent of white. Their banner was flowing proudly in the wind, on either side of the tent. A group of the eastern blond could be seen past another smaller group of darker skin, and there were even groups of women too.

And this was but one of four entrances into the City of Stone.

I sighed as I realized the stench in the air, and I decided to take us as far to the end of the road as possible. I'll put some distance between us and the rest.

The knights would understand. I was carrying dyes. Valuables. More wealth than likely all of the other merchants here combined. They'd just think I was being cautious.

We didn't even have enough supplies to last the week. I'll need to make sure Renn rationed her water.

Finding a spot of grass, a short distance from the very last tent alongside the side of the road, I guided the donkey off the road and to our new camp.

"Hm. At least we get grass," Renn said happily.

Yes. Some of the others were on gravel and stone.

Once far enough off the road I got off the cart and went to readying the cart. I locked the wheels in place, so it'd not accidentally move, and put down the little stand that would let it stay upward and not fall forward.

Renn went to unfastening the donkey, and I dug out a small stake from the back of the cart. I found the lushest part of the grass and pushed it into the earth. Not entirely, just enough to be used as a secure post for the donkey. So that it'd not run off.

Donkeys rarely did. And I didn't need it to pull the cart, but I wasn't going to risk it. Not with all the weird people around us, and other animals. There were lots of other horses and mules nearby.

"Do... do we have enough water Vim? For Fred?" Renn asked as she brought me the creature. I went to fastening it to the post, but I gave it more than enough slack that it would be able to not just graze all around us, but trot around too if it wanted to.

"No. I'll figure it out. There are rivers nearby that I can draw water from, but with the disease going around I don't know how hard it will be for me to use them. They might make me pay them for it," I said.

"Oh?" she looked around, likely searching the horizon for the gleam of water.

She couldn't see any, but I knew why. They had dug the aqueducts underground. To shield it from the hot sun. There were only a few sections where the rivers were accessible, or wells and pools built for that very purpose.

"Sorry Renn. I can probably get us to get through quicker, if I made a fuss and sent word to Landi... but sometimes it's better to just abide. When in Rome," I said as I went patted the donkey as it went to nibbling on the grass.

"This is Rome? I thought they called it Stone," Renn glanced away, to the towering rocks.

“Ah... no. It’s not. Sorry. That was just a phrase,” I said, and had to kick myself again.

Damn. I know I had made the decision to be more open with her, but really. Too much too fast would only get her hurt.

“Come on, let’s make a little campfire,” I said. Hopefully I didn’t sound too forceful.

She giggled as she went to help me, and I knew she had noticed. Yet like the many times before... she had been more than willing to forgive me.

To wait patiently. For me.

Such a weird woman. She’d genuinely wait forever, wouldn’t she?

It wasn’t long after we finished making a small encampment. One with a small fire pit, and a few small boxes for seats, that the man who would take our census showed up.

He wore dark robes, and had a bald head. One that gleamed even in the setting sun thanks to the sweat.

He had been accompanied by a pair of guards, but they had remained on the road. They had let the robed man approach us alone, though I knew the reason as to why.

We hadn't seemed like much a threat. They knew we had likely been out of contact with others for a long while, since dyes usually came from the far east. From the sea.

"The dye merchants," the man said as he approached.

"Aye. My name is Vim, hers is Renn," I introduced us as he pulled around a tiny note board. One with crunchy paper upon it. It made noises as he wrote on it. Funny. I knew that this place had well made paper, so it was likely just something he's re-used or got wet on accident.

"Vim and Renn... So we'll come by and check you twice a day. Once in the morning, and once at sundown," the man began to explain the rules as he then pulled something out of his pocket. He stepped forward, and I took the tiny wooden slab.

It had a single digit upon it. The numeral here for one.

Our first night.

"Six days, right?" I verified.

"Yes. On the seventh morning you'll be allowed to enter town," the man said.

“The guard said six,” I said as I handed Renn the little wooden piece. She had stepped over as to see it.

“The rules changed two days ago. Every two days a shipment of water and food comes. You get rations, but if you want more you have to pay for it. You don’t need to worry over guards, our military will patrol the road all day and night...” the man went quiet as he studied Renn and me, and I tilted my head at him.

What was it?

“Dyes? Really?” he asked me.

“Yeah... want to see them?” I asked, and I wondered if he was doubting us. Why?

“No. I’d get in trouble if I did. Still...” he sighed as he looked away, to the guards watching us.

Oh? Maybe he was a corrupt official or something. Could I bribe him to let us in earlier if I offered him some of the dyes?

I let the thought simmer for a moment, but didn’t get to act on it. He sighed again and shook his head, likely tossing the idea out of his head as well.

“Try not to mingle with anyone. There’s a few people here showing symptoms. The larger tent in the front especially. The guards plan to check it in the morning. Stay safe, keep out of trouble and the days will pass quickly,” the man finished giving us the scenario, and then turned away.

I watched him go, and noted how he and the guards didn’t even say a word to each other as they went back down the road, heading to the next group.

“Was he odd to you, or is it just me?” Renn asked softly.

“I think he was going to ask for a bribe,” I said as I turned away, to go about starting a fire. It’d be night soon, and although Renn and I honestly didn’t need a fire to stay warm even in the desert nights, it’d be strange if we didn’t pretend to do so.

“Bribe...” Renn studied the man and his guards as they began to talk to the nearest group from us. It looked like a family from here, but I honestly didn’t pay much attention to them.

Kneeling next to the little stone fire pit we had made, I got the fire going.

“So they bring water and food. He mentioned rations? So they will give them for free?” Renn asked as she went over to the cart.

“Likely just the bare minimum. I’ll get us some supplies when it comes,” I said.

She went to rummaging around in her bag, and I noticed the sounds she made as doing so.

That wasn't her bag, but mine.

With the fire readied, I stepped over to the small box I had placed to use as a seat. Inside were rolls of thread. Colored thread, already dyed. Yet not fashioned into anything yet.

Sitting carefully, I made sure not to break or crush the box. Luckily it was made of stronger stuff than most, thanks to the type of wood it was made of, but I made a note to not sit down too quickly... it'd break otherwise.

I didn't care about breaking the box, or even damaging the contents, but I knew Renn would laugh hysterically if I broke it... and then likely go pass out from the amount of laughing she'd do if I went and broke another not long after.

There weren't any rocks or logs around... I'll need to figure something out. Maybe I could convince one of the guards to bring me one, for a few coins.

Glancing over at the donkey, I found it lazily munching on the grass not too far from the cart. It looked exhausted.

It was the same one that human family had used. The first ones to have arrived to Secca for work.

Only three families had arrived before we left, and all three of them had come for help. Not just for work... but for safety.

Most had lost family. Not just to the plague but to the famine. They had hoped to work at Secca earlier, and longer, in exchange for not just the safety the canyons provided but the plentiful drinking water and food it had.

It wasn't my place to tell them no, but I wish it had been.

"Think these would be tasty warmed up?" Renn asked as she stepped away from the cart, and displayed some fruit. They looked like...

"No. Don't do that," I warned her against trying to cook bananas on an open fire.

"Oh...? Hm..." she walked over, to sit on the box she had chosen for her own seat. She carried the small bundle of bananas with her, and stared at them as if starving. Maybe she was.

"You can cook them. There are many ways to. But just cooking them over an open flame will just ruin them. You could cut them up and use a pan, I guess, but I'm not sure how well it'd go," I said.

We didn't have anything to wrap them up properly, so an open flame would just burn them.

"Oh?" she went to peeling one as she stared at me.

Watching her happily eat the banana, I wondered why she had placed her box so close to my own. She was close enough I could reach her with an outstretched foot if I tried.

“One day I’ll make you banana bread. You’d probably like that,” I said.

She smirked at me as she chewed the last bit of the banana, all the while staring at the peeling of it. She held it in her hand as if...

She wasn’t going to...

She did. She took a bite of the peel, and for a few moments chewed on it.

It didn’t take long for her to realize that the peel wasn’t worth eating. She still finished the bite she had taken, but went to readying another banana instead of trying to eat more of the peel.

“Is... is this the first time you’ve ever had a banana?” I asked her, worriedly.

“Hm? No? Vim... I’ve been eating these since we left Secca,” she said, just as worriedly.

“I know. I meant were these the first you’ve ever had before?” I asked her, specifying.

“Yes. Or well. No. Riz gave me one for the first time the other night,” Renn said as she went to eating the next.

Huh... the nation she was from had rather decent trade, all things considered. She should have not only seen them before, but have eaten them often enough to not be too new to the fruit.

As she smiled at me, while chewing, I realized I’d done a disservice to her.

There were likely a lot of different foods and drinks here she’d enjoy. Stuff she’s never seen before.

I’ll need to put an effort into such a thing. After we leave here we’ll slowly head back north, so the local cuisine will shift somewhat back to what she was used to. So before we left the Stone city, I’ll make sure she gets her fill.

“Want one?” she asked.

“I’m fine thank you,” I said.

She nodded as she went to eat another. A small pile of the peels were starting to form next to her feet.

It was very... humbling, that Renn would always offer me some of her food. Even though, like most in the Society, she knew I didn't need to eat anywhere near as often as they. Many members often asked if I wanted drinks or food when I first arrived, but rarely would they offer afterwards. And even rarer was it for them to offer as often, or as Renn did.

In fact while traveling with other members, it was usually only the children who ever asked or offered to share.

Taking a small breath I glanced around. To make sure no one was coming near us. There wasn't, of course, but I could feel that we were being watched.

Not too surprising. There were dozens of people within shouting distance, and I knew just like we were about to be... they were likely very bored.

If we weren't being quarantined I'd bet many would have come over to talk. To exchange news of the area, or just to visit.

There were some positives to dangerous turmoil.

"Landi is a woman about your height. She's got brown hair, and looks nearly entirely human. But her eyebrows have white stripes in them, down the middle. It's a little trait, but it's obvious when you notice it. If we get separated for some reason, go find her. She's the Queen of this place, the ruler. She has a castle on one of those large rock pillars. The one in the middle, surrounded by the other big ones. It's very obvious once you see it," I gave Renn some information, just in case.

“Oh...? Okay,” Renn nodded as she glanced over her shoulder, to the distant city. It was growing dark, but it was still readily visible. All the lanterns and lights were being lit, so the city was gleaming like a massive cloud of fireflies.

“Do you think you could get home if something happened? If we had to separate?” I asked her.

“Home...” Renn perked up, and I noticed her hat shift a little. My question had made her focus.

She pondered it for a moment, as she slowly peeled another banana. She was running out of them, she only had a few left on her lap.

“Or at least get back to Secca?” I asked as I watched her fingers.

She had cut her nails... very short this time. She had done it the day after I had accidentally woke up and poked my eye on one of her nails, so I understood why she had done it... but...

I kind of liked them when they were longer. And for me to have been the reason that she'd probably now keep them that short for a good long while... it was well...

A little upsetting, to be honest.

“I could do that. Especially since most of the road had been straight. I might get lost a little in the canyons, but only because I’d be entering from another angle. If I rounded them to find the route we took on the way there, I’d be able to find it easily,” she said as she thought of it.

Right. Her memory.

Terrifying.

“Home though might be hard. We spent longer on that river than not, and I’d been distracted so I hadn’t cared at all for watching the world pass us by. But honestly Vim I probably could? I mean... I just need to go north until I find a place I recognize or know about, and then head home from there,” she said.

I nodded. “Just... remember for me. Just in case. You never know Renn,” I said.

She smiled as she nodded, and then tossed aside another peel. “I will. But let’s try not to let that happen, okay?”

Right. Let’s not.

Renn happily went to eating another banana, and I wondered how she hadn’t gotten sick of them yet. That was her... eighth one? So far? She had eaten a few more earlier, on the cart this afternoon, but...

“Is this how they write the number one, Vim?” Renn then asked as she held up the little wooden marker that man had given us.

“Yes. It’s more reminiscent of an older language. But you’ll find that most of the written word here is the same as you know. A few words might look odd, but you’ll be able to make sense of them with a little effort,” I said.

“It’s similar to what the witch taught me. Her language wrote it like this too,” she said.

Oh...?

Oh. Right. “You did say she taught you another language,” I said as I remembered.

She nodded, and then frowned a moment... and then she drew a symbol in the air with her hand that held her next conquest.

At first I didn’t see what she meant by similar... but after a moment I realized it.

“She taught you the language of the western steeps?” I asked, dumbfounded.

“I don’t know? She just said it was hers, and that it would be useful for me. She had a lot of books in that language, so...”

Leaning forward, I checked the ground.

No. Although dry, the grass was too thick and healthy. She'd not be able to write in the dirt.

Did we even have a pen or pencil? Or a strip of charcoal?

No... but we had paint. Plenty of it.

Standing, I ignored Renn's curious look as I went over to the cart. To find the small jug I had in mind.

The small vase like jug was about the size of Renn's head, and was full of a sloshing paint. A green color. Once I had it I went to find something she could paint on. It didn't take me long to just take the lid off one of the larger boxes. A little paint wouldn't hurt it.

"Vim?" Renn sat up straighter as I carried the jug of paint and the lid over to her. Putting the paint down next to her, I smiled at her and knelt a little.

Picking up a small stick, I handed it to her and nodded. "Write me a word, in that language," I said.

Renn gave me an excited smile as she nodded and happily grabbed both the stick and the lid from me. She put it on her lap, ignoring the bananas, and I took the lid off the jug of paint for her.

She dunked it in, and then held it out a moment. It dripped a bright green, and after a tiny shake it was ready.

Stepping around her, as to look over her shoulder, I watched as Renn wrote... or rather painted... a single word.

“Yep. That’s the language found in the western steeps. Interesting,” I said as I noticed the way she had written the vowels. Not only was that the language of the steeps, it was the one of the educated. They had two writing styles, one for the higher born individuals and those of a lesser cast.

Which meant Renn’s little witch friend... had not only been from far away, relative to where she had found Renn... but had also been someone of importance.

Maybe even a royal. Which was odd. They’d not have banished her for being weird, or her supposed magic she used.

If Renn knew her story she hadn’t shared it with me yet. Maybe I’d ask it someday.

Renn frowned and sighed as she looked up at me.

“Hm?” I wondered what was wrong.

“You’re just going to ignore what I wrote?” she asked me.

Oh. Right...

It wasn’t the word for love... but it was close. It more so meant passion than affection. But if Renn knew that or not was up to question.

Smirking at her, I held my hand out. She stared at it for a moment, but then handed me the small stick.

Dipping it back into the paint, I responded to her word with one of my own. I wrote it a little smaller, since she had taken up most of the lid with her calligraphy, but it was fine.

Renn smiled at my answer... and I handed her back the stick. She took it excitedly, and I wondered if she’d use up all the paint before we were able to deliver it to Landi.

I didn’t mind it... but I would have to find her more to paint on. That lid was only going to work for a few moments, and there were only a few boxes with such lids. The rest had been sealed with nails.

Maybe I could just let her paint all over the cart...? We’d be leaving it here anyway.

“Vim.”

Turning to her, she smirked as she lifted the lid, to show the other side. Where she had written a small sentence. One that was basically accusing me of being a failure of a man, in a way.

“Yes. I wish we had a tent too,” I said to the oddly happy woman.

Giving me a toothy grin, Renn happily giggled as she went to paint something else.

Knowing her she’d spend the whole night talking to me like this. Not with words spoken, but painted.

Oh well... it was fun. And I’d rather her be happy and joyful than depressed and bored.

And if I could keep her attention on me, and away from the very obviously sick people not far from us... then all the more reason to indulge her.

Chapter 223 Hark

Another group of people were being rounded up.

Sitting next to Vim, I felt oddly anxious as I watched the soldiers march the people out of the tent.

They did so at spear point. And some of the people being forced out onto the road were barely able to do so on their own. One of them was being carried by two others. They looked wobbly from here... as if...

“Ah...” I sat up a little straighter as they all fell. The world got a little louder as people began to shout and yell. Both the soldiers shouted orders and the people being forcefully marched into a group complained and begged. The chorus they sung made me fidget and worry. It was a good thing Vim was next to me, or else I’d be very...

“Hm?” Vim looked up from the little leather piece he had been messing with for the better part of the afternoon. I turned away, and looked at him... and kept my eyes on his as he watched the soldiers become violent.

Flinching as someone screamed in pain, I watched as Vim sighed.

Unlike me he wasn’t bothered by the scene of violence, but he did seem annoyed over it all the same.

“One side is both following orders, and scared of getting sick. The other is afraid they’ll be killed if they comply. It never goes well during such disparities,” he said lightly.

“You sound far too calm, Vim,” I mumbled.

“We’re not sick,” he said.

No. We weren't. Thank goodness.

But it seemed such a thing wasn't as common as I had thought.

When we had first arrived... we had camped at the end of the groupings. We had been the last camp along the road, and had a little bit of distance between us and others.

Now there were more. Nearly two more dozen encampments had formed, both across the road from us and past us farther down the road.

And the camps we had passed had started to dwindle... but not because they had been allowed to leave and enter the city.

Another scream echoed out, and I flinched at the woman's cries for help.

"Vim..." I complained.

"I know Renn. I'm sorry. But I'll not force our will on others, especially so when by doing so I'd just be endangering you. And Landi, who would be the one I'd be going to war against by doing so," he said calmly.

I nodded. I knew that. I understood it. He's been telling me similar stuff since the soldiers had started rounding the sick up and...

Turning, I looked away from Vim for the first time since I had looked away as to look past the nearby tents. To the bellowing smoke in the distance. It was dark, and big.

They were burning the bodies. Of not just the people who had died in the middle of the night, from the sickness, but those who had fought back.

Like the ones right now... not complying. Not obeying their orders.

"Why won't they just leave?" I asked softly. It made no sense to me. The soldiers weren't killing them initially. They only wanted them to leave. To leave the area, and go away. To go back from whence they came.

Yet as far as I was aware most refused. And the result was always the same. I'd understand if it was just because they couldn't, being too sick or hurt, but several hadn't been. Most had been healthy enough to actually try and fight back in full. With swords or spears of their own. Two days ago Vim and I had watched a pair of men even use bows. They had killed several guards before being subdued.

The soldiers nearly always ended up having to use force. And that force wasn't gentle. It wasn't reserved.

They didn't force them out when it got to that point. They simple killed them.

“It’s not a pleasant thing to admit, but this is pretty standard for such a scenario. There are many reasons. Most here are merchants. They’re being forced to leave everything behind. Since they’re burning it all. Most genuinely think their stuff is worth more than their lives. Others are likely too sick to realize what’s actually happening. They look delirious. Most don’t even seem able to walk, let alone do much else. And others might not be willing to abandon their fellows who are too sick to leave, even if they themselves are. Just as I’d not leave you behind, if we had been such a position,” Vim said.

I smiled at Vim’s comment at the end there. He hadn’t meant that just literally, but figuratively.

He was saying even if we had been humans, and he not strong enough to face them all... he’d still protect me. He’d die for me.

I let myself read too much into it, since it made me feel warm inside. Even though I knew he’d say, and do the same, for any member of the Society.

“Are you going to let them do this...!” a man shouted loudly. The bellow made me flinch, since it genuinely felt as if he was shouting at us. At me.

His tone was so accusational it hurt.

Right...

There was some more noisy commotion... then silence.

Daring a glance down the road, to the scene, I flinched as I watched them use long poles to push and pile bodies onto a cart. They had finished killing those who had not obeyed. One of the men being tossed into the pile even looked as if his arms were still moving.

They killed even those who hadn't been able to leave. Like that one who had not been able to walk on their own?

It was a death sentence either way... wasn't it?

"Could you cure it Vim?" I asked softly.

"The disease? No idea. They look like they're getting spots, so it could be a myriad of different things... but if it's what I think it is, then no. Not because I couldn't, but because the plant I'd need for the cure is not here. It's only found in the marshes far away," he said.

Marshes...?

My eyes left the soldiers as they headed our way. There was a section of tents they had removed, not far from where we were, that led to another road. One they used to take the bodies, and all the stuff they'd soon be burning at that huge fire in the distance.

"Does... burning all the stuff work?" I asked Vim.

“Yes. To a degree. It’s better than not doing so,” Vim said... then he flinched.

Looking down, I frowned at the little strap of leather. Or rather, the two pieces of leather.

Vim sighed, and flicked the pieces away. They flew off the cart, landing near the road.

“That’s what... the fifth one?” I asked him.

“Yes. Yes, I know. I’m not even distracted or bothered, what’s wrong with me...?” Vim asked as he leaned back a little. As he did, I noticed the way he had said such a thing. That hadn’t been just a mild mumble of a complaint. That tone he had used had been genuine, and full of worry.

“Vim...?” I asked as I sat up a little more.

We were sitting in the cart. We had moved most of the containers of paints and dyes off the cart, and to the ground nearby, so we could use the cart for sleeping. Right now though we were just sitting on it together, sitting up against a stack of the boxes.

It was interesting that no one had tried to steal any of them. They wouldn’t have gotten away with it, with Vim of course, but it was still amusing to think that no one had tried. The guards and the men who came to take tally of our days and lack of signs of sickness knew what we had, so I figured the rest of the people here did too. We had a fortune, per Vim’s explanation of it all, so...

Though maybe people just weren't willing to do anything right now, out of fear of catching the sickness.

"What had you been trying to make?" I asked him, since he hadn't responded to me. He looked lost in thought all of a sudden.

"Just a bracelet," he said.

A...

Looking for the two strips on the ground, I found them easily enough. They had fallen near the road, and it was dryer there. More stone than grass and dirt.

"What for?" I asked, a little excited over it. I've known for a long time that Vim was handy and crafty... but he's not once ever made anything like that on our travels. Whenever he built, or fixed, stuff it was always for someone else. For another member. Never anything for himself. He often did it simply out of boredom, I believed, but...

I honestly couldn't think of any other moment he had made something without it being for a reason.

"Why were you making a bracelet?" I asked.

“Why’d you paint half the cart?” he asked back.

Oh. So it hadn’t been for any reason, he really had just been bored.

“It’s prettier now, though,” I said.

He smirked at me. “Yes. At least you have something to show for your boredom.”

Amused, I went to sitting back with him, I sat back next to Vim. The cart was actually wide enough we could sit, and lay, without touching one another... but I still sat directly next to him. We touched more than not.

The sun was going down so it was finally cool enough that I felt I could get away with it.

“Why the struggle...? You’re usually pretty handy,” I asked.

“Not sure. I thought it was the leather, but obviously not. Maybe I’m hungry?” he wondered.

I frowned, even though he had said that a little amusingly. As if in a joke, yet not. “Still tired maybe?” I asked carefully.

I'd not said anything... but Vim has been trying to get some sleep, since we begun this... quarantine thing. It was one of the reasons I believed he was even willing to indulge in these human's antics.

He was using it as an excuse to rest.

He'd not said it aloud, yet... and honestly might not ever do so. But I was okay with that.

Though he'd not been doing a good job of it. Either because he was on guard, or just not able to sleep very long even when tired... he has only twice as far as I was aware actually fallen asleep. Even though he's laid on the cart with me every night. And those two times had been short, as far as I was aware.

"Not sure. I'm glad this is our last night, though. I'm in the mood for something very cold to drink," he said.

"Oh?" I perked up at that. I too was tired of water and stale tea. We had run out of supplies rather quickly, and as such had acquired some from the humans here. They rolled in a huge wagon, full of food and water and other supplies, every few days. Vim had let me purchase whatever I wanted, which was one of the reasons we now had blankets and pillows. Though they were pushed over into a corner of the cart right now.

Although they brought supplies, and were willing to sell it to us, they didn't bring much more than the basic necessities. Nothing tasty or desirable. Water. Tea leaves, which were nasty. Dried meat and hard bread.

"They should have your berry drinks you like here," he then said.

Now he had my full attention as I nodded quickly. "Oh yes," I said as I actually began to drool at the thought of such a delicacy.

He smirked at me as I heard the wagon of corpses crunch dirt as it turned.

Looking over the cart's side, I watched as the wagon surrounded by spearmen turned onto the other road. The one that led to the giant burning fire in the distance.

"Are they really burning so much, and so many people, that the fire can keep going all this time... or are they feeding it wood?" I asked as I studied the massive smoke stack.

"There's another entrance that way. That fire is burning two entrance's worth of people and their stuff. That's also the northern entrance.... So there's likely far more people over there than here. This one's used by those who come by foot from the west, and that's not normal. Most take that route from the north," Vim said.

I gulped at the idea of such a massive fire burning so long... by people and their possessions alone.

That fire had been lit a few days ago. And it hadn't gone out since.

It was making the air feel hotter than it was, and there was a very weird smell and taste to the air as well. But I couldn't quite place it. Plus sometimes little flakes of ash fell. When they did I tried my best to not let them land on me, but I couldn't notice each one.

It was a little worrisome that the ash could have been from a person at one time. It was unsettling, and...

Vim has said another fire, similar to this one, was off in the distance past the massive stone city. I couldn't see it, but he was quite confident that it was there. I've known his eyesight was better than mine, but I hadn't realized it was that much better. I couldn't even see the dark clouds of smoke from it.

Though he might not see it, but smell it instead.

A group of guards separated from the cart, heading our way along the road. I knew not to worry over them, and not just because of Vim. I recognized some of their faces. They were the ones who patrolled the roads. They'd head into the city, and then a few hours before sunrise return.

My assumption was correct. The group of soldiers walked past our little camp without even glancing at us.

"Wonder where the bald man is," I said.

"I've not seen him, but I saw another clerk type earlier on the last wagon. She wasn't bald, but she was definitely someone who worked with numbers and not spears," Vim said.

I tried to think of the wagon that had passed by a few hours ago. It had been only half covered, and it had a few dozen people on it. Most had been soldiers, so I hadn't really paid much attention to it. All of them looked similar; thanks to the fact their armor and weapons were all the same.

I couldn't remember this woman he spoke of, which bothered me.

Not just because I hadn't noticed and he had... but also the underlying reason for it.

Vim noticed women before I did. Often. Especially ones he found to be attractive.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, and wondered if he even realized he did such a thing or not. He was weird like that. He actually had quite a few tendencies and patterns, yet seemed completely oblivious to them.

Or rather he might know about them, but was simply so old and set in his ways that he just didn't care or deem it noteworthy.

Like how he had been messing with that strap of leather earlier.

Such a thing to me had been somewhat uncharacteristic of him. Yet... was it?

After all even though I've been traveling with him for nearly two years now... in the grand scheme of our lives, that was not very long at all.

Just how many things was he hiding? How many likes and dislikes? Desires and needs?

“What...?” Vim turned his head just enough to glance at me out of the corner of his eye, mimicking me, as he smirked and wondered what I was doing.

I couldn't help but smile back at him. “Excited? Tonight's our last night,” I said.

“It better be,” he said with a huff.

Oh. Right...

There was indeed that possibility, wasn't there?

“They wouldn't actually... stop us, would they? They've let other people go,” I said.

Not many, but we've seen it. At least thirty people have walked past us. Most did so excitedly, and hurriedly. Pleased to be given the right to enter the city finally. Some had hurried their comrades, and horses, so quickly a few had dropped things as they walked past. Half the time they didn't even pick up the stuff they left behind.

“They will, as long as Landi doesn’t change the rules on a whim. She’s erratic like that,” he said.

Ah... “Right. This is her city,” I said in awe.

I’d forgotten. She was the Queen here.

“Her nation, Renn,” Vim corrected. “This is the biggest city, but there are at least a dozen more elsewhere that fly her banner. There’s a reason she has such a large military,” he said.

“Oh. Right. These men are hers...” I realized such an important thing far too late.

He nodded. “That they are.”

“Huh... so the Society has an army? An actual one? I didn’t even realize it even though I’ve been staring at them for a week,” I said as I wondered how I hadn’t noticed.

He chuckled. “I knew you’d been checking them out. Is it men in armor, or do you like their darker tans?” he asked.

I smacked him lightly on his thigh, and laughed at him. “Shush!”

Vim gestured at the world around us. Him doing so reminded me it was dusk. The person who took our condition and gave us a new marker really should have been here by now... "They're hers, but they'd not march for the Society. They know nothing of us. Plus for what purpose would they march? And to where? She's too far away. If she sent her soldiers up north, all it'd do is get them locked into war with all the nations up there. They'd be no help," Vim said.

"Hm..." I nodded slowly as I tried to ponder all of that. It was a lot to take in.

An army. One ruled by one of our own. Yet... not. "You've said before that she's..." I hesitated, since I didn't want to either talk bad about her nor make assumptions before meeting her. I wanted to make my own decisions and expectations of her, not share those of others.

"She's odd. But I'll let you meet her first and make your own conclusions about her," Vim said, like always being a man such as that.

"Would you... do that for others Vim?" I asked him.

"Hm?" he tilted his head at me, which meant my question hadn't been properly structured.

I quickly made sense of my own mind, and nodded. "I mean... would you say such a thing to others? Do you treat them like you do me?"

Vim's eyes softened a little as he stared at me... but he didn't say anything.

A long moment of awkward silence ensued, and I shifted a little. "I mean... you've before said stuff, that I interpreted as... special. Like how you've... although a little reluctantly, been teaching me to be like you. To be a protector. Someone a part of the Society, but a step removed. So... do you say things like that, about those we meet, to just me or is that something you tell everyone?" I asked him.

"A little reluctantly? You have no idea how much you make me sweat sometimes, Renn," Vim said softly. I frowned, and was about to complain at how honest he was sometimes, but before I could he nodded and sighed. "I do to a point, though, yes," he continued.

"To a point...?"

He shifted a little, and suddenly his arm was nearly in my lap. It was a little startling, but I made sure not to move or say anything as he gestured around us lightly with the same hand that was connected to the elbow now resting on my right thigh. "I would tell anyone to make their own conclusions, and have their own thoughts. I'd never try to change anyone's beliefs if I could help it. But... all the same, I'd not trust some of our members to entirely form their own conclusions. Since they'd only cause issues if they did. So for others, I'd give warnings... or maybe gentle nudges and reminders occasionally. As to keep them from doing something that they can't take back," he said.

Doing my best to not acknowledge the arm upon me, I nodded as I stared at Vim's face. He was looking elsewhere, off in the distance. Maybe at the far off smoke.

"I expect more from you. I expect a lot more. So... I try to give you a little more freedom, or opportunity, than I'd give others. As to see what you'll do. To see what you'll accomplish. I give the same freedom to everyone when I can, so it's not as special as you think... but yet at the same time..." Vim went quiet a moment, and then nodded. "Yes, I treat you different than the rest. It'd be a lie to say I don't. And it'd be wrong. I know it makes no sense, for me to say I treat everyone the same as you yet not... but..."

I smiled as slid my own arm upward, to grab the hand he seemed to have not realized was in perfect position for such a thing.

Vim actually went still, and frowned as he looked at our hands as I secured his in my own. My heart nearly thumped out of my chest at the expression on his face. It was a mixture of pure shock and... acceptance.

“It doesn’t make sense, but I like to hear it all the same,” I said to him.

For a small moment I expected Vim to pull his hand out of my own... but he didn’t. Instead he only nodded... as our hands lowered to our sides, and remained there.

Oh...? He was going to let me hold his hand? Really?

He really was lowering his guard around me. Even if I had to be a little pushy sometimes... it was amazing he was still letting it happen to this degree.

“To be honest Renn... I don’t want you to become like me,” Vim then said.

My happy, warm and full heart suddenly went cold.

“Huh...?”

He gulped and nodded. "I don't want you to suffer. To have to hurt, and hurt others. I'd rather you just be happy. Which is why it's so difficult for me. I want you to find someone else, or somewhere else, yet at the same time I don't," he said.

Oh. That's what he meant.

It felt good to realize his meaning, and the relief it brought me... but my shocked heart was still beating quickly. It had almost been stunned out of commission just now.

"We've talked about this Vim. I don't see it as suffering. Even if it hurts, it's the very fact that it hurts that it is so important. That it's so wonderful. This life, being so harsh and painful, is what makes it one worth living," I said.

"You quote that scripture again and I'll sleep with Fred tonight," Vim said.

I couldn't help it, I broke out into laugh. A nearly hysterical one.

It took a long while to get myself under control, but every moment of it was wondrous.

"That's the first time you ever called him by name!" I said happily.

He had only stared at me with a loving smile as I laughed. It was a little sad he hadn't joined me in the laughter, but I understood it. Vim didn't laugh, genuinely, often.

"Well once something becomes your sleeping buddy, you got to respect them at least that much I think," Vim said.

It took everything I had to not laugh aloud again, as I snickered and nodded. "Indeed it is!"

Giggling happily, I leaned against him. Resting my head on his shoulder, I sighed as we watched the sun set in the distance.

"Don't fall asleep yet Renn. We have a visitor," he said gently.

Hm...? Who would dare ruin this wonderful moment? This picturesque...

Ah. It was the marker person. The woman he had mentioned earlier.

I stayed seated as Vim stood up. He had to lightly tug his hand free from mine, which I happily smiled at. He didn't say anything as he stepped off the cart as to talk to the woman approaching us.

"Vim the dye merchant?" she asked as she got near.

“Aye. And Renn, the woman who just woke half the camp up with her laughter,” he said.

I glared at the back of his head as I watched the woman smile at him... and then me. She was pretty, actually. Her hair was oddly flowy, and done in a design I’d never seen before. It was curly on top, but straight below her chin.

“To be honest it feels good to hear laughter out here. It’s been nothing but complaints and anger for weeks. I’m told you’re not only one of the calmest merchants we’ve had, but also a generous and good-willed one. I can see why you have such a wonderful wife. You two are definitely not sick, either. So...” she held her hand out, and then I realized what she wanted. I crawled over to my bag and quickly fished out the little wooden pellet that had the number five on it.

Handing it off to Vim, who then handed it to her, she smiled and nodded. “You may enter the city tomorrow morning. Here’s your permit,” she exchanged the wooden pellet with a piece of paper.

Vim took it and nodded. “Thank you.”

“No. Thank you. For cooperating, and not threatening to kill my dead mother. I swear, people can be so rude for no reason sometimes,” the woman complained as she shook her head.

Oh...? I hadn’t realized that the other people quarantined like us had such attitudes.

Though I guess it made sense. This was... not exactly a very happy time, to be honest.

“Alright. May your stones never shift,” the woman then said and stepped away.

“As yours,” Vim said as he watched her go.

Smiling gently, I happily waited until Vim finished studying the woman. I even forgave him for looking at her rear, as he turned around and held out the paper she had given him.

Taking it, I found a small note. Like a letter. One written in the oddly familiar language I knew, yet with enough of a difference to make me have to re-read a few times for it to make sense to me.

“Entry for a husband and wife who are dye merchants, Vim and Renn, into the City of Stone. Quarantine checkpoint,” I read.

“They could have let us just go now,” Vim complained as he clambered back onto the cart.

It rocked thanks to his weight, and I tilted my head and wondered why they hadn’t.

“At least we can finally go,” I said.

“Indeed.”

Happy, I returned to sitting next to Vim. Our hands didn't return to each other's... but I did notice we sat a little closer than before. A little more intimately.

Unlike the other nights, where we had laid next to each other and stared up at the night sky... talking quietly through the night, this one we had chosen to be quiet. As if to cherish these last few moments here on this cart.

How long would it be before Vim and I would do such a thing together again? Travel, sure, but... just sit? In such an odd way? Without direct reason?

It was a little sad to think, but a part of me was actually regretful that we were done.

The night lingered, and my eyes grew heavy. Vim eventually pulled over one of the blankets, and I was about to slide off into sleep while resting against him...

When suddenly Vim's back went stiff and a foot crunched dry grass nearby.

Vim rocked the cart as he stood. I went still as I watched him swiftly and almost inhumanly smoothly; go from his lounging position to a half-kneeling stance right next to me.

Half expecting him to leap off the cart, and deal with whomever or whatever was approaching our cart, I was genuinely surprised when instead Vim seemed to immediately calm down upon seeing whatever our intruding visitor was.

A pained huff made my ears flutter as I recognized the sound of a woman's voice. One strained. Maybe even hurt.

Since my ears moved so much, I was reminded that my hat had slid off. I had been about to fall asleep, next to Vim.

I kept my head low as I reached for my hat.

"Come no closer," Vim then said with a flat voice.

Huh...? That had been a warning... but it honestly sounded like one. Vim had spoken with an oddly gentle tone...

A heavy foot was the answer. She came to a stop, and her breathing became quick. As if scared.

Had she thought she was sneaking up on us, uh? Even if we had been human we would have likely heard her. She had been nearly coughing and...

"Please. Just the boy," the woman whispered.

Frowning, I finished securing my hat and sat up just enough to peer over the side of the cart... and I found something that was far more terrifying than it was.

A young woman was a few feet from us. She was bundled in an oddly thick dress, and held an even thicker bundle in her arms. Her eyes were glossy in the night, and I could see the pure desperation within them.

I couldn't really tell if she had those weird spots on her skin as the others did, but at the same time I felt I could see them. It was either spots, or she was dirty. Real dirty. But I couldn't really fault her for that. Although we got water here from the guardsmen we didn't get enough to properly clean ourselves really and... They also charged for anything more than a single bucket. A single bucket was barely enough to drink or prepare food, let alone wash with.

Vim shifted. A roll of a shoulder made the whole cart shift again. Even as I shook, alongside the cart, I couldn't drag my eyes away from the woman... or the little bundle in her arms.

It was moving.

A tiny sound came from the bundle, and what was obvious only became more so. She was holding a child. A baby.

"I'm not sick. Nor is he... but the rest in my group are. Please. The guards noticed. You're leaving in the morning," she stepped forward a single step, and her whispers got lower. Quieter. More desperate.

My heart thumped, and I quickly looked to my companion. Vim was standing right next to me, so closely that my tail was occasionally bumping into his foot. I was lucky he hadn't stepped on it earlier when he had rolled to his feet, or stood.

Though maybe not. Vim was rather astute, especially so during such moments as these.

He'd not notice his own love and emotions for me, but he'd notice my dark tail in the dead of night even while it was half hidden by a blanket. And even more so still while his focus was on something else.

"Please... I have money," she shifted the bundle, and although I couldn't see the purse I heard it. A lot of coins just shifted somewhere out of sight.

I opened my mouth to say something, but was able to catch myself before I did.

Turning to Vim, I felt the inner battle rage on inside my heart and mind.

Would he stop me?

Would he claim the child could be sick? As he had done that family we saw with Herra?

Would he say it wasn't worth the ire of this Landi? Or that it wasn't something we could take as a burden?

Would he defy me? If I went to accept the child from her? He believed in free-will. But it wasn't just me and him he had to consider. We had another member. One who ruled this nation, even.

Even if he overlooked the danger of being caught. Or the child being sick...

He had rules. And not just his own. If he took the child, even to save it, it'd be breaking the laws. Of this land. Her rules.

And Vim... obeyed those rules. Religiously. Those laws and rules, set by our members, were his edicts. His religion. His...

"Please...!" the woman stepped forward, and I heard the baby squirm as she squeezed it. She was pleading. Crying. Yet her body was holding on to the child as if she'd never relinquish it while she still breathed.

Yet... even with her desperate request...

Even though my heart was breaking for her, and telling me to accept...

Vim said nothing.

The woman tore her eyes from Vim, and to me. "Please. He's just a boy. I have family... in the city. You can take him to them, and..." she stepped forward again, and her whispers grew a tad bit louder.

My eyes begun to water as my heart broke for her.

Yet Vim still said nothing.

"Everyone else is sick. You're the only woman near us, who isn't, please. Please," the woman stepped forward again, and was now within arm's reach of our cart.

With her closer I once again found myself wondering if those were spots or not. They looked more like stains, like from the ash falling... but most of her body was covered in those thick clothes. They looked like robes, but she had strange looking sleeves.

Those thick clothes could be hiding the spots. And it wasn't as if the spots were a valid way to tell if someone was sick or not. Nor the baby, either, especially since we couldn't see it while wrapped in that bundle of cloth.

Sitting up, I decided to just risk it.

Vim would have to stop me. He'd have to pry the child out of my arms.

If the child turned out to be sick... then I'll just need to get Vim to care for me. To tend to me as I recover.

Not just from the sickness, but Vim himself. He'd likely try to separate me and the child rather swiftly if the baby really was sickly... and me, being who I am, would probably not let him do so without a fight.

And Vim, being who he is, would be willing to incur my wrath and disappointment... as to protect me from my self. And then he'd use force, if he deemed it necessary.

He'd be able to do it. I'd argue with him. I'd fight him. I'd weep after... and I'd end up forgiving him... But he'd get a fight all the same and...!

Then Vim stepped forward. Before I could. My heart thumped into my throat as I opened my mouth to speak. To warn the woman. To tell her to go away, less he did something I'd never be able to forgive him for...

It would be one thing for him to forcefully separate me and the child thanks to a genuine threat, but... to kill a woman and her baby? When you could still reason with them? Or at least simply let them go...? He wouldn't right?

But instead of killing the woman... he instead simply knelt a little and held out his arms.

The woman instantly melted. Stiff and trembling shoulders slumped in great relief as she started to sob. She was trying so hard not to be loud, yet was trying to whisper her heart out to Vim as she stepped up to the cart.

My world grew blurry as tears filled my eyes while I watched Vim take the small bundle from the woman. She relinquished the child to him, and then had to grab the side of our cart for support. She had almost collapsed.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” she sobbed in whispers.

Blinking my blurry eyes, I quickly sat up onto my knees as Vim stepped back. He held the bundle carefully, and was shifting the bundle around... likely to get a look at the child’s face.

Likely to see if the baby was actually sick or not.

“I... I’m...Yana,” the woman had to take a deep breath as she tried to control herself. It only took a few sharp breaths for her to nod at us. “His name is Hark. In the southern center, my family owns the bowl shop. It’s a large blue building, with lots of bowls in the windows. Please... make sure he gets there,” she spoke quickly, and surprisingly evenly.

For a woman handing off her child to complete strangers, she sure did sound full of confidence.

“We’ll get him there. I swear it,” I said to her gently.

She blinked out some large tears as she nodded... and then looked up to Vim. He had found the child, who was now grabbing at his fingers.

“My name is Vim. On my name, I promise your son’s safety. Go into the night without fear,” Vim said to the woman.

My tail shivered at the way Vim had spoken, and the steadfast surety in his eyes. The whole world had just heard a promise nigh unbreakable.

Yana's hand gripping the edge of the cart shook. It trembled, and I half expected her to try and clamber up onto the cart.

To take her son back.

Yet instead she fell.

Panicked, I clambered over to the ledge and looked over and down. She was on her knees, and...

Staring down at the prostrating woman, I heard her whisper a prayer. To a god of stone. She spoke with all her heart. Thanking her god for this divine blessing being granted to her.

After a few moments... she sobbed one last time... then took one last deep breath.

And then she stood. With a tear stained face... she spared one last glance to Vim and the boy in his arms with clear eyes...

And then turned away.

Stunned by her resolve, I watched in awe as she left. Walking off into the darkness. Heading back towards the rows of tents she had come from.

With a quick heart, I turned away from the woman... and looked up at Vim.

"Gua," the baby made a tiny noise. One that sounded happy, as little hands and tinier fingers squeezed Vim's thumb.

"Life is full of surprises," Vim said gently.

"So are you," I whispered at the man who had just once again proven himself to be far better than should be possible.

Chapter 224 The Stone Palace

Getting through the two checkpoints and into the City of Stone was easy.

Even with the baby.

We hadn't even needed to hide the child in a box or anything. Renn had simply held the child in her arms, and they hadn't questioned it. But it was their fault.

The permit they had given me had been a little too lax. They had left plenty of room for me to simply add the child's presence to it. They hadn't questioned it, or the fact that the ink I had written the extra segment in had been just a few shades too blue than the ink they used.

Reaching the entrance to the main castle proved to not be difficult either. I had expected the city to be a little... strange, what with the checkpoints and epidemic, but it was actually relatively normal. There weren't as many people walking around as I remembered last time I was here, but there was still order and seemingly normalcy in town. People were working. Shopping. Even just calmly talking to one another, and going about their lives.

If not for the very obvious missing population, one wouldn't think there was a deadly plague wreaking havoc throughout the lands.

"We'll need milk Vim. Quick," Renn worriedly reminded me, for the tenth time.

"I know Renn. We'll have Landi find us a wet nurse," I said.

One of the benefits of her being Queen. She could swiftly handle nearly any problem we had in this region with but a few words and orders.

“Wet nurse...” Renn mumbled under her breath, and I wondered if she didn’t know what that was. Surely not... right? I mean...

Unless the northern peoples used another term for them. Maybe they did. I didn’t often make a habit of needing to find women capable of breastfeeding, so it wasn’t like I was up to date concerning such matters.

Actually...

I didn’t like the fact that it’s been hundreds of years since I had endured a similar problem before.

Lately those I’ve saved, or encountered, have been older. Or although children, were old enough to not need such help. Like Lomi, or Fly.

It’s been... a long time since I’ve held a baby that wasn’t human. Decades. The last few I remembered I’d been there for their births but I hadn’t actually held them or cared for them. When I was around for the births of our people, I rarely lingered long. I stayed long enough nearby to let the mother and family feel safe, but I hated the feeling that I was intruding. That I was out of place. So I usually left not long after the births, once I was sure the mother and child would survive.

Last one I remembered holding had been Amber. But she had been human. Who had been before her...?

The baby made a noise and reached out for Renn. She smiled warmly as she lowered her face, letting the kid grab at her long bangs and nose.

Seeing the way Renn let it, and her smile, made me completely forget whatever I had just been pondering.

It was a good thing the child really wasn't sick. Hungry, but not much else.

The child made another noise, and Renn giggled. "He's just looking. He won't bite. You're not big enough to be a snack for him," she said to him.

Hmph. Like the boy could even see my glaring at this angle anyway.

And as if I'd eat a baby. Let alone one that she was looking at so lovingly.

Her subdued grin, and the flushed happy smile is what had made our entry into the city so easy. My changing of the permit letter had helped, yes, but Renn had appeared as the child's actual mother. Not a one had doubted her.

Which only further made this so worrying.

"I know, right? He's so mean," Renn cooed and talked to the boy as I guided our donkey along the... now blatantly obvious empty road.

We were rounding a large flat rock. One that had long ago been used to give speeches. Where the ruling class had updated the peasants on their laws, or decrees. Now it was used as a landmark. The stone road rounded the large flat boulder, and separated into four different directions. One of which led to the giant rock not far from us. The one that Landi's palace was built into.

Usually by now the streets would be crowded. All around her palace was the business districts. Places of business, and markets. There was, or at least had been, even a large theater and other attractions too.

Yet I didn't even need to pay attention to the donkey or our cart as we rolled closer and closer to the stone palace. There were that few people walking on the street, and passing us by.

I wonder how many had died from the plague, and how many were simply hiding away. Staying home as to not potentially catch the deadly disease.

Even if people had been out and about they'd likely have avoided us. Since we looked like traveling merchants, and as such potential carriers of the disease.

Glancing to the woman next to me, who was making weird faces to the baby in her arms... I felt oddly worried for no reason.

Why did a child in her arms make me feel like we were in danger?

It made no sense.

The baby wasn't sick. I felt no fever upon him. I saw no pox, or signs of a plague. It could be carrying it, but as long as Renn didn't lick its blood or anything she'd be fine even if he was a silent carrier.

Yet all the same I felt as if I should be on edge. As if the child was more dangerous than a thousand spears.

Ridiculous.

"Look at him glare at you. He's so rude, huh Hark?" Renn teased as she giggled at the child's attempt at tugging on her long bangs. Although a baby, it would have probably discomfited a human woman. But to Renn it was likely something that barely registered.

"Hark now, for all ye who ignore. Harken the end and all it brings," I said.

Renn looked away from the child for the first time since we entered the city, which was noteworthy. Usually she'd not be able to keep her eyes from wandering all over the place, especially here. She was missing the City of Stone, and it was regrettable. It wasn't often you saw an actual city built out of stone. Even half the buildings were made of stone. And not because they were made of bricks. Most of the architecture here was fashioned out of giant boulders. Shaped and cut to their needs from a single stone.

But I understood her fascination with the child. Especially since we had been so uniquely entrusted with his life.

That woman hadn't hesitated to give me her baby.

And a good thing too. The guards had been readying to enter their camp right as Renn and I had packed up and left.

It was a good thing we had gotten far enough away before they had killed his mother. If Renn had heard her screams, I could only imagine what would have happened.

“Did you just quote that bible?” she asked in awe.

I frowned at her. “What? You can but I can’t?” I asked.

“Well... no but...” she looked oddly troubled, but I didn’t get to spend time enjoying that look on her face.

We had reached the palace’s gates.

Or well... not real gates. Just the place where the guards would begin to approach us, for passing by.

Large pillars of stones were angled and placed along the road we were on. They were all dark and glossy in color. They looked hard, but I knew the obsidian was fragile.

A few were even broken. They weren't as tall, or as designed. Either from simple time, or accidents.

"Lo'! What business you on, merchant?" a guard asked as he stepped out towards us. He didn't step out in front of the donkey, but did get close enough to make the creature hesitate.

"We're tasked with bringing a shipment to Queen Landi," I said to him.

The guard frowned, and glanced to my right. To Renn.

"Of...?" he asked as he stepped forward, to the cart.

"Dyes," I said as I turned to pull back the cover.

"Hm..." the guard didn't seem too impressed, which told me he either didn't care or had been in his position for a long time. He might be used to Landi getting weird shipments often.

He did look a little older. I wonder if I'd met him last time I was here. I hadn't brought a shipment of dyes with me, and had traveled on foot, but I remembered having to wait for them to get Landi's authorization for letting me into the castle.

"I'll need to verify this. See that building there? Mind going there? We'll send for authorization," the guard pointed at a familiar building. One next to the road, and was honestly a little too big. It dwarfed most of the other buildings around here.

"Aye, want my permit?" I asked him.

"No. If you got in then all's fine. One moment," he stepped away before I could say more. I didn't even have a chance to give him my name as he walked away, heading for another building. One smaller, and with large windows. I could see other people within them, staring at us.

"Seems lax compared to the other guards," Renn mumbled as I sent the cart into motion again.

"He does seem lethargic," I agreed.

"Sick maybe...?" Renn wondered. As she did she actually shifted the baby closer to her, as if to shield him from any potential pathogens.

"Don't get too attached Renn. I'll take him to his family later," I said carefully.

Renn glared at me in response, and I had to look away.

Yes. I know. I shouldn't have said anything.

She knew. She knew full well... yet...

Sighing as I guided the donkey alongside the large building, I realized this was indeed the same one I had been kept in nearly a whole day last time I was here.

One side of the building was a large warehouse like barn. Perfect for us. But I wasn't keen on letting them ignore us and take their time. Renn and I would be fine, but the child was another story.

We had water. But nothing the baby could comfortably drink or eat. And it's already been long enough to be an issue. It'd only become worse as the hours go by.

Parking the cart alongside the side of the building, I placed the reins next to Renn. "Let me go throw my weight around," I said as I stood.

"Please do," Renn said simply.

Getting off the cart, I rolled a shoulder as I rounded the building to the entrance. The one not to the warehouse section, but where workers and a little sitting area was located.

As I went for the door, I glanced over at the smaller building. The one the earlier guard had went into.

I didn't see any hint or sign of anyone following through with their duties. There were a pair of guards down the road, but they were just talking to each other. They likely didn't even know we existed.

Odds are they'd send word on the next shift change. They were in no hurry.

Usually there'd not be any need to. Merchants were used to waiting. Even if they complained.

But...

Entering the waiting area, I found my memories to be a little accurate. A large open room, with tables and bars. Some stairs led to a second floor, which had an open ceiling, and the stone floor was layered with rugs.

Two men were in the building. Both sitting at a table near an unlit fireplace. They had cups in front of them, but were wearing the same guard outfit as all the rest. They were either on break or just bored.

"Oh...? Who's this?" one of them perked up at the sight of me as I walked over to them.

"We're waiting for authorization to enter the palace. We bring dyes from the east, for your Queen," I said.

The two men frowned, and one nodded as he stood. "Alright. Do you know if anyone's sent word yet?" he asked.

“I think we’ve been set aside for other tasks. Is there any way I could entice either of you to send word for me? You probably hear it often from merchants, and are tired of hearing it, but I’ll make it worth your while,” I said as I pulled out a small handful of coins.

The man who stood whistled at me. “Wow. I knew dyes were expensive, but really...?” he stepped forward and frowned at me. His eyes never left the coins in my hand.

Smiling at him I held them out. “My name is Vim. The dyes are a personal gift to Queen Landi... So I’m a little rushed to get them to her, you know?” I said.

The guard smirked as the other quickly stood. “I’ll go too!” he said.

Before the other guard could even get off his chair, the one before me took the coins and pocketed them. “You do your job! I’ll go now. Vim, right?” the guard said with a nod as he stepped around me.

“Yes sir, thank you,” I said as he hurried out of the building. He didn’t even close the door behind him as he hurried out.

“Shit... should have known,” the other guard mumbled as he sighed and sat back down.

“Sorry,” I said to the man who had actually laid his head onto the table in defeat.

“Ah, it’s fate. I’ve had no luck at all lately. First Kathy leaves me, then my dog dies and now this,” he mumbled.

Poor guy. I knew that feeling.

“Can’t pay you the same, but I’d be willing to offer a coin for some information,” I said to the depressed man as I stepped up to the table.

His head perked up as he stared at me.

I nodded and pulled out another coin. “Know anything about a bowl shop in the southern center?” I asked.

The guard’s eyes focused on the coin and he nodded. “Aye. It’s a big blue building. Been there forever,” he said.

Interesting. “What can you tell me about it?” I asked as I put the coin onto the table... but I left my finger upon it, to keep it there.

“Well...” he sat up, his back going straight. “Like I said... been there forever. Ran by a large family. They came out with some fancy plates a few years ago, all the women wanted’em. I spent two months pay on them... for Kathy,” he mumbled.

My eyes narrowed at the man who was about to go back into depression.

Sighing I slid the coin over to him. He took it, but he didn't seem too happy about it.

"Thanks," I said.

He only nodded as he stared at the coin. As if it was the last one he'd ever earn.

Stepping away I left the building. I closed the door behind me and glanced around... and noticed the guard from earlier. The one who had stopped us on our cart. He was heading along the road, going towards the palace entrance.

Odds are I'd get one of them in trouble with my bribery, but I didn't care.

A tiny cry drew my attention away from the guard and the stone city around me. Stepping around the corner of the building, I found the source. The baby in Renn's arms was crying, although not too loudly.

She was rocking it, and I was a little surprised to see a... lack of urgency and worry on her face.

Either Renn was far more used to children than I had expected, or she was just keeping herself calm and would yell at me once I came into view.

Let's test it.

Walking over, I stayed quiet and kept my presence low... until I stepped up to her right. Right next to where she was sitting.

"He's hungry," I said.

Renn startled, and actually pulled the bundle away a bit from my area. She held it out, as if to keep it safe. It wasn't until she realized it was me before she sighed and calmed down, and brought the child back.

"Of course he is! We need to get him something, fast," she said angrily.

Oh...? Was that anger because of the child or because I had startled her?

"I've greased the wheels. We should be in the palace shortly," I said.

"Greased...?" she frowned at me, and then returned her attention to the boy. His crying had softened, but he was still making noises.

He was growing hungry. He'd soon become irate, and he'd let the whole world know once he was.

The boy's mother had included a small bag of coins alongside him... but honestly I'd have preferred supplies. It wasn't her fault though. She had done what she could, I guess.

"Will they be quick Vim?" Renn asked worriedly.

"If they don't I'll figure it out."

I hope. It was hard enough to find a wet nurse even on a good day. And right now with the plague going around...

Yes... even if a woman was available, there was a chance they'd not be willing to risk it.

Maybe I should hurry to his family. That guard had said...

"I asked the guard of his family. He said it's a large one. One with a long history here. Maybe we'll get lucky and one of their women is up to task," I said.

"And if they're not? What if we can't find a woman with milk? What then Vim? What if they won't accept him?" Renn bombarded me with concerns, and I did my best to ignore them.

Well...

“It’s not like you can feed him Renn,” I said gently.

“Vim...!” Renn didn’t want to hear that.

“At worst we can get milk from goats or something,” I said.

It worked. Sometimes. But it was also a risk... A large one, to be honest. But it would at least be a temporary fix.

This era didn’t have anything to substitute a mother’s milk. And sadly there was already a problem with unsanitary conditions, let alone the diseases and stuff everywhere.

Even during a more advanced era, with more advanced peoples, children's mortality rate was high. And most of the time it was because of a lack of nutrients in one shape or another.

Renn’s glare turned into one full of worry as she stared at me. “Would a goat work, Vim?” she asked.

“Haven’t you raised children before Renn?” I asked. I knew at least about those human ones. Lujic and Ginny.

“They had already been old enough to eat normal food. I’ve never had a baby, Vim,” Renn said as she looked back to the boy.

Huh...? I knew she’s told me she’s never given birth before... but...

I mean... she was two hundred or more years old. You’d think by now she’d have been around, or helped, with a child before. Most communities and families in this era helped each other and raised their children together more than not. They had to. They’d not survive otherwise.

But it made sense. She’s been alone most of her life... and the few times Renn had not been so, was with those like Nory or those children.

Or that witch.

Suddenly Renn’s personality made a lot more sense.

She’s been alone most of her life.

A very long life.

Nory and the human children had been just that. Humans. Even if she spent many years with them, such moments had likely passed quickly. A fraction of her life. If she had actually been alone most, if not entirely, the rest of her life...

I studied the woman who now made a little more sense to me. I now understood why she found such great joy in simple little things, yet at the same time wept so strongly during the painful moments.

“All will be well Renn. I’ll figure it out,” I said gently.

“You better Vim. You vowed he’d be safe,” she whispered.

I had.

I had indeed.

Just as I had vowed to keep you safe too.

Reaching up, I patted her thigh. Renn glanced at me, but said nothing.

Little Hark continued to make small noises. Renn was doing a good job keeping him somewhat happy. But I knew no amount of rocking, or funny faces, would stop the unrelenting hunger that would soon assail him.

Stepping away from the cart, I sighed as I debated my next move.

Landi was a dictator. The ruler of a monarchy. As such she had checks and balances, yes, but they were lacking in most ways. Plus she currently, or at least had last time I was here, a firm grasp of her military.

She ruled with an iron fist. Her laws weren't punished with jail time or hard labor, but flesh and lives. If one wasn't hanged for committing a crime here, and their lives spared, they still had something precious. Usually a hand.

So it wasn't like I could just barge into the castle. Even if Landi wouldn't mind, the guards would try to stop me.

Rather, I didn't need to necessarily break in...

I could just sneak in.

But then what would I do with the dyes, and Renn and the boy?

"If they don't return shortly we'll head for the boy's family. The southern center isn't far from here," I said. A large road nearby led all around the massive stone pillar we were under. And all around that pillar was the market districts. We were on the opposite side of the southern one, but I knew it'd not be too difficult for us to get there and find this blue building. It'd likely take only a few hours. We'd be able to find it before the afternoon.

“Should have just gone there first,” Renn mumbled.

Well... maybe.

Going to my people first was usually my priority. Over everything else.

But Renn wasn't wrong.

“Want me to go find them? While you stay here?” I asked her.

Renn turned to look at me, and squeezed the baby closer to her. “With the boy?” she asked.

“I'd take him with me,” I said.

Her face contorted into worry and annoyance. She wanted the boy to get fed, and thus become safe and happy... but at the same time she didn't seem to like the idea of handing him off to me.

“Merchant!”

I turned, as did Renn, and I found the guard waving me down as he hurried towards us.

“Good,” Renn said with relief as the guard ran up to me.

It was the one I had given the coins to.

“Queen Landi has authorized your entry into the palace,” he said with a huff. He was covered in sweat.

He had run the whole way.

“Thank you,” I said, and meant it. Now Renn and I would not have to get into any kind of argument.

The guard smiled and then pointed to the cart. “I’ll guide you, if you’re ready,” he said quickly.

Maybe he was hoping for more payment.

Actually...

“You want to take the dyes to the storage right?” I asked. It’s been a few trips since I’ve brought dyes, but they usually always took them there. To a smaller, secured and guarded, warehouse. One inside the palace walls. Usually I’d not complain or worry about it, since spending a little time doing it was no big deal. Since I was usually alone.

“Huh...? Uh... yes sir. I don’t think we’ll be taking it to the Queen herself...” the guard spoke oddly, as if unsure of what to say. He likely thought I wanted to hand them to the Queen myself.

“Would you take them then? I’ll go see Landi in the meantime,” I said as I stepped over and reached up to Renn.

She glared at me for a moment, but then nodded and handed me the bundle.

Taking the boy in my arms, I smiled down at the little face. He looked confused, as if not understanding why the beautiful woman who had just been smiling at him was now a weird looking man.

“Uh... sir?” the guard wasn’t sure what was going on as Renn stood and went to grab our bags. She pulled aside the cover as to do so, and I noticed the way her tail twitched beneath her pant leg. She was excited.

“I trust you. I’ll tell Queen Landi about the contents, so she and her people will verify that nothing gets stolen,” I said as I turned to the guard.

He looked terrified for some reason. He kept looking from me to Renn, who was rummaging with our bags. I heard her stuffing what sounded like a blanket into one of them. Was she going to keep all the

blankets and stuff we had bought during our quarantine? I hoped not, they had been rough and uncomfortable. Cheap stuff.

“Sir...?” the guard mumbled as I nodded to him.

“I have an urgent message for her. So I’m going to go see her. The donkey’s name is...” I turned to the donkey, and wondered why I had forgotten it. “Hark?” I asked.

“It’s Fred! Did you actually call the beast Hark? Are you serious Vim?” Renn stood up straight as to yell at me.

Smirking at her, I nodded. “I had.”

She went to mumbling obscenities at me, and I turned back to the guard.

“As I said. I’ll tell the queen the contents... everything,” I said, re-enforcing the point.

He nodded quickly.

“Though, I think there’s oddly a small box missing. That one there?” I pointed at it from under the bundle and baby.

“Huh...?” both Renn and the guard paused a moment.

“That one? With the colorful lid? Yeah. That one went missing a few nights ago. During our quarantine. No idea what happened to it,” I said.

“Vim?” Renn sounded concerned, but the guard got my meaning right away.

“You’re far too kind sir,” he said softly.

“Want the job, or should I ask that poor unlucky fellow inside?” I asked.

“He’s not unlucky, just stupid. He cheated on Kathy,” the man said with a huff as he went to climb up onto the cart’s bench.

“Glad you’re not stupid then,” I said.

He nodded with a smirk, and then held out his hand as to help Renn off the cart. She ignored his hand though, and stepped out from the cart’s bed, and onto the bench... then off it to the ground.

The guard didn’t seem bothered by Renn’s actions, and instead went to picking up the reins. “They’ll be delivered promptly sir,” the guard said.

“Please and thank you,” I said as I then held the baby out to Renn.

Her expression instantly morphed into a happy one as she dropped our bags, almost a little too roughly, and went to take the baby from me.

Swapping responsibilities, I took the bags as Renn took Hark. “Good day,” I said to the guard as I stepped away from the cart alongside Renn.

“You as well sir!”

Heading for the main road, the one that led straight into the palace, I guided Renn and the baby she carried.

“Should have just done that from the start,” Renn said as we heard the guard usher the donkey forward.

“We would have still needed authorization to enter. There are two entrances. Both have these buildings for people to rest and wait for permission to enter the gates,” I said.

“She must have a lot of enemies,” Renn wondered.

“More than you’d think,” I said.

We reached the palace gates quickly enough. The large gates were built into the massive stone pillar, and were in sections. Three sections, each with their own gates, were between the outside world and the palace within. Although we were stopped at the first, to verify who we were, we weren’t bothered at the second or third even though guards were stationed at them too.

Hark started whining more as we entered the stone palace, and because of it... all eyes were on us.

“Shush now, it’s okay,” Renn tried to quiet him, but I knew it was pointless. His hunger was here. And it’d not be ignored.

“This way Renn,” I guided Renn deeper into the stone palace... we went from the open sky, if blocked by looming pillars of stones, to a cramped building. One with bland hallways and rooms fashioned out of the reddish black stone that surrounded us.

The stone let Hark’s cries echo well as we delved deeper into the palace.

Hopefully Landi wasn’t sleeping. If the child’s cries woke her, then I’ll need to keep her from eating the poor thing.

Though... based off the way Renn was protectively clinging to the thing, maybe I didn’t need to worry for its safety.

“State your business,” a guard in robes, and not armor, stepped out in front of us as we neared the entrance for the inner palace. A large archway, that led to a more decorative section of the palace.

One with ornaments and plant life. Nothing like the bare stone we had been walking through.

“We’re here to see Queen Landi. She’s expecting us,” I said.

The baby grew louder, and the guard flinched. “I sure hope she is, for your sake,” he said.

Chapter 225 Landi

Hark wailed loudly in complaint as he was lifted into the sky.

Anxious, I crept a little closer... just in case... as Landi lifted the boy up over her head and held him there.

“A man does not weep! Especially not for a tit!” Landi said loudly.

Hark went silent as Landi’s voice echoed throughout the palace.

My hands worriedly fidgeted as I kept my eyes on the boy. Landi wasn’t much taller than me, but she must have longer arms. He was too high up for me to reach. I’ll need to catch him on the way down if she drops him or...

But she didn't. She simply lowered him back down and smiled at him with sharp teeth. "There? See? It takes a woman to make a man, doesn't it boy?" Landi asked Hark.

Hark made a noise, but it sounded like an unsure moan.

Glancing over to Vim, who stood near the large square table, I didn't like how he was completely ignoring what was happening. Wasn't he worried? Was the map on that table so much more important?

"Not that you're no woman, Renn. You're a mighty fine one indeed. Especially since you look ready to pounce on me the moment I get out of line!" Landi said as she turned to me.

"Ah..." I forcefully lowered my hands and calmed down. Great. So it had been obvious.

Landi immediately started laughing, showing off her huge pointy teeth. Gosh they looked sharp. "You're adorable! Ah, Vim always gets the cute ones," Landi said.

Shifting a little, I noticed Hark reaching up to grab onto Landi's hair. Seemed he liked to grab at woman's hair. It helped that Landi's was coiled in huge braids, and wrapped around circular stones. There was plenty to grab at. They actually looked heavy, even if polished and pretty. The biggest rested on her breasts, and was the size of Hark's head. But it wasn't that one he was grabbing at, but instead the smaller ones that dangled near her chin.

"Heh, see? I knew he was a man. Grabbing the reins already, are you?" Landi asked Hark, but didn't stop him as he grabbed and tugged on one of the stones tied in her hair.

Landi honestly looked... happy, and not bothered nor planning to harm or eat Hark... but still all the same I somehow felt horribly worried. It was taking a lot of effort to not walk over to her and snatch him out of her hands.

“Are you involved in the war to the west, or are you just keeping your border secure?” Vim asked, uncaring of my anxious worries.

“They’ve not even rattled sabers at us. I wish they would though. I’ve been gathering men on that border in case I decide to invade while they’re all distracted and starving. I’ve not made the decision yet. I want those ports, but do I want the headache of a land ruined by famine?” Landi said as she grinned and cooed at Hark.

“Waging war during a plague may not be the wisest choice,” Vim warned.

“That’s what you got fire for Vim. Fire and arrows,” Landi said as Hark made a noise at her.

“Do you mean the ports we passed through on the way here?” I asked her.

“If you came through the armadillo and camels, yes. Those very ports,” Landi said.

Huh...

I frowned as I imagined her... conquering that area.

“Wouldn’t that be a good thing Vim? Her lands seem rather well managed, all things considered. Plus it’d let her rule over the areas of our people, and help keep them safe,” I said as I thought of it.

Landi quickly took a few steps over to me, and I went stiff as she leaned up next to me... and stared into my eyes.

“Uhm...” I worriedly wondered if maybe I had said something wrong, or bad. What was wrong? And did she realize Hark was sticking his fingers in her nose? It made her serious expression look silly.

“Why not tell Renn how exactly you would conquer those lands, Landi?” Vim said.

Landi smirked and then stepped away from me, and returned her attention to the boy in her arms. She began to pace around, walking around the large square table in the center of the room. “I’d burn everything to the ground... and rebuild it with stone. As I would have it,” she said.

“So... cruelly?” I asked.

“No more than any other tyrant would do,” Landi said.

“That’s true,” Vim said with a sigh, agreeing regrettably.

Wonderful...

“My lady, the nurse has arrived,” a man’s voice entered the room, intruding in the conversation... but I grew excited as it did.

So she was here. Finally!

“Good. He’s been relieving himself, and I did not want to deal with it,” Landi said with a laugh as she turned to take the boy to the woman who would feed and care for him, while we were here.

I stepped forward, as to follow her, but Vim coughed. “Renn.”

Pausing, I felt oddly weak as I watched Landi walk to the door. Carrying Hark with her. He didn’t even realize he was leaving me behind.

“But...” I turned to Vim, to argue.

“He’ll be fine. He’ll be in a room a few doors down, not far. Let the human do their job,” he said gently.

“But...” I argued some more, and hesitated as Landi left the room. A guard followed her as they went down the hallway.

“It won’t be long and he’ll be asleep. Once he’s cleaned and fed. All will be fine. Landi is... dangerous, but she’s not foolish enough to anger me,” he said softly.

I groaned as I studied the door a bit longer... and then forcefully turned around. As to not let it call for me any longer.

With a deep breath, I sighed as I walked over to Vim. To the large table he stood next to.

“You’re right... I might fall in love with him, if I’m not careful,” I admitted.

I mean... not only had we met a new member, a very unique one... there was also other things to be of interest.

A large map was on the table before me. Littered with information, and little... figures? There were tiny buildings, and even people, carved out of wood upon it. And all throughout this room was more stuff I should be amazed by too. Shelves full of strange things. Paintings. Other tables. Even the rugs on the ground, covering the stone floor, had designs on them. Ones I wanted to study.

Yet that baby had occupied my whole attention. My entire heart.

“Careful Renn. Please,” Vim whispered.

I nodded, though it felt wrong to do so.

Surely it wasn't so wrong... right? What was so wrong with me wanted to care for and protect a baby?

Wasn't that something important?

But I knew the truth. He wasn't my baby. He wasn't a non-human. He'd soon be given back to his rightful family... so...

“Hark has a large breast, a clean bottom, and soon a wonderful bed. I'm jealous,” Landi spoke loudly as she walked back into the room.

“Thank you Landi,” I said, and wasn't sure what to say to the rest of that.

Landi smirked as she walked over to the table, and went to stand next to Vim. Across from me.

She was... honestly a rather attractive woman. Maybe not to the level of Kaley, but even with the very visibly non-human teeth she was something to gawk at. Her eyes were especially striking. They were a beautiful blue. The type of color that was mesmerizing. And her eyebrows did indeed have a white line running through them. It was tiny, yet very obvious. It made her seem more exotic.

Honestly she looked a little too young to be a queen. But as far as I'd seen, and heard, no one doubted the legitimacy of her rule. In fact most seemed to have a lot of respect for her. The guards seemed happy to be given orders from her.

Though that might not be respect, but fear.

"So Vim. Showing up with a beauty is one thing, but a baby too? What brought this chain of fate to fruition?" Landi asked as she leaned against the table, as to look at us and not the map that Vim was still studying.

"Renn joined me some time ago. The child had been happenstance. He was entrusted to us by his mother," Vim said.

Oh...? He wasn't telling her the whole story. I wonder if that was on purpose.

In that case I'd keep it secret too.

Landi glanced at me and I quickly nodded. "We're to take him to his family. Here in town," I said.

"Hm. And Vim, being his typical self came here first. You're such a prick Vim. You're going to make me deal with it aren't you?" Landi asked, but did so with a smirk. She looked as if she was having fun.

“Renn would likely prefer to do the deed. So we’ll handle it. I figure we’ll do it tomorrow,” Vim said lightly. He was focused on the map, and spoke a little absentmindedly.

Landi snickered, and then gestured at me with a light wave. “You do seem to be attached already. The boy is a human, is he not? Careful Renn. They never live long, you’ll just get your heart hurt,” she warned.

I gulped at her warning, since it was actually a very real one. One that resonated with me.

I nodded, but said nothing. Out of fear of saying the truth.

“And you brought some dyes Vim? Once again you fund my tyranny. I’ll think of you as I squish the wills and freedom of my people beneath my new set of heels,” Landi said.

A little bothered by her comment, I glanced at Vim. To see if she was just joking or telling the truth.

Vim though gave no insight. He only nodded as he frowned and studied the map closer.

“Hmph. He used to glare at me. Now I’m just another child to be tolerated. How about you Renn?” Landi turned her focus to me.

“Um... At least do it gently...?” I asked unsurely.

Landi erupted into laughter, and Vim actually looked away from the map as to glance at me.

Shifting on a foot, I glared at the man who was smiling at me gently. What?

“My...! Hm...” she stepped around Vim, and I noticed the way she ran her hand along his back as she did so. It was an alarmingly sensual act, the way she did it. Yet I ignored it as she focused on me and drew closer. Once again she stepped up next to me, and leaned forward, as to stare into my eyes.

“You’re a predator,” she said with confidence.

I gulped and nodded. “I am. I’m a jaguar,” I said.

Landi blinked, and then leaned back. I grew a little worried as I watched a shocked look take over her face.

Huh...? That was...

“You’re kidding,” she said.

I shook my head. What was wrong?

Landi tilted her head, and then looked at Vim. "Vim... has her bloodline been in the Society for long?" she asked.

"Renn's? No. She joined a few years ago. From the north," Vim said. He was staring at Landi, and I could tell he too had noticed something odd about her reaction.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Maybe. Come. Let's talk in depth. Let's see if you and I will be enemies, or friends," she said as she held out her hand.

Taking it, I smiled gently at the woman who I knew had been banished from most of our society. "We can be friends right now, if you'd like."

She giggled as our arms got interlocked, and she turned as to guide me out of the room. "That works for the lesser ones, but not us," she said.

Lesser ones...? Did... did she mean those who weren't predators...?

As we walked out of the room, I noticed Vim quietly followed us. But not right away. He lingered behind, as if to give us space.

“Let him be. Vim’s fun, but I’ve grown bored of the stoic protector,” Landi said.

“He is boring sometimes,” I agreed.

Landi giggled as we rounded the door and out into the hallway. I glanced around at the guards up and down the hall, and noticed none were nearby. It seemed they... kept their distance unless they were summoned or had duties to attend to.

“Where’s Hark?” I asked.

“That room. Four down. The one with guards posted,” Landi answered.

Ah. That made sense. Good. I’d remember it.

Landi’s arm squeezed my own. “Very protective. I like it. We should be that way. We should always proudly protect and keep watch on those we claim as ours,” Landi said.

“You said not to claim him. That it would hurt my heart,” I said.

Landi nodded. "I did. But even if it is wrong, as predators it's our right to do whatever we want. I recommend not loving that boy, but I'd be amiss to say not to do whatever you want," she said.

"You speak like Vim," I said.

The Queen of Stone tilted her head at me. "Do I?"

I nodded. "You mean free will don't you?"

"Ah. No. I mean the right of the strong. The right to rule," she said as she lifted her other hand, to point with a finger.

As she did I noticed her nail. It was like mine. Long and sharp. It was time I cut them.

"The right to rule," I repeated her words.

She nodded. "It's the duty of those strong. Of those above the rest."

Frowning at her, I wondered if this was what Vim meant by her being... different than the rest.

“You mean to say that because we’re so strong it’s our duty to rule over the rest?” I asked.

“Obviously...? If not us then who? Are you going to say we should be ruled by those weaker than us?” she asked me.

“Why does anyone have to rule anyone?” I asked her back.

Landi giggled at me. “There’s always someone at the top.”

Well... she was maybe right... but...

We rounded a corner, and the hallway suddenly grew larger. What had been something normal sized was now gargantuan. I strained my neck as to look up at the ceiling, and found I couldn’t really see it.

We were inside a giant stone... monument, or pillar, as Vim called it. Monolith? So it was dark. And the torches and fires lighting the place up weren’t very strong. Not strong enough to completely illuminate the giant hallway.

“How big is this hallway?” I asked her.

“Hm? Several stories. You can’t see them, but the top floor is up there. It’s open, and overlooks all the hallways like this,” she said.

“Open...?” I wondered what she meant.

“I’ll show you later. Basically up there are my quarters. My bedroom,” she said.

Ah.

Looking away from the massive ceiling, I instead focused on the hallway... and everything down it.

There were several larger doorways along it. Likely other hallways that this one led to, but I could see a few real doors. Large wooden things, with red wood. And a rather... odd lack of guards.

“Where are all the guards here?” I asked.

Landi squeezed my arm again. “What use are they? I have them to keep the annoyances away, but we don’t need them,” she said.

“Annoyances,” I said. I wonder what she meant.

“My puppets. Government officials... military generals, and nobles and merchants. They’re like flies, always buzzing around trying to sound important.”

Puppets. "Do they know you're not human?" I asked.

"Some do. But it's not like I really hide it. Sometimes I need to... lay the law down, as you say. But in this region, like most out here, they're used to legends and monsters. So I'm not that weird to them," Landi explained.

She... didn't hide what she was...

"What about the church?" I asked.

Landi paused, which made me have to stop walking too. Then she smirked at me. "You mean the one I control?" she asked.

Oh. "You rule that much?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" she asked back.

Well... I mean...

I tried to think of the lands I was used to. The ones back north.

There were powerful people there too. Those who ruled. Some, like Landi, with cruelty.

Yet even they couldn't rule everything. One person, or a group, could control a powerful section of society... but rarely if ever did they control all sectors of it. One would rule the church, but not the royalty. Or vice versa.

Like Lumen. There were many different factions, and they weren't at all on the same page. So there was a level of... separation of...

I frowned as I thought about it, and realized that maybe that was no longer the case. Since they had all joined together, alongside us, to declare Lumen a free state.

"Have you been ruling long?" I asked her after a moment of pondering.

"I'm nearing my second century as Queen," she said.

"That's a long time," I said with a nod.

"Not really. For humans, sure, but not us. Our kind used to have rulers you know? Ones far, far older. Right Vim?" Landi turned her head, to shout at him.

“Right what?” he asked as he drew closer. He had been standing behind us, at enough of a distance that he couldn’t talk normally. He drew closer as Landi huffed at him.

“How long had King Javlo rule?” Landi asked.

Javlo?

“Almost five hundred years,” Vim answered.

Landi nodded and returned her attention to me. “See? And he was just one of many.”

“Huh...” I frowned as I nodded. I had known that a long time ago we had... entire nations and lands of our people, but I hadn’t really ever realized or thought about the fact that such a thing meant we had also been such structured societies.

So at one time we had been so numerous, and so settled, that we had such things. Monarchies. Rulers. Kingdoms.

We returned to walking as Landi leaned against me. She was warm, even though she wore a very thin dress. In fact now up closer I could...

Yes. I could see through some of it. As if it was a nightgown.

She had hair. Fur. On most of her body. It ran up and down her sides, it seemed.

“What are you searching for Renn? How long have you been with Vim?” Landi asked.

For a tiny moment I hesitated... but then I decided to just say it.

“Actually... I’ve been planning to stay with Vim. To join him,” I said.

Landi tilted her head at me, and I nodded as to confirm it. My heart thumped loudly in my ears as I grew overly anxious of what I was saying, but I said it anyway. “I like it. I like traveling, and I like... what he does. So I want to do it too. For as long as he’ll let me,” I said.

Landi frowned, but only for a moment. “I see. Well I can’t say I agree, but that’s because the idea of spending so long with Vim makes my butt itch. But, that’s actually not that bad a thing, I think. Far better than you just looking for a husband or something silly,” Landi said as she thought about it.

I was half tempted to glance at her behind, to see if she had a tail or if it was covered in fur, but wasn’t able thanks to how we were locked in arms. As I glanced back though, I noticed Vim. He was rather far away again, although still following us.

“I’ve heard that a lot of people have gone with him looking for husbands or wives. Is it that common?” I asked.

Landi nodded with a grimace. “I know, isn’t it weird? I mean really,” she said.

Oh...? “Are you married already, or do you not care for such a thing?” I asked.

She smirked at me. “To be honest, I do want a mate. But the idea of finding one in the Society, or even a human,” she shivered as if suddenly cold. “No thanks.”

Huh... interesting. “You don’t want one from the Society?” I asked.

“Who’d want any of those weaklings? Bunch of spineless boys, not men. Though maybe that’s why you don’t see it that way. Traveling with Vim and all. Just so you know, in case you don’t, Vim’s the outlier. Most men aren’t like him at all,” she warned me.

I nodded, since I actually did know that. I knew it well.

“Wait... so you want someone strong?” I asked, trying to understand her.

“Hm. I want to be toyed with in bed, yes,” she smirked at me.

Doing my best to ignore the way she had said that, I gestured behind us.

“Why not him then?” I asked with point.

Landi broke out into a huge grin. “Gross!” she said.

Feeling a little oddly relieved, I smirked at the woman who broke out into a fit of laughter.

She laughed like Brandy. Full of volume and without reserve.

I liked it.

Even more so since our arms were locked together, and I could feel it. She let her laughs fill her whole body, it felt great.

“So gross,” she giggled as she calmed down.

“May I ask why?” I asked.

“Of course you can!” she then hesitated, and then frowned. “Well... to be honest, I shouldn’t say gross. He’s not that bad looking, and I bet he’d be a wonderful mate. Very protective. Caring. And I bet he’d last a long time in bed too! But...”

Fascinated, I listened and watched intently as Landi pondered my question.

Then she nodded, and decided something. “Yes. I’d accept him. But at the same time, I don’t want to. Maybe it’s because I’ve known him since I was a child? I see him kind of like a big brother. So that’s probably why. I’d find it really weird, probably so weird that it wouldn’t work,” she said seriously.

I see. Interesting. “That makes sense.”

“No. It doesn’t. You’re right... why have I never considered him...?” she mumbled as she turned around, to look at him.

Uh oh. Had I maybe just gained a competitor?

Glancing back with her, I noticed Vim was even farther away. He was walking really slowly... and looked lost in thought. Was he not listening in? I knew he could hear us from there. Especially with the way this massive hallway made our voices carry and echo.

“Considering it now?” I asked Landi lightly.

“A little. I’ll think about it while you’re here. But something tells me no. I don’t think I’d be able to get over the fact that I see him like a big brother. I may be weird, and eccentric, but even I wouldn’t do that,” she said.

“I’ve heard it’s common for queen’s to do weird stuff like that,” I teased her.

Landi snickered at me. “Reading those stories are you? Please,” she scoffed.

Oh...? “You mean the Queen’s Lament?” I asked.

“Yeah? You’ve read it right?” she asked.

I shook my head. I hadn’t gotten the chance to yet. Or rather, I have had opportunities... but I was saving them. For when I could really just... enjoy them. I was waiting to read them at a place where I could dedicate my whole attention to them, and nothing else.

We’d not been anywhere yet like that.

“Oh. Then I won’t spoil it for you. Hm... I have the whole story here. All four, if you want to read them,” she said.

“You have all four too?” I asked.

She nodded. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Lumen just got the fourth themselves. A few months ago," I said.

Landi smirked. "I'm more important than them," she said.

I blinked at that, and then before I could ask more Landi leaned closer to me... and smiled.

"Were your parents like you Renn?" Landi then asked.

"Like me?"

"Humanoid," she said.

Oh. "Yes. As were my grandparents. But past them we had members who were more... beastly. I had an uncle who sometimes even walked around on all fours," I said.

"I see. That must be him then. Or his parents," she said with a nod.

“Huh?”

Landi grinned at me as we passed one of the large doorways. It did in fact lead to another hallway, but that one looked dark. Few torches were lit within it. “I believe I’ve met your lineage. Or at least a distant relative,” she said.

My heart sunk as I immediately thought of that elderly woman back at the Bell Church. “You’re kidding!” I shouted.

She shook her head. “Nope. I enjoyed that fight. They almost got me. See here?” Landi then lifted her dress, and showed me her stomach.

Sure enough she had fur. It ran up and down her sides, circling her stomach. But it wasn’t the black and white hair I focused on, but instead a nasty looking scar. One that ran along her belly, to her groin area.

It looked like something had taken a huge chunk out of her at one time. Her tanned skin was pure white on the scar, as if it’d never been touched by the sun in its long life.

“Ripped me apart something good,” she said.

Hesitating, I slowed and stopped... and then looked up at Landi with watery eyes.

She tilted her head at me, and then our arms detached... but not entirely. She held my hand still, as if refusing to let me go.

"I'm..." I started to apologize, but Landi only grinned at me and waved my apology away before it had been given life.

"Oh please! It's not like you had been the one to bite me! You sure you're a predator...?" Landi asked with a smile.

Gulping, I shifted as Vim stepped up to us.

"You recognize her, Landi?" Vim asked gently.

"No. But I think I remember the smell. They smell like a wet forest," Landi said as she studied me.

Wonderful. Great. Just...

Would I be banished here too? Really? So soon?

My mind whirled as I thought of my uncle. And even more so my other uncle. The one no one that hadn't been human at all. The one who had lived in that cave.

“I had another uncle. One not human at all. He... was missing his right eye,” I said as I covered the same eye on my own face.

Landi blinked, and then her weirdly happy smirk died down.

“The scar ran to his mouth. Curling it,” I said as I drew it on my own face.

“Well I’ll be...” Landi shifted, and I noticed the way Vim’s eyes dug into her. Her. Not me.

“Landi?” Vim asked.

She blinked a few times... then nodded. “Yes. That was likely him then. I gnawed off half his face. He had bit me, along the waist, and was shaking me. I clawed and bit off his lip and eye as to free myself,” she explained to the both of us how it had happened.

Feeling sick, I closed my eyes and groaned.

“What... Why’s she look so hurt, Vim?” Landi asked.

“She feels responsible,” Vim said.

Suddenly I was being shaken. I opened my eyes and couldn't help but smile as Landi wildly shook my hand and arm, all the while grinning at me.

"Responsible! Really! Jeez...!" Landi was loud, and then she stepped forward and wrapped her arm around my own again.

She returned us to walking, and I blinked some blurry eyes as she guided me down the hallway. "You don't get to feel responsible until you tear my flesh yourself!" she said to me.

Feeling oddly humbled, I nodded. "Okay."

"Let me guess, this has happened before huh? Did he kill or hunt others in the Society too? Well pay it no mind. Only the weak would get upset over something like this. If anything you should be proud! I've only a few scars on my body, so be proud to be related to someone able to add to them!" Landi declared.

I laughed a little, but wasn't sure if it was really something I could be proud of.

So she had met that beast. And had actually fought him off.

She was why he had been blind.

“Honestly... I should be thanking you, I guess. It’s thanks to the injury you gave him that I had been able to kill him,” I said.

Although I had help at the time. A lot of help. But it was still the truth. If he hadn’t been crippled we’d might not have been able to do it.

She paused again, and turned to look at me... and then broke out into a huge grin.

“We’re totally friends!” she happily declared as she wrapped me in a hug.

Chapter 226 A Bowl’s Son

It wasn’t as blue of a building as I had expected.

The large two story building was one of the biggest in this section of the market. It had huge windows on the first floor, but none on the second. And there were large fences between the building and the stores next to it on either side, likely hiding large gardens and workplaces.

This section of the market was busier than the northern one I had checked last night, but it was still lacking. Most of the people walking around seemed to be the workers going to work more than anything.

But that was likely simply because it was early morning.

“Hm...” Renn hummed as she stepped forward, to draw closer to the largest window. One full of display cases and racks. Showcasing their wares.

Keeping an eye on her for a moment, I studied the way she held the child. The boy was still asleep, luckily, and looked far too comfortable and content in her arms.

Sighing I looked back to the building. The blue shade of paint was faded. Dull. It had likely been painted years ago by the looks of it. It needed a new coat of paint.

“They do sell more than just bowls,” Renn said as she studied one of the largest plates. It was rather reflective in the morning sunlight.

“Anything’s a bowl if you try hard enough,” I said.

I noticed Renn’s hat shift, and I smiled at the way she glared at my reflection in the window.

Stepping forward, I went to the main door of the building. It was shut, but I wasn’t sure if it was simply because it was too early or because of the plague. Several of the other shops around here were already open, if lacking in customers.

Upon our nearing of the building we had seen smoke coming not from one chimney, but two, so there was definitely people inside. Odds were the owners of the shop lived on the second floor of the building.

“You’re sure they’ll take care of him?” Renn asked quickly as she stepped over to me.

“They’re his family, Renn,” I said.

Renn frowned at me in a way that told me she didn’t believe such a thing guaranteed anything. It told me a lot about her perception of family, or rather her experience with such people.

But honestly I hadn’t meant it that way. I hadn’t said such a thing as to imply that such a thing meant they’d take care of him properly... but rather...

Well...

Glancing at the young child in her arms, I did my best to not let the way she clung to him so dearly bother me. Especially when it really shouldn’t.

If anything I should be glad she was the type of person to care for a child’s well being. Especially so since she’s a predator.

Most of her ancestors would have eaten the boy, not cared for it. They had rarely cared for their own, let alone some random child that wasn’t theirs.

Going up to the door, I gave it a few knocks. I didn’t knock too hard, but upon hearing the banging I realized I had hit it a tad too hard.

At least nothing broke.

Sighing as I stepped back, to stand next to Renn, I wondered how this was going to go.

Landi had given me this families tax records. They had bought their way out of serfdom generations ago. They weren't the wealthiest merchants, but they were far from poor. Plus their family was big. Big enough that they had purchased another house a few streets down a few years ago.

The records the Nation of Stone kept weren't good enough to know who exactly lived in that house, other than it was just one of the sons. Their census took into account the family sizes, but only recorded how many sons were born. Daughters were just numbers on a ledger, nothing more, here.

"Mhm..." Renn made a noise, and then I heard it. Footsteps. Smooth leather on old wood.

The door clanked, and promptly opened to reveal a younger woman. Too young to be the owner of this building.

"Yes...?" she frowned at the sight of us. "We don't open for another two hours," she added before I could say anything.

"I'm sure. Is the master in?" I asked, before Renn's obvious thoughts escaped her lips.

The young girl's frown deepened. "Grandmother is. Why?"

She once again studied me. Looking me up and down.

Yes. I know. I didn't look important enough to be knocking on a proprietary's door so early in the morning, and acting so haughty.

I know.

"My name is Vim. If you'd please let me speak with her for a moment, I'd appreciate it. It's concerning one of her relatives," I said.

Suddenly I wasn't something to be doubted. The woman's eyes perked up and she stepped forward. "Who? Did someone get hurt?" she asked quickly.

Shoot. She wasn't an employee, but a daughter.

Mentally kicking myself I raised a hand and tried to smile gently. "It's best if I speak with the head of the household first," I said.

"She's here."

An older version of the young girl stepped around the corner, revealing herself. She looked tired.

Sick even.

Yet she hadn't sounded sick, nor did she have spots on her.

"You're the head of the family?" I asked her.

She nodded... and then sighed. "I've been expecting this. Come in. At least have tea before you break my heart," the woman said as she turned as to head back inside.

Before I could regain control of the conversation, Renn stepped forward.

She stepped through the door without hesitation, and I held back a groan.

Great. This could have been so quick and easy...

Following Renn into the craftsman's house, it was I who had to close the front door since the young woman had hurried to follow her grandmother instead.

“My name is Renn,” Renn introduced herself as I glanced around.

“Renn...? Odd name. I’m Verla, and this is...” the young girl introduced herself, and her grandmother, but I stopped listening as I studied the little shop.

Or well... it wasn’t little. About half the first floor was an open shop area. Full of stands and display shelves for their works. The vast majority were indeed bowls. Of all shapes and colors and styles. But there were a few other non-bowl items too. Plates, utensils, even...

Pausing in front of a small rack, I stared at the combs being showcased upon it.

Right... I had thought of getting Renn one for her tail.

Studying them, I decided none would work. They were finely made, and colorful which Renn would like... but these wouldn’t suit Renn’s tail. Most of these were to make hair seem fuller. Not something suitable for the fur on her tail, which was more smooth and silky than not.

But...

Where would I get her one that would suit her tail, actually...?

Or rather, where would I find one suitable for her that wasn't originally intended for an animal? Like a farm animal or something?

I'd not feel good getting her something like that.

"Momma!" a small cry drew my attention and eyes away from the rack of combs, and down a nearby hallway.

Renn had given the baby to a new woman. One I'd not seen yet. She had fallen to her knees, clutching the baby as she cried.

Frowning, I stepped forward as I studied the situation. It looked... fine, relatively.

There were four women now. The older one, the owner of this place, was staring wide-eyed at Renn. She was up against a table, using it for support. She was shocked. The woman Renn had handed off the baby to, the one on the floor... resembled somewhat the woman who had given us the baby the other night. She had the same hair.

Had she been the one to cry out mother? Or had that been the younger girl...?

I should have been paying more attention...

As I approached, more people showed up. A few were dressed in thin clothes. The type of silks that told me they had just jumped out of bed upon hearing the commotion. Others however were already grimy from work. There was likely some kind of clay work area nearby, if not in the house itself. Maybe in the back. One of the men who walked into the room had dried clay caking his arms.

Without saying anything, or joining the conversation, I studied and examined the family. I wasn't sure how many were relatives of the boy... but it didn't matter. In places like this, employees were basically family too. Most folks in this era, and especially here in this nation, worked the same job their whole lives. Half the time marrying into it.

"Thank you...!" the woman on her knees reached up, to grab Renn's hand. Even while clinging to the baby, she still grabbed at Renn as to shake her hand.

Renn looked rather uncomfortable as she accepted the gratitude. The others drew closer, to see the baby. To assault Renn with hundreds of questions.

I let her handle it for a moment as I studied the older woman. The one still leaning against the table for support.

Yes. She was weary. But was it from age or disease...?

I blinked as I realized it didn't matter.

"Blasted Witch!"

My eyes left the old woman and focused on the man who had yelled. The one with clay on his arms.

He was quickly growing upset. Rather, he was already upset. His voice grew louder as he began to complain about the tyrannical witch, but he wasn't able to get his whole spiel out. Other family members pushed him out of the room, back down the hallway to the other side of the house.

"Please. He's... he loved his sister," one of the women said.

Renn didn't seem to know what to say so she looked to me. Because of it, the whole room followed her gaze.

"We don't necessarily know what happened to her, or the others. I'd recommend finding out from the watch," I hesitated when I noticed one of the woman's expressions. She hadn't understood what I meant. "The guards. They could still be in quarantine," I said.

"May it be so," the older woman nodded.

Ignoring Renn's look, I gestured to the boy. Or rather, the woman on the ground... still on her knees in front of Renn.

"We've fed and tendered him. But he'll likely be hungry once he..." I didn't get to finish my sentence as he woke up.

As the boy began to cry, I wondered how it had taken this long for him to do so. Not only had the woman holding him been squeezing him, it'd been noisy. But oh well. A good excuse.

Renn got another handshake, from another woman, as the older one stepped away from the table. To me.

Watching her approach, I decided she might be sick... but not of the plague tormenting the area.

Rather her sickness might be more of the heart than body.

"I thank you. We are in your debt," she said to me.

Gesturing softly, I shrugged at her. "Who'd do anything different?" I asked her.

The old woman smiled in a way that told me she knew full well I didn't believe in what I had said. Just as she didn't.

Sighing I nodded. "Here. I'm assuming it was your daughter?" I asked as I dug out the small purse.

"Yes. She was," the old lady said softly.

Holding out the small leather pouch, I smiled and waited for the old woman to take it.

She studied it, and then looked up at me. Yet didn't take it.

"It was hers," I said.

"I know. I made it for her," she said.

I shifted the bag, to make it jingle a little.

Not a single coin was missing. Though I knew from experience that they'd never believe it.

"Keep it," she then said.

I shook my head. "To me that'd be as wrong as not bringing him home," I said to her.

The old woman studied me for a moment, but before I could say more I noticed Renn had headed for me. She was done being thanked.

Stepping to the left, I placed the small purse onto a counter. One built into the wall. It was likely something they sometimes used to display products, yet it was empty right now.

“Sir...” the older woman wanted to complain, but I ignored her as Renn stepped up to us.

“He was hungry,” Renn said happily.

Oh...? She was a little flushed, but not a tear in sight.

Wonderful. I wonder if she really was improving... or if she'd start bawling once we left.

Looking away from Renn, I turned to the old woman and nodded. “We’ll be off then. Forgive us, but we’ve duties to attend and little time,” I said.

“Aye. Business doesn’t stop. Even when the world is on fire. I know,” the old woman smiled as she nodded.

“Goodbye. Watch your hair, he likes to pull it,” Renn warned her.

The old woman laughed, and I pretended to not notice the tears in her eyes as I turned away and headed for the door.

Leaving the shop, I had to usher Renn a little. The old woman kept trying to keep the conversation going.

“Thank you...! Really...!” the old woman continued to thank us as we left, heading down the road.

“You didn’t have to leave so quickly Vim,” Renn said as she waved goodbye to the family of bowl makers.

“Yes I did. Otherwise you’d be adopted, or have adopted them, or who knows what else,” I said as I shivered at the idea.

Renn smirked at me as she finally waved one last time and turned forward, to walk alongside me. “Is now a good time to tell you I thought about asking you to keep the boy? If that hadn’t been his family, I mean,” she threatened.

“Never is a good time for that,” I said stiffly. Such a worry had kept me up all night. Which was saying something for once, since I was actually tired.

She nodded and laughed at me.

As we left the blue building behind, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Yes. I’m glad that went so well and easy, too,” Renn said happily.

Yes. Though my relief was for different reasons, likely.

“Though... Vim... Are you sure he’ll be fine?” she asked.

“Yes Renn. They’re his family. Not us. Our meeting and moment with him was pure happenstance. He belongs there, with them, not with us,” I said.

“Ah... I mean... yes. I guess... but I more so meant, will he be safe? A few of them were sick, weren’t they?” she asked.

Glancing at Renn, I noted the look in her eyes.

I see. She had noticed.

Of course she had.

“I noticed, yes. But I’m... hoping it was just emotional stress, more than simple disease. None of them had spots, after all,” I said.

“I think the man did. He hid them, with the clay on his arms,” Renn said as she lifted her own arms, as if to display how he had done so.

Slowly coming to a stop, I frowned.

“You didn’t notice...? Though I might be wrong. But the spots are rather big, and...” Renn suddenly started doubting herself, but I knew better than to think she had simply misunderstood.

Renn may not know much about disease, but her attention to detail was second to none. If she saw spots, she saw them.

I sighed as I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

Renn said nothing, but I felt her staring at me.

“It’s always something...” I mumbled. That was likely why he had been so vocal about his feelings about how Landi was handling it. That hadn’t just been anger over the boy and his mother’s fate, but his own.

Lowering my hand, I glanced around. We weren’t far from the building. About half a block away. And the market was starting to pick up in traffic too, there was even a horse led cart heading our way.

“Had you noticed, and hoped I’d not...?” Renn asked softly.

“No. I’d not noticed. But I hadn’t been looking. To be honest I had even kind of... ignored most of your conversation with them. I hadn’t wanted to get involved,” I admitted.

“I could tell. I handled it for you, Vim,” Renn said gently.

Yes. She had.

“This is where I say we’ve done our job, Renn. We brought him home. Safely. From here his fate is in his hands or well... his families,” I said.

“He’s just a baby, Vim. He can’t hold anything with his little hands,” she whispered.

“I said his families,” I said, reminding her I had corrected myself.

She smiled at me, but it was a sad smile. One I didn’t like to see on her face.

Shifting, I held her gaze... and waited.

Renn stared into my eyes for a long moment, and as she did I wondered how many of our members looked at me in such a way anymore. There used to be more, back in the beginning. Those who stared at me, not the protector.

The me she saw was Vim. Not some story or legend. Not some... thing... but a person.

And that was why she was willing to stare at me with eyes of judgment. Even a bit of disappointment.

"I honestly don't know what to say or do. If we took him... what then would you say about the other children? Would we help him, but not any of the others? Even though we can? Or would you argue that since fate placed him into my arms, he is... or was... more special...?" Renn asked as she looked down to her arms.

"Don't read that deeply into it Renn," I warned her.

She shook her head. "I know... but I still do. I can't help it."

"Before you say anymore... consider what it would mean to take him now," I said.

Her hat shifted, and I noted how much it had done so. Maybe she was lacking in those pins. This time it had shifted to a point that it worried me.

"Take him now..." she mumbled as she began to ponder it.

I nodded, and stayed silent as I let her dwell on it.

It didn't take her long. But it was interesting to watch her face contort from confusion, to worry, to strained relief.

"We'd have to take him by force, now," she whispered as she realized it.

I nodded. "They'll be even more protective of him now. Especially since they're blaming Landi. They might think we some scheme or something, likely," I said.

Renn sighed. "You've called her a witch before too," she said.

"That's what they think she is, after all," I said as I gestured for her to return to walking with me.

She obliged, and I kept my relief from showing itself on my face as we began to walk again.

Thank goodness. She'd not ask me to go take the boy back.

I had half expected it to be honest. Renn... likely because of her predator blood-line, seemed very overprotective of things she claimed as her own.

It was a good thing I had chosen to bring the boy home as quickly as possible. If I had left her with him for too long, she might have grown to see him as her own.

“Because she’s lived so long,” she said as she understood.

“That and her strength. She’s strong like you... and enjoys using that strength, too,” I said.

I thought of the times Renn and I sparred, or I had her training. Like back at the smithy.

She had enjoyed it too. I’ll need to be careful from here on out, to keep her from learning the thrill of battle.

“Hm... She seems fine to me, honestly. She reminds me of Brandy, in a way,” Renn said.

Raising an eyebrow, I tried to imagine how she had come to such a conclusion.

“Her breasts aren’t that big,” I said as I thought of Landi.

Renn giggled at me and nudged me with an elbow. “I knew you’d say something like that!” she said happily.

Enjoying her laugh for a moment, I glanced around us. This city was as I remembered it from my many other visits. Stone roads and alleyways. Stone buildings. A hot sun, made hotter by all the rocks and the lack of trees or grass.

But it really was... a little empty. There were a few people walking around, becoming active, but it was a far cry from the bustling city I remembered.

This place should be like Lumen. Crowded. Noisy.

Yet it was quiet and quaint enough that Renn and I were strolling leisurely, and able to talk softly.

We rounded a corner, turning onto a smaller street. One not suited for carts or wagons. The ground became more decorated, and lamps began to appear.

A road of homes. Living quarters.

I studied the homes we passed for a moment, but eventually grew bored of them. So I turned my attention to Renn. She was more than happy to examine the houses we passed, focusing on them entirely.

"It's quiet but... it doesn't look that bad," Renn said softly.

“There’s definitely a lack of people. But they might all just be afraid to wander around too much,” I said.

“Hm...” she nodded, and a small crowd drew my attention from her.

At the end of the road was a small platoon. Armed guards on patrol.

Renn noticed them too, and I noticed that she stepped a little closer to me as we walked. “Vim?” she asked.

“They’re just on patrol,” I said.

Sure enough they didn’t even acknowledge us as we passed one another. Only a few had even glanced at us. Or rather, at Renn.

As they headed away, I paused as Renn stopped to study them for a moment longer.

She did seem to enjoy staring at the guards here. I wonder what she found so fascinating about them?

“I’ve seen knights and stuff patrol, but never like this,” she said.

Ah. So it wasn't they themselves she found interesting, but what they were doing.

"They're likely on guard for the disease," I said.

She nodded, but still kept her eyes on them as she pondered something.

Studying her, who studied them, I watched as her pupils contracted and her eyes narrowed.

It was a good thing humans weren't the most observant creatures. Her pupils really were unique.

"Are... are the people here slaves, Vim?" Renn then asked.

Frowning, I shook my head... but stopped as I realized to her they very well might be.

"Rather here people are serfs. It's why money is so precious here, not everyone earns actual money. It's why those guards had been so happy to oblige me over a few coins," I said.

Renn shifted, and once again I noticed her hat move a little too much. "But... that family. They sell bowls," she said as she pointed down the road we had just come from.

I nodded. "They do. They do have money here, Renn. But a little more than half the population are serfs in servitude. They're owned by Landi. They get paid, but such a small amount that they likely can't even afford a single one of those bowls," I explained.

Renn frowned at me. "All the houses look nice though?" she said as she looked around.

Well... "One can be a serf and still live lavishly, Renn. Although considered a witch, Landi isn't necessarily hated or despised on a grand scale. She actually takes care of her people," I said carefully.

Although I'd decided to be more open with her, I didn't want to change Renn's belief system too much. I needed her to have her own beliefs. Her own desires and morals, not mere copies of my own.

"These people don't seem like slaves to me," Renn said softly.

"Because in the truest sense they're not. Their slavery is one of a contract. They, in families, agree to work and dedicate their lives to a job. In return they get a house, food, water, security... and rations of supplies and desires fulfilled. As I said, they do also even get paid. Just... a small amount. Most even eventually buy their freedom, which is inherited by their children," I said.

"Yet they're still slaves," she said.

I nodded. "In a way. But one could argue everyone is. Here they're slaves to Landi. Those in Lumen are slaves to coins. In Telmik they're slaves to their religion. Men enslaved to their desires. Women to their wills. Everyone is a slave to something, in some form," I said.

“And you to the Society,” Renn said.

Blinking, I frowned at the woman who was staring at me with a rather serious expression.

“Well... yes,” I admitted.

Exactly. I’m glad she understood.

“For a man who values freedom and free-will, you’re sure defending something completely against it,” Renn argued.

I blinked at her, and couldn’t help but smile. “Funny,” I said.

Renn though didn’t smile back. “I hadn’t intended it to be so.”

Nodding, I sighed. “I know... I...” I stopped talking, and realized I was about to have a very peculiar conversation with her.

One I’ve only had with a few people in the Society.

Not just because I tried to usually avoid such conversations and topics, but also because so few people had the mind to comprehend it. They weren't able to look past that which they took for granted.

Only a few members in all the years have ever brought it up, and even fewer had the perspective to actually debate and talk to me about it.

One of which wasn't far from us. At the Salt Flats.

She and Renn would likely be quite a pair... maybe I should take her there to visit before we headed north? This wasn't one of the times I'd usually go there, but...

"Vim...?" Renn drew me out of my thoughts, and I nodded quickly.

"You are right. Very so. I do not like it. I don't like what Landi is doing, or how she does it," I said.

"But..." Renn waited for the rest.

"But..." I nodded. "I... well..." I hesitated.

Should I tell her?

Renn's golden eyes held my own. Waiting. Expecting. They looked lovely.

"I once forced my will, Renn. On others," I said carefully.

Renn blinked, and her beautiful golden orbs shifted a little. The pupils widened. The gleam became glossier. "Forced...?"

I nodded. "I made a decision. For... well..." How did I say everyone and everything, without admitting to it? "Well, the world," I said.

"The world..." Renn whispered.

"My actions. My deed... what I did then, is something of great argument," I said. "I used to... ask others. What they thought of it. Back during the beginning. But over time I stopped, since I realized something horrible," I continued.

"Ask what...?" she asked gently.

"If what I had done was right or not. If my actions had been the right ones. If the world was better for it or not," I said.

Renn blinked, and somehow looked sad. As if she somehow knew about what I had done. As if she somehow knew everything. But that was impossible.

Right...?

Coughing, I shifted and gestured around us. "I could change this. I could. Be it by force or not, I could... as you would say, free these people," I said.

Renn nodded.

"But... the cost of doing so, would be great," I said.

I pointed to the nearest house. It was only one story, but it had a garden. It was small, but cozy. Well kept. Something that I knew the owners took a lot of pride in; just by the way they made sure everything was in tip top shape. Their windows were spotless. The stone path to the door was bright and stainless. The few plants they had in the small section of lawn were also trimmed and well manicured. "The people who live there. Even if serfs, even if slaves... are living happy lives. Right now it's hard, yes, because of the plague... but before that, and after it passes, their lives will be somewhat good. They have a home. They need not worry over food or water. They don't need to worry over raiders or brigands. They need not worry about war or natural disasters," I said.

Renn, being the wise woman she was, quickly understood my meaning. Her eyes dulled a little, and her head lowered. I knew if her hat wasn't blocking them from view, I'd be seeing her ears droop too.

Nodding, I sighed. "If I freed them from this supposed slavery... they'd lose all that. My actions would free them, but the cost would be all of this. And after it's all said and done... well... would they honestly be any better off?" I asked her.

"They'd be like the towns we passed coming here," Renn whispered.

I nodded, very glad that Renn was smart enough to understand.

"I don't like it Renn. And if one time I come here... and found the humans all revolting against Landi, trying to overthrow her... I'd side with them in an instant. But for now, right now, Landi although cruel and a tyrant... is honestly the better option for them. Like the way she is handling the plague. Although cruel beyond measure, her methods are likely the only reason this place is still functioning as well as it is. Even if many will hate and blame her, the fact of the matter is with her resources and abilities this is the better outcome. The better path. Thanks to her there is order in chaos. Food is still available. Water is still flowing. Society hasn't crumbled here, like elsewhere," I said.

Renn shifted, and her eyes meandered around me. Not really focusing on anything in particular. "Your belief in free will is so firm, you believe if people are accepting and happy... even with slavery, then it's okay," she said.

"In a form," I admitted.

She didn't seem too upset with my own views of life, but I could tell she had some grievances with it. I wonder if she'd voice them or not.

Waiting, I was a little surprised it took her so long to do so. Several people walked past us as we stood, silently, staring at each other.

“You... changed the world once. Did what happened afterward bother you so much, that you gave up from ever doing so again?” she asked me.

So that was what she'd focus on? Of all things...?

“In a fashion, I suppose, yes,” I admitted.

“But Vim... You do still change the world. Your very words, or actions, change things all the time. You end lives. You change them. You save them, and not just when it concerns us either,” she listed as she gestured around us.

“Only when I'm forced to,” I corrected her.

Renn's mouth closed, then opened again to argue... but no words came. Instead she just stood there, staring at me.

“I long ago decided to never change the world without purpose. Take that little boy for example. I... took him, yes. But I'd not have helped or saved him had his mother not approached and begged for it. Don't forget Renn, I sat there next to you as we watched soldiers slaughter and burn many people. People I could have saved,” I told her.

Golden eyes gleamed as she nodded, understanding. "I know Vim," she said softly.

"You can find fault in it Renn. I know what I do is wrong, but it's a life I've chosen," I said.

She shook her head. "I admit I... don't like it. But I understand it. You can't force your will on everyone, since that goes against your beliefs. Even if by being so, others suffer because of it," she said.

Well... "You can reason it away Renn, but the faults and failures of my stance can't be ignored," I said.

She sighed and nodded. "I'll ponder it..." then she crossed her arms as she started pondering. "So... Hark is a slave?" she asked.

"Well no. His family bought their freedom generations ago. Four, if I remember correctly," I said as I thought of their tax record.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"I looked at Landi's records, while you two were getting all smoochy," I said.

Renn's frown contorted into a wry smile. "Smoochy," she said happily.

Turning, as to return us onto our path, I nodded. "I basically looked up their family records. What little Landi keeps, at least," I explained further.

Renn hurried to join me, and seemed excited. "So you did worry," she said happily.

My eyes narrowed a little, but I didn't let her teasing bother me too much. "I'm not so heartless that I'd abandon a baby to suffer, if possible," I defended myself.

She giggled at me, but said nothing.

Yes. I know. I'm a walking hypocrite.

We walked in silence for a moment, until we left the street of houses and found another larger intersection. One that led back to the market we had left, or away from it and back towards Landi's castle.

Deciding to head back to the castle, Renn and I headed down the northern road.

"Are we not going to check the city, Vim?" Renn asked.

"I did last night. While you were with Landi," I said.

Renn hummed, and I wondered if I shouldn't have. Glancing at her, I wasn't too surprised to find her smile gone.

"I had been worried over the disease Renn. I checked to make sure it was safe enough for you to venture out," I said to her.

Plus to be honest I had wanted to give the two a little alone time. Landi had so few members in the Society she could talk to... and well...

It seemed that Renn too would need every friend she could get.

She blinked at me, and nodded. "I figured, Vim. I was more so just realizing that you still... sneak away without me noticing. I thought I'd gotten better at keeping track of you. I hadn't noticed you even left long enough for you to do such a thing," she said.

Oh...?

Renn smirked and nodded again. "Maybe it's because Landi's so fascinating," she said.

I huffed at her. "Fascinating, sure."

“She is. Did you know she’s looking for a mate?” Renn asked.

My eye twitched. “I assumed, yes.” Hard not to. That was why she was banished from everywhere, after all.

“You’re cute when jealous. But you don’t need to worry. She wants one as to have children. I’d not be able to help her there,” Renn said happily.

I blinked the twitch away. “She wants children...?” I asked as I slowed.

I had known of Landi’s recent fascination. It had started when she had enslaved those two men. The porcupines.

One was still alive. I had checked on him earlier. Still alive, and still happily enslaved. Unwilling to let me free him.

I had thought they had been simple play things for her. Landi had always been... eccentric. So her having a harem had never been weird to me. But I had thought it had been just simple decadence. Simple pleasure and fun.

If those men had been for another purpose...

And...

A lot of things made sense all of a sudden, as my mind whirled at the possibilities.

“Vim...?” Renn slowed to a stop, as I did.

“Should I intervene...?” I whispered to myself.

“Intervene how?” Renn asked worriedly.

I blinked, and remembered Renn was here. Woops.

I took a small breath, and noted Renn’s smell. It calmed me down a little... even though I could still smell Hark on her still. She needed a bath now.

“Actually let’s go make a stop first, if you’re okay with it,” I said.

“Hm?” she smiled as she tilted her head at me.

Staring into those golden pupils, I felt a little relieved.

I was glad the boy had been easily returned to his family. I was glad that Renn hadn't ended up burdened with him.

Yet most importantly I was glad that Renn was the type to actually worry and help in such a way... but also was detached enough to not fight me on handing him over.

I had somewhat expected her to, honestly. But... maybe her decision to not fall for humans had been a firm one. One she'd not fight, at least for the time being.

Turning back around, as to head back to the shopping district, I reached out to put my hand on her back. To guide her next to me.

Before my hand reached her back though, her arm slipped into mine.

Glancing at the woman who happily wrapped her arm into mine as she took my side... I kept myself from saying or doing anything that'd hurt her heart.

I hadn't wanted to get this close to her this quickly...

"Where we going?" she asked happily.

Sighing softly, I nodded and let it be. For now.

“To get supplies,” I said as I took her back to the marketplace.

A fitting distraction, from my own personal failures.

Chapter 227 The City of Stone

Vim was studying the blocks of wood with a keen eye.

We were in a rather odd shop. One that sold wood. Timber. The place actually smelled familiar, and reminded me of home.

The building was situated in the corner of a small square marketplace, near the edge of the market district. I had heard this was the western market, though I wasn't entirely sure if we were in the center of it or on the edge. The only thing I was certain of concerning our location, was that we were very close to one of the large stone pillars. It loomed nearby, blocking most of the sunlight.

It was interesting for it to be the middle of the day, yet somewhat dark. As if the sky was covered in dark clouds. But there was no storm. No clouds. Just the stone pillar. The monolith, as Vim called it.

Standing a few tables away from Vim, I glanced around the shop one last time before looking back to the colorful wood in front of me. There were a few other customers here, but by the sounds of it they were regulars. They were speaking with the one who was running the shop, laughing about something they had heard from a friend earlier.

Reaching out to pick up one of the thin pieces of wood, I wondered what one would need such long strips of thin wood for. They were too thin to be used to build anything, at least so they looked. They were only as thick as my fingernail. They were pretty though. The one I was lifting had an orange tint to it that seemed... fake almost. As if it had been soaked in paint for a long time.

Putting the slice of wood down, I stepped over to the next table. It, like all the tables in this shop, was large and covered in wood. Each table had different cuts of wood, or of different shapes and colors.

This one had square block shapes of wood. They were stacked together, forming a small pyramid, with different colors on every side. It made it look neat, but once again I wasn't sure what this shop's entire deal was.

They sold wood. I got that. Here in this dry place, wood was likely valuable. So it made sense to me.

But... why the different shapes? These small pieces wouldn't be usable for anything too useful. No one would be able to build a house, or a cart, or even a table with most of these things. They were just not big enough.

I'd understand if this was just a way to display the wood. Like showing off their quality and type, by showing smaller cuts, and then selling the larger pieces... but from what I gathered that was not what this place was for.

You bought these pieces, not what they represented.

It was the oddest shop we'd been in yet. Vim had been on the hunt for something, seemingly these wood pieces, but had been kind enough to let me browse the shops we passed on the way here. I'd not bought anything, but it had been fun looking at all of them.

There was a bit of comfort in finding that even though half a world away... the shops here were nearly just like the ones back at home. Some of the stuff was different, or odd, but relatively it was all the same.

Yet...

Glancing again over at Vim, I frowned as he finally nodded and decided on which one he wanted.

"I've not seen you before sir, which crafting guild do you belong to?" the shop owner stepped over to Vim, who likely had also noticed Vim had made his choice.

"None. Do you have any ivory?" Vim asked him.

I stepped around the tables I had been busying myself with and watched the shopkeeper's face morph into a small frown. "Ivory...? I can only wonder what you're making. I do have some, but what I get is from trade and barter... so it's not much of a selection, honestly, and nothing I'd really want to sell to be frank," he said.

Ivory... Vim meant bones right?

He wanted bones...?

Now I was very interested in knowing what he planned to make. The only thing I could think of was jewelry, or maybe certain tools.

“Wouldn’t happen to know anyone in town that sells ivory, would you?” Vim then asked.

The man shook his head. “No. There might be some like myself who have a little from trade over the years, but there’s definitely not a singular store for it or...” he paused as he pondered it. Then nodded. “The only thing you could do is put in a request for it. To one of the main guilds, or maybe the Queen,” he concluded.

Vim sighed as he looked away from the man and to me. I perked up a little at his glance, but it was short lived. Vim looked away after a moment and back to the shopkeeper.

“I’ll take this. And a section of your smoothest leather,” Vim said.

The shopkeeper nodded as he glanced at the block of wood in Vim’s hand. “I’ll give a discount if you’ll tell me what you’re making,” he said.

Smiling at the man, I nodded. Yes, please ask.

“No thanks. Actually let me have this one too,” Vim stepped away, to another table, and picked up a smaller piece of wood. One a quarter of the size of the one he already had. It was about the size of my closed fist.

“Hmph. You’re definitely not a craftsman. Bet you’re some weird merchant. All right then, I’ll go get the leather, one moment,” the shopkeeper complained as he stepped away and headed deeper into his store.

Stepping over to Vim, I smiled at him. “Keeping it a secret, or do you hate haggling that much?” I asked him.

“Both. Touch this, how’s it feel?” Vim then held out the first piece of wood he had picked up to me.

Taking it from him, I frowned as I ran my hands along it. It was rather light for as big as it seemed and felt... smooth. A little too smooth. As if it had spent a long time in a river, or ocean. “It’s smooth,” I said after a moment.

Vim took it back, and then reached over to grab my hand.

I went a little still as he turned my hand around, as to stare at my palm. I kept it open, and watched as he studied my palm for a moment.

“Vim...?” I asked softly. What was wrong?

Then the shopkeeper returned, carrying a small bundle of wrapped leather.

“Will this do?” he asked Vim.

“Perfect.”

Before he handed Vim the leather, he smiled one last time. “Half off. I bet you’re making a flute of some kind,” he said.

Vim frowned at him, and I noted the annoyance on his face.

Vim didn’t find the man’s attempts humorous at all. “No,” was all he said as he dug out the coins.

A few moments later we were walking out of the store, and Vim was smiling happily as he carried his new spoils.

I wanted to ask what he was planning... but that had been the third time that I had asked, and he had ignored me. Which meant he had no intention to tell me.

I’d found out eventually, hopefully. But it was starting to really bug me.

Vim had messed with those leather pieces earlier. While we had been stuck outside of the city, thanks to that quarantine thing. Was this just a simple continuation of it, or was it something more?

“He was upset with you, Vim,” I said as we headed down a street. One that had more people on it than before. It was now the middle of the day, but I was starting to realize that Vim was right. This place wasn’t as busy as it should be. I felt like we were walking in a smaller town, not one the size of Lumen.

“Who?” Vim asked.

“That shopkeeper,” I said.

“Oh. Hmph,” Vim shrugged, uncaring.

Yes... Vim really didn’t care did he?

It was honestly a little interesting how Vim cared so much for certain attention, yet completely didn’t notice or care for other types.

“Shall we find somewhere to eat then?” Vim then asked.

I nodded quickly. “Preferably somewhere with something tasty to drink,” I said.

Vim smiled at me. "Yes. Landi only had alcohol, I'm assuming," he said.

"She had water too," I admitted. But not much else. Or well, I probably could have asked for anything I wanted. She would have then ordered one of her servants, and I'd have gotten it shortly.

But I hadn't wanted to seem ungrateful, or needy. We had already been so bothersome with Hark after all.

"This way then. If I remember correctly all the food shops are either north or south, and past the marketplaces," Vim said as we turned down a different road.

"Past the marketplaces...?" I asked. Usually markets were where they were located.

"Landi built this place in zones. It's a useful system, but once a city gets big enough you need to start incorporating more efficient methods. She hasn't done it yet," Vim said.

Zones...? "So... that's why the city is made in blocks?" I asked.

"Blocks indeed," Vim said.

Smiling I nodded. Yes. The buildings were actually blocks themselves. They were all just giant rocks, carved into the shape of houses or buildings.

It was honestly a little ugly, now that I've spent enough time looking at them to realize they were so... Similar.

They had been interesting at first... but now I missed the... uniqueness of wooden and brick buildings. The ones back home up north.

Those had character. Each one was different. Each one, even if uglier or smaller, had been its own building. Something recognizable and unique.

These though were all the same. Some were painted different colors, or had designs carved into them... but...

Passing one of the more boring looking buildings, I decided this place wasn't very fun. And not just because half of the town was missing, or afraid to leave their homes because of the plague.

Though the looming pillars of stone were interesting. I could admit that.

There were four of them as far as I could tell. But only two were massive. The other two were about half the size of the others, and one of them was Landi's palace. It was situated in the center of the other three, and looked to have huge sections cut out of it all over it. Like giant windows... but I wasn't sure if any of them were anything more than massive open rooms.

Landi's palace was her own. Past a certain floor, no one else was allowed up there. Other than her... and her servants when she wanted them to do something.

"Is there another member here Vim?" I asked him as I thought of Landi, and her smell.

She had a strong scent. One that was very obvious and noticeable... but there had been other smells on her too. And not just from oil, incense, or her clothes.

"Yes. A porcupine," Vim said.

I slowed a little, but returned to walking normally when Vim didn't notice. "Really? Where are they?" I asked.

"In her castle. He's her..." Vim frowned as he thought of something, going silent.

"Hm?"

"Well... A concubine, in a way," he then said.

Concubine...? "You're kidding," I said.

“No. She used to have a rather large harem, actually. Though I suppose she might have human members now and I don’t know about them,” Vim said.

I had to blink an odd fog out of my head as I tried to comprehend exactly what he was saying.

Landi... she had a harem...? Really...?

“But... but Vim, she doesn’t want a child from a human,” I said quickly.

“Yes. Odd, isn’t it. It’s why I hadn’t realized she was actually trying for a child. She hates humans. So I thought she was just... frisky. Like Kaley,” Vim said as he frowned.

“Frisky,” I whispered the word that made me smile and wondered if that was really what she was.

“I try not to get too involved in our members more personal matters, Renn. You should know that,” he said.

I nodded. I did. “Why didn’t he come introduce himself...? Or why didn’t she tell me about him?” I asked. Last night she had been very clear she had wanted a mate, and desired one something rather fierce. If she already had such a thing, those desires and our conversations concerning them made little sense.

“Well he’s... a little unique. He’s not what you think he is,” Vim said.

“Hm...?”

Vim pointed at a road we were approaching. It was actually one of the busiest roads I’d seen so far. Not only were there more people walking around, there were also more carts and wagons upon it too.

“What are you in the mood for Renn?” Vim asked as we headed down the busy, for this town, road.

“Something warm. No more plain soups or dried meat, please,” I said.

Vim nodded, understanding. During our stay outside of the city, all our food had been of poor quality. Thanks to the rations they brought out being so lackluster. Even when Vim offered to pay more than normal, they hadn’t been willing to bring anything nice out for me.

“So... can I meet him then? Or is he one of those types afraid to meet someone like me?” I asked Vim.

Surely not right...? I mean if he was Landi’s partner then...

She was far more forceful than me. I could only imagine what she’d be like in a bedroom, especially when one took into account her natural personality.

Vim chuckled. "I'll show you him. But he'll... well... you'll see. Put him aside for now, and let me know once your nose catches your fancy," Vim said as we drew closer to the shops, and the people walking in and out of them.

I nodded as I took a small sniff of the air.

Yes. He was right. The smells of food were now in the air.

Once I acknowledged them, my stomach made a noise.

Vim chuckled at me, but I ignored him as I paid keen attention to the smells and stared at the buildings we started to pass.

Like all the buildings before, all of the ones here were made of stone. Giant block buildings. But although not painted fancy, they did have something to make them stand out and distinguish themselves. Each building had fancy designs carved into their upper roofs. Designs that quickly became very apparent in their meaning.

One was a pig. Another had a bunch of ducks lining the top of its roof. A larger building had huge tankard looking barrels that looked as if they were constantly pouring from their spigots.

"Neat way of doing it," I said.

“A lot of people here are illiterate,” Vim said.

That made a lot of the shops make a lot more sense. Not only had most not had signs... very few had displayed prices on any of their products.

Coming to a stop before a shop wafting in spices, I smiled as I pointed at it.

“Sure,” Vim obliged me, and was about to go into the shop that smelled of honey, but we both came to a stop as a pair of guards emerged from the shop’s entrance.

Pulling a man behind them.

I quickly stepped aside, alongside Vim, as we watched the guard pull the body out onto the street, dropping the man in the middle of it.

They both sighed as they stepped back away from it, and suddenly they had the attention of the entire area. It was almost scary how quiet it suddenly got.

“I’ll go get the others,” one of the guardsmen said with a sigh as he turned and hurried away down the street.

“Well, there goes that idea,” Vim simply said.

Looking down at the body, my eyes narrowed at the man’s face.

At first I had thought it was black and blue from a beating. Usually when I saw men, or knights, dragging a man out of an establishment it meant they had gotten into a fight, or were being arrested.

This man hadn’t been beaten. Nor was he even still alive.

His face was covered in dark spots.

“Vim...?” I whispered.

“Come on, before we get caught up in it,” he said with a sigh.

I happily obliged, but stared behind us at the guard and the body he stood next to as we left. Most of the rest of the people on the street followed suit with us, also hurrying away.

“Sorry Renn,” Vim apologized.

"I... uh... Well, it's not your fault," I said as I finally looked away from the guard and the body. Other guards were now in the distance, hurrying over.

"We can try the other side's market. Or elsewhere...? Maybe an inn or something?" he suggested.

"Hm..." I wasn't really sure if I wanted to agree to such a thing. All of the happy expectant joy at eating fresh food had just disappeared.

We walked in silence for a moment, and I noticed I was now studying the faces and exposed skin of everyone we saw and passed. As if on edge, I was now paying attention if we were going near anyone sick or not.

"Did... did that man just fall over and die in that shop?" I asked Vim.

"Possibly," Vim said.

"It happens that fast...?" I asked worriedly.

"Well, it shouldn't. Odds are it had been a worker or something. Trying to hide. Or something. Plagues can spread fast, and kill fast, but people don't usually just fall over and die without warning. I'd say it's more likely he died last night, and they finally just found and handled the body," he said.

I didn't like how he sounded a little unsure.

As we walked, I wondered how many people around us were sick. "How long do... plagues last, Vim?" I asked.

"Actually they can last a long time. Especially now that there are no Saints or Gods to perform their..." Vim went quiet, and then abruptly stopped walking.

Stopping next to him, I blinked at the man who had a rather startled expression on his face.

"Vim...?" I asked gently.

"Hm... I just realized another thing I ruined, is all. I'm surprised it took me this long to notice it," he said softly.

He ruined...?

Is... is he saying he ruined the Saint's and God's abilities to help us? Or had his mind simply shifted topics abruptly, as he did sometimes?

He frowned as he nodded. "Without Saints, or the power of their Gods, the only way for such disease to disappear is to either find a cure, or simply wait for them to run their course. Either could take a long time, and in today's era a cure is highly unlikely. Even if found I doubt it could be distributed enough to make a difference," he said.

“Are there really no saints left...? What about the Chronicler...?” I asked.

“She’s not a real Saint. She and her church gave birth to her out of desperation. She has access to the power, but it’s fickle and not that strong. She can’t perform what you consider to be miracles,” he said.

I blinked a few times, mostly shocked over Vim’s strange willingness to be so open.

He really was changing.

“Amber hadn’t seemed much like a Saint, Vim,” I said gently, thinking of her.

“She wasn’t one. But her bloodline could have given birth to one. There are... a few bloodlines that I know of, but as far as I’m aware none have a current Saint in this generation,” Vim said.

Shifting a little, I wondered what to ask next. Could I ask something a little more personal? Or should I keep my questions more... safe...?

“Not to say there aren’t any. Link had mentioned there was a war up north somewhere over a supposed Saint. But rumors like that are usually just that, rumors,” Vim then added.

“Oh...?”

We returned to walking, and I made sure not to draw too close to him. I wanted to, out of interest and simple joy over him being so open with me... but I knew if I did, he'd likely change the topic. I've noticed that sometimes my touch made him become more guarded.

“I suppose if the disease spreads... it'd be a good way to find any Saints, actually. A real one emits a slight radius of their divine aura. Sometimes it's strong enough to keep the whole town they're in free of disease,” Vim said.

“They're... that powerful?” I asked, surprised.

He nodded. “Some are. Others are like the Chronicler. Able to do interesting things, but nothing too weird. Back in the day there used to be quite a few everywhere. It was common for there to be one or two in every major town,” he said.

Interesting... “You believed the witch I knew was one, right?” I asked.

“I've no doubt of it, if you saw her perform what you consider magic,” he said.

“Then... I know where her bloodline is, if you'd like to go check on them,” I offered.

Vim slowed again, and once more we came to a stop.

I nodded up at him, and wondered if he was upset with me. Should I have mentioned this earlier...?

"I thought you mentioned you killed her," he said gently.

"I had. But she had given birth to a son. It's... been some time now, maybe over ten years, but last I saw they had grown into a rather large family. The son had settled down, and three of his children had formed families of their own. They lived in a town not far from where Nory and I had lived, near Ruvindale," I explained.

Vim frowned and tilted his head as he glanced around. No one was around us, although people were walking the street. We had left the direct area of the restaurants a short while ago.

"I'm sorry, Vim," I then said.

"Hm? What for?" he asked.

"For not telling you earlier."

He smiled lightly at me, and then nodded. "It's fine Renn. I was more so wondering... well..." he went quiet as he pondered his words. Then he shrugged. "I was wondering why you hadn't been with them. But then I realized you had killed the witch, so maybe there was bad blood between you and them, so..." he finished.

Ah...

Smiling at the gentle protector, I nodded. "I'm not on bad terms with them Vim... I just feel horrible. I killed her. So I feel... sick, when I'm with them. Even though they don't blame or hate me for it. Basically... well..." I hesitated, and didn't like how my eyes actually began to water.

"That doesn't make you weak, or a coward, Renn," he said gently.

"Yes it does. You're able to go and see those you've hurt and failed before. Why can't I?" I asked as I wiped my face.

Vim said nothing for a moment as I got my crying under control. I took a deep breath, and... actually felt a little better thanks to it.

Sniffing, I smiled at Vim who was smiling gently at me. "You have a beautiful heart, Renn," he said softly.

The remaining tear stains made my now hot cheeks feel cool as I smirked at him. "Shush."

"Let's... keep your friends secret to ourselves for now, okay?" Vim then said.

“Hm...? Sure?”

He nodded. “If we let others know those at Telmik will send out people to verify it. Let’s not scare and rattle the family for no reason, just in case,” he said.

“Oh... yes. I’d not like that. They’ve always been very kind to me when I visit them,” I said quickly.

“We can visit next time we’re up north,” he said as he returned to walking.

This time I didn’t hesitate to step closer to him. I didn’t wrap his arm with my own, since he was carrying stuff, but I drew close enough to brush against him. “I’d like that,” I said honestly.

We walked for a moment without adding to the conversation, and I was going to enjoy the happy silence... but a question dug at my mind.

“What would they do? If they found a Saint in that family?” I asked.

“Well...” Vim’s tone didn’t sound good. “They’d offer employment, basically. A hefty bribe. If they didn’t agree though, they might resort to force,” Vim said.

“Force...?” I slowed.

“Yes. Depending on the situation, they would,” Vim said as he slowed again, turning to look at me.

“Please tell me you’re joking,” I said.

Vim frowned, and I didn’t need him to tell me the truth. I knew he hadn’t been. Vim didn’t tease like that. Not about such serious stuff. Not when it concerned someone, or something, I loved.

“Sorry Renn,” Vim said softly.

Concern welled up inside me, and I began to grab at my shirt as I grew anxious. “The Chronicler would do that?” I asked, as I thought of her and everyone else at Telmik.

“Most of her churchmen would, yes. Saints are a holy conduit to their divine gods. They aren’t seen as people, Renn, they’re seen as literal manifestations of their holy creators. So they... become very fervent over them,” he said.

“I’m very glad I never mentioned it to anyone else then,” I said.

“As am I.”

Nodding, I sighed as I returned to walking. I needed to walk now, since I felt tense. My tail, hidden beneath my leather clothes, was squirming. "I hadn't wanted to hear that, Vim. That really upsets me," I told him honestly.

"Well... I don't disagree with your sentiments, Renn," Vim said gently as he returned to walking next to me. I noticed he had returned to walking up alongside me, and not away from me. Even though it would have been easy for him to put that familiar distance between us.

"Yet you allow it. I know. Geez Vim, I don't know how you do it," I said.

Vim said nothing for a few steps, and then I blinked and glanced at him. His face was like usual. Without much emotion... but I could see the thoughts in his gaze.

"Sorry," I whispered an apology. I had just hurt him.

"Hm...? Oh. I'm fine Renn. I know that I'm half the problem. But... that had been why I said we should keep it a secret, you know," he said.

Ah.

I blinked and nodded. "Right...!"

Actually...

As we walked, I realized that Vim likely did such a thing... very often.

He allowed everyone to do what they wanted. Because he believed in free-will. He let them choose their own fates. Their own stories. He didn't stop them, from even doing something horrible, because it was their right to do so.

Yet...

"You do that a lot don't you...?" I asked softly.

"Do what?"

"Keep the Society from knowing what could get them hurt. Or let them hurt something else," I said.

He rolled a shoulder, which I was starting to realize was something he did subconsciously. Especially so when he was bothered. Or annoyed.

He may not have a non-human characteristic... but he sure did have the same little twitches and tendencies we did.

“It’s a fine line, yes. My hope is you either learn it, or learn a better method,” Vim said.

A better method... “Is there one?” I asked.

“When you learn it, please teach me,” he said.

Glancing at the Societies Protector, I felt all my anger and disgust with our members fizzle and disappear... and get replaced with anxious expectations.

He nodded at me. “I have high hopes for you Renn,” he told me.

“Funny Vim... I have them for you too,” I said.

He smiled at me, and I smiled back.

Then my stomach made a loud noise.

The whole world became oddly quiet all of a sudden as my stomach gurgled in complaint... and it had been noisy long enough to make me look down in shame, and groan.

“Let’s go get Landi to make you some food. Your stomach’s being as noisy as your heart,” he then said.

I blushed again, for a different reason, and nodded as I followed him down another road. Heading back towards her palace.

Chapter 228 A Queen’s Request

Carving slowly, I kept a keen eye on how the boxwood’s design ran along the spot I was shaving.

I wanted that design to run along the top of the teeth. So I needed to be careful to not cut too much here. A hard task, when I was basically shaving a hairs width at a time.

“Really Renn, you act like you’ve never been burnt upon a pyre before...!” Landi said loudly from behind.

“Burnt...? No. Thankfully,” Renn answered smoothly, and honestly. She had grown long used to Landi’s oddness, which somehow only made Landi want to act even more eccentric.

“Pfa! Well, if you weren’t so adorable I’d need to fix that. But knowing my luck it’d make you bald, so I’ll refrain for now!” Landi said.

Landi laughed, and Renn joined her, and I wondered if Renn realized that Landi had very likely allowed such a thought to enter her head.

Probably did, to be honest.

A tiny slice of thin wood slid along my thumb as I rolled the sharp blade along the wood's surface. Cutting it as I would an apple's skin, I kept my focus on the pattern on the wood. The boxwood had a straighter grain, and was a light yellow in color. Not as golden as Renn's eyes, but pretty nonetheless. And I knew from experience that this type of wood would get a little darker over time, and after I properly stained and finished it.

As long as I did a proper job, it'd suit her perfectly.

"Vim's a bore. He's the only man I know that can make an entire whorehouse sober up and become nuns with only a few words."

My little knife came to a stop after I finished its path, then I turned as to look at Landi and Renn.

They were still on those stupid looking couches. Sitting close to one another, they were lounging happily as they drank dark wines. Renn even had a thin blanket covering her lap, as if cold. Which was good, since her glare could freeze.

Just what had I missed to not hear my own reputation getting attacked in such a way? Hadn't they just been talking about times they'd gotten caught by humans...?

"You better tell her the whole story, Landi," I defended myself.

Landi snickered as she waved her glass of wine at me. "Aye, sure!"

Yet she didn't.

Sighing I returned to my block of wood, and did my best to ignore the feeling of Renn's glare.

"Look at those daggers. I like that. A woman should be bold. You could learn a thing or two from her, Vim," Landi said.

"Vim's bold," Renn defended me, rather quickly too.

Landi laughed. "Is he now!?"

Was I...?

I'd think Renn would have thought different. Especially since she thought I wasn't being... well...

Very pursuant.

"What was Vim doing talking to bunch of prostitutes?" Renn then asked.

Landi's laugh turned into a serious of giggles. "Whores, Renn! You're so oddly proper in weird ways. They had been mine. I won them in a bet, so I had wanted to show them off to him," she told the truth.

"Oh...?" I heard in Renn's tone that she had perked up. I knew if I glanced over at her, she'd be sitting up straight and her ears would be pointed and alert.

"Aye. Nearly fifty of them... I think? How many had it been Vim?" Landi asked as she wondered.

"At least fifty, yes," I said. It had been a small band of women. They had been traveling, following the many groups of mercenaries and paramilitaries at the time. They got... caught by someone, or something, and Landi had been the one to win them in a duel. I had arrived to check on her on the same day she had come to collect them. It had been an odd task for me. She had basically pushed them off onto me as she cleaned up the rest of the scattered mercenaries she had been hunting at the time.

"What'd you do with them?" Renn asked.

"Hm? Well, made them servants of course! I tell you Renn, humans are dull creatures but women such as those become very devoted and loyal. Most of my servants are their descendants," Landi explained.

"Huh..." Renn sounded fascinated.

"Men can get loyal, but usually only for other men. Or their lovers. Women though, they can become nearly fanatics for those like us," Landi explained.

“Like... us?” Renn asked carefully.

“Strong. Proud. Human women are often meek things, especially in these regions. So they love those like us, who have a spine,” Landi further explained.

“Huh...” Renn hummed as she listened, and I hoped she didn’t... learn too much from her.

Landi wasn’t necessarily wrong, of course. I mean... not long ago I had basically said something similar. Concerning those pirate women. But Landi’s explanation had been a little on the nose, and without a hint of compassion.

She saw slaves. Tools. Disposable things.

“Do you not care for them?” Renn asked.

“My slaves? As much as I should, I suppose,” Landi said light-heartedly.

“I’d think being as nice to them as you could would only further enforce their loyalty,” Renn said.

Landi snickered. "A very telling phrase. Take it from me, being nice works for awhile but never forever. Humans become complacent. They eventually take your kindness for granted, and either betray it or come to hate it," Landi said.

"So you'd be cruel? Wouldn't that just make you a tyrant to be overthrown once they can do so?" Renn argued.

"Oh some try, occasionally. But it's far rarer than you think. And it's not like I mean we shouldn't be a kind every so often, in certain ways. Keep them housed. Fed. Fat. Let them breed without worrying over taxes or invasions and they'll be like sheep. Meek and led around with a finger," Landi said.

Renn hummed as I heard her take a drink. She let her teeth hit the glass when she did, but I knew it was only because of how long her fangs were. She wasn't doing so as often as before, nor as loudly, so she was adjusting to it. It was just taking her time.

She hadn't been used to the glasses here. They weren't circular, but a little elongated.

"It helps when you keep the surrounding nations worse than yours. Send some raiding parties, spread some chaos, and always keep the grass on the other hill drier and shorter and the humans won't ever think of leaving you. Vim taught me that," Landi said.

"Did he?" Renn asked, and I noted that once again I was likely being glared at.

Slowly sliding my knife along, I turned the piece of wood a little. As to start forming the small curve, where she'd be grabbing it as to hold it.

It was taking shape. And so far it was looking good.

“What of Gods Renn? You believe in any?” Landi then asked.

“I believe they existed, but I’m not a devotee of any,” Renn answered.

My little knife paused a moment, as I processed what she had said.

Or rather, a singular word. Not the entire thing.

Existed.

Landi hummed. “You don’t think they exist right now?” she asked.

Renn didn’t answer aloud, but instead shook her head. I heard her hair as it moved and swayed. I didn't need to look to know that her hair was likely down to her lap. It really did grow faster than someone of her blood-line usually allowed.

“Interesting. Especially since you basically walk alongside one,” Landi said with a small laugh.

Returning to shaping the wood, I watched as another thin strip of wood shaving slid along my thumb and then off it, to the ground near my feet.

“You also believe Vim’s a god?” Renn then asked.

I luckily had been just finishing up a shaving, so I hadn’t ruined my work as I raised an eyebrow.

Landi immediately went to laughing. “Hell no! But I admit he’s as strong as one. Vim’s too... he has too many flaws, to be a god. I’m not sure why so many of our members think he’s one. But I shouldn’t be surprised, they’re all stupid and small minded after all,” Landi said.

Letting a tiny breath relax me, I went back to cutting the wood. I turned it a little, to start shaping the other side. This side I didn’t need to be as careful with, since I needed a rather large section removed.

“Then... what’d you mean by that?” Renn asked, once Landi finished her laughs.

“Hm? I mean Vim’s basically a god. As far as I’m aware he’s immortal. So I believe that if he still exists, then so too can our real ones,” she said her reasoning.

“Ah... I see,” Renn seemed to find that very understandable.

“You don’t agree do you?” Landi asked Renn.

Slicing off a large thumb sized piece, I shifted the wood again as to cut from another angle.

“I can see why you’d think such a thing. You’re right... in the sense of, if Vim exists, so too can those like him. But... wouldn’t we know if any gods were still here? Based off all I’ve heard, and read about them in their holy texts I’ve seen, they’re rather powerful and obvious. Things that don’t hide, or need to. Why don’t we see them? Or hear of them?” Renn gave Landi her reasoning.

“Hmph. You’re too logical. I admit I agree with what you’re saying, but I’ll counter it anyway. Most humans have no idea we exist. Just as we all have legends of our gods, so too do they have legends of us. Yet we still exist, even if humans don’t know or realize it. So then why can’t gods be the same?”

“Honestly... that’s a good point. I’d not thought of it like that,” Renn admitted.

Landi giggled. “That’s no fun Renn, I want you to argue with me,” she said.

Renn huffed. “I can tell. No wonder you find Vim so unappealing,” Renn said as she took a drink.

“Ha! Exactly! I’m glad you get it!” Landi happily shouted.

As I whittled the piece of wood, I listened to the two women debate... or rather, more so just exchange ideas.

They spoke of religion. Morals. Politics.

They talked of what they thought of humans. Of what they thought of me. Of those in the Society they liked and those they hated. In Landi's case, those she'd kill on sight if she could.

"You'd say that in front of him?" Renn asked.

"Why not? He knows I'd never hunt them. As long as we never meet, they're safe from me. Vim knows that," Landi said.

"But..."

"Many would do the same to her Renn. The hate she speaks of is not hers alone," I said, interjecting into the conversation for the first time in a good hour.

"Oh...?" Renn perked up.

"Aye. Most are the women, though," Landi said. I could hear her smirk.

“Why...?”

“I took their men, for some. For others I tried. The rest well... unlike you and I, they’re too meek. So the minute they meet something with a spine their own lack of one makes them full of wrath over their jealousy,” Landi said.

Renn was silent as I blew off some dust. I had mostly cut the thing into shape, and was now just whittling and carving it into its destined form.

“You tried to take their men...?” Renn asked.

Landi giggled. “I didn’t try! I took several!”

“Really...” Renn whispered.

“She caused quite a stir. Most of her banishments are not from her temper or attitude, but because of her attempts of breaking up homes,” I said.

“Oh please Vim, you and I both know that’s the entire reason! Only Lilly and Yangli had been willing to fight me. The rest were too scared!” Landi said.

I frowned as I nodded. "There were a few others Landi," I reminded her.

"Shush! You can tell her of my defeats but not the ones I had to run away from!" Landi shouted at me.

I smiled at her as Renn giggled.

"You... fought Lilly?" Renn then asked.

"Hm. She's rather dangerous that owl," Landi admitted.

"You... actually wanted her husband? Really? He seems like the last kind of man you'd want," Renn then said.

For the first time tonight, I was the one who laughed first.

Turning, I smiled at the two women as Landi laughed away and Renn smiled at me. "That's just plain hilarious," I said.

"It is! Ah, why not stay here Renn? Spend a few years with me, please?" Landi asked loudly.

Before returning to my little project, I spent a moment to study Renn as she processed the invitation.

Damn. She was actually considering it.

Looking away right as Renn's face broke out into a loving smile, I noticed the way my knife ran along the wood a little too smoothly. Far smoother than it had done before.

"I'll admit you and your nation would be very entertaining and fun Landi, but I've something I want to do with Vim. I can't afford yet to spend any time away from him," Renn answered.

Landi groaned, and I had to pause a moment with my knife as a large pillow thumped me in the head.

It rolled off me and fell to the bench next to me.

Glancing over a shoulder, I ignored Renn's expectant smirk as she waited patiently to see what I'd do.

Landi huffed at me and made a gesture. One fitting of her annoyance over her being rejected.

"Did you just attack me Landi?" I asked.

The woman who had been rather boisterous suddenly went still as her eyes met my own.

Holding her gaze, I found it amusing how quickly color left her face and her eyes became tiny. Her pupils shrunk, and she quickly raised a hand to wave at me. The same one she had just used to insult me with. "Please Vim! Last thing I need right now is a beating!" she said quickly.

After a moment of keeping hold of her eyes, I sighed as I looked away from her. I ignored Renn's gaze as I went back to the boxwood and the knife I was attacking it with.

Landi let out a sharp sigh of relief, once she was sure I hadn't been serious.

Seems even with Renn here she hadn't progressed past that innate fear.

Interesting. I had actually thought maybe she had. She'd never thrown something at me like that before.

Glancing at the pillow next to me, I wondered what had brought that on. Landi would do that to anyone. Anyone else.

But not me.

She wouldn't dare.

Fascinating indeed.

“What were we talking about, Renn?” Landi asked carefully.

“Um... How about this harem you supposedly have?” Renn easily gave Landi a way to ignore and avoid what had just happened.

“Harem...? Oh. You mean my eunuchs?” Landi asked, her typical haughty tone had already returned.

Sitting up again, I turned once more. “Eunuchs?” I asked harshly.

Landi flinched, and for a long moment... didn't look at me. She kept her eyes on Renn.

About to stand, and find out exactly what she meant, Landi turned and stopped me as she smiled. “Vim! I mean only the human ones! Forte is fine! He still has all his parts, I'll go show you right now if you don't believe me!” Landi said quickly.

Studying the way she smirked, I noted the trembling worry. Although she had sounded better, she was still unnerved from my earlier comment.

I sighed as I looked away and back at my attempt of distracting myself. It had been doing fine earlier, what had changed...?

Landi sighed again. "Jeez. What'd you do Renn? Why's he so touchy of all a sudden?" Landi asked Renn.

"Huh...?" Renn sounded like she couldn't believe what she was being accused of.

Smiling a little as I went to carving a tiny design on the edge, I waited patiently for their next words.

"Maybe he's not doing well enough on his little thing. Or did you do something earlier today? While you were out and about?" Landi asked with a whisper.

"Um... No? You sure he's even upset Landi? He seemed fine to me just now," Renn said.

"Fine...? Renn, I love you dear but you obviously need glasses," Landi said.

"I... I do?" Renn sounded hurt, as if she believed her.

"Maybe he needs to get laid," Landi wondered.

“You think?” Renn asked.

My carving stopped, and I sighed as the two whispered their theories as to why I was supposedly grouchy.

It didn't take long for them to switch topics. They left me as a focus, and returned to her harem for a short time. Landi told her about the porcupine, and how he was addicted to the drug native to this area. And how we had lost his brother trying to get them off it. He had killed himself out of withdrawal, so now we just let the surviving brother be.

Landi spoke of the humans she had for a short time. How they had failed her. So she made them eunuchs.

It was interesting that Renn had to be told and explained what such a thing was.

“And they survive...?” Renn asked, interested.

“Not always. A few died from the shock,” Landi said.

“Shocking,” I said.

Landi giggled as I finished carving one of the designs. Shifting the piece of wood, I went to carve the next one.

For a few more hours, Renn and Landi enjoyed their talks. It was interesting that the two of them were willing to disagree, and debate, over things. From philosophy to simple beliefs or likes and dislikes. They argued over the moral conundrum of killing the diseased on sight just as harshly as they argued over their favorite drinks.

Yet as the night grew old, and the hours passed... eventually their conversations turned into more somber ones. With each telling of their past sorrows, and failures.

Landi spoke of all the people she wished she had been kinder to. Those she had fought and killed, those she had called friends. She wished she hadn't hurt them. She wished she could go back in time and not try to fight them.

Renn spoke of the many members in the Society she now hated, or was upset with. And how she wished she was better. How she wished she could overlook the things she saw as flaws. And of the humans she had fallen in love with, and how she would never change her time with them... yet she still in the end regretted spending so much of it on them all the same.

It was a little humbling to hear the two of them speak in such ways. It was as if they were trying to tell each other their life stories. Because they knew, innately, that they might not ever see each other again.

Yet they were doing it in a way that...

Glancing over at the two, and how close they had gotten to each other on the couch as they spoke...

Yes. They spoke as if sisters. As if they've known each other their whole lives.

I was glad I had brought Renn here. I was glad that Landi got to meet her, before it was too late.

Renn was unique. She was a predator... but not as brash. Not as cold hearted, or as simple minded.

She could relate to those like Landi. Like the Clothed Woman. She could become friends with those like Merit, or Tosh. Yet... could also become friends with even the meekest of our members. Like little Fly, or Rapti.

At least, she could until fate forced them apart. Like it had done at the Sleepy Artist.

As I pondered such a thing, and carved the piece of wood... I didn't notice the two go quiet.

I blinked as a shadow shifted nearby... And Landi appeared in the corner of my eye.

Landi was silent as I blew off some tiny wood shavings.

Studying the shape, I was very pleased.

I knew I still had it. All those little bracelets must have just been a fluke. Maybe sleeping on that cart with Renn during that quarantine had... fixed... whatever was wrong with me.

Trying to be hopeful, even though I still felt that small tug of exhaustion deep down, I nodded as I turned to finally look at Landi.

She stood before me with crossed arms, and a sullen look. If I hadn't known her better, I'd think she were upset I had been ignoring her. But Landi, although eccentric and a predator... didn't have that kind of pride. Her pride was a different flavor.

"I have a request," she then said.

I nodded as I leaned back a little, as to sit properly and not hunched over my wood block. "You always do," I said.

Renn entered my peripheral vision, but I kept my eyes on Landi. She looked a little too serious, even for her.

"It's a big one, this time," she added.

"About the plague, I'm assuming?" I tossed out what I had expected it to be.

Landi shifted, and for the first time in many years... I saw worry on her face.

Earlier when I had challenged her, to see if she had finally grown strong enough to challenge me to a fight... she hadn't shown worry. She had shown concern. Uncertainty. But not outright worry.

She was usually too proud to let such an emotion scare her.

Frowning at her, I tilted my head. "Is it not?" I asked.

"Well... kind of... did you say that because you know, or...?"

Know...? "Know what?" I asked.

Renn was now closer. She had walked up towards me, and was a few feet away from the bench I was on. To my right. Her bare feet on the stone floor sounded interesting. The sound made me want to turn as to look over the back of the bench, to see her feet. Even though I should be focused entirely on Landi right now.

Landi grumbled, and then sighed. "I hate that. You're so...!" she mumbled some insults at me, some I noted made Renn's ears twitch.

Smiling at Landi as she stepped away, and then paced a moment... I wondered what was wrong. She must think I knew something I wasn't supposed to. But... well...

I did, but also didn't. I'd studied the city, but honestly hadn't done much more than that.

I had focused more on Renn. And that young boy. Hawk or whatever his name had been.

"Now who is not acting themselves, I wonder?" I said gently.

"Gah! Seriously Vim!" Landi groaned as she went to rub her head. As if she suddenly had a horrible headache.

Patently waiting, I smiled gently at her... then glanced at Renn.

Our Jaguar was smilingly softly, if a little unsurely, at our Queen Badger. I liked how she looked as if she was staring at a long time friend.

"Feh! Fine...! Vim... I have a request!" Landi then spun, and stepped towards me.

I nodded. "You always do," I said again.

Landi was about to say it, but then smirked and laughed. "See Renn? I complain, but Vim is actually a good man. He lets me abuse his mercy, yet always makes it clear his opinion on it," she said to Renn.

“Hm... I personally think he should be a little more opinionated. You’re right, he’s more open with you about his annoyance, but he still obviously plans to do whatever it is you ask of him. I think he should be a little more forceful with his own beliefs,” Renn said, once again continuing their little weird debate about their different morals and beliefs.

Landi giggled. “Right! I agree... but it’s sexy, isn’t it?”

“Sexy...?” Renn and I turned to frown at her.

She nodded at us. “Yeah? I mean... he’s so strong. So old and wise. Vim could ignore me, or outright deny me, yet he always lets me give him orders and tasks as if he was just a common soldier in my army. There’s an odd indescribable joy to have control over such a man, isn’t there?” Landi said as she pointed at me.

I studied Landi’s expression as Renn shifted uncomfortably in the corner of my eye.

“Why make it a sexual thing...?” Renn asked her.

Landi broke out into a huge grin, and then started to giggle... then her giggles turned into laughs. Ones that were full and loud.

Glancing at Renn as Landi laughed away, I smiled at Renn’s unsure face. She looked more bothered by Landi’s sudden laughter than what had been the cause of it.

“Ah...!” Landi contained herself as she sniffed and grinned at Renn. “Isn’t everything, though?” Landi finally answered.

I sighed as I put my little wood piece to the side. “What do you want me to do, Landi?” I asked her.

The Queen of the Nation of Stone turned to me, and her smirk slowly died.

Staring into my eyes, I noted the weird look in them. Was...

Was that fear...?

Really?

From Landi?

Not just worry, or concern, but genuine fear...?

“Why... Kill the Monarch that’s poisoning my people, of course.”

Chapter 229 The Monarch of Stone

Deep in the canyon below us, was a large creature. Swimming and wiggling around in a pool of utter blackness.

The same gunk it was in made it impossible to tell what color it was, or if it had fur or scales. The gunk it was in was caked and layered all over it.

It looked... like a snake, a thing without arms or legs... but it was thick and short. Not elongated. Yet it wasn't small by any means. The thing was a far distance beneath us, to the point it was almost a scary sight, and yet it still looked humongous. It was hard to really tell how far below it was, since it was in a pool of water looking stuff and there was nothing around it to use as a comparison for size... but...

The thing was definitely as big as that creature in Lumen. The things that Vim had fought. Maybe even as big as the one that had emerged above ground, the one that had destroyed half the city.

"Vim...? What is that?" I asked worriedly.

It looked as if it was pulsating. As if its heart was as big as its body, and every few moments a huge ripple ran along its whole frame as it beat and thumped. I wasn't able to look away from it. Although far away, and seemingly not aware of us at all... I felt a strange sense of terror because of it.

Not only was it weird, I could actually hear the thing pulsating. It sounded like a far off drum.

I wanted to run. My hair on not just my tail and ears, but even along my whole body, was standing upright. I felt itchy. As if I was surrounded by danger, and needed to run for my life.

Which was very telling since I was standing right next to Vim, and safe and sound. I was even holding his arm, since I had been somewhat leaning over the ledge.

“That Renn, is a Monarch,” Vim said.

Shivering at his voice, I finally pulled my gaze away from the thing beneath us. Vim had spoken calmly, but there had been an odd tone in his voice.

“It... it looks like a worm, or some weird snake,” I said.

“Likely is. It’s spewing that gunk... likely the very source of the plague,” Vim said as he studied it.

Glancing back over the edge of the cliff, I squeezed Vim’s arm again. Just in case. Usually I’d never worry about slipping and falling off a cliff or something, especially when the ground was solid and firm... but...

Well, right now I felt like having a little surety.

Peering at the thing below, I watched as it pulsed and... yes. The nasty water all around it was definitely sloshing around. From here it looked like a puddle rippling as if from raindrops, but odds were it was more akin to an ocean’s wave.

It was indeed spewing that gunk out. You could see the way the water rushed forward, and then splashed all around as it circled around the thing's body and into all the other canyon cracks around it. It spewed it out alongside the pulsations.

Was it... puking the stuff out...? Nasty.

"Where did it come from?" I asked. "How'd it even get down there?"

The canyon it was stuck in was very deep, and ran a fair distance... but it didn't seem as if there were any ways in or out of it. Not without just... falling into the cracks.

Vim sighed as I stepped back, as to stop leaning over the cliff's edge. He remained at the edge of the cliff, standing so close the tips of his boots were hanging over the ledge.

"The better question is why Landi had kept it secret. That thing's been down there for some time," Vim said.

Oh. Right. "Do you think it's really the source of the disease...?" I asked.

"It's very likely. That's toxic stuff, for sure. I can smell it on the wind, even from here. That's basically just a bunch of poison. Odds are the stuff was eaten by birds, or smaller animals, and then the humans ate them after, spreading its contamination thusly," Vim said.

“Why would anything eat that gunk...?” I asked. The mere thought of it made me shiver. I honestly couldn’t smell anything too odd. I smelled the army behind us more than anything else.

“See that part over there?” Vim ignored my question as he pointed to our right.

Following his point, I found it quickly. On the other side, past the canyon divide, not far on the opposing side where we were, was a very obvious stain. It led up to the edge of the canyon, and then slid down it. You could see not just the discoloration on the rocks and ground from whatever had stained it all, but you could also see where rocks and chunks of the cliff wall had been recently dislodged.

“It fell...?” I asked.

“Or was led here,” Vim said quietly.

Frowning, I glanced behind us. To the army nearby.

Massive tents were a few hundred feet away. Far enough that I could just barely hear the human soldiers there, but not close enough they could hear us. There were several hundred soldiers stationed all around the tents, and there were large towers of wood and stone where archers were stationed.

Landi was there somewhere. Inside one of the tents, talking to her generals.

“So she lured it here. Until you could get here and handle it,” I said, comprehending what he was implying.

“Not before trying to handle it herself. I wonder how many thousands she sacrificed,” Vim said stiffly.

Looking away from the nearby army encampment, I studied Vim’s face. His expression was normal and placid, like usual, but his eyes were a different story.

He was angry.

Fascinated, and worried, I wondered what to say.

“Do... do you suspect her?” I asked, trying to understand.

“Very. She should have sent for me immediately. She knows better.”

Yes. He was not happy at all.

“What uh... what do we do?” I asked.

“I’ll have to kill it. I don’t know why it woke up, or which divinity it had been birthed from but it doesn’t matter. It’s spewing poison. It needs to die,” Vim said.

I gulped a worried question down and squeezed his arm. “Will you be okay?” I asked.

Vim blinked, and then glanced at me. For the first time since we’d stepped up to the cliff’s edge he had looked away from the Monarch. Yet he hadn’t done so for very long. Just as quickly as he looked at me, he had looked away. “I’ll be fine. I used to hunt these for sport,” he said.

For... sport?

Really...?

“At least she led it away from the city, and kept it here. Makes it easier,” Vim said as he scanned the canyons all around us.

I nodded. Yes. Please don’t get too angry with the Queen I was starting to see as a friend.

Although she and I disagreed on many things, I really liked how she was willing to openly talk with me about them. We differed, yet were able to not only find common ground... but embrace it.

Studying the man whose arm I held, I wondered if I should be more worried or not. Honestly... although scared, and bothered, I really wasn't too worried over Vim. It might just be misplaced trust or me not being able to comprehend that thing's danger... but...

Well...

For some reason I felt he'd be fine no matter what happened. No matter what he faced or how terrible the odds were.

Hopefully I wasn't falling for the same sense of security the rest of the Society had when it came to him. Since it was clear he could fail. He admitted it himself, sometimes.

"It's strange. I can't believe it isn't trying to escape. Some Monarchs can be... pretty much just beasts operating on instinct, but even without reason it should still desire freedom. It's so big it has barely any room. It looks like it couldn't even turn around if it wanted to," Vim said as he studied it.

Stepping back up to the ledge, I squeezed Vim's arm again as I peered at it below.

"Looks like it just wants to spit its poison," I said.

"Yes. Odd," Vim noted.

Was it...? I didn't know anywhere near enough about these things to understand why he found it so.

“Vim, I know I’ve asked a bunch already but... will you really be okay?” I asked as I watched the thing shake violently, and then spew out a huge amount of the gunk. It had spat out so much I had actually seen the stream expunge from it. Like a torrent of water, from a spigot.

Gross.

“I will Renn. I’ll want you to stay with Landi while I handle this,” he said to me.

“Even though you doubt her?” I asked.

Vim tilted his head and then turned to look at me. “Keep yourself safe Renn. Do what you think you need to, if it comes to it,” he said.

I didn’t like that at all. “How long will... uh...” I wasn’t sure how to phrase it.

“Depends. Tell Landi to prepare her army. Once I’ve taken its heart we’ll need to burn it and all that gunk, else the disease will spread and get worse. So tell her to gather as much flammable material as she can. She’ll know what she needs,” Vim said

I nodded.

Vim shifted, and I felt his arm grow a little harder. He had flexed. "If for some reason it seems like the Monarch is coming up here, I want you to run away. Even if alone. Just get as far away as possible," Vim said.

I nodded again.

"That thing is more dangerous than the creatures you encountered in Lumen. Treat it as if it's a natural disaster. You can't fight it, you can only run from it," he added.

I nodded once more. "I'll be on guard Vim, I promise," I said.

Vim sighed and looked away from me, to the creature. "I know. I just feel like I'm missing something," he mumbled.

Missing something...? He meant he felt uneasy right...?

I mean... shouldn't he? That was a Monarch, right? Something beyond normal reason? Something that had been created by Gods?

"Wait... are you saying you're worried for me, because you feel strangely uneasy?" I asked. Not just out of concern for my safety? Not just because it was dangerous, the Monarch itself?

Vim nodded.

I couldn't help it, I smiled. "Vim! You should be uneasy; this thing's dangerous isn't it? Why wouldn't you be?" I asked.

"Because it's nothing new."

My smile shifted into a frown as I studied the face of the man who had said that in such a matter of fact tone.

"Vim..." I whispered, but he seemed to have made a decision. He stepped back and away from the ledge, forcing me to take a few steps back too since I had been holding his arm.

"Go on, Renn. Let Landi know she better do her job, or I'll be taking the crowns of two Monarchs today," he said.

My jaw clenched as I nodded.

For a few moments we stood there, staring at each other... then I realized why Vim had an odd look on his face.

"Ah..." I released his arm, and felt a little silly as I stepped back a few more steps.

Vim nodded and gave me a small smile. "Remember, stay on guard. Run if you need to. I'll be done as fast as I can... oh," he realized something. "I'll probably be covered in that thing's gunk once done... so uh... stay away from me for a bit. Until I can disinfect myself," he said.

"Disinfect?" I asked, not understanding the word. Did he just mean clean himself off?

Vim flinched. "Just make sure not to come near me until I say it's okay to do so. Even if that stuff isn't the source of the plague, it's definitely toxic. Just keep a distance from me until I say otherwise," he clarified.

Nodding, I watched as Vim turned and stepped back over to the ledge.

He... he wasn't just...

I gulped as I realized he was going to.

"Stand tall, Vim!" I said to him as he stepped off the ledge.

Right before he fell down, and disappeared from sight, he turned and our eyes locked for a tiny moment.

Then he was gone.

Standing still for a moment, I felt a weird tremble run up and down my body... as I suddenly started to sweat a little. Even though it honestly wasn't as hot as it usually was here in this area.

For a few long moments... I heard nothing. Felt nothing...

And it was a little concerning. Honestly I had expected sounds right away. Like that creature in Lumen, that had roared like crazy...

Stepping forward, I very... very carefully peered over the ledge.

I couldn't see Vim at all.

But I could see the Monarch. And it was definitely...

Had it gone completely still?

Yes. It had. It had even stopped pulsating.

There was no way Vim had killed it already... right? That was...

Then it roared.

A bellow of a moan, which shook not just the very air but even the ground. I hurriedly stepped away, and nearly fell to my knees as the very ground began to quake.

Hundreds of tiny rocks began to dance and bounce all around me, adding to the loud roar. The world suddenly became very noisy, and not only did it hurt... it was dauntingly terrifying.

Quickly standing, I hurried away from the ledge of the canyon. Running back towards Landi's encampment, I picked up my pace as the creature's roars increased in intensity... Echoing loudly all around me.

How did Vim even stand near anything that yelled so loudly? I was barely able to stay on my feet and I wasn't just a distance away, I was sure the sound was being diminished by the massive canyon. Down there in that huge crack... who knows how loud the thing's roaring was.

As I neared the army encampment, I slowed as I noticed the group of armored soldiers. The vast majority of them had huge spears, most two or three times taller than they. It was concerning, and brought back memories of the past back when I had met the witch. Yet it didn't end up like that time, thanks to Landi standing out in front of them.

“And here I thought maybe you’d try and fight with him!” Landi greeted me with a huge smile as I hurried over to her.

“Yeah, no,” I said as I stepped up to her, and tried to ignore all the stares and looks of the men and women around us.

I still wore my hat and hid my tail, but I felt as if I hadn’t been. They were staring rather weirdly.

Landi chuckled at me as she turned, and the group of soldiers behind her all parted. They formed a path into the encampment, which I hurried to follow her through.

Keeping my eyes forward, I tried my best to not notice the stares... or the huge spears that were now all around me. Like a forest of pointy trees.

One wrong mistake and I’d not live to see Vim’s face ever again.

“Vim should make quick work of that thing. Want to bet on how long it takes him, Renn?” Landi asked as we walked to one of the larger tents.

“Um...” I wasn’t sure what to say. Even if I did have any idea on how long it took Vim to kill a Monarch, I wasn’t sure what I had to offer as collateral. Plus I wasn't sure if I'd be comfortable betting on something like that. I'd feel horrible for doing so, if Vim perished or something.

Landi giggled as a pair of soldiers, without spears, pulled aside heavy flaps for us. We entered the huge tent, and I was very glad to find it was empty. Of people at least.

Stepping into the tent, I looked around at the oddly furnished place. It... looked like it was lived in. There were tables, boxes, chairs. A large bed was in one corner, and there were even rugs and flag decorations.

Was this normally what these army tents looked like, or had this tent been up for a long time...?

Maybe Vim was right.

But I shouldn't judge her yet. After all it wasn't like I'd ever been in an army's encampment before. Let alone the tent of a Queen, or leader.

"Vim told me to remind you to prepare. To gather flammable stuff," I said.

"They're all being brought as we speak. Enough oil to fill that gorge twice over," Landi said as she walked over to the largest table in the room. A square table that was littered with papers and...

Walking up to the table, I frowned at the scrolls. Most were wound up, and still tied sealed.

"You've dealt with Monarchs before," I noted.

"A few. But... not myself. Rather I just help Vim and the rest clean up, when I'm there to do so," Landi said as she reached over to grab one of the scrolls.

She untied it by simply tugging on the little red lace. It snapped, and she unfolded the roll and went to reading it.

Nosily stepping over, I peered at the thing's contents as Landi read it.

It was difficult, although I recognized some words... thanks to the angle; I was only able to deduce it was some kind of report. Something to do with...

"What's a principality?" I asked. And why was she getting a report on where they were.

"My current enemy. You see, now that Vim is here I can return my attention to more important things," Landi said.

Enemy... "You... you mean the neighboring nations, don't you?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes. This specific one is to our western border. They're currently under rule of a very corrupt church. The kind I hate the most," Landi said.

The Monarch let out a huge cry, and I felt a small tremble even through my shoes and the rug beneath them.

“And you’ll focus on that as a Monarch roars just beyond?” I asked her.

Landi lowered the scroll and smirked at me. “Do you not have faith in Vim, dear Renn? I thought you did.”

“I... I do but...” I shifted, and felt oddly uneasy as she made me feel like the weird one here.

She giggled at me and placed the scroll down onto the table, and then leaned against the table with an outstretched hand. Suddenly she looked sensual, somehow. “You’re an odd one. But maybe it’s because you’re too new. Maybe you don’t realize what Vim can do yet, truly, so you worry because of it,” Landi said as she pondered me.

Studying her as she did the same to me, I noted some of the whispered conversations around us.

Seems although none of the soldiers were in the tent, they were still outside it. Likely stationed around it as to guard it. They were whispering, in wonder, about what was going on. About the creature. the Queen. Gladly I didn't hear anything about me.

Another roar echoed throughout the world, this time though the ground didn’t shake. At least not here.

“Your soldiers seem very... calm,” I noted.

“They’ve been on watch here for awhile now. They’re used to the thing making noise and shaking the ground,” Landi said.

“How long has it been down there?” I asked.

“Too long. I’ve tried to keep everyone away from it, even had archers posted all along the canyon to shoot down any birds that flew near or other animals... but it seemed it didn’t matter. I had thought since this set of canyons were not near any of the underground waterways, the city would be safe. Teaches me to think myself smarter than I am,” Landi said with a sigh as she returned her attention to the scrolls.

My ears shifted under my hat as I absorbed her words.

So Vim really had been right. Not only had Landi known for some time, she’s even been going through lengths to handle it.

And not only was failing at it, but knew she was. She knew she was out of her depth.

Why then hadn’t she contacted Vim? Was there more to it... or...

Maybe she just didn't care? She knew, like all members did, that Vim would eventually show up. Maybe to her it didn't matter. Maybe it was a simple matter of one of our older members just... not being very aware of how much time actually mattered.

To her a few years or months made no difference.

Yet...

I thought of all the dead. Of those we saw on the way here. The burning villages. The starving people like Roslyn and her people. The piles of bodies in that port village. Those families at Secca who had arrived with all of their possessions, begging to work earlier and longer as to be somewhere safe and free of disease and famine. Even in Lumen we had heard tales of the disease and the damage it had been doing. By now it might even be in Lumen too. And...

Hark's mother, who had literally gave her baby to complete strangers in a last ditch effort of hope.

Staring at the woman who I was silently judging and blaming for all of those things, I wondered if I had a right to.

Her actions might have caused all that chaos and death... but did I have proof of it?

And even if her lack of urgency was the cause... did I have a right to blame her, or judge her for it? What if even if she had sent word to Vim, it would of all happened anyway? Or what if she had actually sent word, and we just hadn't known?

Even more so... even if she had withheld the information, and done an improper job... would anyone even care?

Most in the Society would not even be fazed by learning her actions had caused such chaos for humans. In fact, many would only smile and be happy over it.

They all saw humans as... something lesser. They might not hate them as much as my own family had done, but it was a very similar hatred. A very similar disgust.

At one time I had seen humans as inconsequential as she. As most of our members.

It took the witch for me to realize the truth. It took the siblings, and Nory, for me to really realize that not every human deserved hatred. That they were just like me, like us. People just doing their best, with what little they had or understood.

Without such similar experiences... those like us likely never learned how to see humans as anything other than enemies to be destroyed.

Yet, do Landi and the rest not have that same chances and opportunities to learn such a thing?

Most of them have been surrounded by humans far longer than I have. In a far more direct fashion too.

Landi was a perfect example. She should know full well how much humans could be like us.

Another roar shook the world, and this time I heard actual impacts. I felt them, through the rug. For a few solid moments, something massive and heavy continuously impacted the ground and shook it violently.

"I gave orders for scouts to watch it. They'll come let us know if the Monarch gets free of the canyon or tries to," Landi said, likely noticing my sudden worry.

"Uh... What if it collapsed the ground?" I asked. It felt as if the whole world was shaking.

"We're farther away than you likely think. Other parts of the ground will collapse first if it starts burrowing or something," Landi said as she rolled up a scroll and went to opening another.

Jeez. Her and Vim. They both just seemed to have no urgency at all concerning something that could supposedly poison entire nations.

Actually...

"How... how strong is a Monarch, anyway?" I asked. Honestly Vim and others never seemed to be willing to tell me, or in the case of everyone else likely didn't know. But Landi seemed to know far more than she should, and... seemed willing to tell me, for the most part.

Asking as one roars nearby might not be the best time, but it was still an opportunity to ask.

“Very. They’re not just huge, but they can usually heal from insane damage very quickly. They can be killed with normal means, but it takes a lot. To give an example two Monarchs once attacked the Kingdom of Divinity. They were able to kill one, but it took months of constant attrition. They threw everything they had at it. Tens of thousands of soldiers, more arrows and spears than you can count, and who knows what else. And in the end they were still destroyed,” she said.

They healed quickly...

Like Vim.

“Kingdom of Divinity...? Is... or was that Merit’s kingdom?” I asked.

Landi looked away from her scroll, and smirked at me. “Tiny Merit? No. Her kingdom, if you can call such a thing a kingdom, had been near the inlet to our west. It had been destroyed by a Monarch, but only indirectly. Funny,” Landi snickered as she told me.

Did she find the fact I brought up Merit funny, or instead what had happened to Merit's kingdom, I wonder?

“Queen Landi!”

I turned, even though Landi didn't. She remained focused on her scroll as one of the heavy flaps was pulled aside and a man stepped in.

The man was broad shouldered, made even wider by his armor. Surprisingly, unlike the armor of everyone else, his wasn't polished. It looked rusted almost. "The first batch of oil has arrived," he informed his Queen.

"Have them kept on the carts, and at a distance. In case we need to have them moved quickly," Landi said without ever looking away from her scroll.

He nodded stiffly, and I noted he never even looked at me. He kept his eyes on her. "Also, we have reports of cracks. Running along the canyon," he added.

I didn't like the sound of that at all.

And it seemed, oddly, neither did Landi. She put her scroll down and frowned at me. "How bad?" she asked him, while staring at me. Maybe she was blaming me for bring it up earlier, or something.

"Nothing too bad yet, My Lord. Most are no wider than a finger, but some are as long as an arm. I have ordered more scout groups to round the canyon, to keep an eye on them," he said.

"Good. Go see the Monarch yourself, and report back to me what you see," Landi ordered.

The rusty armor clanked as he saluted, and then he hurried out of the tent. The flap fell back down, drowning out some of the noise outside.

“Why was his armor rusty?” I asked her.

“It wasn’t. That was a special type of metal. It looks like that on purpose,” she said.

Oh. Really...? What purpose could it have had?

Landi sighed as she leaned against the table, resting against it as if about to sit on it. “I hope Vim finishes soon,” she mumbled.

Oh...? So she was worried, even if a little. Interesting.

“Back to what you were asking, Renn, a single Monarch can bring down an entire kingdom with ease. But not all Monarchs are that strong. Some are more simple, or smaller creatures. I know you’ve been to Telmik, but if you didn’t get a chance to meet it, there’s a little creature there. A tiny weasel looking thing. It’s a Monarch, but only a little bit stronger than the same creatures it looks like,” Landi said.

“Ah... yes I’ve met that cute little thing before,” I said. So it hadn’t been strong. Interesting. I wonder why some were, and some weren’t.

“Cute? I suppose. I’ve never found animals cute, but I used to like little birds,” Landi said.

"Hm, some are cute, yes," I agreed.

Landi giggled at me. "Some," she said.

Had I said it oddly...? I had meant it genuinely. Some birds were cute. Others were pretty.

"I used to have a pet hawk. It had been huge. It slouched a lot, yet still stood as tall as my knee," I said as I lowered my hand, to show where it had stood up to.

"Oh...?" Landi nodded, interested.

"It had been pretty. It would open its wings to feel the wind, and it had looked... very majestic," I said.

"Must have been a rather big hawk. Was it one of us?" she asked.

I smiled at her and shook my head. "No. Just a normal bird."

It had hurt to put the thing down. It had broken my heart.

Another roar shook the world, and this time the whole tent shook alongside it.

Going still, I hesitatingly waited for the chaos. The collapse. The screams. Some of the beams keeping the tent up were swaying rather harshly. It looked ready to collapse any moment.

Yet none of those things came... and after a few moments, the roar settled down.

Gulping, I shifted and wondered what to think.

I heard some armor clank and people talk outside, and I realized some people had fallen to the ground.

Maybe I should go back to town...

"Fret not Renn. Vim will handle it. If it tries to escape him, we'll just let all these lovely humans die for us while they draw its attention," Landi said with a wave at me.

My stomach turned as I stared at the way she smirked. She had been completely serious.

"If you sacrifice your whole army, you'll not be able to conquer anyone," I said.

Landi broke out into a laugh at me. "That's true!" she said happily.

Groaning a little, I didn't mean to make her laugh. I hadn't meant it as a joke, at all.

She continued to snicker as she went to grab another scroll. Completely unfazed by either the worried voices around us, the roars in the distance... or the ever growing doubt in my heart.

Watching her as she went to planning her upcoming conquest... as Vim fought a creature of legend and myth, I realized once again that I'd been disappointed in our people.

The dismay at realizing she was just as bad, if not worse in her own way, as all the rest... made me sick.

I had thought her to be a little better. Maybe not in the sense of liking humans, or not seeing them as enemies, but at least... well...

I had thought that surely, since she ruled a whole nation, she had some semblance of compassion. At least for her subjects. Honestly I had thought she did have some compassion for them. After all, even Vim had said that she took relatively good care of them. She gave them safety. Housing. Kept them well fed. So I had genuinely thought Landi was... not as bad as she seemed to be on first glance.

Yet it was obvious such a thought had been mere hope.

She was just as bad as all the rest. Just in a different way.

And...

Another roar echoed throughout the air, but the ground didn't shake as harshly. I turned, to look at the flaps of the tent. They were heavy things, so didn't shift in the wind.

Vim was once again fighting. Bleeding. Risking his life...

For someone who didn't deserve it.

And I knew once he was done... once it was all said and over...

Vim would do nothing about it. He'd simply move on. Leaving Landi be, and allowing her to continue endangering her people and the whole world around her. All because of some stupid rules he's allowed to shackle him.

Glaring at the world around me, I did my best to keep my disgust and anger in check. To keep it all deep down, and as bottled up as possible.

Since I wasn't sure what to do with it yet.

Maybe by the time Vim finished killing the Monarch, I'd have a better grasp of my thoughts. Or at least, find a way to set them aside for now.

Landi sighed as the creature roared again. "He really is taking his time," she mumbled.

Yes. He was. Maybe one day he'd not waste his time on those like you, ever again.

Maybe one day.

Chapter 230 Landi's Plague of a Threat

The heart thumped, pulsating in my hand.

Walking slowly along the Monarch's corpse, my footsteps sounded loud thanks to how squishy they sounded.

It had fur. For its size, it was actually a small amount. But it was still about a foot thick, and it was dense. The kind of dense that would have protected it from even a sharp blade. Made even thicker and slicker, thanks to all the gunk covering it.

As I walked, I sunk into the mushy fur. My steps sounded real loud down here in the canyon, as the sounds reverberated up to the sky. Especially since the whole world was now... eerily quiet.

This thing had been loud. And not just as I tore its heart out. Even before I had even done damage to it, the thing had started to roar. Bellowing at the top of its lungs whenever it could.

A Monarch roaring wasn't too strange... but it was odd for it to have roared so passionately even before it realized I was a genuine threat.

Odds are Landi had pestered the thing for months. There were thousands of spears and arrows all over the place. Before engaging the thing in battle, it had been covered in them. Most had dislodged, or broken, as the thing tumbled and spun as I fought it... but the broken shafts were still on the thing. Stuck in the thick muck it had been expelling.

The stuff was genuinely toxic. It burnt the skin, in a way that told me it was partly acidic. I had lost my shoes very quickly, and not just because the gunk was somewhat sticky and dense. The stuff had melted through my clothes and leather rather quickly.

"Wonder if this stuff will even burn," I complained as I stepped up onto the thing's head.

It had collapsed up against the wall of one of the cliffs. It had also curled up a little, coiling inward like a snake did, likely because all of its internal muscles had hardened as it died. I knew it'd start decomposing soon, like all Monarchs did, but I was in no mood for this thing to decay naturally.

This thing needed to burn, and fast.

Looking down at my hand, and the beating heart within it, I studied the dark crystal-like orb.

It wasn't smooth. It was ridged, and even had some points. Yet it was still, like all Monarch hearts, in the semblance of an orb. It glowed, emitting a dark color. One similar to the color of the gunk it had been spewing.

The glow of its creator. In the palm of my hand.

For the smallest moment... I squeezed it.

With all my might. I clenched my fist, and strained myself. I clenched my teeth. I focused. I bent my arm inward, as to better use every muscle I could.

I squeezed with everything I had. I tried to crush it. To break it.

As I did, I waited for it. The snap. The crack. The eventual crush and break. The feeling of thousands of shards flying out of my hand, with half of them digging into my skin.

I knew the feeling. I knew it well. There were only a few gems on this planet I couldn't break in my grip. And even those I could crack, sometimes. Especially when they were something as unsmooth and oddly shaped as this was.

My grip strength was not something one could ignore. Not something that could be denied. A tiny little crystal such as this was, should be, nothing to me. It should break and shatter any moment and...

Yet it didn't happen.

Taking a deep breath I stopped my attempt at trying to break the Monarch's heart, and sighed at the thing.

Turning it a little, I looked into the heart for any sign of stress. Any cracks or damage.

Like all the times before... I saw nothing.

It looked as if someone had just freshly cut it from a diamond. One that was unnaturally flawless. Something so pure it was almost frightening.

The little glow inside of it, gleaming steadily and dimming and growing brighter as it slowly pulsated... told me it was fine.

I'd done nothing to it. All my strength... and it hadn't even noticed.

It denied every law of natural order.

"Damn things," I mumbled as I turned my attention away from the heart and back at the surrounding mess.

The gunk was everywhere. Not just all over me, and the creature, but it had been poured for what was likely months. I knew, from falling into it, that there was actually many dozens of feet of depth to the gunk. Maybe even more in some places. The stuff was flowing away, seeping into the rest of the canyon and all the cracks around it, but it did so slowly. The gunk was thick, more akin to murky swamp slime than anything else.

And there were more than just broken spears and arrows floating in the gunk, too.

A nearby body was half floating. It, like most of the bodies around the creature, had been stripped. Just as I had. Their armor and clothes were gone... yet unlike myself... their flesh had not been spared. Some were laying on the surface in such a way that there were sections visible and not covered by the gunk.

What was interesting was the gunk seemed to melt and eat the flesh, but not the bones or muscles. It was as if it only ate the first few layers of skin, based on how they all looked. It gave the bodies an odd mummified look.

If not for the high sun over head, I'd wonder if my own top layer of skin was missing too. But I was able to see it, even through the stains and gunk.

I still had all my skin. Even the hairs on my arms and stuff were fine.

Not too much of a surprise. I was more durable than a normal human. But...

It was such an odd thing. Usually something that ate away flesh, or something acidic that melted it, didn't just stop on the outer skin. It made me want to do a little research on the stuff, to find out just what it was.

But I knew better. Now that the Monarch was dead, and the source of its power removed... this world would likely never again see such an ability ever again. In fact, given a little time, most of the gunk would stop functioning too. It'd dissolve, and fade away.

Though...

"Would the disease?" I wondered.

I wasn't really sure a hundred percent that the plague devastating the lands around here was thanks to this Monarch, or its poison, but it was definitely a likely possibility. To be honest I'd little doubt of it, and my assumption would only further grow until something decisively obvious showed me otherwise.

Stepping over to one of the thing's huge ears, or what was left of it, I wondered what this thing had been.

It was shaped similar to a worm. Yet it had several sets of ears, and three mouths. It didn't have any arms or legs, but that hadn't made it defenseless. The thing had been able to move with massive momentum. It had rolled and slammed into the ground and walls with enough force to shake the whole area. With enough force that I was a little surprised at how fragile it had been.

"A few hours, maybe," I said as I glanced up at the sky. The line of bright blue, and the shining sun in the middle of it, told me it had likely been less than half a day since I had fallen into battle.

Sometimes Monarchs were... weaker. Especially if they were many generations separated from their source. But usually those descendants were... not as big. Smaller. More normal in appearance and shape. For something of this size, with its strength... I had honestly expected a longer battle. When I had fallen in originally, and it had rolled over me as I approached it... or rather swam to it, and it had squished me I had expected a far fiercer battle.

But...

“She definitely harried it for months,” I said as I looked around again at all the carcasses.

Wait...

Frowning, I bent down to pick up one of the spears. Or at least, the remains of one. The shaft pole was about my height in length, and it was missing its tip. Likely stuck in the fur somewhere.

“Why hasn’t it melted this?” I wondered as I felt the iron.

It had melted the armor. There’d be no other reason for all the bodies around me to be naked. Most of her army up topside had been armored. Most in metal. In polished newer stuff, too.

Yet...

Tossing the spear shaft aside, I wondered if it was a purity thing. Maybe pig iron was able to be melted, but more pure metals weren't. Some kind of chemical reaction maybe...? It made no sense. Why make something that melted materials but only the weaker ones? Did that mean the reason the bodies weren't melted to mush was because the muscles and bones were too dense?

"Stop trying to reason a God's creation, Vim," I mumbled as I realized I was spending far too long on something that didn't matter.

Sighing, I glanced around once more. To make sure my job really was done. Or at least, this part of it.

Sometimes Monarchs weren't alone. Either because they had been created with a sibling, or because they had a mate or something. It wasn't very often, since Monarchs had been made with the intent for them to not build bonds like that. They had been created to feel blood lust towards any other Monarch they encountered. Sometimes even with their own fellows.

But this one didn't seem to have a companion. I neither sensed any other nearby, nor had been attacked or bothered from anything else during the battle.

If another Monarch had been here, and a companion of this one, it would not have been able to resist coming to its aid. Especially when it had bellowed in pain so much.

So...

"Just burn it all, I guess," I said as I decided that was the best course of action.

I wanted to understand it better. To find the truth of its existence if I could, but the reality was... there was no need.

Anything I could learn by studying it would come at a cost. Every moment that passed with this things carcass, and its poisons, would only result in either more deaths or more corruption.

My interest in it and my desire to find out the truth of Landi's actions were both pointless.

Even if I found out Landi had awoken it... what did it matter?

It wasn't like I could punish her in any real way.

I rubbed the orb against my thigh for a moment, and frowned at myself. Why didn't I feel my pocket or...?

Oh. Right.

Feeling stupid as I realized I was naked, again, I shook my head at myself.

"Pay attention," I complained as I looked up the cliff face that the creature was lying against.

It was caked in the gunk, and for quite a distance. Thanks to the thing's flailing, the stuff had flown everywhere. Plus it had tried to climb out, once it had realized I was actually a threat it couldn't handle.

Even with all the gunk caking the cliff, I still quickly found a route that would work. I had to walk back down the dead Monarch's neck a bit to reach it, but a few moments later I was climbing the cliff face.

The side of the cliff was not as hard as usual. Thanks to the gunk, some of the dirt had gotten a little mushy. I had to sometimes scrape away a layer of gunk and mud before I could find a proper rock to grab.

As I climbed, I wondered how to deal with Landi.

Should I even confront her...?

I wanted to. But that really wasn't my responsibility. Even if I could prove that she had awoken the Monarch, or had been negligent in reporting it... well...

No one would blame her. Even the more religious, like those in Telmik, would chastise her but not want to punish her for it. A few might, since they hated her, but it would be accusations and demands made in hatred not logic.

After all Landi could just claim she had sent word, and that word had simply never arrived. We had no proof of negligence. If Landi's motives had truly been nefarious, she might even have a back-up plan for it already. Like already written letters and reports that she could show as proof.

The mushy cliff wall became dry again as I ascended. It made climbing easier, but I slowed down enough to keep myself from reaching the top just yet. Especially since reaching the top might force my hand.

Knowing Landi, she was up there. Waiting for me. The Monarch had released a death cry not too long ago, an unmistakable scream. She might be waiting to hound me with questions, or excuses.

So I needed to make a decision about her before I reached the top.

"It's always something," I whispered as I reached for a crack. My fingers slid in, and I supported my whole weight with them for a moment as I wiped some of the gunk off my face. It had started to harden, and felt weird.

Hopefully Renn wasn't up there too. I had asked her to keep a distance, but she sometimes let her emotions take over her common sense.

Though... this stuff was toxic, but it probably wouldn't hurt her just by bearing nearby. She likely would need to eat it, or get it in a wound or something... but I wasn't willing to take the chance of something like that happening. It'd be just my luck it was also some kind of weird airborne toxin too.

Nearing the top, I heard metal clank above me. Looking up, I frowned at the sight of a few long spears dangling over the cliff's edge.

Men were staring at me. Soldiers.

Wonderful.

Sighing as I continued to climb, I wondered if Landi had told them to leave me be or if I'd be shortly relieving Landi of her army.

I was in the mood to punish her, but that didn't mean I wanted to slaughter a bunch of innocent men. It wasn't like it was their fault their Queen was a scheming piece of...

"By the stones," the man whispered in awe as I neared the ledge.

"Step back, quick," another said stiffly.

Well that was a good sign. They sounded terrified.

Fear worked. For a moment at least. Maybe it'd give me long enough to either escape or convince them I wasn't some kind of demon spawn or something.

Pausing for a moment right before the ledge, I listened for any sign of them preparing to attack me.

I heard metal upon metal. Footsteps on dry, rocky, dirt. Whispers of concern.

But none sounded close enough to be a threat. Nor did I hear the sound of hands tightening on spear shafts, or deep breaths in readying for an attack.

No. I'd be fine.

Pulling myself up over the ledge, I glanced around as I rolled upward and brought my knees under me.

A good dozen men stood around, and they were all close enough their spears could be used on me... but not a one looked like they even remembered they had spears in their hands.

They were staring at me as if I was a ghost.

Standing up, I glanced past the glittering sets of armor, and noticed that they had hastily built some watchtowers closer to the ledge of the canyon. They hadn't been here before I had dropped down. There had been others, farther away, but not this close. There were four of them, and there were...

Ah. I understood why as I noticed the wagons being pulled our way. Ones full of barrels.

Landi was readying her men to set the canyon ablaze. Good.

Where was she then...?

Looking around as I stepped forward, I was both happy to find Renn not nearby... but also a little disappointed.

“Um sir...!” a man stepped forward towards me, and his spear thumped into the man he had been standing next to. Hitting him in the head. Neither men seemed to even notice the mistake, as I tilted my head at him.

“Um... uh... We have a bath sir, ready,” the man stepped forward once more, hesitant.

Oh? I turned to study the armored man. He wore mostly leather armor, not metal, and looked...

“You the same guard who handled my cart for me?” I asked, a little surprised. I recognized that scar on his face. A burn mark.

The man quickly nodded and grabbed his spear with his other hand, holding it tightly as if for support. As if he suddenly weak in the legs. “Yes sir! I uh... Yes. That was me,” he said quickly, unsure of himself.

Huh. What were the odds?

“So, a bath?” I asked as I looked around. There was a group of men, and a watchtower not far but I didn’t see... Ah. There. Near the watchtower, a large cart with a huge barrel. One far bigger than all the other barrels on all the other carts and wagons.

“Aye sir. This way,” the guard hurried forward, leading me towards the watchtower.

Hm...

Was this bath Landi’s or Renn’s idea, I wonder?

I smiled as I followed the man and approached the watchtower. Some soldiers hurried down the ladder that led to the top, to watch my approach.

Did I really need to doubt whose idea it had been?

“So uh...” the soldier hesitated as we reached the wagon. The barrel on it was big. Big enough to give dozens of soldiers a bath each.

But although a barrel of water, it didn’t seem to have any hose or spigot to use.

“Do you um... want us to splash you with buckets or...” the guard stepped up to the wagon, to put his spear against it. There were a few buckets on the tailgate of the wagon, waiting to be used.

“Anything I can use to wipe off with? Or soap?” I asked as I looked for a towel or cloth of some kind. There didn’t seem to be any.

“Oh! Here!” another guard hurried off, to the front of the wagon.

Stepping up to the wagon, I crawled up onto the wagon’s tailgate. Ignoring the buckets, I simply stepped up to the large barrel. It was taller than me, but not by much.

“Ah, just going to get into it,” the man behind me said. He made it sound like it made a lot more sense than them cleaning me.

But no. What if they needed this water later?

Judging the barrel’s size and where I assumed the water was filled to... I picked a spot. About a foot below the barrel’s lid, not far from one of the first metal bands that held it all together.

“Your towel, sir,” the man from earlier returned, right as I punched the barrel.

The man nearly dropped the towel in shock as a loud crack rang in the air, and the whole wagon shook. Some water splashed outward, telling me there was no lid.

The thick wood snapped, and before I could even pull my hand out of the hole I had just made I had gotten doused.

Spraying out quickly, I didn't wait to go about cleaning myself. First I just scrubbed with hands and fingers, but I didn't take long to reach over and grab some of the cloth towels the men had laid on the side of the cart.

Scrubbing away, I wondered if I should have demanded soap too. I had asked for it but it didn't seem any had been brought. But I knew better. This region used oils, not soaps. It was my fault for not specifying, especially to Renn earlier and...

Pulling my head out of my makeshift shower, I glanced at the soldier who I had a history with. "Any soap oils?" I asked him.

"Uhm... no sir... I'm sorry..." he shook his head quickly.

Wonderful. I'll need to make sure Renn doesn't get too close to me until I properly disinfected myself, then.

Oh well. This was better than nothing. At least I'd not be walking around covered in weird muck.

Returning my head under the strong flow of water, I paused a moment as I heard something odd.

Looking down, I frowned and realized I had made a mistake.

The gunk, although hardening and not as in as much quantity as had been on me earlier... was still something toxic. Still acidic.

And it was eating away at the wooden boards beneath me. The cart itself.

“Woops,” I mumbled as I quickly went to finish cleaning myself off. As much as possible.

“Uh... the wood is burning,” a man said worriedly.

“Sir!” the knight I knew shouted at me.

I know. I know.

Finishing up, I stepped off the wagon. The water pouring out of the barrel had lost most of its pressure, and had turned into a smaller stream. It would only be a few seconds and it'd turn into a trickle, and then eventually stop as the water's surface reached below the hole.

“The wagon might break,” I warned as I tossed the used towels aside and went to grab one of the two that were remaining.

“Uh... it might, yes,” my knight companion said as he stared at the growing hole on the wagon.

I glanced at it as I dried off a little. The hole was near the tailgate, somewhat burning along its edges. There was white smoke, but... the cart wasn't actually on fire, it was just sizzling. Luckily it seemed the gunk melted through the wood and metal bits quicker than not and so only melted what it landed on. It wasn't spreading or eating away at it continuously.

It was interesting. It really was more like acid than anything else. An interesting ability for a Monarch.

“So? Where's our crazy Queen?” I asked as I dried my hair.

“Um... well... in her tent, I'm sure. Do you want some clothes, sir? I suppose we should have thought of that,” the knight asked.

“Yes. Please.”

“Right... uh... I got a set, I guess,” he mumbled to himself as he ran off. Hurrying off towards the tents.

Hm.

I debated following him, but decided against it. I was being looked at funny enough as it was, running into the main encampment while buck naked was likely not going to help that fact.

Plus I wanted to dry off before seeing Renn... and...

Well...

I still hadn't decided what to do about Landi yet.

"Wait... do we serve him?"

I turned, just enough to side-glance the man who had spoken. He was off near the watchtower, near the ladder they used to climb up into the sentry box. They were whispering to each other, wondering what to think of me.

Was I someone to serve? A commander? Or was I something like their Queen, an inhuman demon without reason or morals. Something to be feared and kept at a distance.

If only they knew.

I sighed at myself as I wondered how long the man would take. The encampment wasn't too far, but it was a distance suitable for a rear command center. The man wasn't even half way there yet. Even though not wearing a full-plate of armor, he was still running slowly.

And had forgotten his spear too.

I studied the thing that lay against the wagon. It was the same make and style as the many others in the canyon. The ones that had been broken and floating in that muck.

A piece of the wagon snapped, and half the tailgate broke off. It landed in the muddy puddle beneath the wagon, and I studied it alongside the rest of the on-looking soldiers.

Waiting for the whole thing to collapse, I was a little surprised when it didn't.

Looking away from the dripping wagon, I studied the other carts and wagons in the distance. There were more than a dozen, and men were all around them. They were unloading the barrels, and readying them near the edge of the canyon.

"Anyone here know what kind of fuel they're using?" I asked the nearby soldiers.

For a few moments no one spoke up, and then one of them coughed. I heard the familiar sound of a spear butting another man in the back, ushering them forward.

He sucked in air in shock and made a noise similar to a hiss. He'd remember his fellow comrade who had pushed him. He coughed and shifted, squeezing his spear in worry.

It was funny, and made me smile. Soldiers were the same no matter the era.

"Um. Some kind of oil sir," the man who had been chosen as a scapegoat said.

Turning, I glanced at the soldier. He looked to be one of the youngest here. "Does no one know what kind? Whale oil? Grease? Animal fat?" I listed.

"I think it's the same oil we use for our arrows, sir. The barrels look the same," one said with a lowered head. He had answered but didn't want to make eye contact. Though that might just be because I was naked.

Ah... The stuff they used on those basket arrows. That'd be a mixed fuel oil then. Using saltpeter as a base.

"That would work," I said with a nod, glad to hear it.

"Will it...? Didn't the first time," one whispered.

"Don't refute him, what if he takes offense?" another whispered back harshly.

Although that statement had bothered me enough to confront them about it, it wasn't because I had been doubted.

I see. So Landi really had tried herself.

Well... that wasn't necessarily proof she had awoken it though. Anyone would have tried to kill it as fast as possible, if able, as to protect themselves.

I'd not be able to discredit Landi for engaging the Monarch before I got here. If anything that should be something praiseworthy and...

My friendly knight had returned. He entered my view, running with another. A smaller and lankier...

I frowned and wondered if they had squires here. I called them knights in my head, but they weren't honestly knights. They were more simply just common soldiers than knights. Yet that definitely looked like a young squire, following behind him. The lad looked far too young to be in this army, even for this era.

Maybe a son?

At least it wasn't Renn.

They reached me after a few minutes, and with heavy huffs of exhaustion handed me a large sack. One full of clothes.

"I grabbed all I could, sir," the young boy said quickly.

"Thanks," I said and went to digging out a set I could wear. It was indeed full of clothes.

It didn't take much effort. A perk of being a very average man, with an average build, made it easy to find clothes that fit. Even if a little stained.

The clothes weren't dirty though. They smelled fine. It was just obvious that they were indeed the knight's clothing. There were small worn rips and tears, and parts of the sleeves were torn completely. They only got a few sets likely, maybe only replacing them when required. Typical for a low soldier.

Once dressed as much as I could be, I ignored the fact that they didn't bring shoes. They had brought socks, though. I decided not to put any on as I handed the bag back and nodded. "Thanks. Come on then, let's go find the source of all this trouble," I said.

"Source...?" the man and boy whispered to each other in confusion as I headed for the tents.

I didn't run, as the knight and boy had, but I did hurry. We passed a small group of soldiers as we neared the encampment. They were marching towards one of the wagons, likely to get helping with preparing.

The encampment was much busier than when Renn and I had traversed through it earlier. People were hurrying in all directions, and there were orders being shouted. I ignore them all as I headed for the largest tent. The one with the several hundred foot long flag flying in the sky.

Nearing the tent, I quickly made out Landi's loud voice.

"Just get them lined up! If they're not ready by the time I get out there, I'll be tossing more than barrels into that gorge!" she shouted as I neared the opening in the tent.

There were a few guards stationed outside, and each one of them was looking at me with a look of pure disbelief. They couldn't believe I was actually approaching the Queen's tent, in the way I was doing, with how I looked.

One of them got their shock under control before I could just step between them and enter the tent. He stepped over, and put his large spear and body between me and the entrance.

Or well. Not a spear. More of a halberd. It looked silly though, it was decorated with tiny flags.

"Let me in Landi, or barrels will be the least of your worries," I said loudly.

Someone else had been talking. A man. But Landi's voice cut through his spiel instantly. "Let him in!"

The guard hesitated, but didn't need to be told again. He pulled his halberd aside, and I wasn't bothered as I entered the tent.

Stepping into Landi's command room, I scanned the crowd. Most were men, but I noticed several women too. One was even bigger, and stouter, than her male companions. She had crossed arms, and was glaring at me.

My eyes found Renn before I found Landi, even though she sat somewhat behind her. They paused a moment to enjoy her happy smile as she sat up from her chair before I pulled them away to glare at Landi.

The Queen of Stone was alone on her side of the table. Except for Renn, who had been sitting a few feet to her right. She didn't look too bothered or heated, but she was looking at me with an odd look of concern, as if I was just another general here to worsen her headache.

And she had a sword on her waist.

"Did he actually kill it?" one of the men asked.

"Everyone out. Get the oils ready. I'll be out to oversee it shortly," Landi said quickly, before anyone else could ask or say something out of line.

Her generals and attendants quickly began to move. Although each one of them was unsure, they all knew better than to argue with Landi. I stepped aside as one after the other passed me by.

Glancing at the larger woman as she left, I noted the thickness of her arms. They were twice the size of my own.

Too bad she was human.

“And what are you doing here! Get to your position!” one of the men shouted from outside, and I flinched.

Right. Knight. My friend. Or well, my friend for the moment.

“Wait. Pay that knight something. He helped me out,” I said quickly.

“What...? Vim...!” Landi wanted to complain, but I didn’t hesitate. I stepped back out of the tent and quickly found the knight. Found him too late, that is. He was already running around another tent, heading away. His young squire following him dutifully.

“Damn,” I sighed as I stepped back into the tent. I wasn’t going to go chasing him, but I felt bad. This set of clothes was honestly not worth much at all, the coins and box of dyes he'd gotten from me earlier would buy him many wardrobes... but I still felt bad about it. Especially if he ended up not taking the box of dyes, for one reason or another.

“Vim?” Renn asked worriedly, stepping around Landi.

“Stay back Renn. I’ve washed but someone forgot to bring me soap,” I said.

Landi flinched as I walked over to the table. I didn’t get too close, or touch it, but I did glance at all the stuff on the table. It was covered in maps, letters, messages and reports.

Too many for this current campaign she was on. The largest map wasn't even of this region, but the one to our west.

“Did you kill it Vim?” Renn asked happily.

“Of course he did. Don’t you see what’s in his hand?” Landi said.

My finger thumped the heart, that I’d not released from my grip since trying to squeeze it to pieces.

Interesting tone she had there.

I turned, to look at the tent’s exit. One of the flaps had been unfolded, but the other was still propped open. I could see two of the guards from this angle, and there were men and women running around outside. Hurrying to fulfill Landi’s orders.

“How do you plan to burn it?” I asked her.

“Pouring as much oil as I can into the gorge, and setting it aflame. I’ll keep the fire fed for as long as possible,” Landi answered.

I nodded. “Would you do it differently?” Renn asked me.

“No. The canyon is big, but not so big you can’t contain and sustain a fire on that level. In fact it’ll act as an oven. Especially if you don’t pour fuel in one of the corners, for airflow. It’ll be hard to keep it fed for very long, but it should last long enough to get the job done,” I said.

“Then why the glare, Vim?” Landi asked.

I frowned, and wondered if I really was glaring at her. I hadn’t thought I was.

In fact, I was actually doing my best to not smile back at Renn. She had a huge grin on her face, and even though I wasn’t looking at her I could still see it out of the corner of my eye. It was blinding.

My finger tapped the heart again, and I felt it pulse. It thumped in my hand, and thanks to how tightly I was grabbing it the pulsation had even shook my bones.

Keeping my eyes on Landi, I wondered why her hand was creeping towards her sword.

It was a scimitar. One built for use. It wasn't decorated. Its sheath plain and rough.

A very strange thing for her to have.

Landi didn't need a weapon. And not just because she wasn't in danger. Even discounting the fact she was surrounded by a large battalion of her personal army, she was near her capital. The Monarch was dead. I was here.

She was in no danger.

Plus... that weapon... just as useless as it was to keep her safe, when in no danger; it was also useless in another way.

It was useless against me. And she knew it.

Even more so... it wasn't her style at all.

Landi hated using weapons. She fought with her own teeth and nails. Her own fists. To her a weapon was a sign of weakness.

Yet...

Staring into Landi's eyes, I kept myself still.

"Come here Rennalee," I said.

Renn's head tilted, and her hat shifted. It nearly fell off thanks to how quickly she had done so. She hadn't understood my request. She had hesitated. It made her wickedly smart mind go into overdrive, as she tried to comprehend what I had just said. Her mind was trying to parse my request.

Come to me? After I had just specifically told her not to? When she knew that I could still be toxic? She couldn't comprehend it. Couldn't understand why I was being so contradictory. At least not immediately. I wasn't a man to be so.

She hesitated because of it.

And that was why Landi had enough time to draw her sword.

I kept completely still as Renn yelped, and lifted up her head. She pointed her chin upward, as Landi's long and thick blade came to a stop against her neck.

Renn gulped, loudly, as the whole world got deadly quiet.

The outside was noisy. Armor clanked. Horses. Wagons. Shouting. But inside the tent... here... in our little tiny pocket of the world...

"Don't. Stay still, Renn," Landi said softly. As if to not alert her very own guards.

"Um..." Renn worriedly kept still.

"You have moments, Landi," I promised.

Landi blinked. "The heart for her," she said.

My eyes narrowed as I suddenly realized I was wrong.

She mistook my expression for something else, as Landi nodded. "The heart and I'll not kill her," she said again, and held her other hand out.

She... she wanted the heart...?

For Renn?

“You’re joking,” I said, unable to believe it.

Renn’s hat fell off. She flinched, since it landed noisily, but Landi’s blade didn’t move hair. Landi hadn’t been bothered by Renn’s noises, or her movement. In fact she didn’t even adjust even as Renn somewhat leaned back and away from the edge of the blade.

I didn’t see any blood on Renn’s neck, but I knew not to feel relief from such a thing.

Landi, even from that outstretched position, could lop Renn’s head off several times over in the span of a single eye-blink.

“I am not. I know you cherish her. I’ll kill her now if you don’t give it to me,” Landi said.

“Why?” Renn asked.

Landi ignored her, and pushed her hand farther out.

“And here I thought you’d just try to excuse your act of awakening it,” I said.

Landi’s nose twitched and she snarled. “Don’t play coy! I know you treasure her and...!”

“Yes. I know. The heart for Renn. I heard you,” I said.

I ignored Renn’s look on her face as I kept my eyes on Landi’s.

“I’ll do it Vim,” Landi said through clenched teeth.

“I’ve no doubt you would, Landi,” I said.

“Then...?”

Shifting, I debated just tossing her the heart.

I mean... why not?

What was a heart?

The heart in my hand held no value compared to the heart beating in that woman’s chest. A mountain of the hearts I held couldn’t replicate the value of a single breath in Renn’s lungs.

Yet the heart in my hands was something not even the Societies rules could pry from me.

“Even if I give it to you. It won’t save you from me after,” I warned her.

Renn blinked, and Landi’s snarl grew darker. “You won’t be able to. Not after I do what I plan to,” she said.

I frowned at her and wondered what weird scheme she was currently trying.

Did... did she think the heart would give her power? Enough to face me?

She was kidding right?

What power could this thing give over me? Yes it was dangerous, and powerful... but... I mean...

The most she could do is gain the strength and ability of the Monarch.

The same creature I had just killed.

“Landi...” Renn whispered.

“Shush Renn. I like you. Don’t talk.”

Ah.

Instant relief flooded into my bones, as I realized what was happening.

Thank goodness.

Renn raised an eyebrow, oddly calm, as she glanced from Landi... to me... then back at Landi...

Then she simple stepped away.

Renn slowly, with a frown, stepped another step back. And even lowered her head a little as to keep her neck from being openly available for another appointment with the blade.

Yet even as she did, Landi didn’t move. She kept the blade in the air... which was now hovering without threat. No longer near Renn. Not close enough for even her speed and deadly accuracy. Renn stepped away again, and her ears fidgeted as she wondered what to do. She kept glancing from me to her.

“You can speak with them, can’t you?” Landi then asked.

Speak with them? I kept my emotions from showing on my face as I waited for her to continue. To let her reveal to me what I wanted to know.

Landi's eyes narrowed, in both anger and...

Was that shame...?

"What's wrong Landi...? Why go through such lengths?" Renn asked with a soft and concerned look.

Landi ignored her, and kept her eyes on my own. "Give me that heart, Vim."

"Come take it," I said as I lifted it.

The thing pulsed, and gleamed a little. As if it knew it was the center of attention.

Landi shifted, and her scimitar finally moved. It lowered a tad, and tilted. In a way that told me she had actually considered trying.

So strange.

She didn't really want, or plan, to harm Renn. Her attempt at ignoring Renn, and even letting her step away, told me the truth of it.

If Landi had really wanted to hurt Renn, or use her against me, she'd have proven it by now. Either by cutting off an ear, or worse.

Which made me wonder...

"Why'd you wake it up Landi...? And why not just wait for me? Why risk your nation, and all the world around you in such a way? You poisoned the world for what reason?" I asked.

"Because of your stupid rules, Vim," Landi said through clenched teeth.

I frowned... and then felt something odd.

In my grip. Something was... brushing? Or bothering my palm?

But there shouldn't be. I had the heart in my hand. It was not a perfect orb, nor completely smooth, but... it wasn't sharp or rough enough to feel like whatever was rubbing against my palm and thumb and...

Looking down quickly, I spun the heart a little, to see what could possibly be feeling so weird.

The sight of the cause was almost far more concerning than the current situation.

It had cracked.

“Rules...?” Renn’s voice was distant as I panicked.

The heart. It was cracked. How...? Why? All of a sudden?

Gulping a dry groan, I looked away from the heart and found Landi and Renn glaring at each other. I had missed an exchange. Stupid of me.

I lowered the glowing heart, and put away the crazy reality it had revealed, and frowned at Landi. “What rules, Landi...?”

“Your stupid Societies’! I’ve told you before Vim, if you want us to obey them you should at least tell us all of them. How can we follow them, if we don’t even know what they are?” she asked.

“The only possible rule the Society has concerning Monarchs is simple. Call me. Summon me. Nothing else,” I said.

"It's not that Vim...!" Landi clenched the hilt of her blade. I heard the leather straps that wrapped around the handle cry out in stress under the pressure.

I kept an eye on her, and shifted my left foot a little. Just enough that I'd be able to pounce forward, to put myself between her and Renn, if I needed to.

"Then tell us, Landi," Renn then said.

"I need the heart!" she said, a little too loudly.

One of the knights outside shifted. His armor clanked as he turned to peer his head in.

"Stay out!" Landi shouted at them.

The man startled, and quickly went to unfolding the tarp entrance. The tent got a little darker as it folded down, blocking the outside world a little better.

For a few moments we listened as many heavy feet, armored boots, ran off. Either in fear, or to get busy in hopes of avoiding her wrath.

“You’d not have even known. If I had succeeded. You’d never have known,” Landi said softly, mostly to herself.

“Then why even tell Vim about the Monarch...? We might have left without ever knowing it was here,” Renn asked for me.

Landi scoffed. “Please. He knew. Or if somehow he didn’t, he’d have found out. He can smell them,” Landi said.

I kept myself from telling her that Renn had been right. I honestly hadn’t noticed the Monarch. It was far enough from the city, and likely because of where it had been in that canyon, that I hadn’t smelled or sensed it at all.

The likeliest reason was actually because of how weak the Monarch had been.

“Then... how would he not have noticed, after? Wouldn’t he sense the heart? Once we came back next time?” Renn asked. I liked how she sounded so calm and sure of herself. She was acting as if Landi hadn’t just threatened to kill her, or still held a very deadly weapon and seemed intent to use it.

Even more so that she didn’t even realize she always included herself in my future endeavors.

Landi made an odd sound. Something similar to the scoff earlier, but with more scorn. “Why would he?” she asked.

Renn heisted, and I decided to interject this time.

"I would have," I said.

"Oh... I doubt that," Landi sneered at me.

"Why...? Because of the heart in your womb?" I asked her.

Landi dropped the scimitar.

Studying her as she gaped at me, I kept a close eye on the woman's hands. They were curled. As if in recoil, as if from a slap of the face. Last thing I needed was for her to think she was cornered and go for Renn first.

"What...?" Landi whispered, and she actually stepped forward. Suddenly she had both her hands on the table in front of her, using it for support.

She had nearly fallen to her knees.

"You've had a heart inside you for... well... at least a hundred years I think," I said as I tried to remember the first time I had sensed it within her.

“How...?” Landi stumbled. She fell forward, dropping closer to the table. She went from holding herself up with her hands, to her forearms and elbows.

Renn, being the kind woman she was, stepped forward. Worried for her. Luckily though she stayed a distance, and only drew a little closer.

“What I sense Landi, isn’t the Monarchs but their hearts. These,” I said as I lifted the thing again.

I did my best to not see the shining crack running along one of the extruding points.

Damn it really was cracked.

Landi said nothing, and only stared at me with wide eyes.

“What...? Why are you so shocked Landi? Of all the things you know about me, why is this so surprising for you? Or is it the fact you thought me incapable of keeping something a secret for so long? I’ll have you know I have secrets that make this one infantile in comparison,” I said, smiling a little.

Renn groaned, but I wasn’t sure why. I glanced at her to make sure she was okay, and by the time I looked back at Landi... she had lowered her head and released a deep sigh.

"I see. So...? What? Going to rip it out of me?" Landi asked.

It was my turn to sigh. "Why would I Landi? If I was going to do that I'd have done it the moment I knew about it," I said.

"But... why...?" she whispered.

Frowning at her, I wondered if...

"Did... did you resort to threatening Renn, because you thought I'd notice or something? Is that why you panicked?" I asked, understanding.

Landi flinched, and then nodded.

"Landi..." Renn whispered softly.

Studying the crestfallen woman for a moment, I realized I had likely made this worse than it had needed to be.

She had been on guard of me. Thinking that I had simply decided her a liability. Something to destroy.

My fault really. I had been upset. Angry, even. Over her waking and antagonizing a Monarch. One that had infected a deadly disease into the world.

Yet...

It was more than that.

Ever since I got here I'd been upset. Snarky, even. I'd said and did things that had made Landi go on edge. Worried. For her own self.

Even though there had been no need for her to do so. My own failures of containing my emotions had simply been another factor. One beyond her.

I was tired. And I had been worried for Renn, about the boy.

No... that boy wasn't a good excuse. The simple matter was I had a growing concern over the exhaustion within me. It was tugging at me even now, even though I hadn't sustained much damage with the Monarch.

But my own exhaustion and troubles weren't good enough reasons to scare and bother those I protected.

Glancing down at the heart, and the glowing crack, I had no choice but to admit it.

Renn affected me. In more ways than one.

I'd never once, in all my life, cracked a heart. Ever.

Yet Landi's attempt to threaten her had been enough. To startle me to such a degree, that I had actually done it. Reflexively.

An impossibility, made possible thanks to pure emotion.

As always, even thousands of years later my parents had once more proven themselves right.

Funny.

"Let's... take a step back," I said carefully.

The two women looked over at me, and I found that Renn had finally made it to Landi. She had her hand on her back, and Landi's head was hung low. Almost low enough I couldn't see her eyes, thanks to her sitting lower than the table stood.

I nodded at them. "Let's do... this..." I said as a plan formulated in my head.

One that hopefully I'd not regret later.