

## Non Human 241

### Chapter 241 Elisabeth

“Elisabeth,” the young woman shook my hand a little stiffly, as if worried I was going to snarl at her.

“Oh...? That’s a nice name,” I tried a little flattery first.

The young woman smiled, and looked away. The way she grinned and actually blushed told me that my attempt had not only worked, but that I had likely been one of the first to have praised her in such a way.

Poor girl. She was actually very adorable, especially the way she awkwardly walked. She was stiff, yet was trying to act normal. It made her seem much younger than she appeared to be.

Walking side by side with her, she was pulling on the reins of her horse. It followed, but its footsteps were heavy. It didn’t want to follow. Either it was unruly or it was fully aware of her shy temperament, and wanted to abuse it. Animals, especially horses, seemed to do that sometimes.

Her blush slowly died, and I looked away from her for a moment to study her brother.

He was walking next to Vim several dozen feet ahead of us. He too had a horse, but unlike hers it wasn’t walking behind him or reluctantly. It followed dutifully to his side, and the man wasn’t even holding the reins anymore.

He wasn't as large as Vim, but he had a very comfortable gait. Just like Vim, he walked with confidence. Surety. He had a large sword on his waist, which sometimes tapped the ground thanks to how low it hung, and several smaller knives elsewhere on his body. Such as a long thin one on his thigh. He wore leather armor, but had a metal breast piece that looked... honestly a little tight on him. Not because he was fat though, but because he was muscular. As if it hadn't been made for him at all.

Likely hadn't been.

The two men were talking, and not as quietly as me and her. The man sometimes barked a laugh, or said something loudly. He spoke to Vim as he was a long time friend... and at first, I had genuinely thought he had been. He had spoken to Vim so calmly and with such a weird grin that I had thought they had known each other at first.

Yet it seemed it was just... the way he was. An affable person, maybe.

A stark contrast to the one next to me.

"Were you just training?" I asked her.

"Huh...!?" she startled, and turned her head at me quickly. Her shoulder length hair danced a bit as she frowned at me. "You can tell...?" she asked after a moment of shock.

I frowned and nodded. "Am I wrong?" I asked.

“No... how’d you know?” she asked as she glanced me up and down.

“You’re a little sweaty, and sound as if you were recently out of breath,” I said. I wasn’t going to tell her she smelled a little. If she was so on edge then who knows what such a thing would do to her.

“Huh... Brother has been teaching me how to use a sword,” Elisabeth said as she tapped the small sword on her waist.

Glancing at it, I noticed the sheen of the metal beneath the handle. It was some kind of iron. It looked relatively newer, actually, though it seemed it didn’t properly fit the sheath.

“I’ve been training too. Everyone has to start somewhere,” I said gently.

She smiled and nodded, as if glad to hear it.

Her brother had mentioned she was a virgin of the field... and right after Vim had immediately asked of the plague.

Martin had responded of their family being dead now.

Which meant she was not a mercenary because she wanted to be... but because she had no one else to rely on.

Her brother was all she had.

“It’s a good thing you have your brother, huh,” I said to her.

She nodded quickly. “Yes.”

Feeling a little humbled, I wondered how Vim had realized their situation so swiftly. It was as if he had recognized it before they had even hinted at it.

Was it that obvious...? Or was it just something Vim’s seen many times in his life, and as such was used to it.

“So you two work as guards?” I asked, trying to pry a little without being too rude about it.

She nodded again. “Yeah... we patrol this road, and across the river. We keep anyone sick from getting too close to town. Or well... brother does, really,” she said. I noted the way she smiled at the end of her sentence. She had said that with a little bit of self-depreciating shame.

Either something must have happened, or it was just a simple fact. She wasn’t much taller than me really, and was young. She would likely not fare well against a grown man, even if they were sick.

Humans weren't like us. Not able to overcome that physical gap as easily as we did.

"It's the man's job to do the hard stuff, you know? Don't feel bad about it," I said to her.

Elisabell glanced at me, and because she did her horse made a huff and stepped away. She had to turn quickly and tug on the reins, and hush it as to get it back into control.

"I think she hates me," Elisabell complained.

"Rather she's just testing you. You need to be firmer," I said.

"Brother says that too. But..." Elisabell finally got the horse under control, and she sighed in relief as we returned to walking normally.

Glancing ahead of us, I found only Vim had glanced back at us. The brother hadn't. They were now a little farther away too.

Maybe it was some kind of tough love from the brother. To be honest it might be necessary... especially if she was to be a mercenary.

"Do you two belong to any band?" I asked her.

“Huh...? No... I don’t think so, at least. Brother wants to join one, but not before I’m ready. It’s my fault,” she said.

Her fault. Again with the self-depreciation.

I didn’t like that. But I knew better than to say or try to do something about it.

Some people were just... like this. Some grew out of it, others didn’t.

Plus she was likely younger than she seemed. Even if a tad taller than me.

“I’m sure it won’t take you long to get ready for it,” I said, hoping to lift her spirits a little.

She nodded, but frowned. Unsure of herself.

Then she gulped and glanced at me. “You came from the Capital of Stone...?” Elisabeth asked.

I nodded. “A few weeks ago, yes,” I said.

“Were they at war? We’ve been hearing they’re at war, again,” she asked.

“Hm...” I frowned and was about to shake my head, but realized that they probably were. To her, and those like her... Landi was indeed very likely at war. “Maybe...? I know they’re getting ready to mass their army, but I’m not entirely sure where or why,” I said.

“Ah...” she nodded, fully focused on me.

“Is that where you’re from?” I asked, wondering why she wanted to know. She wasn’t as tanned as those in Landi’s city, but not everyone had been as dark. There had been some as pale as her.

“No... But Brother mentioned maybe heading that way. For work. So...” she mumbled.

I see. So it was just basic fear.

She worried if her brother learned of a war nearby, he’d take the two of them to it. For work.

I’d understand why that’d be terrifying.

“If you have a job now, and it pays well, why leave?” I asked.

“It’s ending soon. This region’s landlord is sending a group of knights. Once they’re here we’re out of work,” Elisabeth said.

“Ah,” I nodded. That made perfect sense.

She sighed. “I used to think Brother was stupid. That he should retire after a few battles. Now I know why that’s not possible... I feel bad when I think of all the yelling and fights he used to have with my parents,” she mumbled.

I wanted to ask for more details, but figured if I did she might question if I was a mercenary too. She was speaking as if something was obvious. A matter of fact.

Maybe it had something to do with the pay, or the jobs. Maybe they didn’t get paid much?

“Times are hard right now as it is, too,” I said, choosing to focus on that instead.

She nodded and sighed. “Isn’t that the truth...”

“Have there been many sick here? In this area?” I asked.

She frowned and shook her head. "Not really. A few months ago we encountered a few, but since then the only people coming and going have been healthy. Maybe twenty or so sick people have shown up this whole time, I guess?" Elisabeth said.

Twenty...? That wasn't anything compared to Landi's nation.

I wonder if it was because those who got sick were dying quickly, or if it had simply not spread as bad here yet.

The girl's brother laughed loudly again, drawing my attention to him. He reached over to pat Vim on the shoulder, and I frowned at him.

Why was he so familiar all of a sudden?

I mean... I got it. Vim was a calm and even-natured man... plus he was obviously just trying to not draw attention to us... but...

Sometimes it was a little odd how easily he blended with strangers. Even though he himself seemed to not want to be so.

"Is he your husband?"

Blinking I turned to the young girl, who looked away from me. Embarrassed.

I nodded. "He is," I said, and felt strangely happy to say so.

"Hm... is it normal? To find one? To marry a mercenary? Brother says it's usually not normal for a woman to be in a band," Elisabeth asked.

What a cute question! Of all things to be concerned over that! "Mercenaries need to find love too, so I doubt it's that rare," I said.

Elisabeth's face contorted into an awry frown, and then she smiled and nodded. "Right...! That's true...! Brother just says it'd be hard for me to find someone as a mercenary... he wants me to find someone else," she said.

Oh. So this was something rather personal.

"I'm not sure... I could see why it'd be odd, but I've met many female knights and mercenaries. We're not as uncommon as you'd think, I bet," I said as I thought of all the ones I'd seen. When we had met Rapti I had seen a whole band of them, too.

"Oh...? Maybe he just means this region then. You said you're from the north?" she asked.

I nodded, glad that such a thing wasn't a lie at all. It felt weird to fib, even if it was necessary. "Yeah."

“Maybe we should go up there then. I suggested it to my brother, but he worries we’ll be ostracized. Being pagans,” she said.

Pagans... “There are lots of pagans up north too, so I’d not worry about that,” I said.

Elisabell frowned at me, but then nodded happily. Excited to hear it.

Glancing ahead, I noted the buildings in the distance. “So there’s a town up ahead?” I asked.

She nodded, and pointed past our men. “It’s still a few hours off, but there are lots of families up and down the river. Fishers, farmers, and the like,” she explained.

Just as Vim had said. I wonder how he barely remembered certain things, like Hark’s name, yet remembered stuff like this in such detail. Maybe it was because they weren’t people he was remembering, but locations and landmarks.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any brothers that need a wife, do you?” Elisabell then asked.

Hesitating, I wondered what to say. She was really focused on the whole marriage thing, wasn’t she?

“I uh... no... Can I ask why you want a husband so badly?” I asked.

She frowned at me, not upset I'd asked but finding my question strange all the same. "I mean... I need one? Brother won't take care of me forever, and I've no family anymore. Plus sticking around with him for too long might just get me killed... especially if he wants to go off to war," she said, a little quietly.

An odd tingle ran down my tail, and I was glad she was so focused on her hands. She was twisting and tugging on the reins she held, absentmindedly. If she was more observant she might have noticed my tail shift beneath my leathers and clothes. It had twitched that harshly.

"Has he said you needed to... leave?" I asked quietly.

"Hm...? No? But it's a fact he can't take care of me forever. He can barely take care of himself half the time," she said with a matter of fact tone.

I huffed as I glanced at her brother.

Was he then cruel, or was this just... normal? Maybe such things were more common than I thought.

I rarely noticed, being what I was. Even when alone, although lonely, I didn't need help. I had been able to survive just fine.

But maybe it was harder here, and during a famine and plague... or well...

Thinking of Roslyn and her people, I had no choice but to accept the very real fact being forced onto me.

This world was growing harsh. Harsher than it's been. Thanks to Landi's actions. Thanks to us.

And the ones to suffer weren't our people, since the Society and Vim protected them, but instead those like her. Like this young girl.

The disease and famine weren't just killing people... it was forcing those who survived them into precarious situations and trials.

She wasn't looking for a husband because she was yearning for love... but because she needed someone to rely on. Because the world was too dangerous to be alone, or to be with her brother who only could survive by doing dangerous things.

"Anyone in your band maybe? I'm not... really a good warrior, I know, or with horses..." she mumbled as she glanced at the horse, which had actually been rather amiable lately. "But I'm real good at cooking, and thatching roofs...! My family built all the roofs in the village I'm from," she proudly added.

Feeling for her, I wondered what to say. She sounded, and looked, very serious and desperate.

Was it really that bad?

I couldn't imagine asking someone who was basically a stranger for... a husband. Even if to her I was someone possibly trustworthy, being a fellow mercenary and a woman.

Yet here she was. Asking for help.

If she had been non-human, I could have offered her several names. But...

"I can ask Vim. He might know someone," I decided. I was sure Vim wouldn't care, or bother at all, but I vowed to at least ask for her.

Elisabell stepped closer. "Really...! Thank you!" she actually beamed a smile at me and I noticed one of her lower teeth, the one next to a canine, was broken. Not too uncommon, thanks to accidents. The rest of her teeth looked fine, though. We had to pause for a moment, and I almost stepped backward since she had gotten so close.

I nodded, and wondered what to say. She suddenly looked very hopeful. She even released a deep sigh as she returned to walking ahead.

"That'd be so great. None of the families around here have any unmarried sons... the only man who doesn't have a wife already is real old, so..." Elisabell said.

Keeping myself from asking something that would have likely hurt her, I instead decided to approach it from a different perspective. "Have you maybe asked your brother to take you to a large town? Before he goes off to war?" I asked.

“He doesn’t think we’d be able to afford to. We don’t have much... it’s why he was also thinking of going to the Nation of Stone. We could join the war, and I can maybe find a family to marry into,” she said.

Oh. Right.

Poor girl was either destined to marry the first eligible man she could find, or die in a war she had no say in.

Great.

Elisabell skidded a step, almost tripping. She collected herself quickly and tugged on the reins as the horse shook its head at her, as if upset her master was such a klutz. The girl smiled at me as she returned to walking normally, although with that same haphazard gait. As if tense.

Mercenary? Hardly. I bet part of the reason her brother was pushing for her to get married was because he saw the obvious. She was no warrior. And would likely never be one, no matter how hard she tried.

I sighed a little as I tried to stop myself from feeling too strongly for her.

We had just met yet I was now fully worried for her, and contemplating how to save her from a life of struggle.

How did Vim do it? So often? Now that I think about it we had recently argued over this. I had tried to argue he always affected people, even when he didn't mean to. That his mere words were enough to change a life.

He had argued he only did it when fate demanded it. When it concerned one of us, or out of pure necessity. Like Hark.

And here I was, proving his point. Or about to.

Her fate didn't affect us. It made no impact to the Society. Whether she survived or not didn't matter. Whether she was happy or not, changed nothing.

Yet I wanted to help her. Just because I could.

Did I even have the right to, though? Would I then do the same to every downtrodden individual I meet?

Vim was actually not as bad as I had claimed. He could change every life he encountered, if he wished, yet didn't.

He saw himself as a tyrant, because when he did change fate he did so in a dramatic way. In a way that no one could deny or fight against.

I had argued he hadn't been... but here I was, contemplating who to set her up with. There were a few human men in the Society I knew, like that man Vim had invited in Lumen. Mark. He had been a good man, who had cared for his elderly parents. Though he had been married, there were several men like him there. It'd not be too hard to find this girl a husband if I really tried to.

But I wasn't supposed to. Because if I did, that'd be the same as playing god. It'd make me as much as a tyrant as Vim.

So I wasn't supposed to. Shouldn't. Even if it made me a hypocrite. Even if I had done the same with Roslyn.

Glaring at Vim, who wasn't even aware of my current internal struggle, I wished to pick up one of the small pebbles in the road and toss it at him. But didn't, since it'd only make Elisabeth and her brother weary about us.

Was I going to be able to do the same? As he does? Just walk past people who needed help? Really?

We were about to find out.

"Honestly it's brother's fault. If he was a normal man and just settled down with a family, I'd not need to rush into marriage," Elisabeth grumbled.

Right. "Right? Let's blame him, at least for now," I said with a nod.

She giggled and nodded back, glad to hear I agreed.

Jeez she was adorable though. She had freckles all over her face, and her hair was the type of thin blond that let you see those freckles even in her eyebrows. She kind of reminded me of Lamp and her people, a little. She must have a similar ancestry as them.

She then sighed. "I've also considered converting. To become one of those nun women. But who knows if I'd even be allowed to. Brother says they'd burn me if I tried," Elisabeth said.

"Who'd burn you?" I asked.

"The church people...?" she answered as if it was obvious.

"I'd not think they'd do that if you wanted to convert, Elisabeth..." I said. Or well, maybe they would... since she was only converting as to find a safe place to live.

I pondered it for a moment, as I tried to think of the religion that was in Telmik. Would they accept her? Maybe I should send her there?

Wait. No... how would she survive the trip? It cost a lot to travel... the food alone was so expensive that most people couldn't venture too far from their home because of it, and that was if they were willing to never stay at an inn or something.

It wasn't like her brother would willingly take her there, after all. Which meant she'd be alone.

A lone girl on the road, without much money... yeah... not a good idea...

But it wasn't as if Vim would let her come, either.

I could just see it now. Us returning to Telmik, with a legion of helpless women and children that I'd pick up along the way.

I sighed at the thought, since I could actually see it happen. Not just because I'd give in and want to help, but because Vim would give in and let me do as I wished. Both because of his belief in free-will, and his devotion to me.

We started to pass the first building I'd seen in a few days, and I noticed it was made more of wood than stone. Only its base foundation had stones, and they weren't formed brick but rather just large slabs of cut stone.

"That's Grams house," Elisabeth informed me.

"Hm," I nodded, and wondered if that was a name or a nickname for an older woman.

My thought never got answered, since we left the house behind before the person in question showed themselves. Nearing the next set of buildings, I watched as one of the distant figures near the river waved at us. Martin waved back at them.

“They’re fishing, but they’re the ones who make shoes,” Elisabeth said.

As we continued to pass houses and farmland, the density of the buildings started to increase. It only took about an hour until Elisabeth pointed at one of the larger, stone made, buildings and told me we were now in the center of the village.

“The other side of the river actually has more buildings. Me and my brother are currently living in one of the empty buildings next to the village elder’s house,” Elisabeth told me.

“I see,” I nodded, and wondered where our member was. Vim had said they lived near the village, but I don’t think he mentioned they actually lived within it.

Wait... hadn’t Vim mentioned we were still a few days away? Yet here we were already, in the town.

Maybe this wasn’t their village.

“Is this village relatively newer?” I asked her, curious.

“Huh...? Oh... maybe? It has grown I guess. I remember hearing them complain about the empty buildings, they built a bunch and now no one is here to use them,” she said.

Ah. Maybe this village, although possibly a village even back when Vim came here last time, was new. A place that Vim didn't consider a real village. He had said we'd pass houses and stuff before reaching the weaver's village. These homes may very well be what he had meant.

“Wait... why can't you just have one of them? If they're not being used?” I asked her.

Elisabell shrugged. “I don't know? But even if they let me... I can't pay the taxes. It's ten Earls a person. That's what we're getting paid for this whole job, and we've already spent several since then. I don't know how I'd be able to pay it,” she said simply.

Earls. Must be the currency here. And ten...? Per person, and likely for the year?

If they got paid ten for a job such as what they were doing, it was likely not the lowest level of currency she was talking about. That meant, like other nations, these Earls were a higher valued currency than the normal one used.

Which meant it was likely a high fee. Interesting.

I wonder what happens if you don't pay the taxes.

I wanted to ask, but decided to just ask Vim later.

“Do you guys get paid well? What do you usually make per job?” Elisabeth then asked.

Wanting to groan, I quickly scoured my memories for any hint at what was likely standard. Although I had a lot of memories of money, from buying stuff to handling such things while working in Lumen... I strangely couldn't remember any hint of a typical wage.

I felt as if Vim had mentioned it before, but...

I never paid attention. It was Vim's fault, really. He just always had money to hand me whenever I wanted it. As if he always had an endless supply.

“Depends what we're doing I guess... I let Vim handle that stuff, usually,” I said, deciding to just toss the burden elsewhere.

“Ah... true... Some men don't let us handle that stuff, huh,” she nodded, understanding.

Well... no... but now I couldn't correct her. If I did she'd find me weird.

Glancing at Vim's back, I sent him a tiny mental apology. I hadn't meant to make him seem like a rude husband.

“Can’t be doing too badly, though. You’re both dressed nice. Maybe it’s just this region... maybe brother’s right and we should go elsewhere,” Elisabeth mumbled, mostly to herself.

Was I dressed nice? I knew I was dressed a little better than most people were, usually, but I didn’t feel as if it was that big of a leap in quality.

And Vim was definitely not dressed nicely anymore. He didn’t even have leathers anymore.

One of the houses was noisy as we passed it. It sounded like there were several people inside, notably children. There was a pair of men sitting on the outside porch, who had gone silent as to stare at us as we passed.

“They’re the largest family. They’re always having dinner together and stuff,” Elisabeth said.

I liked how she didn’t sound upset or jealous at all. If anything she sounded a little envious.

Once we passed the noisy house, the road turned a little. Bending somewhat west. It led to more buildings, but they were noticeably starting to thin out and become less and less.

And it was here that Martin and Vim came to a stop.

“Ah... Here I thought you’d two would stay for a bit,” Elisabeth said softly.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized to the girl that suddenly looked hurt.

She smiled at me, forgiving me, and we slowed as we came up to Vim and Martin.

“I’ve not got much, brother, but I can at least promise a long night of drinking and stories,” Martin offered Vim.

Vim smiled gently at the man and nodded. “I appreciate it, and under a normal circumstance I would have loved to share some of my own. But we’re already behind schedule. If I don’t reach our family before winter’s first snow there’ll be hell to pay,” Vim politely turned him down.

Elisabeth shifted, likely upset to hear it.

Martin sighed but nodded. “That I get. I do. I really do. Alright then,” he said then held out his hand.

Vim took it, and the two men smiled and nodded to each other.

“May your blades not chip,” Vim said.

“And your purse stay full,” Martin nodded.

Then their arms separated and Vim turned to look at me.

“Ah... goodbye Elisabeth. It was a pleasure meeting you,” I said to her.

“Goodbye. If we meet again, please uh... be kind to me,” Elisabeth said as she waved as I stepped forward.

“It’s if we meet again on the battlefield, Sis’ I’ve told you,” Martin said lightly.

“Oh. Right. That...! Yeah!” Elisabeth smiled sheepishly as we waved at each other.

Laughing softly, I nodded in goodbye to Martin as I passed him and his horse. He nodded back with a light smile as I followed Vim away.

“Bye!” Elisabeth shouted as we drew farther away. I turned to give her a hearty wave once more.

After exchanging one last wave, I watched for a moment as her brother helped her back onto her horse.

Turning around, I sighed as I took my spot along Vim's side.

"What?" Vim asked.

"I feel bad," I said softly.

"What for...?" he asked, frowning at me.

"Her," I answered honestly.

"Huh...? Why?" he turned a little, to glance behind us. But he didn't look long.

"She's just... pitiful. But no more than likely most women are right now. It makes me realize how lucky I am, I guess," I said.

Vim tilted his head at me, and then rolled his shoulder. "Her brother asked if I wanted her," he said.

Slowing, I nearly came to a stop. "What...?"

“What? Oh. Not as a slave, or a wife, but as a mercenary. He wanted to know if I’d take her into our band,” he quickly corrected my own line of thought.

Although that was a little better... at the same time it wasn’t. I returned to walking at a normal pace and groaned. “What am I supposed to think about that?” I asked.

“Not sure. Why were you worried about her?” he asked.

“She knows she’s not cut out to be a mercenary. So she’s looking for a family to marry into. Otherwise she fears she’ll either die on a battlefield, or be left behind by her brother eventually,” I said.

“Ah... figured.”

“And you like usual sound callous and without heart,” I complained. He didn’t even blink.

“What...? It’s typical. And will get worse, if the disease and famine become harder to endure. It’s difficult for young women to survive alone in these eras. It’s just the truth,” he said.

“I know but...” I groaned again as I nodded. It was the truth. But that didn’t make it less sad.

Vim smiled at me. “You can’t save everyone Renn. Though I do enjoy your desire to do so,” he said.

“Problem is I’m not really sure how I’d even save her... It’s not like I can force someone to marry her, or something,” I said as I glanced behind us.

They were both back on their horses, and slowly heading back down the road. Back towards the way we’d come from.

“You’re taking it too seriously. If it was me I’d just send her to Lumen or something. Just as you’d done with the pirates,” he said.

“I thought of that, but how would I get her there, Vim? Roslyn and the rest had each other, and some of the coins I gave them. Even if their ship doesn’t make it, they will... hopefully... but that girl would have to go alone. Even if I gave her some money that’s no way to do it. It’d be dangerous for her, too dangerous,” I said.

“Well... I suppose that’s true,” Vim nodded after a moment, all the while studying me.

“What...?” I asked after a moment. Why was he looking at me like that? He had a weird frown on his face.

“You get heated. When worried about someone. Makes me jealous,” he said.

My tail once again twitched. If it had been out, I’d have smacked him with it.

Glancing around, I sighed at the buildings we were still passing. Most weren't near the road anymore, but built off in the distance and away from it... but it was still too populated of an area to reveal my tail or ears.

Even though I didn't see anyone.

"Where is everyone, by the way?" I asked.

"Hm...? Likely at the river, Renn. Fishing for food. I heard voices coming from over that bend over there occasionally as we went through town," he said with a gesture towards the river.

Oh. Right. Food. Famine.

"Not sure how this place lacks food. The ground seems more like the one I'm used to. They should be able to grow food here, shouldn't they?" I asked. Most of the ground was now lush with grass, and it wasn't the pointy brown stuff either.

"You'd be surprised. Plus it's more than that. The disease likely killed a lot of able bodied people, so that means less workers. Plus it means less money, since not working as efficiently. That means tools that break don't get replaced or repaired. And even if you grow food, it doesn't mean you grow enough of the right type. You still need to buy other foods and stuff, which now you likely can't afford or can't even find thanks to the aforementioned lack of workers," he explained.

"Hm... So right now Lumen should be investing in farms then, huh?" I said.

"You'd think, I guess," he said.

I sighed as I glanced behind us, now almost unable to make out Elisabeth and her brother. They were but tiny specks in the distance, blending with the buildings around them.

A tiny groan escaped as I thought of that poor girl. I felt as if I was abandoning her.

"Calm your heart Renn. I know you feel for her, but she'll be fine. One way or another. You're acting as if she's starving to death as we speak," he said.

"She may as well be, Vim."

"Really...? You think her situation that dire?" he asked, interested in why I thought so.

I nodded. "She's willing to marry the first man she can find. Abandoning any thought to happiness or choice. Out of desperation and need. That means even if she succeeds... and finds a family to marry into; all she'll be doing is extending her life. It doesn't mean she'll be happy afterwards. It means she's basically abandoning her heart. Her heart is what's in dire need, and that's what makes me sad," I said.

For a few steps, Vim said nothing... and I had to glance at him to realize why. He had a somber look on his face as he nodded at me, and then smiled.

“What...?” I asked after he continued to be silent.

“Nothing. My mother would have liked you,” he said.

For some reason that made me blush. “Really...?”

He nodded again. “Yeah. Is this what also bothered you about those pirates?” he asked.

“Yes. Roslyn even tried to sell her daughter to me, if you don’t remember. That desperation was what made my own decision. When she did that is when I decided to help them, any way I could,” I said.

“Oh right. She had done that huh...” he nodded as he remembered.

Really... why did he forget such things? Was it just because they were human?

“Well... I guess Roslyn wasn’t really her trying to sell Rosie, honestly. But it felt the same. I just... feel horrible for such people,” I said.

Such people reminded me of Nory.

“Hm. I can relate I guess. It’s a form of freedom, after all. You’re right... what that girl is being forced to do is basically abandon her free-will, because the world won’t let her do aught else. A predicament to be sure,” Vim agreed.

“You agree too?” I asked.

“I do. I never said that I disagreed Renn, I just don’t think you and I have either the right... or the responsibility to save them from such fates is all,” he said.

“Right...” I nodded, although I wished I could disagree with him.

Passing the last house for the visible distance I could see, I reached over to poke him in the arm. “Mind if we hold hands Vim? Else I might run back to grab her, if we don’t,” I begged.

Vim didn’t even say anything as he wrapped my hand into his, and nodded.

Walking hand in hand, we left the village and the mercenaries we met there behind.

Chapter 242 Questions For a Man Without Answers

Some places never changed, even after hundreds of years.

And some people didn’t change either.

“Listen to this Nann,” Nasba drew closer to the Weaver, smirking happily as she coughed and cleared her voice as to read aloud from her letter.

“My bet is that by the time they reach you, she either has him wrapped around her finger, or she’s become a slush of a bubbly mess and has become completely smitten with him. What I’d really like to know though, is if she’s been able to make him admit it yet, and how far they’ve gone,” Nasba happily read Merit’s letter to her, with her smirk increasingly covering more and more of her face as she did so.

I sighed as I turned the leather strap around, to start puncturing the tiny holes on the other end. For the eventual seams and tie-downs I’d install on it.

Renn was lucky she was fast asleep. Or else I’d be glaring at her right now.

“Well, I’m not sure if she’s a bubbly mess yet, but she’s definitely smitten for him. Even when she was able to pull her eyes off him, she kept an ear pointed his way the whole time,” the Weaver said calmly.

Nasba happily giggled and nodded, her tail feathers expanding in the process. “Right! Though... hm...” the duck turned to me, and frowned at me.

“What?” I asked, and decided that the next time I saw Merit I was going to throw her into a pond. The slimiest one I could find.

“Hm... I’m just wondering if I should feel sorry for my friend, or be happy for you is all,” Nasba said.

I shook my head at her as the Weaver gestured for her to continue. "What's the rest say?" Nann asked.

"Hm," Nasba nodded and went back to reading. "Take care of Renn either way. She's a lovely soul, if a little unsure of herself. If we take care of her and keep her out of trouble, from herself mostly, she'll end up being someone very important that we can rely on later," Nasba continued.

"Is she now?" Nann asked me.

I nodded. "Merit's not exaggerating," I admitted.

Nasba whistled as she stepped over to me, her large tail feathers folding so she could walk between the leather work station and the nearby rack of tools. "High praise from you. And Merit too, honestly. That old grouch hasn't seemed so interested in someone in years," Nasba said.

"Centuries," I corrected the duck.

"Indeed. You must not have told us everything about what happened. How'd Merit and her even have a chance to grow close, Vim?" the Weaver asked as she stopped messing with her spool of yarn.

"I didn't leave anything out. I told you they became fast friends, somehow. I even caught them taking a bath with each other," I told them.

Both Nasba and Nann raised eyebrows at that, and Nasba stepped closer to me. She leaned forward, to glare me in the eye.

“Really?” she asked.

“Really. Ask her yourself. Renn’s an open book... regretfully,” I said. Actually, please just go bug her instead. Not only would it make it easier for me, I bet Renn would enjoy every moment of their teasing.

Nasba glared at me for a moment, and then sighed. “Knowing Merit she probably got close to her originally as to see if she really claimed Vim or not. Then along the way became friends,” Nasba reasoned it.

I blinked and frowned, as I realized that was likely... well... yes.

“That’s exactly how it happened, isn’t it?” I said with a sigh.

Nasba giggled at me, patting me on the shoulder as she walked around me. “Bet it is! So...” she stopped behind me, and with both of her hands on my shoulders... leaned over my right shoulder, and blinked seductively at me. “How far have you gone, then?” she asked.

“She’d tell you all about it if you’d just ask her,” I said, looking away from the duck’s poor attempt.

Nasba sighed at me, flicked my ear, and then stepped away.

The Weaver giggled lightly, and gestured to the nearby table. "Would you get me Brandy's letter, dear?" she asked.

Nasba quickly obliged, putting her own letter from Merit down and grabbing the one from Brandy.

"Don't be upset, Nasba. I can tell he's not taken it too far yet. He'd be smirking more if he had by now," Nann said as she went to opening Brandy's letter.

"Hm... probably," I admitted.

"You're boring Vim," Nasba commented as she went to sit back down next to the Weaver.

"I am," I admitted again.

Returning my attention to the leather I was working on, I enjoyed the few moments of silence as the Weaver read her friend's letter.

"Hm... basically the same. Lumen's Monarch attack, having to flee, returning in triumph... Brom's loss. She also speaks of a human pirate. One that Vim brought into the Society. She worries he's too dangerous for such an important position, but is afraid to challenge Vim over it," the Weaver said.

“She made no complaint of Ronaldo,” I said as I stopped messing with the leather again.

“Because you’re scary, Vim. How many of us are left that would even be willing to argue with you anymore?” Nasba asked with a smirk.

Well...

“Which is why she is telling me. So that I’ll do it for her,” the Weaver said with a smile.

“She is good at making others do her dirty work,” I mumbled.

Nasba giggled as the Weaver went to read the next page of her letter. It seemed it was shorter than Merit’s, only a couple pages long.

“Hm... she only mentions Renn at the end. A single sentence,” Nann then said.

I shifted, and waited... a little impatiently, for her to say it.

The old bird smirked as she folded Brandy’s letter back up, and handed it to Nasba. “Renn is our only hope of distracting Vim, she says.”

Nasba took the letter, and went to smirking too as she stood. "What's with that?" Nasba said with a laugh.

"Something stupid," I said.

"On the contrary. Very telling," Nann said gently.

It was. But... damn it, I'll never admit it.

While Nasba put the letter away, humming happily, the Weaver turned a little. To sit away from her workstation, and the large wheel next to it.

Recognizing the very obvious intention, I put down my own leather and tools, and turned to face her.

"You're weathered Vim," she said.

Nasba's feathers folded inward, making an odd sound as she hesitated. She remained standing, even though she had been in the middle of returning to her seat.

It was funny that someone so much older always acted the inferior. Nasba had more than two hundred years on Nann, at least. Yet for all intents and purposes, Nann was the elder here. To Nasba she was basically a mother. And not just because she had married Nann's grandson.

"A lot has happened," I admitted.

"Concerning. That means you've either neglected to tell us everything... or something more personal has happened, and it's bothering you," Nann said.

"Can we just blame it on the one lazily sleeping, or are we going to spend the next several hours beating around the bush?" I asked the Weaver.

Nasba's feathers made noises again, as they rose upward off the ground. She apprehensively shifted as she looked from me to her mother-in-law.

"Speaking of Renn... were you pushing her? She seemed oddly fatigued," Nann said, casually switching topics. I knew better than to think I had avoided it though. She wasn't called the Weaver because of her sewing or weaving skills. Or because that was the type of bird she had been created from.

And she wasn't wrong. We had arrived here late in the night, and Renn had spent most the night and the following morning talking and telling stories with the Weaver and the rest here. Yet the moment the hubbub died down she had drifted off to sleep, and had been since. If she didn't wake soon, she'd sleep long past the point that it would be considered normal. Which meant she had been exhausted.

“Slightly. She got a little sick a few weeks ago. I let her rest and recuperate as much as possible, but this is the first place since then where she likely feels comfortable enough to truly sleep. We’ve been on the road since then,” I told her the truth.

“The plague?” Nasba asked.

I nodded. “Possibly. I made sure to spend enough time between her getting better and coming here. She’ll not be contagious. No more than any other human or animal you’ve encountered lately, at least,” I said.

Nann waved it off. “We’ve had the plague show up and leave already, as you know Vim. But I find it interesting you’d push her. Why?” Nann focused on something most would have ignored in favor of the disease.

Taking a small breath I nodded. “Many odd things have been happening. I’ve not had this much chaos since the wars. Granted it’s not as bad as the wars were, but it’s enough to concern me. I fear the world is simply once again becoming hectic,” I told Nann the truth.

“Already...?” Nasba asked worriedly.

Nann sighed as she shifted her dress a little, a tiny habit she’s had since I’d known her. “You should not have allowed Landi such freedoms, Vim. I’ve always been a vocal supporter of your hands-off approach to our Society, but there should be limits,” Nann said.

“I wasn’t blaming Landi. Even if I had punished her, I believe discord would still have come,” I said.

Nann smiled and nodded. "I know. But let me poke at the woman who once tried to take my husband," Nann said.

"Tried. Tried to take, Nann. He's one of the few she hadn't bedded," I pointed out to her.

Nann smiled, proudly, and I smiled back. Yes. She always liked to hear that her husband had remained faithful, when so many others hadn't. It was a great source of pride for her, and the few others who could say the same.

For as crazy as Landi was, she somehow had found her way into more beds than you'd think.

"Speaking of husbands, are you Renn's, Vim?" Nasba asked.

I ignored her and gestured at the Weaver with a small wave. "So you didn't mistake it. I pushed her. But it was a necessity. I'm still expecting bad news from Lumen at any moment, too, with all the political junk going on there. I don't think Brandy and the rest comprehend just how violent humans can get during such upheavals," I said.

"Oh I believe Brandy knows. She just doesn't care. I've always found it odd that someone so religious could be so greedy," Nann said, also willing to ignore Nasba.

The duck sighed as she stepped forward, and finally sat back down. She pouted a little, letting her long tail feathers fan out over the workshop floor.

“Still... I worry Vim. I would not mind meeting my end. I’ve lived a long, fulfilling life. But I have many children. Even if their lives are now fleeting and simple, I still cherish them. Every single one. If anything now that they’re so feeble, I worry even more. They are no longer strong. No longer able to endure. Weak, gentle little things they are,” Nann said, her expression going a little dull... likely as she thought of the many humans who were descendants of hers. There were now nearly fifty of them here, and who knows how many elsewhere.

I nodded. “I know, Nann. I think you’re fine here. The village nearby is simple. Still small. Not bothered by the church or its lords. The humans don’t question your family, or you, and you have a good relationship with them. You’re distant from the plague, the wars, and any major city. I...” I hesitated, as I held Nann’s and Nasba’s gazes. They were sad, and full of worry. “The ones I worry for... I worry for those I don’t get to often. Those too far to help, when they need me. The more chaotic the world gets, the more centralized my presence becomes. Just like with the wars,” I told them.

“That is not your fault Vim. Those who live too far away do so out of their own desires. Although we may weep upon losing them, there is little more we can do when it happens,” Nann said gently.

I nodded, even though I hated to agree with her. “What of the parrots?” I asked, since we were on the topic of distant members.

“Saw them last year. They were fine. Gribon is as grumpy as ever, but they were healthy. I’d assume they still are, Vim. You talk of those in danger because they live near humans and their chaos, well... they need not worry over that,” Nann said with a smile.

Yes. It was true. The parrots lived so far from any humans it was almost hilarious.

But it was still good to hear they were fine.

“He’s going bald too, by the way. I couldn’t believe it when I saw him,” Nasba pointed out.

Nann smirked and nodded in a way that told me she had forgotten.

I smiled and chuckled at the thought. So they were getting that old, were they?

Good. I’m glad they had survived so long. Even if I didn’t like their stupid singing.

“He just thought of their yodeling,” Nasba said with a giggle.

“He did,” Nann nodded.

I sighed and crossed my arms. How come I wasn’t allowed to have privacy in my own thoughts anymore? Between them and Renn... I swear.

“Now he’s upset,” Nasba said.

“He has been. He’s on edge because he knows I’m getting ready to interrogate him about Renn,” Nann said.

My left leg shifted a little.

Nann smirked at me, knowingly, and nodded. “Don’t get me wrong Vim. I’m vastly looking forward to spending time with the girl. But you... you I’ve known for almost a thousand years. And I do believe this is the first time I’ve seen you actually bothered by a woman’s affection?” Nann said as she pondered it.

Was it? Surely not.

“I don’t know... I’ve seen him bothered before,” Nasba said.

“Not like this. This is more real. He went straight here, to work with his hands. Vim only does that when he’s trying to distract himself,” Nann said with a gesture to the workbench in front of me. Or rather, to my side now.

“I’ve got a few things I need to make,” I pretended to defend myself.

Nann sighed at me, and blinked her pretty blue eyes... then she tilted her head and pondered for a moment.

I didn't like that look. Nann was oddly perceptive. And like her namesake, and bloodline, she saw through webs and weaves with ease. She unraveled mysteries easier than she made them. And some of the ones she created still confounded the world today. Poor Hands still hasn't figured out how to solve that puzzle she left for him centuries ago.

"She seems rather gentle, though. She was fine talking not just to us, but our human children. She didn't just acknowledge them, she actually saw them. They weren't just animals to her. To her they were people," Nasba mentioned.

Nann nodded, agreeing. "Indeed. A very rare trait for someone so thick in the blood of her ancestors. Is she a Monarch Vim?" Nann asked.

"No...? Why do you ask?" I asked, and paid close attention to Nann's eyes. She was still looking downward a little, more lost in her thoughts than focused on us.

"Not sure... Maybe she's a direct descendant, then. She somewhat reminds me of the few I've met. Like Yangli," Nann said as she pondered it.

Damn. She really was astute. I'll need to take the heart from Renn later.

"I doubt she's a Monarch. As much as it would make sense for Vim to end up with one, I can confidently say he'd never overlook it. I've been abandoned by him one too many times just so he can go hunt them to not know how much he hates them," Nasba said with a huff as her feathers fanned out again, in annoyance.

“Abandoned? No. Left behind for a moment, temporarily...? Yes. In safe places, out of reach of danger,” I corrected her.

Nasba smirked but said nothing.

“Still... I suppose it was bound to happen eventually, but I can’t help but feel that something is off. She’s more than pretty enough, and seems to have a personality suited for it... but...” Nann hummed as she studied me.

“So... you’re not doubting my affection for her, but how I could possibly fall for someone like her in the first place...?” I asked Nann, trying to understand where she was going with this.

Nasba shook her head. “I don’t agree Nann. Vim probably just likes something special or unique about her. Maybe she laughs in a certain way, or has an outlook on some moral quandary that he prefers. You’re forgetting this is Vim we’re talking about. He’s more simple than people think,” Nasba gave her own opinion to the mix.

I glared at the duck, and hated how right she likely was. I mean it was probably more than just one or two little things, but...

Well...

“Vim.”

I blinked and nodded to the Weaver. Nann sat forward a little, clasping her hands on her lap as she frowned at me. "If she hadn't fallen for you. If you hadn't allowed it. Where would she have ended up?" she asked me.

Gripping a knee I nodded. "I believe she would have either ended up alone or possibly at one of the more religious convents. In the beginning I had suspected Telmik, but today I'd say more than likely the Crypt," I gave her the honest answer.

"Alone because she has no choice...?" Nann verified.

I nodded slowly.

Nann sighed and sat back up straight, tapping her thumb as she did. "Too gentle for those like Lilly to welcome her. Too forceful for those in Lumen. A precarious situation," she concluded.

I nodded again. "Yes. Her predator side scares those unable to ignore it. Yet although a predator she'd not be happy living alongside those like Lilly. Even if she could, and would be accepted by them all the same, Renn would eventually feel uncomfortable there. She neither possesses the hatred for humans, or our own kind, that those like Lilly thrive upon. It would inevitably result in discord," I explained.

"I'd be okay with her here. Though I'd worry she'd eventually fall for a human. I think she'd be the type to take her own life or wither away once her mate dies," Nasba said gently.

Nann nodded. "She would be. When I told her of my husband she had grown forlorn. She had nearly cried for me. She's likely already suffered similar losses, and would not likely survive another," the Weaver agreed.

I wanted to sigh, since they were only verifying what I had already known and assumed. Yet I kept my thoughts from being heard or seen, as the two women pondered in silence for a moment.

It was kind of them to worry for Renn. But I was a little worried of the conclusion they might reach at the end of this little conversation.

“Yet it’s inevitable, isn’t it Nann...? There used to be many like her. Like Merit. They’re all gone now,” Nasba said.

“Yes. It is. But they had perished with their fellows. Merit when she goes will at least be able to remember the many centuries with her friends. Renn may very well be one of the last in her position. She will live her long life, possibly as long as ours... even to the point of outliving us, and only end up dying alone. Without ever even having known the community and family we’ve all known and remember. We all die alone at the end, but we remember the times where we weren’t. Will she be able to do the same?” Nann said with her strange wisdom.

“She’s not so pitiful, Nann. She’s had friends and family. And she has the Society now... as small and fractured as it is. Even the ones who she is disappointed in or hates, she can still be cordial with them. Herra had voted to banish her, yet she still sees her as a friend,” I said.

The bird smiled gently at me, and I noted the pitiful look in her eyes. “Vim... I love you dearly, but you really do not have the right to say such a thing. We are not like you. We only pretend to be strong, we’re not truly so,” Nann said.

Hesitating, I squeezed the knee I held and narrowed my eyes. "You're saying I've misunderstood the woman I've been traveling with for several years. One who is an open book, mind you. She is incapable of hiding a single emotion, and not just because of her tails or ears," I said.

"Vim... I'm sorry but you're wrong. Didn't you hear what Nann said? She had almost wept upon hearing of her story. I had seen it too. We all had. She's far more fragile than you seem to think. Where'd you even get the idea that she was strong?" Nasba was now also staring at me with pity.

Glancing between the two women, who I've known nearly since I'd joined the Society, I felt my mind go numb.

"I'm not saying she's not affected or emotional... But to say she's teetering on the edge of shattering is a stretch don't you think?" I asked.

Really... they were talking as if she was about to break completely. Like Tosh or the many others!

It wasn't an impossibility. I admitted that. I saw it often enough. But Renn...? That bubbly girl? She laughed as much as she wept. She got angry. She got excited. She was full of curiosity and questions and life. Even after Lumen, beaten and broken, banished and betrayed by those she had become friends with... she had wept, but she had continued onward. She had stayed strong. She fell. Then got back up.

I've been on guard against it. I've been watching for signs. It was why I so willingly gave in concerning those pirates... I had hoped her helping them would have given her a sense of relief and surety. And it had. She had felt better after saving them.

Yet she wouldn't have even cared for them, or noticed their plight, had she been like Tosh. Those who broke like that became numb. Uncaring. Heartless.

Renn was emotional, sure, but not fragile in that sense. She was anything but numb.

“Do you think he doesn't realize he's the reason, or is this his way of trying to avoid the obvious?” Nasba asked her mother-in-law.

“I think it's a combination. But it's also likely that he hasn't genuinely noticed. Look how long it took him to notice Merit's feelings,” Nann back to her.

Clenching my jaw, I glared at the two who were speaking softly. As if afraid the woman in question could hear them, even through her deep slumber. I could hear her snores even now. Thank goodness she still slept.

“I'm not obtuse. I've been worrying about it too. I have done my best to make sure she was fine. She's not the first soul I've had to worry about. She's emotional, but not broken. How many people like her do you think I've traveled with? That I've dealt with over the years? She's hurt. Her heart is swollen. But she's not in danger of breaking or being lost to us,” I argued.

The two of them glanced at me with rather obvious looks of disappointment.

“Really Vim... the fact you can't see what we noticed in a few words and hours with her is very concerning,” Nasba said.

Nann nodded. "Before I sat down I had been planning all the ways I was going to tease him. Now I simply want to berate him," she said with a sigh.

They were being completely serious!

They completely believed that Renn was on the precipice of losing all hope and will. That cat? That smirking, adorable, lovable woman who found such joy in tiny little things like drinks and combs?

Yes she had gotten emotional last night. She always did when we first arrived somewhere, or left. Yet always without fail she got better. A few hours later, half the time, she returned to her happy upbeat self.

She wept. Then she laughed. And did so again and again. Someone about to break into a million pieces wasn't able to become so vibrant and happy so easily. Such depression rarely allowed such joy.

Renn wasn't about to shatter. She wasn't going to break like Tosh and all the rest. They had to be wrong.

There was no way these two weren't just trying to tease me. There was no way they were being serious.

There was...

They...

The Weaver softly smiled at me, and nodded. "Vim... if you died right now, she'd break," she then said.

My throat tightened, and I felt my right knee get dislocated from my intense grip.

I ignored the pain of muscles and tendons being snapped and torn as I kept on squeezing. Half a moment later, the kneecap itself snapped in two. "Impossible..." I whispered.

"Did he just break his kneecap?" Nasba asked softly.

"I believe he did," Nann said, but I didn't stop squeezing.

My eyes blurred as I tried to argue with them. It had to be obvious. It should be easy.

Renn would not lose all hope if I died. There was no way.

She'd weep. I could see her weeping for days. Becoming forlorn, sure.

But...

To give up completely?

Surely not. She had so much she wanted to do. She wanted to meet everyone. See so many things. Help people.

I had just... just asked her... not too long ago...

She had laughed and kissed me for crying out loud and...

I closed my eyes and sighed as I realized the truth.

"And there it is," Nann said gently.

Gulping, I nodded. "She's made me her anchor," I gave in and admitted it... aloud... and to myself.

"An apt description," the Weaver said.

"Should... should I praise him for noticing?" Nasba asked.

“We should. Vim’s ability to face the impossible and accept even what he doesn’t believe in is one of his better traits,” Nann said.

“Good job Vim. I’m proud of you,” Nasba then teased me.

I shook my head, ignoring her small giggle. “I should not have allowed this to have happened,” I said.

“No. You shouldn’t have. But the fact you think it’s a bad thing is rather sad,” Nann said.

“It is a bad thing. It’s terrible,” I said as I glared at the Weaver.

“How so, Vim?” she asked back.

“Yeah... Unless you don’t actually care for her. Then it is. But even if so, like Merit, she’ll get over it. Someday, surely,” Nasba said.

Releasing my knee, I ignored the tingly sensation as the muscles and tendons moved under my skin. They re-attached and re-grew as I took a small breath. The bone itself had started to heal before I had even let it go.

What do I do? There was nothing... fundamentally wrong with Renn using me as the foundation of her own life. It wasn't like I was in danger of dying or being lost to her. And it wasn't like everyone else didn't do similar things, in their own way. Most of those that we lose are because they lost their own anchors. Their families. Their homes. Their nations or religions. They died not from wounds or time, but heartbreak.

People faded away when they lost everything they loved and valued. This was nothing new. Humans did. Non-humans did it. Even basic animals did it too.

Renn was no different than the thousands of others.

Yet at the same time she was.

Because I was the thing she cherished.

But...

"Have... have you ever had someone like her Vim?" Nann asked me gently.

I blinked, and memories flooded through me. "A few," I admitted. But never to this degree. Not like this. Those I thought of that had cherished me to such a degree, that had depended on me so deeply, had not made me their only anchor. They had others. Other family. Other friends. Other duties and dreams. I wasn't the only thing in their heart.

They had lingered next to me long enough to stand on their own feet, and then continued on their paths alone. Without me. A few had returned, at the later years of their lives... but only to say goodbye, or to endure their final moments as they defied their fates.

Renn although had many attachments... were any of them strong enough to separate herself from me? Was Lamp and her people enough? Those pirates? The few friends she has made along the way?

I couldn't see them being enough for her. Especially so in the long run.

"I find it hard to believe. Are you telling me in your thousands of years you've really never had anyone grow close to you, to cherish you, like her?" Nasba asked with an eyebrow raised.

"None that didn't grow distant on their own after a bit. Like Merit," I said as I continued searching my memories for another.

"And... why are we not simply assuming she'll do the same? Is it because we can't think of anyone or anywhere she'd change her attachment to?" Nasba asked the two of us.

Nann nodded. "It's a major factor, yes. Are there really no other predators or even prey that she could become family with Vim?" Nann asked.

"I don't know. She could to a degree, I guess... she even seems to find women more interesting than men, but that might just be because of how deeply she treasures friendship and stuff. Landi and Renn got along well, and I could see her sticking around with her... but I wouldn't be surprised to return a few years later and find one of them dead, or Renn missing," I said honestly.

“Honestly I don’t see the issue. Just keep her around, Vim. Not only would it be amusing for the rest of us, it’d probably do you good. Who knows maybe you’ll have children or something,” Nasba said as she smiled and nodded, happy at the idea.

My steady heart thumped like normal, but I felt as if it had just missed a beat.

Children.

Nasba went to giggling, and I glared at her. She had likely noticed my moment of pure terror at the idea.

“Can... can you even have children, Vim?” Nann then asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. I’d never had any, and although it’s not like I’ve ever actually tried...

Well...

“There’s no way it can’t have happened at least once or twice. Even if on accident,” Nasba said.

I frowned and shook my head. "As far as I'm aware, no. Not a single one. But it's not too surprising, I'm an extra step separated from all of you. It's not as simple as a non-human and human mixing," I said. And even for them it wasn't easy sometimes.

"Funny since you look so human," Nann said.

It was. But it was the truth. I may look like everyone else. Like the most average human to exist... but deep down... deeper than anyone's eyes can see, I was the farthest thing from them.

My parents had made sure of that.

"Still... that's funny. I've never actually considered why you've never had children. That tells you what kind of man you are Vim, where even I don't find it weird you don't have any. You're that boring of a man," Nasba teased me.

"Have you never tried Vim?" Nann asked, ignoring Nasba.

"No. Not intentionally," I said as I thought of the few women that I'd stayed with for extended periods of time. There was shockingly fewer than I thought there had been as I ran through my memories. Few enough to make me realize I'd been neglecting the most basic need of a sentient creature, but enough to tell me that I likely was either infertile or unable to bear children with humans and non-humans alike.

"He just thought of all his past lovers, didn't he?" Nasba asked.

“Hm. Moments like this make me wish I had been born a Saint. The grief would have been worth seeing all those embarrassing memories,” Nann said with a smile.

“Oh shut up... How’d we go from you two teasing me about being in a relationship to this? This is depressing,” I said as I sat back a little. The very solid chunk of stone I sat on made an odd noise as I did.

Nann smirked as her daughter-in-law giggled at me. But I shook my head and sighed. This wasn’t funny.

“Honestly it’s not depressing. Other than saying aloud the fact that our kind are literally going extinct, of course. Other than that fact, admitting that you’ve found someone to cherish and that she’s such a kindhearted soul is far from depressing, Vim,” Nann said.

“We’ve known about our inevitable end forever. I’m glad in these final moments we still have things to smile and be happy about,” Nasba added.

“At my expense,” I argued.

“Oh do not worry. We’ll tease Renn plenty once we can,” Nann said.

Good luck. She’ll enjoy every moment of it.

“Usually you guys never have any requests for me. So I usually like visiting. Now I don’t ever want to come back,” I said to them.

The two laughed at me, and Nasba's feathers danced in the air. Going up and down, and kicking up a little dust in the process.

Calming down a little, I decided to just... put aside the stress-inducing fact that they were likely right. Renn was only still able to be happy because of me... and there was a chance she'd not be able to find anywhere or anyone else because of it. And I, being the absolutely failure of a man I was, would not be able to do anything to help her avoid the inevitable heartbreak that would come because of it.

I could love her. I admitted I did, at least to myself. To her. I could cherish her. I could enjoy her being with me. I'd not be bothered if she spent the next thousand years at my side.

But could I actually be who she needs me to be?

What will I do when she wants me to be the husband? What will I do when I can't reciprocate the level of love she so desperately wanted to share?

After all... eventually I'd have to put the Society before her. It was inevitable.

Would her heart survive the moment I abandoned her to save those she despised? Those who banished her? Those who didn't deserve it?

Would mine?

Time would tell.

“As amused that I am about this, Vim... please do not stress over it. We are making simple assumptions. Give me time. Before you leave I’ll find out the truth for you,” Nann offered gentle words of encouragement.

Nasba nodded quickly. “Yeah. We’ll find out for you Vim. Maybe we’re just seeing what we want to, because it’s funny... and gives us hope,” she added.

I scoffed at the two, who somehow seemed genuine in their teasing.

“Who knows? Maybe we’re not seeing the extent of it, too,” Nann then said with a smirk.

“That’s what scares me,” I whispered.

Chapter 243 The Weaver

Nasba had a nasally voice, but she spoke with a passion that made her sound very beautiful.

I sat with the rest of the Weaver’s family, all circled around the small lifted podium in the center of the room. Nasba stood alone on it, and was telling the end of her story.

“Now most of you don’t know how small she is, but Merit is tiny indeed! So when she sat on her throne, and the crown was placed on her head it actually slipped off and to her neck! The whole crowd went quiet, unable to believe it. A crown became a necklace, and all the pointy jewels covered half her face! Which was a good thing too, since she was so red from embarrassment that she even started to cry!” Nasba was barely able to keep her smile contained as she teased her friend.

Several people around me giggled and chuckled, as if they could actually see Merit now. Fumbling with her crown as she tried to retain her dignity as queen.

Although I was smiling, I found myself more teary eyed than not. Vim had told me of her kingdom, but I hadn’t realized there were still others who remembered it too.

“Where’s she now aunt Nasba?” a younger girl raised a hand and asked.

“In Lumen. The city of coins,” Nasba answered, unbothered by the interruption.

“Is she their queen too?” another asked.

“No... she’s just a little girl there. Good thing too, Merit regrettably never really learned the importance of money. I used to have to be the one to buy stuff for her or else she’d just toss all the coins she had onto the counter without care!” Nasba said.

Oh...? I had never realized she was like Vim. Interesting.

Maybe that was why she wasn't allowed to work at the bank. It wasn't just because she wasn't tall enough to see over the counter.

“What about her kingdom?” someone behind me asked.

The ears on top of my head twitched a moment, since I was reminded that there were people behind me. Hopefully my ears didn't block their line of sight.

“It sadly collapsed a long time ago. Just like all things, everything ends,” Nasba said gently.

I noticed the way her eyes lingered on me a moment after she answered the person behind me, and then she turned to nod to another raised hand.

“Last story you told about Merit, you said you and her grew up together. Is she a duck too?” the long haired girl asked.

Nasba shook her head. “No. She's a fish. Good thing too, since she loves to eat eggs,” Nasba said happily.

I blinked at the odd smirk on her face, and the way everyone suddenly giggled and laughed.

Huh... some kind of joke I didn't know the full story to. Interesting...

Looking around at the many faces around me, I felt oddly... out of place.

I mean, it made sense to feel so. I was a cat. Everyone here was either a bird of some kind, or human. Yet... it was something more than that. My strange sense of unease was something deeper. Something I couldn't quite explain. And it wasn't just because everyone was wearing fancy clothing, with neat colors and designs sewn into them. While I wore the more simple clothing Vim and I wore while traveling.

Oddly, Vim had mentioned that this family had fox blood in it. Yet not a single person had a pair of fox ears, or any hint of such traits. The only non-human traits I'd noticed so far, were either the huge tail feathers, or the typical bird feathers on peoples arms and stuff.

It was a little odd. You'd think at least one or two would have a fox trait at least. Did a single bloodline overpower the rest that much?

"Do you know Merit, Renn?" one of the younger girls asked me. Her tail feathers shuffled as she turned and they bumped into the boy sitting behind her.

"Hey!" he complained, but everyone ignored his complaints as he pushed her feathers away.

"I do. She's a good friend of mine as well. She really is as small as Nasba says," I told them.

They all nodded at me, happy to hear it. The girl who had smacked the boy with her feathers turned around to hush him, as if annoyed he was still grumbling at her.

“How can someone so tiny be so strong?” a man then asked. He didn’t have tail feathers, but most of those here didn’t. There were only a few who seemed to still retain the non-human traits of Nasba and Nann, whom they all had descended from. About one in five had any traits it seemed.

“Strength is more than size, Peter. Remember ants and other creatures. They are stronger than us, when one compares size to lifting power,” Nasba answered in the way that told me she was long used to teaching.

“Are there any ants in the Society?” someone else asked, piggybacking off the statement.

Nasba chuckled, and as she answered I heard something more important. I turned a little, and quickly found the source.

Vim. He was walking across the main center yard, with Nann the Weaver. I could just barely make him out through the window across from me and over all the heads.

I couldn’t help but smile as I watched him head for one of the other buildings across from the one I was in.

How had I heard him? Now that I was actually aware of him, and focusing, I couldn’t actually hear him. All I could hear was Nasba as she answered questions.

Slowly standing, I smiled apologetically as I made my way out of the group of listeners. I made sure to slip between the people that were more human than not, so I'd not step on any tail feathers.

Once out of the circle, I slowed as I rounded a corner and entered a hallway.

This was the first floor of the largest building here. The place where Nasba lived, and her immediate family. But it was also where they all ate together and spent time together. Like that room I'd been earlier. It was a place of learning, as they called it. A place where they told stories, gave lessons, and held family-wide debates.

It was beyond interesting, but...

Quietly leaving the building, I shut the main door behind me with a gentle push. It was quiet as it shut, slightly muffling Nasba's voice as she continued her spiel on how duck eggs were more nutritious than chicken ones. Which was interesting to hear. I wonder if that was true, or just her own personal belief.

Pausing a moment to glance around at the large courtyard, I smiled at the grass and flowers before me. It was very pleasing to see such luscious nature again after all this time.

Stepping away from the building, I took the longer path. The one that led around the center garden and not through it, and headed for the building that Vim and Nann had entered. It was one of the smaller ones, but it had a weirdly shaped roof. It looked like it had a sunken roof, somehow, with several chimneys lining the sides of it.

As I walked, I smiled at the little bees and other flying things. They were happily buzzing around the flowers, enjoying life.

Yes. I missed this. I missed nature. It was a little odd how much I had actually missed it, without realizing it.

But this grass and these flowers even as well cared for and pretty as they were, only made me long for the thick forests of home.

Thinking of those trees made me smell them. I had to blink a few times as I tried to comprehend how I could still smell their unique scent of moss, moisture, and wet wood all these years later.

This place was interesting. We were a few hours from the nearest human village, but this place was almost a village unto itself. There were dozens of buildings, of varying sizes and purposes. Here in the center of it all, was a massive field of a garden. The main houses were built around it, and not a few were big and several storied tall.

There were a lot of people here. All descendants of Nann, the Weaver, and her children. One of which was Nasba... who wasn't a daughter of the Weaver, but instead a duck. One who had married one of Nann's sons.

Merit's friend.

Some of the children were human, but some also had their traits. One of which was Nasba's huge tail feathers. Resembling birds and ducks, they all walked around with a fan of feathers behind them. It was a little silly, but at the same time pretty.

Growing closer to the building, I wondered what it'd be like to live with dozens of my children and descendants. A part of me prayed that I'd get to experience it one day, but another part of me worried about it.

More than a few of those here were human. Entirely human. Even though related to us.

In that circle I had just been sitting in, were siblings. There were siblings who looked like parent and child, thanks to their apparent ages. Yet it was only because some children were born thicker in the blood of non-humans, and others weren't.

That meant those more human grew old and died. Quickly. Faster than their peers did.

It was a joy to have such a huge family... but I was a little scared of the idea of half my descendants dying before the other half even fully matured. From simple age.

Would I be able to endure such heartache? Again and again?

I wasn't sure how Nasba and Nann did it...

"You know how I feel about armor, Vim," Nann's voice made my tail twitch as I neared the house.

Armor...

Approaching the door, I found it already open. It hadn't been closed all the way, and I only needed to push gently as to open it and enter.

Entering the weaver's workshop, I slowed as I blinked away the odd smell of flax and other materials. It was a strange scent. One that made me a little lightheaded for a moment. I didn't shut the door behind me, since they had left it open, but I did close it almost to the point where it was.

As I walked deeper into the building I passed large storerooms. Full of cloth and clothes. Some had rows of clothes on racks, while others were layers of cloth and yarn stacked high.

"There's nothing to change, Vim. It's fine. Like always your work is simple but efficient. Your only problem is that it's too perfect. Would it kill you to have some character?" Nann sighed as she chastised the Protector of the Society.

Smiling at her, I walked down the small hallway until I found the open workshop. I found Vim and her together, with him sitting before a large workbench and she standing next to him. She had crossed arms behind her back, and was studying the leather he was messing with.

She was a tall woman. A little skinny, and gangly. Yet although supposedly very old, she looked young and healthy. Although much taller than me, she looked almost as old as people assumed I was. Until one looked into her beautiful blue eyes, and saw the depth and wisdom within them.

"Isn't perfection a character trait, Renn?" Vim asked me with his back turned.

My smile grew as I stepped down the tiny step and onto the sunken floor of the workshop. So he had been the one to leave the door open. For me. "Some might say it is. But I do agree, as have many, that your work is plain Vim. It wouldn't hurt to add a few details here and there," I said as I stepped over to them.

Nann glanced at me as I walked past the odd devices and tools she and the others here used to make clothes and other items. Some were huge, intended to make blankets or curtains instead of clothes.

I stepped up to Vim's other side, opposing the Weaver. I gave her a happy smile as she glanced at me, and I held her pretty blue eyes for a moment.

"Who else has voiced such an opinion?" the Weaver asked me.

"Most notably Lellip. Nebl's granddaughter. She likes to add little patterns and designs in the stuff she makes, and Vim and her grandfather always yell at her for it. It's rude," I said.

"I don't yell at her for it..." Vim mumbled as he turned over the leather piece he had been working on. It had a few other leather straps connected to it, and it was now formed enough that I recognized it.

It was one of the pieces that would eventually go on his back. That covered his shoulder blades. A thick and sturdy piece, which would be connected to many smaller pieces that would move and shift as he did.

The Weaver chuckled lightly. "Yes. I believe you, Vim. You'd never tell us not to do whatever we wish... but I do know you'd also sigh at the sight of such decorations. For us that sigh is as stern a beating as a fist," Nann said.

I blinked a few times as I processed her words.

So... they took his little mannerisms that deeply then? Really?

Maybe I should have told Nann about the pins Vim had recently made me. I didn't have any on me right now, since I didn't need to hide my traits here, but they were actually proof that Vim was able to be very decorative and personal. Same with my comb... but...

I shifted, and for some reason... even though I'd have enjoyed showing Vim's gifts off... at the same time...

Deciding against it, I didn't mention that he added character to the things he made for me. It was a tiny little secret I cherished, since I wasn't sure if Vim even noticed he did such a thing yet or not.

Yet was that not selfish? Was it not silly? What harm was there in letting others know? Vim himself likely didn't mind at all, so...

Vim sighed, as if to replicate the very sigh he made during such moments... and then put the leather piece down and turned to smile at me. "How's it going Renn?" he asked.

“Good. I was listening to Nasba tell the story of Merit’s coronation,” I said as I stopped debating why I didn’t want to show anyone the stuff Vim’s made for me. At least not intentionally.

Vim’s smile disappeared and he huffed and looked away. “Don’t remind me,” he grumbled.

Frowning, I glanced at the Weaver who smirked at me. “She had asked him to be the one to crown her. He had not enjoyed it,” she told me.

“Huh...? Really? You were the one to put the crown on her head?” I asked Vim.

He nodded. “For the moment it lasted there. I uh... well... I thought her thick hair would have been a little firmer. So... well...” Vim took a deep breath and sighed, this time not intending it to be one to be misunderstood.

Reaching over I patted his shoulder. “Thus why you hate remembering it. She must have been rather upset with you,” I said as I understood exactly what had happened. So not only had he been the one to put her in such an embarrassing position, but he had been the one to make her crown. Merit’s embarrassment was entirely thanks to him.

Interesting. Wish I could have seen it. Another moment of history I had not been blessed to witness.

He nodded, but said nothing.

“She was more upset he wouldn’t become her king consort than anything else, I think,” Nann said as she stepped away.

Vim nodded, and my patting of Vim’s shoulder turned into a hard grip as I held onto him as to steady myself.

“Huh?”

I felt Vim’s shoulder flinch, and Nann turned back towards us, and frowned at me. “You didn’t know?” she asked.

My mouth went dry as suddenly a whole lot of things suddenly made sense... and I glanced away from the Weaver and to Vim.

He wasn’t looking at me, and instead at the leather in front of him. Even though his hands weren’t moving. He had gone completely still.

“Vim...?” I asked, hoping he’d tell me I had somehow misunderstood.

“Oh my. Oh my indeed... You hadn’t known? Really? Why is that?” Nann stepped back over to us, placing her hand on the edge of the workbench Vim sat at. She hadn’t done it for support, however.

“Merit doesn’t tell anyone anything about herself. Let alone something she regrets, or hates,” Vim said simply.

“Vim!” I said his name a little loudly, and bent forward. To stare him in the eye.

“What...? Yes. She wanted me to join her in ruling her nation. No. I didn’t,” he said.

“She loved you!” I shouted as I replayed all the times I had seen her with him.

Of course she had! It was so obvious! The way they she acted. The way she had spoke of him, and looked at him...! How could I have not noticed it! It was so blatantly obvious now!

Merit's disgust and annoyance at Vim wasn't hatred, but love. Just a form of love that had likely been neglected, and abandoned...!

“Don’t feel too bad for not noticing. Vim didn’t notice for almost two hundred years,” Nann then said. Looking away from the man who I was quickly growing upset with; I frowned at the Weaver who nodded at me. “You think you’re shocked now? You should have seen him when he figured it out. It had been spectacular. A whole lake is gone thanks to it,” Nann said with a smile.

“What...? Wait...” I blinked as I tried to organize and calm myself.

Ok. Merit had loved Vim. Maybe even still did. Vim hadn’t noticed... and then...

My tail twitched wildly behind me as I thought of all the conversations. The jokes. Merit's snide comments about Vim, and how much she hated him.

Gosh, it all made sense. So much sense...

"I need to sit down..." I mumbled.

Vim stood, stepping away from his seat as I went to sit upon it.

The chair was horribly uncomfortable. It was barely a chair at all. It had no backrest, no armrest. It was more a flat stool than anything else. It felt, and seemed, made completely of stone... but... I didn't care. My mind was numb. My whole world had just been shook.

"She's not taking it well, I wonder why?" Nann said.

"I was expecting her to either laugh or yell at me, not this," Vim agreed.

"That's coming," I stated.

Vim huffed and Nann giggled.

Gulping a dry mouth, I turned a little. To look at Nann. "She really loves him?" I asked her.

The Weaver nodded gently at me. "She's over it now, Renn. But yes, she had. It's... not really her fault, to be honest. She had simply fallen for the first man to ever be kind to her. She had a troubled upbringing," she explained.

Turning some more, I glared at the man who had stepped away. A little too far from me. "Why didn't you say anything?" I asked him.

Vim frowned at me. "You know me better than that Renn. I'll not reveal anything that's too personal. Even to you," he said.

Well... that was true but...

"Merit didn't tell you?" Nann asked.

I shook my head. "No... but... well... It's my fault. I should have noticed. It's obvious now that I think about it," I admitted. Especially when I thought of some of the things she had said when we had been alone. Like when we had bathed together.

"Not always," Vim said as he stepped away. I heard his heavy footfalls as he went to sit down elsewhere.

“Did... did you really not notice? For two hundred years?” I asked him.

“He really didn’t,” Nann answered for him. Yet I still turned to glare at him. I wanted to hear his own answer. I wanted to hear what kind of feeble excuse he’d give to torture my poor friend for such a long time.

Vim sat down a few feet from me, in another chair. One made of wood. “I honestly hadn’t. It had been during the beginning Renn. Back when the Society was first really expanding and becoming its own. It had been hectic... There were times I was traveling around with dozens of people at once. Most of that’s all a blur to me today,” he said.

“You’re such a prick. Poor Merit,” I said.

Vim frowned at me as Nann giggled. “Isn’t he?” she agreed.

Two hundred years... poor, poor Merit. No wonder her blood boiled at the mere sight of him!

“How did you notice my affection so quickly and not hers?” I asked him.

Although I wasn’t looking at the Weaver, I heard her shift and draw closer to me. As if interested in the answer too.

Vim shifted a little in his chair, and I heard the wood creak and complain because of it. "I don't have an answer Renn. I'll not excuse it... yes it was rude. But I mean..." Vim gestured lightly, as if not sure what else to say.

"Merit wasn't really forthcoming about it Renn. In fact when he finally realized it, she hadn't even been around. She had been far away," Nann said.

My ears turned towards her, to hear her better, and I frowned as I tilted my head to look at her. My eyes ran up and down her, looking for the source of the sound of feathers I had just heard.

Where were they? She didn't seem to have feathers, but I had definitely heard it. Must be beneath her clothes... but she was wearing an open dress. Her legs and arms were visible. And the parts that covered her completely hugged her tightly. The dress wasn't loose at all... and...

Wait...

Realizing that her dress was actually the source of the sound itself made me feel a little dumb.

Her dress was made entirely of feathers. Though if they were hers, her children's, or genuine feathers from birds I couldn't tell.

"You said a lake disappeared?" I asked her once I solved that mystery, and went to address the next.

She nodded and her eyebrows rose as if she was witnessing the sight now. "Yes. He had stepped backward, to catch himself. Since he had been startled. Upon doing so, the whole world shook and a massive crack opened up beneath him. He had cracked the earth, and a nearby lake was eaten by it. It had been quite a sight," Nann said.

Shocked for a different reason, I turned to Vim for verification. He nodded and frowned at me, but said nothing.

I knew exactly what kind of expression she spoke of. I had witnessed it before. I've even seen him step too harshly because of it... but... a whole lake? A crack in the earth? One deep enough to swallow a lake whole?

"You're a monster," I said to him.

Nann laughed at me, patting me on the shoulder as she stepped away. She went to sit down in front of a huge wheel looking device, which had threads and ropes all over it. Although she sat in front of it, she didn't begin messing with it. She instead turned, to face me and Vim. Which was too bad, I would have enjoyed seeing how she used such a huge wheel to make clothes.

"I'll be honest Renn I had thought you'd known. You and her had gotten close," Vim said.

"Well... I think she might have kind of told me. In her own way," I said as I recalled our conversation in the bath. She had told me on how much he had helped her in the beginning. His kindness. His strength that she had been able to rely on, when no one else had been there for her.

Yes. I could recall her small smile. That weird little flushed grin she had while talking about those memories. I had originally interpreted those words as Merit simply being shy. Too shy to readily admit she had relied on a man she didn't like. How wrong I had been.

Merit hadn't just loved Vim... she likely still did.

Which meant...

"I've stolen you from her," I whispered as I realized it.

Nann scoffed. "Please. She never had him. As amusing as it would be to watch such drama, that is unfounded," she said.

"I... I didn't mean it literally, just..." I turned to look at the Weaver who waved my concerns away with a light gesture.

"Nonsense. Merit's had over a hundred years to come to terms, Renn. And she knew even before he realized her feelings that he'd never return her affection. Even if she'll never admit it," Nann said.

Still... that didn't make me feel any better. How much had it hurt Merit to see me and Vim together? Flirting and stuff?

Gods it felt horrible to think how she had probably felt. Seeing and hearing such a thing right in front of her. And I not even realizing how much pain I was putting her through...

I'll need to beg her forgiveness when I see her again.

"In some cultures I'd be the victim," Vim then said.

I turned to snarl at him, and he smiled back at me.

"In some cultures it'd be normal for a man to have many wives, as well," Nann added.

My snarl turned into a sad frown when I turned back around to look her way. "Right. I've met a few people with multiple partners. Like Landi," I said.

"Those aren't partners, Renn," Vim said gently.

I nodded softly. "I know... I just mean..." I gave up trying to explain what I meant as the Weaver tilted her head at me in an odd way.

"Would you be okay with such an arrangement?" she then asked me.

Blinking at her, I sat up a little straighter as my ears fluttered. "You mean... letting Vim have multiple wives?" I asked.

She nodded, waiting patiently for my response.

Shifting a little, I spun a little in the uncomfortably hard chair to face her better. Why'd they have to sit opposing like this? I'll have strained my neck by the time our conversation was over. "I'm not sure honestly," I admitted to her.

"Why's that?"

Vim remained silent as I crossed my arms. "I'd hate to imagine him with another... but... well... Take Merit for instance. I'd enjoy being with her constantly. So to me it'd be like having a sister. But yet at the same time, I'm not really sure what I'd think or do if I had to share them," I said as I thought about it.

"Share them. She's not complaining that she'd be sharing me, but that she'd be sharing Merit with me. See that?" Vim finally spoke up.

"I do. That's an interesting perspective... but surely you don't mean to say that you'd view Merit as a partner, right? You just said yourself, she'd be like a sister, not a mate," Nann clarified.

"Well... yeah? I love Merit but I'd not see her as a mate or anything, no. Plus I mean..." I nodded as I thought deeper about it. I immediately made a decision as I imagined watching Merit and Vim enter a bedroom, leaving me behind. "No. I'd not be okay with it," I firmly decided as my tail grew stiff.

"I see. What'd you just think of?" Nann asked me, likely noticing my thoughts.

"I don't want to say it," I admitted.

She smirked at me, and something told me she knew full well what I had just imagined.

"How about we pick a different example than Merit, please?" Vim said.

"Shut up," I told him.

He did.

Nann giggled at me. "So. No sharing," she said to me.

I nodded. "None," I decided.

"Interesting. Even more so that you'd willingly consider it. Most predators like yourself would have either outright denied it without even debating it, while others would have found no issue with it whatsoever. You're an odd mixture. Firmly against it, yet had genuinely considered it," she said.

I shifted again, and was glad that I felt my tail begin to sway normally once more. It being stiff made it too clear that I was unsettled. "You had asked... So..." I said. I wasn't sure yet what to think of her being so upfront about my feelings and thoughts, but I was enjoying this. Even if unsettled.

She nodded. "I had. Have you never had a mate, Renn?" she then asked.

"No...?" I answered, though wasn't sure if she was asking if I had been married before, or something else. It was interesting to have proof once again though that most of our older members called such partners mates and not husbands or something. I knew they meant the same thing, basically, but it told me a lot about them.

Though Nasba used the term marriage. And supposedly she was just as old as Nann... so maybe it was something other than age that factored into it.

"Why then did you come to appreciate Vim? Out of all the men you've met over the years... why him?" she asked me.

Although it was a little odd she was being so inquisitive about my personal feelings, I didn't shy away from it. "Why not him?" I asked her back.

"Oh I could give you many reasons. But I'd rather hear yours first," she responded.

Great. I glanced behind me, at the man in question. He was still sitting there. Patiently. He even had a strange smile on his face. "Want me to leave?" he asked me.

“No. I’m just wondering if you’re ready for me to interrogate you afterward. About all of this. Every single question. You better prepare yourself,” I said to him.

He blinked at me, and I turned away to face the Weaver before I could see his expression finish changing as he comprehended what I had just said.

Nodding to her, I gestured at the man with a light wave. “At first I wanted his life, not him,” I told her.

“His life... you mean his duty as protector?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah... I wanted this life. To travel. To be of help. To not only have a place in the world, but to be a real part of it...? Someone who made a difference? It... this, was everything I had ever wanted. To me it was like a dream come true,” I told her. If anything that was understating it. I had wanted to not be alone. To have purpose. This life was something I hadn't even imagined possible... I still hadn't truly comprehended how lucky I was, I don't think.

“But that does not explain your attraction to him. Such a life can be had without him. In many ways,” Nann said.

“That’s true... but... well...” I fidgeted as I realized I was about to say something a little embarrassing.

“Maybe I should leave,” Vim mumbled.

“Don’t. I’ve been meaning to say this to you too,” I turned to glare at him, stopping him. He had genuinely been about to go.

Vim stopped from standing up, and sighed as he leaned back, and nodded.

Turning to him fully, I spun on my chair and debated standing up. But... decided not to. Since I felt weird all of a sudden.

Taking a small breath, I did my best to not smell the weird smells in this room. The tools. The threads. The leather. Nann. They were all different, yet somehow familiar scents. Some reminded me of other Society members and locations. Others were new completely. Some comforting... some strange and outlandish.

I dedicated them to memory, and this moment. All of the smells of this room.

And, of course, also the obvious lack of smell from the man I was about to reveal my heart to.

Then I stopped paying attention to them, and nodded at him.

I focused on the man in front of me, who looked almost as unsettled as I felt. He had a hand on his knee, gripping it tightly. Something he did often when unsure of himself. Something he did when he didn’t like what he was hearing.

Well too bad. He was going to hear it anyway.

“I no longer want what you have, Vim,” I told him.

Vim went completely still, his eyes going wide. “Huh...?”

I nodded, and gulped. “I don’t want to do what you do. I don’t want to be what you are. At least... not for the Society,” I said.

Nann made noise, and it almost sounded like Nasba’s tail feathers. I ignored the sounds, and focused on the man in front of me. He looked half a moment away from running away.

“What I want... now, today, is to be your protector. To be for you what you are for the Society,” I told him finally.

His eyes narrowed at me, and although suddenly a little sweaty I felt relieved. Glad I had finally said it aloud.

“You wish to be what he leans on. Fascinating,” Nann said behind me, understanding what I meant completely right away.

I nodded, glad she at least understood.

“What...?” Vim though obviously didn’t, or if he did... wasn’t willing to accept it.

“What yourself? It’s what I want. It’s why I love you, Vim. You give my life meaning. Amongst all the joy and sorrow. Being with you is exciting, fun, and wonderful... but more so than anything I cherish the fact that I could possibly help you. You. A man who doesn’t need help from anyone,” I said to him.

As I finished telling him, I enjoyed the strange heavy silence that followed. Vim sat there, staring into my eyes... and seemed a little out of it. As if not fully awake. As if stunned or concerned. But it was okay. I was okay with him not fully understanding right away. I was okay with him even finding it odd or strange... that was okay too.

Glad to simply have been given an opportunity to say it, aloud, made me happy.

“Now I feel as if I should be the one to leave,” Nann then whispered.

I couldn’t help it, I laughed as I turned to her. “You’re the one who asked!” I said happily.

Nann sighed as she nodded. She had leaned back in her chair, a little too much. It made her look odd. She was a tall, thin woman. Too tall for her chair to sit in at that steep of an angle.

The two of us snickered at each other for a moment, until I realized Vim still hadn't said anything. I turned back around, to smile at him... and instead found him looking at me with a strange frown.

I blinked, and my own smile turned into a frown as I held his gaze.

He suddenly looked hurt.

"Vim...?" I asked gently.

"I'm very glad he had been sitting down. His shock could have destroyed all these buildings had he not been," Nann said behind me. Sounding genuinely grateful.

Surely not... "Vim...? You okay?" I asked.

I noticed his jaw clench, and his fingers twitch on his knee. He shifted and nodded, albeit uncertainly. Nodded, yet still said nothing.

"You should respond Vim. Her words had been beautiful. Even you should be able to think of something to give in thanks," Nann said.

I nodded, fully agreeing.

Vim though slowly shook his head... and I felt my heart skip a beat in worry. He didn't want to respond...? Why not?

"Don't be like that Vim," Nann said softly.

It was my turn to grab my knees. I squeezed them, mimicking him, as I held his gaze. Waiting.

"No. There are no words that could do hers justice," he then said.

Relaxing a little, I smiled at him as he took a deep breath and sighed at me.

"Hm. Not good enough, but I'll allow it for now," Nann though said.

Not good enough...? Hardly. "I love you Vim, even if you're scared of me saying so," I told him.

He nodded, giving up. "I know. You danced to her whims happily and willingly. I can't win anymore, if I ever did," he said.

I tilted my head and turned, to look to the Weaver. She smirked at me and nodded. "I'd tease you, but you knew I was drawing it from you on purpose. So it's hardly fair," she said to me.

Well... I mean... I had. I had assumed she had simply wanted to tease me, or Vim, but... well...

I had wanted to talk about it anyway. Openly. So it was a good excuse.

If anything... her little ploy had been in my favor if anything else.

Turning back to Vim, I gestured at him with the tip of my tail. Since my hands still gripped my knees. "How about you Vim?" I asked him.

"Hm...?" he tilted his head at me.

"What made you fall for her?" Nann asked him for me.

He sighed at us. "Does her persistence count?" he offered.

"It does, but I'd rather hear a better reason," Nann said.

Really...? I found it to be rather pleasant to hear he enjoyed my constant attempts. Even if I had to be the one to be doing so, since he never did.

Vim shifted again, and his chair snapped.

The thing collapsed, falling backwards and into itself. One leg went to the left, other pieces went right... yet Vim didn't move.

Standing up a little, I glared at the man who was sitting without anything beneath him. "Vim... how the heck are you doing that?" I complained. It looked unnatural. It made my hairs stand up.

"Pure hatred," he said as he then stood up, unbothered by what had just happened.

His words concerned me, but I noted he had said them a little gently. He had made a joke, he hadn't been serious.

"Better my chair than my home, I guess..." Nann said with a sigh.

I stepped back and offered the stone chair I had been sitting on to him. He nodded and sighed at me as he went to sit on it.

So that was why this weird stone chair was here. It was for him. Should have known.

"There's another chair over there, dear," Nann said with a point to our right.

I went to procure it, and as I did I couldn't get the sight of Vim sitting in the air like that out of my head. Just how had he done it? His right leg had even been angled a little, not really on the ground. His right foot had been lifted, in a way that told me barely a toe or two had been touching the ground...

As if he had been floating or something...

"And no. I didn't do that on purpose to avoid the question," Vim told us as I pulled my new chair over, to sit in front of him and the Weaver. At a better angle.

"Doubtful. But sure. Go ahead then," Nann teased him.

He huffed at her and then looked to me. I nearly hesitated, but quickly sat in my new chair and nodded quickly. Ready to hear it.

"Your heart Renn," he then told me.

I blinked at him. "My... heart...?" I asked.

He nodded. "You should hate the world. Despise it. After all that's happened to you. Yet instead you love it. You forgive it. I've watched you time and again express concern and care for those who don't deserve it. Even for those who hurt you. As foolish as I think it is... I still find it humbling and attractive."

Smiling at him, I tilted my head and swayed a little. "Thank you, Vim," I said, appreciating the lovely admission.

Nann though sighed. "You love her for her ingrained personality trait that encompasses your own beliefs. Rather selfish of you," she said.

Vim ignored her, and leaned forward. He drew a little closer to me, and I leaned forward as well. We were too far to touch, but it felt good to draw nearer to him. "Also... and don't find this weird, Renn, but..." he gestured at me lightly. "I'm comfortable with you," he finished.

Vim sat back up straighter, away from me. He smiled a little strangely, and seemed to relax a little. As if a great burden had just been lifted off his shoulders.

I though remained a little leaned forward, a little confused. "You're... comfortable with me?" I asked.

I mean... wasn't that obvious? Of course he would be. What kind of person wouldn't be comfortable with the one they loved? And honestly... was he? He always got anxious and shifted as if uncomfortable when talking to me about personal stuff. All the time. Even now.

Hadn't he just broken a chair? Did he forget? That had been mere moments ago!

"When did that start, Vim?" Nann asked, ignoring my internal conundrum.

“Almost immediately... She snuck in once to watch me. The young fox girl, Lomi, was sleeping on my lap. She had snuck in to watch me through the night. Somewhere in the middle of the night I had actually drifted off to sleep, even though she was staring at me. That had even been only a few weeks after meeting her,” Vim told her.

Sitting up, my ears fluttered as I remembered that night. “You actually fell asleep then?” I asked. I hadn’t noticed! I had thought he had stayed awake the whole night.

He nodded.

Huh...

“Fascinating... so you mean that you’re comfortable with her, literally. I wonder why that is. Is it her smell?” Nann asked.

Vim shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Trying not to be too obvious about it, I lifted a shoulder to smell myself.

“So your attraction started with the realization you were okay with her presence. You allowed her to be close to you because it was comforting for her to be so. If I didn’t know you better Vim, I’d almost think you were lying or confused,” Nann said.

“Is it so strange?” I asked her as I stopped smelling myself. I didn’t need a bath, but I did smell a little dirty. Or rather, my clothes did.

“For him? Not entirely. As long as I’ve known him, there’s a particular constant I can say about him. Vim keeps himself a step away from all of us. He’ll let us weep in his arms. He’ll carry us when tired. He’ll eat with us, or sit with us... but there’s always been a very obvious distance he keeps between us and him. Most believe it’s his way of keeping the peace. As to not show favoritism. But I know him better than that. He doesn’t like growing close to anyone because he doesn’t like watching us die. He’s too kindhearted, so he plays the tough man,” Nann said.

I nodded, agreeing completely. “He’s sweet isn’t he?” I agreed.

“Yes. So for him to ignore his basic instincts, to not keep a distance with you, tells me he’s not only telling the truth... but very likely underselling it. Did you just smell yourself Renn?” she then asked me.

I nodded, although a little embarrassed to admit it. I did my best to ignore the feeling of heat rush to my face.

“Did you smell anything?” she asked.

Frowning at her, I nodded. “Yeah...? I need to wash my clothes. Which means I probably also need to take a bath, but I didn’t smell horrible. Smelled like I always have, at least,” I said.

“Funny,” she said with a smile.

“Is it...?” I wondered. I was no longer feeling hot in the face, but I didn’t like the way she was smirking at me. Had I said something silly?

Glancing at Vim, he frowned at me and shook his head. He didn’t know what she meant either.

The Weaver frowned at me, and my tail twitched because of it. What was that look for...?

“Nann?” I asked gently. What was wrong?

“What is it Nann? What weave have you found now?” Vim asked as well.

Her blue eyes narrowed at me... and suddenly she seemed more serious. More concerned.

Whatever was bothering her... was somehow more important, and startling, than anything we've all said or done before.

Glancing at Vim again, I blinked at the weird look of worry on his face. Had he realized it too...? Why was he looking at me with such an odd look?

The Weaver then coughed lightly, and shifted in her chair. Looking back at her, I found her striking eyes piercing into me.

“You don’t smell at all Renn. You have no scent. Just like Vim.”

Chapter 244 Friends, Met Again and Remembered

The human village near the Weaver’s Hut was not as big as I remembered it.

From what I had gathered, from Nann and the rest, a few families had left when the plague showed itself. Fleeing either in fear, or leaving to go elsewhere. Likely where other family resided, as to have safety and surety in numbers. The result was a rather sizable population drop. Between those who left, and those who have died so far, the village was down to nearly half its residents from before the plague had started.

Such a blow sometimes wiped locations off the map. Time would tell if this place would survive or not.

“You and your family are always too kind, Nasba,” the older woman said as she and the rest went to sorting the freshly made clothes along the table.

“Well to be honest the more stressed we get the more we weave,” Nasba said as she untied the last bundle. The stack of clothes shifted as she did, and Renn went to grab a few to lay them out on the table and stop them from falling over.

We had brought several large stacks of clothes here. Probably almost a hundred sets of varying types and quality. The large wooden table was completely covered in clothes, several layers thick.

“Oh how I know that’s the truth. Just last week my youngest granddaughter got a cough. She finally broke free of it a few days ago, and I slept for the first time since! I made nearly a dozen hats as I fretted and worried,” the older woman said with a sigh.

I glanced around for the young girl she spoke of, but knew I’d likely not find her. The few women in the building helping out with sorting the clothes were older, likely grandmothers themselves.

Either these were the only ones willing to risk meeting outsiders, and thus possibly getting sick, or they were the only ones not bothered by Nasba’s feathers.

Stepping away from the table, since they were now only sorting the clothes and laying them openly so people could easily go through them later, I quietly slipped out of the room and outside.

Ignoring the idle chatter of Nasba and the rest, as they caught up with each other, I glanced around the quiet village.

Most of the buildings were rather distant. Close enough to be neighbors, but far enough that I doubted any human could hear anyone’s voices at such distances. There were a few people out walking about, but I knew most of them were out in their fields. We had passed them on our way into the village, there had been a few dozen people working on the farms just outside the village. It had been interesting to see that several of their fields had been abandoned. Growing freely, without any management.

They had chosen to focus on the higher yielding crops, and completely neglect other fields. It was undoubtedly because of a lack of manpower.

Other than the farms, they had a few herds of animals, and a small river on the other side of the small hill that lay just behind the village. Chances are this place really didn't lack food or resources... but I could see why they were so thankful for the Weaver's clothes.

They likely had no money to buy new clothes, and no time or skill to make enough for the whole village. Add the very obvious fact that they had likely burnt a lot of clothes when individuals perished from the plague... well...

Yes. Such charity made sense. Even more so now than ever.

The Weaver had always happily given clothes to anyone who needed them. She never charged for her work. But I'll need to remind her to eventually wean them off as time goes on, or else the humans will get weird about it.

Keep giving things to humans for too long, and they not only grew to expect it they began to want more.

But if she'd ever listen to me was up to debate.

Walking around the large building, I listened offhandedly to the conversations inside. Renn was talking to a younger voiced girl. Probably one who hadn't been in the room before I left. Nasba was still talking with the old woman. She was a friend. Someone who had known Nasba from a young age.

I knew Renn and Nasba were fine. The two of them were strong. Strong enough to keep themselves safe... and they weren't in outright danger either. The people here were pagans. They believed in some kind of forest spirit that supposedly lived in the forest nearby. They had since the Weaver had settled here. It was why Nasba was able, and willing, to walk around here with her tail feathers openly visible.

She was strange and drew eyes, but she wasn't something these humans didn't comprehend or feel threatened by.

They saw her, and her family, as forest spirits. Or servants of them.

It kept them relatively safer than normal.

Rather... It worked until it didn't.

Slowing, I watched a young boy run up to me. He was being chased by a small dog, which huffed happily in exhaustion.

"You're not a spirit!" the boy shouted up at me, coming to a stop a few feet away.

"You sure?" I asked him.

The boy immediately hesitated, his eyes going wide and looking me up and down. "... I don't know...? Are you?" he asked me without a lick of the confidence he just had.

Smiling at him I shrugged. "Let's ask the pup," I said as I knelt down as the small puppy drew near me.

The thing was wheezing. Either strained, since till so young, or something was wrong with it. It was a typical mutt of an animal, but it didn't look like any of the breeds that struggled with breathing.

It paused a few steps from my outstretched hand, and went to heavily sniffing at me... then yelped and ran off.

"Oh my gosh!" the boy startled, and for a few moments turned back and forth. From looking to me, in awe, and his dog running off... in fear. "I gotta tell ma!" he shouted, then ran off too.

Chuckling at him, I noticed the dog run in a different direction. Heading for the fields.

Hopefully it'd not run off...

"Being mean to the locals, Vim?"

I turned to sigh at Renn, who was smirking happily at me.

Nasba wasn't around, which told me that Renn had sneaked away on purpose. Maybe she felt uncomfortable listening to Nasba talk to her human friends.

"Done clothing the needy?" I asked her.

“Oh shush. They’re nice people. They have a severe lack of able-bodied people, I guess. Everyone’s either older or young,” Renn said as I stepped over to her.

“Figured. You see such disparity during such famine and plagues... but then you usually see a rather significant boom in babies for awhile,” I said.

Renn’s smirk turned into a strange smile as I studied her. She was wearing her hat, and had hidden her tail. Even though Nasba and the rest felt comfortable walking around in the open, it seemed Renn wasn’t. Maybe it was just habit for her though.

As I drew near her, I once again smelled what supposedly didn’t exist.

She turned a little, to look out at the village around us, and I wondered if she really didn’t have a scent anymore.

Of course I believed Nasba and Nann. Although the two loved to tease me, this was not something they’d joke about. Even if I didn’t agree completely with their assessment of Renn’s fragile heart, I did not doubt their noses. If they genuinely couldn’t smell Renn... then... she really didn’t have a scent. At all.

Yet I could smell it. She smelled the same as always. Like a wet forest. It reminded me of the thick rain forests to our east. It was of course not as strong as an actual forest, only with hints of it... but...

Honestly she smelled good. Most of our kind usually stunk. Yet her natural smell was something that not only didn't bother me, but I actually found myself wanting when I went without it too long. Though that might just be an innate desire, because smelling her meant she was near me. And it felt calming to have her around. She was safe when near me, so I wanted her to be so; always.

If I couldn't smell her, I couldn't protect her.

"I like how they're friends with the humans here. I wish all of our members could have such a relationship with the towns they live in, or near," Renn said softly, not realizing what was bothering me.

Shrugging, I gestured around us. "These people will live their whole lives here. Born here. Die here. So to them it's normal. The lands where people travel more make it impossible," I said.

"Still... Twin Hills was kind of like this, to a point too. Yet they had to hide their traits... Is it really just the church that makes a main difference Vim?" Renn asked.

"No. The church is a symptom, not the cause. Churches only pop up where people are already traveling to and fro, as they spread their religion. That spreading doesn't exist or happen unless there's already a spread of other ideals and purposes. Money or power is usually the main reason. Conquering, expanding, and searching for profits... A church will belong to a greater religious entity, and will then communicate with them... but they don't just pop up without warning. The seed of belief has to be planted by someone, usually a wandering priest or monk," I said.

Renn hummed as she pondered it, and I glanced at where her hair came to a stop now. It rolled down her back, but came to a stop right beneath her shoulders. I wasn't sure if the Weaver or Nasba had cut it for her, but whoever had done it had given her a layered pattern.

She looked good with her hair that way. It gave her youthful appearance a little more maturity, and made her look more like a merchant's daughter than a mercenary. Even with the leather armor.

I knew it'd not be long until her unruly long hair returned, but I wasn't sure yet if I really wanted it to. I had liked how it had fit her playful nature, but this more settled and mature appearance was good too.

"By the way Vim, should I be worried?" Renn then asked.

"Hm...?" I glanced around, wondering if maybe I had missed something while distracted by her beauty.

"Over the fact I supposedly don't smell like anything anymore. Is it uh... will it do anything to me?" Renn asked.

Oh. "No. In case you've not noticed Renn... you still have a scent. It's just no one else can smell it anymore," I said.

"Right... that's true. Can you smell me?" Renn asked.

Shifting, I wondered if I should fib or not. "I can," I decided not to.

“Hm... so... why though? It can't really be because we're sleeping next to each other, can it? We've been doing that since the beginning almost,” she said.

I sighed and nodded. “Right. I'll be honest I'm not sure why. I had thought that I never eliminated the scent or presence of others... but now I find out that I can still smell those who get affected. Which means it's likely happened before, and I just never noticed,” I said as I thought of it.

“Do you really need to talk of your past lovers now Vim?” Renn mumbled.

Giving her a small wave of an apology, I shrugged. “I'm just saying. It had to have happened sometime after Lumen. Several people told me you smelled there. It made a few antsy,” I said.

“Right... I heard that too. They teased me about it...” Renn said softly.

Glancing at the cat that had crossed her arms in thought, I wondered when it had happened. Had Landi said anything about her scent? Had she noticed? I couldn't remember her commenting on it or not.

Though...

Did it matter...?

What was done was done... wasn't it?

“Would it come back? If we stopped... well... touching?” Renn asked.

“I’d think so. But I’m not entirely sure. Want to stop touching?” I asked her.

Her heavy leather hat actually shifted as her ears fluttered. “No,” she stated.

Smiling at her, I nodded.

“Think it was the kiss?” she then asked with a tiny smile.

“I doubt it. But you’re free to think so, if you’d like,” I said.

She nodded, and I realized she really was going to blame the kiss entirely.

Oh well. I’d allow it.

“Though...” Renn then stepped closer to me, and I kept myself from stepping away as she leaned into me and tried to smell me. She took deep breaths, and sighed after a moment of trying. “I still don’t smell you. At all. Not even your clothes,” she said.

“Well... duh?” I said.

“Not, duh. If I can smell me, and you can smell me, why can’t I smell you? Wait... does that mean you smell yourself?” she asked me.

Smirking at her, I shrugged. “Who knows?”

“Aw Vim...” Renn groaned, but smiled at me.

“The real question is how far it will go,” I said.

“Hm...? Will what go?” she asked.

“The changes. No one else can smell you now. Will you then start to become quieter too? You already walk with light steps, so it’s possible. Typical of a cat,” I said. I noticed it sometimes. Particularly when she walked around barefooted. It was why I enjoyed hearing her footsteps when I could, it was rare to notice them.

“Huh... wait... are you serious? So you mean your sneaky thing you do is related to your lack of smell?” she asked.

I shifted, and wondered if maybe I should have just kept quiet about it. Good thing I didn't ramble on about the other parts of it.

She didn't let my silence bother her as she glanced down to her feet. She shifted a little, making small sounds as she did so.

"I've not noticed... but I don't make it a habit of trying to startle people like you do," Renn said, allowing me to not answer her earlier question.

"I'll pay attention. But... right... if I smell you still, that means I might hear you too..." I said as I realized I'd likely not be able to tell if she suddenly gained such an ability or not.

"Right...! Wait... Wait!" Renn spoke up louder, stepping over to me. She grabbed my wrist, and I smiled at her as her hat shifted again. "Does that mean you'll not be able to sneak up on me anymore?" she asked worriedly.

Looking down at her concerned worry, I felt a little silly. She was genuinely worried about this. How cute. "Who knows? I'll test it later," I said.

Her eyebrows met as she furrowed them, and she groaned. "Jeez..." she grumbled a complaint and let me go.

Renn let out a sad sigh as she crossed her arms again, now upset.

“You can’t smell me Renn, why would you worry you’d be able to hear me then?” I asked.

My companion frowned and shrugged. “Not sure...” she said softly.

Hm... she really was adorable.

We both turned as someone walked towards us. Nasba rounded the corner of the building, and smirked at the sight of us. “There you two are. Come on, we got one more stop,” she gestured for us to follow.

Renn hurried off, to walk side by side with the duck, and I followed the two dutifully. I kept a small distance, as they went to talking about Nasba’s human friends, and how she had come to know them.

I enjoyed listening to Renn talk to our members. She was so eager to learn and become close with them. It was actually a little sad, to a degree, to hear her happy voice as she spoke.

There was a hint of desperation in her demeanor and voice. When talking to our members. At first I had thought it was a longing for friendship... but lately I’ve wondered if instead it was out of fear.

She did her best to enjoy every moment with those she met... because she knew those moments could be her last.

It was very disheartening to think that Renn had an innate fear, and belief, that she'd never see the people she became friends with again. Either from banishment, chaos, or tragedy.

You'd think with me being by her side she'd be more confident... but...

"This whole village started as a single family. I don't think any descendants of them are left here anymore, but it's always been interesting to me how quickly things change," Nasba said.

"Humans come and go quickly, yes," Renn agreed.

"That's the interesting part. How can they expand so quickly... yet disappear just as fast? You'd think being able to multiply so quickly would never allow whole villages and societies to just vanish," Nasba pointed out.

"Well... we don't seem to be any better. I'd think we'd be everywhere too, if things made sense," Renn said.

"We used to be. I remember half the villages we went to had non-humans. If not entirely made of them, at least with a few families," Nasba said as she sighed and remembered the past.

Renn tilted her head at her, and I wondered if she doubted her or not.

One wasn't able to believe it if they had never seen it, usually.

But it was the truth. It really was.

“Before that, Nasba, humans used to be as few as us,” I spoke up a little.

The two turned to look at me, with looks that told me they had forgotten I was even behind them. “So you’ve said before. I still find that hard to believe,” Nasba said.

I shrugged.

“Just how old do you think he is Nasba?” Renn whispered to her.

“Nann thinks he’s from the era of the gods. So however long ago that was, I guess,” Nasba whispered back.

Passing a large house, I noticed the eyes hidden behind a thin curtain. They watched us for a moment before stepping away.

Looking back ahead, I watched Nasba’s tail feathers. They were folded a little, and fanned out above the ground. Lifted just enough to not touch the dirty road.

In the beginning I had thought her and those like her would be some of the first to go. Yet here they were. Still here.

It was so strange that some could go so long while others died the moment they ventured out from the safety of their families or home.

Was it just luck, or something more?

“Do you think he’s a Monarch too?” Renn asked Nasba.

“Vim...? I can see why people think so, but I don’t believe it. He hates Monarchs. Despises them. To the point that if he was a Monarch he’d kill himself. That’s how much he hates them,” Nasba said.

Renn tilted her head at her duck friend, and then glanced back at me.

I stayed silent as Nasba took us to one of the bigger buildings in the village. One that had some horses and a cart strapped to a fence next to it.

An inn or something like it.

“I want to check on their daughter,” Nasba said as she and Renn entered the building. I went to follow them, but paused a moment as I studied one of the horses.

Why'd it look familiar...?

"You're kidding!"

I turned forward, and noted Renn's shout. It had been loud, but hadn't sounded too alarmed... yet I still hurried into the inn.

Entering the inn, I scanned the area and found Renn hugging someone. Nasba was stepping away, and I noted the way her tail feathers were folding down, to become inconspicuous.

What the hell...?

"How've you been Elisabeth?" Renn asked as she separated from the woman, and I calmed a little as I understood what was happening.

The young mercenary girl beamed a smile at Renn. "Good! Glad to finally be off the horse, especially," she said.

"What's this?" the young mercenary's brother entered the room, walking down the stairs in the corner. I tried to remember his name as he hurried over to me, laughing as he held his hand out.

I took his hand, shaking it in the way of mercenaries, and realized I didn't remember his name at all. I'll need to wing it.

"Long time no see," I said to him.

"You're telling me! Though I guess it makes sense. Not many villages up this way," he said with a laugh.

I smiled at him and glanced to my right, and noticed Nasba disappear into the back. To either leave completely, or find her friend. I didn't worry over her being seen or noticed, at least not yet. Nasba has survived a long time. She knew how to keep herself out of sight.

"So your stint patrolling that village came to an end huh?" I asked as I tried to remember their story.

His smile faltered a little, but not enough for me to think I had insulted him. He sighed as he nodded. "Yeah... all things come to an end right? And..." he then went quiet as he glanced around. I watched how he glanced at Renn and his sister, who were chatting away, and then glanced behind me. To where Nasba had run off to. We could hear light chatter coming from the back, which was likely what he was focusing on.

He then coughed, and reached over to pat my arm and gesture to the door. The exit.

I obliged him, but not before locking eyes with Renn.

Leaving the inn, we stepped out onto the deck and off it, to the dirt road.

Keeping a sigh inside, I watched the mercenary shift and glance around once more. Alert. Not because of me, but something else.

Were they on the run or something?

“We got a big break,” the mercenary then said.

“Oh?” I smiled lightly at him, and wished Renn hadn’t liked that girl so much. I wasn’t in the mood for this.

He nodded, and stepped closer to me. As to whisper. “We’ve got an opportunity. To not only earn well, but possibly join a northern band. One that lets women in too,” he said.

Ah. I relaxed a little; glad to hear it wasn’t something I likely needed to worry about. He was just likely worried someone would hear mercenary talk, or maybe he had been traveling with one of these supposed members of this northern band and didn’t want them hearing him talk of them.

“Nothing wrong with that,” I said to him.

“No. I’ll be honest I’m not sure what to think of our luck. It pays real well, and they seem decent and structured. Most of the members I’ve met so far are experienced. Yet willing to overlook my sister’s youth. Guess they got a few wives and kids of their own, so they’re used to it,” he said with a small smile.

“Sounds like you lucked out indeed. I’m glad,” I said.

Honestly I was. This would relieve Renn a lot. She hadn’t brought them up since we had parted with them, but I knew better than to think she hadn’t thought of them a few times.

He nodded, happy... and then gestured at me. “Want me to ask? They’re looking for more people, I have no doubt they’d take you two,” he offered.

I didn’t need to fake a kind smile as I nodded at him. “Thanks, I appreciate the thought. But we’ll be heading out soon. Only reason we’re still here is because she’s waiting for a set of clothes to be finished. They’re being repaired,” I said with a thumb to the inn, where Renn was.

The man’s smile softened as he nodded knowingly. “I see. I understand,” he said.

Did he...? He actually looked a little hurt. It was seen as a great honor amongst mercenaries to help each other out, but it wasn’t that big a deal to share work. It wasn’t uncommon at all for mercenaries to fight together in one battle, and then be on opposing forces the next. There was loyalty, but only to a point.

Or was that not the sting of refusal, but something else? Maybe he had hoped I’d join so he’d have another newcomer with him, to watch each other’s backs maybe?

Either way it didn't matter. "I do appreciate it. But like I mentioned, we got to get north as fast as possible. I'm already twitching over this delay, to be honest," I said.

"I'm sure. You said the Silken Band...?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Hopefully we don't see each other anytime soon, eh?" he said with a smirk.

I smiled and nodded, and noted he didn't tell me the name of his new band. I'd not press him on it, but it would have been something rude had I been an actual mercenary. One wasn't supposed to hide their allegiances. It meant they were either ashamed, or enemies.

Renn and the man's sister then emerged from the inn. Renn was laughing at something as she stepped onto the deck and pointed at me. "He snivels, but it makes me happy," she said to the girl.

The young mercenary smiled and nodded, a little sheepishly. I noted the way her eyes lingered on me for a moment, and I wondered what kind of joke I had just been the brunt of.

"Are you two staying here too? Shall we have dinner together?" the man then asked.

“Ah, no. We’re staying elsewhere,” I said, before Renn could reveal anything. Or worse, agree to something.

“Too bad. You expect to be around for long then? We’re to be here for a few days. If you are how about we have lunch or something tomorrow?” the man asked, trying again.

I glanced at Renn, and noted the way she smiled. She wanted to.

“Sure. If we’re still here. We’ll meet you here,” I said.

“Great! Sounds great!” the man nodded happily and held his hand out.

Shaking his hand in goodbye, I glanced at Renn to tell her it was time to go. She met my eyes, and I did my best to ignore the unwillingness to comply.

She didn’t argue it though, she bid the girl farewell, and she and I stepped away. Heading down the road, around the inn.

Not far from the inn, down the street a bit was Nasba. Waiting for us patiently.

“I’m glad they seem to be doing okay,” Renn said as we went to rejoin the duck.

“So it seems,” I said. I wasn’t going to comment on how they weren’t necessarily out of the fire yet. Joining a band wasn’t easy. You were usually given a tough job first, one that usually included bloodshed of some kind.

“She did look tired though. Hopefully they can get some rest here before moving on,” Renn added.

I thought of the young girl, and wondered if she had looked tired or not. I hadn’t really paid attention.

“Just be thankful Nasba’s quick on her feet,” I said.

“Ah. Right... It’s why I had hugged Elisabeth so quickly, to distract her,” Renn said.

Smiling at her, I reached over to lightly pat Renn on the back. “You did good. I like how you shouted too,” I said.

Renn grinned at me and nodded. “Right? Figured you’d notice,” she said.

Chuckling at her, I wondered how long it had been since I had someone so... well...

Someone that knew what to do innately. To always be on guard, like me, in such ways.

Even those who tried to do so rarely were able to do it properly.

Renn was quick on her feet when she needed to be.

“Did he seem odd to you?” Renn then asked.

“That mercenary? Yes. But he’s probably just stressed. He’s wandering into dangerous territory and probably is more concerned for his sister than he lets on. He invited us to join him and his new band,” I said.

“Did he? That’s sweet of him,” Renn said as we neared Nasba.

“Friends with mercenaries are you Renn?” Nasba asked with a smirk.

Renn giggled and pointed at Vim. “It’s his fault. He makes everyone think that’s what we are while traveling,” she blamed me.

I nodded, admitting it.

Nasba's smirk turned into a knowing smile. "He used to have many such friends. Whatever happened to that family of lions Vim?" Nasba asked as we all started to walk for the edge of the village.

"They all died long ago. There were a few mixed children that survived their last battle... but I never kept track of them," I said.

Strange. I'd not thought of them in years. It was surprising to hear Nasba remembered them. She had only met them once.

"Were they mercenaries?" Renn asked.

I nodded. "Yes. A family of them. During the wars the Society had employed them, amongst others," I said.

"You'd have liked them Renn. Their leader, and their strongest warriors, had all been women," Nasba told her.

Renn smiled and glanced at me. "Really?"

"Really," I said with a nod.

Yes. She would have liked them. They had been real predators. Proud of what they were. Proud of their strength. Similar to Lilly, but without the hatred. They had been cruel to humans, but had extended that cruelty to any of their enemies. Their cruelty had not been motivated by hate, but simple necessity.

I had enjoyed working with them.

“Plus they were a type of cat too. I remember that one having a huge mane. That one son,” Nasba said as she thought of them.

“Cats?” Renn asked.

“Lions. If you’re a jungle cat, they were savanna ones. Although similar, you’re also different. You jaguars usually hunt alone, lions hunt in packs,” I said as I explained it.

Nasba nodded. “And a mighty pack they were. How interesting... I hadn’t thought of them in a very long time...” Nasba wondered.

As we left the village, I glanced back behind us. To make sure nothing odd was out of place.

There were a few villagers in the distance. Heading the other way... but other than they, nothing seemed strange. No mercenaries following us. No signs of chaos.

Yet I felt something off. Something that hadn’t been there before we had run into those mercenaries.

Looking back ahead, I paused a moment at Renn's look. She held my eyes for a moment, and then looked away. To step forward, to go into a deep conversation with Nasba about one of her friends. The large man who had used to travel with her and Merit, before the formation of their kingdom.

I slowed a little, to let the two women talk about their friends and more happier memories.

There was no place for me in there, amongst them.

Especially since I had killed that large man.

Another member I'd not thought of in a long time.

Merit and Nasba would never blame me for taking his life. He had deserved it. I had found him doing something beyond reproach. Yet...

He had still been their friend. For some time.

Heading back to the Weaver's Hut, I kept a watchful eye on Renn and Nasba. The two walked closely, and spoke evenly. Excitedly.

They had become fast friends. Likely thanks to their common friend Merit. A rarity for Renn, to be so well received by such prey.

“He just kept getting bigger! Near the end he was so big he wasn’t even able to enter Telmik’s gate...! Or well, that first gate they had installed. They’re probably far bigger, now,” Nasba said.

“The... you mean the entry gate?” Renn asked, not believing it. But that was no surprise, she only knew Telmik as it was now. She hadn’t been around to see that measly little gate they had made so long ago. It had only lasted a short while, since it had been so rickety and small.

Nasba nodded and giggled. “Yeah. It got so bad he couldn’t ride horses. He once even got on a ship, and it listed so bad he was kicked off!” Nasba drudged up a memory that made her giggle turn into a full blown laugh.

I smiled as Renn and I watched Nasba laugh. Her tail feathers fanned outward, flapping a little in joy.

While Nasba giggled away, Renn turned to grin at me. She gave me a toothy smile, as if to share with me the utter joy she was experiencing at watching and hearing Nasba laugh so purely.

I nodded at her, to let her know I heard it too. Though I didn’t have the heart to tell her Nasba’s words and laughs only hurt me.

Slowing a little more, I let Nasba and Renn gain some distance between us. Nasba went on to tell her more about him, and the rest of their little crew. The ones who had wandered aimlessly for years, unsure of what to do with their lives. How they had not joined the Society, yet had been there amidst it all the same.

As the day grew old, and we neared the Weaver's Hut, I did my best to ignore the sad fact as Nasba told Renn about all of her and Merit's friends.

Their little group, before they had formed that kingdom.

I did my best to ignore how happy she was to talk about them. How she still remembered them so warmly, and as genuine friends.

It wasn't Nasba's fault. Near the end she had found her husband. Settled down. Separated from them.

She hadn't been there to see what they had done. She hadn't witnessed the aftermath.

Although she knew of it. Although Merit had told her the truth herself.

Nasba remembered the years of good friendship... not the moment of betrayal.

Staying far enough away that Nasba wouldn't ask me a question, or bring me into the conversation haphazardly... I did my best to ignore their conversation about those I had been forced to cull.

Let Renn and Nasba remember the good times. And I'll endure the painful ends.

It was what I was good at, after all.

Chapter 245 A Weave to Tell

“They used to bicker something fierce, Renn,” Nasba said. “To the point a lot of people didn’t think she loved him either,” she added.

Following Nasba down the stairs and into the cellar, I ducked a little when I felt my ears brush against one of the lower hanging beams.

“They still fight. Or well, Merit does mostly. She’s very snippy with him,” I said.

Nasba giggled as I watched the way her tail feathers brushed against the stairs as she descended. Didn’t they get dirty when on the ground like that? “I know they do, but trust me it had been worse. She’s attacked him many times. Drawing blood, breaking bones, or shocking him. I can’t count how many times I’ve heard them fighting, rounded a corner to see what was going on, and finding Merit huffing as she stormed away... with Vim sighing as he wipes off blood or resets an arm or something,” Nasba said with a laugh.

Ah. They weren’t that bad now, then, no. “Was it just because he didn’t realize her feelings or...?” I asked.

“A combination. Merit was a little... well... rambunctious. She also really struggled with sharing her feelings. On any level. It took her a long time to comprehend how to even say thank you and stuff,” Nasba said as we left the stairs and headed for a door in the corner of the cellar.

I glanced around at the shelves and racks down here. There looked to be more than just simple food and stuff... were those bags of coins? Looked like them. They had the Animalia Guild symbol on them. They didn't look like the bags used in the banks, but something told me that wasn't because they weren't... but that they were the old ones. The ones used years ago, likely.

Nasba opened the door, revealing a dark hallway. She stepped into the hallway and reached into a recess in the wall, and half a moment later a small lantern was lit and illuminated the area.

I noted it was similar to the one I had seen at the smithy. When Vim and I had gone into the mine.

"I used to feel so bad for her. Especially once it became obvious that Vim had no intention of even considering Merit. I once even begged him to just... indulge her, you know? Even if for a little bit? He outright denied me. I actually grew upset with him, and threatened to make him choke on my eggs. I never followed through with the threat, but I should have," Nasba said as she headed down the hallway.

I followed her, but wasn't sure what to think of what she had just said.

Indulge Merit... I knew what she was implying... but...

"You... and the others have mentioned it but... do you really lay eggs?" I asked, trying my best to focus on something else.

“Yes. Or well, I don’t anymore. I used to. And all of my children left are too mixed in the blood, or too old, to lay eggs anymore. The last one to lay any eggs was...” Nasba paused as she thought of it. “Was it Felicia? Surely not right...?” Nasba mumbled absentmindedly, and I smiled at her.

How neat. “So... were you born from an egg?” I asked.

Nasba giggled. “No. It’s funny everyone always asks that though. Our eggs weren’t ever fertile. But I have been told they had tasted good,” she said.

Wait... “You ate them...?” I asked, not believing it.

She nodded. “Well not me. But others have. Vim said they were good once,” she said as we reached a turn in the hallway. We took a left, and I noticed another recess in the wall. There were two other lamps in it, sitting in wait to be used one day.

“So Vim’s eaten them,” I said, and oddly I wasn’t as bothered by it as I should be.

“He never did so willingly. We used to tease him about it and...” Nasba went quiet as we neared another door. One made of odd looking wood. It was a strange reddish color.

She then turned and smiled at me. “Since we’re down here and alone, and he probably can’t hear us... can I ask something, Renn?” Nasba then asked.

Oh? I nodded, excited to hear what she wanted to know but didn't want Vim knowing she was asking about it.

Nasba glanced past me, into the dark hallway behind me, and then stepped a little closer to me. She lowered the lantern, as if to shroud us in darkness a little more. She then nodded softly.

"Has Vim touched you?" she asked.

I blinked. "Touched me?" I asked.

"You know," she gestured at me, and I knew full well what she meant.

"Regretfully... no. He hasn't. Can I ask... why you don't want him knowing you're asking?" I asked.

Nasba's eyes narrowed as she stood up a little straighter. "I'm wondering if maybe there's something wrong with him. I've been teasing him, trying to find out how far you two have gone... since Merit asked me to find out. But now I'm actually worried. Has he really not done anything?" she asked a little too seriously.

I slowly shook my head. "Nothing too serious... But he does look. Sometimes he looks a little too much, really," I said as I thought of a moment not too long before we had come down here. Right after dinner, I had noticed the way Vim had been staring at my neck. The back of it, at the nape. Though he might have just been staring at my hair. Nann had cut it for me.

The duck sighed. "Maybe he's just... finally too old...? I know he's not just able, but willing. So it's not like he doesn't have it in him..." Nasba wondered to herself.

"Hopefully that's not because you've slept with him," I said stiffly.

Nasba smirked and waved at me. "Please! By the time I was ready to have fun I'd already found my husband. Plus Merit would have killed me had I tried!"

I wanted to tell her that didn't make me feel any better as she turned to open the door.

The new room was dark as well. I followed Nasba in, after waiting for her to enter far enough thanks to her feathers. I didn't want to step on them accidentally in the dark.

"Maybe he's just taking it slow. To treasure you. If you come back next time and he still hasn't done something, you might want to consider just jumping on him Renn," Nasba said as she went to the other side of the room.

I laughed softly, but even I heard the forcefulness of the laugh. "I've actually considered it already," I admitted.

Nasba laughed, a real one, and then the room became a little brighter. She had lit a large torch.

It was situated in a metal holder, near another set of doors.

With the light, I turned to examine the room. This one was open. With a sunken floor and...

Staring down at the large thing, I shifted on a heel and wondered what to say.

"I thought you said no one laid eggs anymore," I whispered at the sight of a huge egg. Sitting in the middle of a very obvious nest.

There was a massive nest, made of tiny twigs and branches. Big enough to house the mighty egg that sat in the center of the dark room. It was a white egg, but had distinct stain-looking marks all over it. Tiny blotches of browns and grays amongst the white.

Nasba giggled as she stepped over to me, still carrying the small lantern. She lifted it a little, to better illuminate the huge egg.

"It's not ours, Renn. It's the egg of a monarch," she said.

Oh...? Oh. For some reason that made me feel a lot calmer. "Is it um... Where's the mother?" I asked. This nest was huge, as was the egg, but the room wasn't. I couldn't imagine whatever had lain this egg had been able to fit in this room, here underneath the earth. We were several floors under the buildings.

"Dead. Vim killed it. Go ahead, you can touch it... if you'd like," Nasba offered.

I blinked, and realized I did wish to. I was about to step forward, but noticed the nest a few feet from me. "Will I bother the nest? Walking on it?" I asked worriedly.

"Not really. Just be careful," Nasba said as she stepped forward herself. I watched as she walked up onto the nest, and I heard the familiar sound of little twigs and leaves crunching as she did.

Gulping I decided to just follow her example. I stepped out onto the nest, and felt an oddly soft bundle of twigs beneath me. They didn't feel dried out or dead at all... even though they kind of looked it.

So this was why Nasba had wanted us to take our shoes off earlier.

"So um... why do you have a monarch's egg down here?" I asked as I stepped up next to her, up to the egg.

Drawing closer to it, I realized just how massive it was. It was lying on its side, not pointed upward where it'd be tallest... yet it was still bigger than me. It was higher than my waist, and it looked like it was longer than Vim would be lying down.

Reaching out to touch the egg, I wondered what it would feel like.

"Nann's husband. His parents had been servants of a monarch. When Vim arrived to kill them, after doing so, he found this egg," Nasba told me.

My hand hesitated, right before touching it.

Pulling my hand back, I shifted and felt suddenly uncomfortable. "I uh... need to hear more of that story," I said uncertainly.

"It's not that fancy of a story. They had been typical monarchs. Tyrants. Vim showed up, killed them, and freed their servants. Nann married one of them, and here we are," Nasba explained as if it was obvious.

Feeling strangely cold, I sighed. "Why'd Vim uh..." I gestured to the egg.

"Not break it? I don't know. Maybe he's just... sentimental? Or maybe he knows it'll never hatch? I mean it's been down here for hundreds of years Renn. Though it has grown bigger. When I first married into the family, it had only been about half this size," Nasba said.

I frowned. "It's gotten bigger...? How? I thought eggs got smaller when they hatched," I said. At least my pet hawk's eggs had done that. It was how I knew it was time to watch them. They usually shrunk a little, and got colder.

"No idea Renn... but I mean... it is a monarch's egg. It's bound to be weird," Nasba said with a shrug.

I sighed and nodded. Right. Monarch. Magic and other stuff...

Stepping forward, I reached out and finally touched it.

The egg felt like any other egg I'd felt. Smooth and a little cold. I ran my hand along it slowly, and felt tiny little bumps as I did so. So it wasn't as smooth as it first seemed...

"It's odd Vim's letting it be," I said.

"Isn't it?" Nasba agreed.

As I felt it, I wondered if there was a heart inside the egg. I of course couldn't sense it, but...

I wanted to ask, but decided not to. Just in case Nasba didn't know anything about such things. Although she was one of the older members of the Society, I'd gleaned from all our conversations so far that she honestly didn't know much about Vim. She knew him as a person, and a lot of stories about him... but nothing too specific. Or if she did, she hadn't shared any of it.

"So uh... I'm guessing it doesn't need to be kept warm?" I asked.

Nasba shrugged. "Hasn't seemed to be bothered yet. Even when we have bad winters it's usually warmer down here anyway," she said.

Right. Underground...

“What uh... what if it hatches?” I asked as I stopped touching it.

“Well... We’re supposed to let Vim know, of course. I think the idea is when freshly born it won’t be able to escape this room on its own. Not right away. Or that we’ll notice it before it does, like we’ll start to see it move or something,” she said.

Sure... sure...

The idea of a monarch being normal enough to show signs, or give warning, before it hatched made me doubt that plan entirely.

Yet Vim obviously was letting it be.

I’ll need to ask him about it...

“Oh. Most of our family don’t know about this... so make sure not to mention it up there,” Nasba said as I stepped away, out of the nest.

I nodded. “Right.” That made plenty of sense. Most of their children were rather human. Too human to likely understand this.

Nasba sighed as she shook her head at the egg. "I couldn't imagine laying something this size," she said.

Smiling at her, I wanted to make a small joke about one of her grandchildren. One of the boys was already one of the biggest people here, even bigger than Vim, and he was supposedly only twelve years old.

The duck then stepped out of the nest as well, and went to the corner of the wall where the torch rested. She grabbed a thick, heavy, rag and went to smothering the torch's fire. It sizzled loudly as it went out, sending us into slight darkness.

Nasba made sure the torch stayed dead, and then once sure the fire wouldn't re-ignite she stepped back over to me and lifted the lantern. "Ready?" she asked.

I nodded and headed out of the room first.

Nasba shut the door, locking it once more, and then we headed back down the dark hallway. Back to the cellar room we had come from.

"Are all of the buildings connected down here?" I asked.

"They are. There are other levels too, deeper down. But they're all mostly just storage rooms now. And most are empty," Nasba said.

“What had they been for? Originally?” I asked?

“Places to hide and where we gave birth. Nann’s an odd one. She didn’t feel comfortable giving birth above ground, and so always came down here once in labor,” she said.

Oh. Right. I nodded, even though I wasn’t entirely sure what to think of that. Maybe it had something to do with whatever kind of bird she was. This weaver thing.

“When you eventually have children, go ahead and bring them here Renn. Maybe we can get some of our kids to latch onto each other. It’d be interesting to see what kind of creatures come from mixing cats and birds,” Nasba said, rather seriously, as we entered the cellar.

Laughing, I nodded. “Sure. Maybe someday,” I agreed.

Once in the cellar, the duck went to putting the lantern away and shutting the last door.

“Though... None of your descendants have shown any fox traits right?” I asked.

“A few had. Only two of Nann's children ever showed traits of them. Regrettably both of their bloodlines died and faded. There's a single branch that still has some fox blood, but we've not seen any of those traits in years,” she said.

Huh... So it wasn't because of one bloodline overpowering the other. Interesting. Even more so interesting that it seemed the traits didn't mix... Why hadn't there been any children with both fox ears and duck feathers, I wonder.

Before I could ask about such things, Nasba paused and instead of heading back upstairs first, she stepped closer to me.

"So... you two really haven't done anything yet?" she asked quietly.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "Nothing like what you're thinking, no," I said.

She frowned and sighed. "Too bad. Merit will be happy, but at the same time she won't. Oh well, maybe by the time you see her again it'll have happened," Nasba said as she went for the stairs.

Sighing softly at her, I followed the long trail of feathers behind her.

Leaving the cellar, we entered the main house where Nasba and Nann lived. Then once in the main hallway, Nasba pointed back down the hall. "It's about time I gave one of my lectures to the kids," she said.

I nodded. It was. She did one in the morning, and one after dinner. It was long time for it. They were probably all waiting for her, by the sounds of their chatter from down the hallway. "Think Vim's with Nann?" I asked.

“Likely. I got him to agree to do a lecture, but knowing him he’ll wait until the last day before he does it,” she said with a smirk.

“Oh? You actually got him to agree?” I asked. Hopefully I’d not miss it.

She nodded, happy. “It’s tradition. He gives at least one each time he’s here. He hates it, since I’ve raised all the kids to pester him with thousands of questions,” she said with a huge grin.

I grinned back at her. “I’ll make sure to add a few myself,” I said.

Nasba laughed and patted me on the arm as she stepped past me. Her tail feathers brushed against my shins as she walked past me, and headed down the hallway.

Watching her go, I wondered how heavy her tail was. I never noticed my tail’s weight, even though I probably should, and hers were pretty much all feathers if not entirely... but...

Surely they were heavy? They sounded heavy. Felt heavy. They sometimes also made loud noises when they fanned up and down, when she laughed or grew excited.

I’d yet to find a feather. Loose and left behind. From either her or anyone else. I had hoped to find one before leaving, just to feel them more properly... but knowing them, they plucked and dealt with any loose feathers long before they fell off.

Would it be weird to ask for one? They were okay with letting people eat their eggs... so maybe a feather wouldn't be a big deal either?

Surely?

Stepping away, I headed for the door. Exiting the house, I found a setting sun and a pair of children. They ran past me and into the house with tiny apologies as they hurried. They were late for their family meeting.

Although Nasba's stories and lectures were very interesting... I wanted to find Vim. I had a slew of questions for him, and I couldn't contain my curiosity of them.

Plus...

Well...

Glancing up at the setting sun, I decided it was time to offer again. Even if Vim has yet to accept it. Even if he never would.

I'd always be there to offer my bed. Not just for the obvious reason, but for the more simple one too.

I had noticed he had looked a little tired earlier. While we had been in the human village. I was sure Nasba had seen it too, but she had likely just blamed Elisabeth and her brother on it. Or maybe she was used to Vim finding our antics tiresome. But... I knew better.

That hadn't been simple annoyance. That look in his eyes had been exhaustion. He was tired. He needed some sleep.

Heading for the Weaver's Workshop, I picked up my pace when I heard the sound of a spinning wheel.

Opening the door quietly, I mentally kicked myself as the wheel slowed to a stop. It was completely still by the time I entered the room, and found the Weaver smiling at me patiently. Vim had his back to me, back at the workbench... working on some leather again.

"Nasba's lectures over already...?" Nann asked.

I shook my head. "Just started, I think," I said.

"Ah. You two must have been getting up to trouble then. What'd you do?" Nann asked with a knowing smile.

I shifted and felt a little silly. She really was perceptive. How'd she do that?

"She showed me that big egg," I said.

Nann blinked, and Vim sighed. "Of course she did," he mumbled.

Smirking at him, I stepped over to peer over his shoulder. I watched for a moment as he tied tiny little leather strips together, making tiny little ropes out of them.

"What'd you think of it, Renn?" Nann asked me.

"It's fascinating. It's bigger than I am... but um..." I hesitated, and realized I had kind of put myself in a corner.

I had questions. But I wasn't sure how many I could ask in front of her.

"Why keep a monarch's egg? Why is Vim allowing it? What will we do when it hatches?" Nann listed most of them for me.

I nodded. "I also wanted to know what kind of bird it is, too," I said.

"A creature that no longer exists. They're only fossils now," Nann said.

"Ah...! Vim spoke of those before," I said.

She smiled at me. "Did he?" she asked.

I nodded, and was rather glad to hear one of his words from someone else. How neat.

"Birds imprint. On the first creature they see. I wish to see if the same will happen to a monarch," Vim then said.

"Oh...? I see," I said as I understood. That was how I had raised my hawk too.

"My husband had been related to those who served its parents. We have a few ideas," Nann added.

Turning to her, I frowned and wondered how much I could ask about that too. Would she take offense if I asked for more detail?

"They had been what you'd call slaves. Vim freed my husband's family by slaying them," Nann answered nearly all of them for me.

Smiling softly, I glanced over at Vim. He ignored what had been said, so I reached over to pat him on the back. "Good job, Vim," I praised him.

He paused in his craftsmanship for a moment, and huffed at me.

The Weaver giggled lightly. "He had done a good job indeed."

Keeping my hand on his back for a moment, I felt the way he breathed and his warmth. It felt steady. Normal. His typical self.

"I also got to hear more about you and Merit, Vim," I said.

His shirt shifted a little, thanks to a lift of his shoulder. "Oh yeah?"

I nodded, grinning at the Weaver who grinned back at me. "I want you to know I'm fully on her side. If she ever wants to file a complaint against you, I'm going to be the first to sign it in agreement, too," I told him.

Vim glanced at me, and I smirked at him. He sighed and nodded, accepting it as he went back to work.

"Also, Nann... are you not a duck too?" I asked.

"Me? No. I'm more related to a finch," she said.

Finch... "Those pretty little birds," I said as I thought of the ones I knew about.

She smiled at me. "Thank you for the compliment," she said.

Ah... I hadn't meant it that way, but smiled and nodded as if I had.

"I have a question too," Vim then said.

"Hm...?" I leaned forward a little, to focus on him.

"How long are you going to rub my back?" he asked me.

Blinking, I smiled a little sheepishly as I realized he was right. My hand was still on his back, and had been going up and down.

Pulling my hand back, I coughed softly as I glanced at the Weaver... who was smirking broadly at me.

"Let me guess. Nasba said something," Nann said.

"Huh...? Well..." I shifted, and didn't want to admit it. She had... but...

Well...

What she had teased me about earlier hadn't been why I had left my hand on his back. I hadn't even realized I had been doing so...

"Ducks are weird when it comes to such things. Just ignore them," Vim said.

Oh...? I wonder what he meant by that. "I'd usually disagree, as to defend my family... but he's not wrong. There's a reason I made them all build their own homes," Nann said lightly.

"Hm... but you let Nasba live with you," I pointed out.

"Her husband, like mine, is dead. I don't need to worry about it anymore," she said.

Oh. Right. Okay...

"And you're a gentle soul indeed. How'd you get so sad over such a simple comment, dear?" Nann asked me, likely noticing my emotions just as easily as Vim did.

Shifting a little, I reached over again to put my hand on his back. "I felt bad. I had asked a question that made me feel rude and disrespectful. It reminded you of something sad," I admitted.

"Yet I know you hadn't meant it that way. I took no offense," Nann said.

I nodded. "I know... I guess... but..." I wasn't sure what to say. I knew she likely hadn't. She hadn't responded in such a way to make a point to me, but to simply state a fact.

"Don't tease her Nann. You're not the one who will have to hold her if she starts crying," Vim said.

"On the contrary. I'd happily hold her. Though... at the same time I'd also like to see what kind of expression you'd make doing so as well. So this time I'll let you hold her, and I'll hold her next time," Nann said as she thought about it, seriously.

I sighed at the two of them. "I really hope you guys didn't tease Merit like this," I said.

Vim shifted on his chair, and I felt his muscles coil on his back as he did so. Nann also shifted, and I heard the sound of feathers rustling.

"We didn't tease Merit about her affection, no. Not even Nasba did that. It was too pitiful," Nann then said.

"Ah..." I nodded, glad to hear it.

“They teased me plenty in place of it, don’t worry,” Vim said.

“You deserved it,” I said as I thumped his back with a fist.

He glanced at me, and I noted the tiny smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

Then I felt his back shift again. He had tilted his head, and raised a shoulder... and it was an odd feeling since...

Stepping up closer, I peered over his shoulder again... and found him staring at his palm.

“Vim?” Nann asked, noticing the oddness too.

Vim sighed, and I watched as he dug into his palm, right under his thumb... and pulled out some kind of long needle.

“What’d you do Vim?” I asked as I watched a half-finger long needle get removed from his palm. He dropped it on the workbench, and went to making a fist. Likely to stop the flow of blood that was now dripping out of the hole in his palm.

“Broke a needle on accident,” Vim said.

“Hm,” Nann nodded, seemingly understanding completely... and not finding it odd at all.

Which... I mean... it wasn't. Vim was strong. Too strong for his own good most of the time... but...

“Want me to bandage it?” I asked him. It didn't look to be dripping much blood anymore, but he had also tightened his fist up quite a bit.

“It'll stop bleeding in a second,” he said as he reached over to grab a cloth. It was a smaller one, and dirty, but he used it anyway. He first wiped up the blood that had spilled onto the workbench, and then he wiped it up his arm from his elbow where the blood had dripped down. Once done cleaning up he snuck it into his fist, and clenched harder. I heard the cloth strain and tear beneath his finger's grip.

“Is it... because of what I said?” I asked.

“I think it happened when you hit him. Funny,” Nann said.

Oh? “Really Vim?” I asked, leaning forward a little more to look him eye to eye.

He glanced at me and then looked away. “I just poked too hard,” he said simply.

Poked. The leather. Too hard. With a needle. And sent it straight into his hand underneath. Maybe even through it, considering how long the needle had been.

“Sorry,” I apologized.

He sighed and waved me off, and then went to messing with the leather again. Though this time with only one hand.

Stepping away from him, as to not accidentally startle him again by touching him wrongly, I wondered if I had thumped him that harshly. I hadn’t thought I had... and honestly, hadn’t thought I even had the strength necessary to bother him to that degree. Yet...

“It’s very amusing how in tune he is to your presence, Renn. Every single movement you make must be loud in his ears,” Nann said.

“Loud?” I asked. Did she mean I was noisy...?

“I mean it figuratively. He’s just hyper aware of your presence and actions. He noticed you were approaching long before I did... and as far as I’m aware, my hearing isn’t much worse than his. Though maybe in my old age I’ve gotten worse?” Nann wondered.

“You are old,” Vim said.

“Don’t be mean,” I chastised him.

Nann giggled but nodded. “He’s likely right... but enough about that. I’d like to hear your opinion on something, Renn,” Nann said.

I nodded, and stepped another step from Vim. I went over to the chair I had been sitting in the other night, and moved it a little as to face her properly and sit in it.

“Do you think Vim’s attractive?” she asked me.

I frowned at her, and wondered why she and Nasba were so strangely fixated on this stuff. Maybe it was a bird thing.

“He’s rather plain, honestly,” I said.

Vim shifted on his seat and Nann smirked. “He is. Yet surely you at least don’t mind him? Otherwise you’d not find him so lovely?” she asked.

Shifting in my seat, I nodded. “I do... find him somewhat attractive, I guess. I like how he smiles. And I like the feel of his hair too, though I’m not sure why,” I said.

“His hair...?” Nann glanced at Vim, in a way that made me realize that she’d likely touch Vim’s hair before we left now. Just to see what I meant.

Expecting her to just get up and do so, I was a little surprised when instead she crossed her arms and hummed at me.

“Rather what I find really attractive... is well... when he does something astounding,” I said.

Nann tilted her head, and glanced at me. “Astounding?”

“Yeah... not too long ago, before we met Landi, we had been given a baby. His mother had the plague. Been sick, really bad, and didn’t have anyone else to rely on. She begged us to take him, into Landi’s city, to save him. To get him to her family where he’d be safe. When Vim took the boy, and vowed to get him there safely... well...” I blushed a little as I relived the moment.

“I see. You find his heroism sexy,” Nann said.

“Sexy...?” I wondered if that was the right way to describe how I felt about it.

“Is it any moment of greatness? Do you feel the same when he’s fighting and killing? Or is it just those moments where he’s a better man than anyone else?” Nann asked.

I blinked, and quickly pondered her questions.

She was right. It wasn't just when he was doing something amazing. It was... well... "Honestly no... I mean... it is interesting, and neat, to see him when he's standing up to an enemy. Or a monster. But no... If you'd ask me what expression I liked the most, it'd definitely not be that weird grin or frown he gets right before he enters battle, but instead when he does something more... well..." I wasn't sure how to explain it.

"Like when you watched him hold a little girl, as she wept from nightmares," Nann said, understanding.

"Yeah. Like when he held Lomi. Or the baby. He gets all gentle and stuff, yet still retains a bit of his anger somehow. It's a weird mix," I explained.

"You two do realize I'm right here, right?" Vim asked.

We both ignored him as Nann reached up and tapped her lips with her finger. Not to imply silence, but instead to ponder deeply. "I know full well the expression you speak of. I've seen it many times. It's usually during a moment of either great sorrow, or something simple. Like when he holds a newborn baby, or meets a new member for the first time," Nann said.

I nodded quickly. "Yes. That's it. That's exactly it," I said.

Vim sighed, and I smiled.

“A strange face to be attracted to... but it’s not surprising, nor is it really a bad thing. I worry though that means you might go extended periods without ever seeing it. You might even go years sometimes without it, depending on fate,” Nann said.

“In a certain perspective, that’s a good thing,” I said gently.

“It is...” Nann nodded with a sigh.

For a few moments she was silent, as Vim messed with his leather. I heard both of his hands moving around, which meant he had likely stopped bleeding already.

“Can I ask why you and Nasba are so interested in... well... our relationship? I understood at first, since it’s fun to tease him, and because Nasba wanted to fulfill Merit’s request... but...” I asked.

“Honestly it’s because I had not expected you. I had thought Vim would have chosen a different kind of woman. I’m not disappointed or anything... but I’m trying to understand how I had misunderstood him so deeply. Basically, you being chosen has insulted my intelligence. Not because of anything you’ve done, but because I wasn’t as perceptive as I had thought myself to be. It’s upsetting.”

I blinked, and wondered what to say.

“Nasba’s teasing and curiosity is just her being playful, don’t read too much into it. Nann is the one you need to be on guard against,” Vim told me.

“Ah... should I be on guard with you?” I asked her.

“Yes. Honestly it's a little upsetting you're so willingly answering my questions, and doing so without any hesitation. But I'm kind of enjoying your willingness to be an open book. It's strangely refreshing. Especially since Vim is the complete opposite,” Nann said.

Oh... I turned a little, to glance at Vim. He was staring at a bundle of leather straps, frowning as he tried to tie one of them to another.

I smiled at him, and wondered if he was genuinely having trouble... or if he was that bothered by the conversation I was having with the Weaver.

“Need help Vim?” I asked him.

He finally glanced at me, and I noted the look in his eyes. It made my smile turn into a grin, then a smirk.

Then he blinked.

I blinked too, and watched Vim go from a man being teased... to a man alert and on guard.

I sat up straighter, as Vim stood.

Then I heard what he did.

Footsteps.

Which wasn't uncommon here. There were plenty of people here. Plenty of children. They usually ran around, even later in the day or early night. But these were not the sounds of little duck feet.

These were footsteps in the distance. In the tall grass, that surrounded the fields around the houses.

And it wasn't just human feet either. But horse's hooves.

"Vim..." I said stiffly as I stood.

He turned, to me and the Weaver.

"Get to the main house. Alert your family. We have visitors."

Chapter 246 The Things That Hurt

I spent a moment to watch Renn and Nann usher the group of descendants to the main house.

They had hurried to do as I had ordered... But they had also made sure to bang on the door of every families house here in the courtyard before doing so.

I kept my eyes on them as they all hurried into the main house. I noted that Nann and Renn were the last to enter, shutting the doors behind them.

Sighing, I glanced around. There were a few other houses, beyond this little courtyard of homes, but they were a distance away. Some had lit up windows, others didn't. I didn't know which were occupied and which weren't. Nor could I really tell which were even houses, and which were storage barns or workshops. Most of the buildings had been built for multi-purpose so they all looked the same...

Nann hadn't gone out for them though. She had only directed Renn to get those they could here. But I wasn't too shocked over such structured reasoning.

Unlike Renn, Nann and Nasba had lived long enough and endured enough heartache to have grown the necessary calluses needed to keep themselves alive.

Plus... they knew I was here, I guess...

Turning, I started walking towards the section of hill that I had heard the group coming from. I had seen a few peek over the hill, watching us, but none had shown themselves intentionally yet.

I wasn't sure why they had not rushed over the hill, to attack, but it was likely because they had been shocked by the numbers of the Weaver's family. I wasn't sure how many people were beyond the hill, but I doubted it was enough to not double-think attacking an outnumbering force.

In this darkness, if they were all humans as I suspected, they hadn't been able to tell that most of those who had ran with Renn and Nann to the main house had been mostly older. There had only been a few children amongst them. The older folks had been gathered. The younger children had already been in the main house, listening to Nasba's lecture...

That was a good start at least.

Walking slowly, I glanced around the courtyard to make sure no one else was around. Neither invader, nor local. Though there was a small stuffed animal on the side of the path nearby, which had been dropped by one of the children as they had been pulled along by their parent.

I didn't see, or sense anyone else... but I wasn't foolish enough to think that these supposed invaders had all approached in the same group from the same direction.

Pillagers usually attacked from two or three angles. If they had the proper numbers.

As I began to climb the hill, I hesitated a moment.

"It can't be..." I whispered as something obvious clicked in my head.

"Shit!" one of the men behind the hill heard me, and I flinched and stepped forward.

Picking up the pace, I reached the top of the hill and stared down the other side... at the small group of humans.

I quickly counted nine men. Three horses.

None had any traits of the bird's family bloodline, and every one of them had a weapon. Most had spears, a few had swords.

Scanning their faces, I felt immense relief at the lack of those siblings.

Renn's friends weren't here.

"Who the hell...?" one of the men shifted and pointed a spear at me.

"Usually I'd ask what you want... or why you're doing this... But!" I stepped forward. "Unluckily for you, I'm tired. Which means I can't take any chances, less I make a mistake," I apologized to the humans I was about to massacre.

"Get ready!" one of the men took charge. He stepped forward, hefting his spear at an angle. The kind that told me he was seasoned. He knew how to face an enemy while on the low ground. He knew how to become deadly.

And he wasn't the only one. Several of the other men immediately went into motion, forming a line. A line of spears formed before me as I descended the hill.

I recognized the way they stood next to each other. It was a style of the northern armies. One that didn't use shields, but also usually had another row of spears behind them in support.

They didn't have the numbers for that extra line, but it didn't make their tactical formation any less dangerous.

Yet I didn't hesitate as I bent a little, and then jumped.

One of the horses startled at my leap. I had jumped a little too hard. I leapt over the row of spears, and landed several dozen feet behind the men. Near the other horse, that hadn't startled on my jump but instead startled at my landing.

While the horse kicked, and jumped away from me in shock, I rushed over to the only man who hadn't taken position into the line of spears.

He didn't have a spear, which is likely why he hadn't, but it had resulted in him being the first to die.

Hitting the man over the head, I grabbed his buckling body by his thick leather shirt and hefted him. Lifting him up, I spun just enough to give my throw some momentum and torque.

Tossing his body at the men still in a row, I watched as they all startled. Some lifted their spears, either in shock or in hopes of not spearing their friend, while others held firm. The man's lifeless body crashed into the spears and men, scattering some and sending others to the ground.

Without wasting a moment I rushed forward. I grabbed one of the closest spears by the shaft, and holding onto it firmly I pushed it forward as I approached. The man holding it didn't have the grip strength to stop me from pushing it out of his hands, but he had clung onto it long enough to break fingers. He screamed in shock as his hands crunched and snapped from the spear's brisk and sudden movement.

Approaching the man with broken hands, I stepped to the right at the last moment. The man next to him was still on his knees, trying to get back up. He had collapsed when hit by the other man's body I had thrown. I stepped up onto one of his knees and thighs, and applied weight.

His whole leg collapsed under my own foot, crunching and separating. He let loose a blood curdling scream of pain and terror, and I backhanded another man across the face. One who had stepped forward to attack.

"By the Gods!" one of the spear wielders was already separating. Backpedaling as he watched the carnage. I noticed him drop his spear and turn, as to run.

I ignored him for a tiny moment as I spun the spear I still held. Swinging it around, I smacked the end of the spear's shaft into another man's spear. It collided, snapped in half, and then the spear I held continued until it hit another man's head.

The man's head cracked as loudly as his spear had, and I felt the butt end of the spear's shaft snap because of it.

I spun the spear once more, stepping away from the man who was still screaming about his broken hands. The man whose leg I had crushed had passed out, falling to the ground. I turned a bit, to find the man who had ran off. He was half way up the next hill already, doing his best to escape.

Readying the broken spear, I hefted it for just a moment. Then in the next, I threw it.

It whisked through the air with a strange sound, likely thanks to its broken shaft, and hit the man square in the back. Even from the distance I heard it thunk into him, and then he into the ground. It impaled him there in the hill.

A sharp point stabbed me in the side, but I ignored it as I swiped my hand down. Snapping the spear that had stabbed me, I stepped towards the man who went completely still. He held onto his now broken spear, even as I crushed his throat.

Pulling the broken tip of the spear out of my side, I turned to face the only two men still standing.

One had a spear. The other a large broadsword. Both of them were standing shoulder to shoulder, shaking and stunned.

Neither looked actually willing to engage me in any kind of combat... but they were also not running away.

“Wait...!” one shouted, but I ignored him as I stepped towards them.

As I drew closer, one of the horses neighed and approached. It stomped its hooves at me, and I realized one of the men were likely its owner. I ignored the horse, and its sad attempt of keeping me away from its master, and stepped right up to the two men.

The man with the spear tried to push me aside, by pushing out with the spear. It was a feeble attempt. I killed him, and then used his spear to kill the man with the sword.

Once the last man fell, I bent down to pick up the sword he had dropped. Hefting the large chunk of chipped iron, I sighed as I walked back over to the small cluster of bodies. A few were still moving.

“Gods... Gods...” one of the men was on his knees. Clutching broken and mangled hands to his stomach, and heaved over. He didn’t even notice me as I brought the sword down on his neck.

The next man, who was still moving, was the one with the crushed leg. He was going in and out of consciousness, and didn’t notice when I stabbed the sword into his throat.

I quickly checked the rest of the bodies, making sure they were all dead. The two horses had run off to a distance, to the top of the nearby hill. They stared at me, huffing and neighing as I made sure their owners were all dead.

Once I finished checking all of the men, including the one I had speared from a distance, I walked back to the top of the hill. To overlook the Weaver’s Hut village.

Scanning the area, I was pleased to see the courtyard all looked fine. None of the main houses or buildings looked bothered... I didn't see any other pillagers or invaders or...

A familiar sound whizzed past my face, and I frowned as I turned to my right.

Approaching quickly, were three horses. Each with a man upon them. One notched another arrow, he guided the horse to turn to the right and then slowed... then he released the arrow.

Spinning the sword up, I swiped the arrow out of the air. Although I had done so successfully, a broken piece of the arrow still stabbed me in the face, right under my eye.

"Really?" I complained as I flinched, and felt the sharp metal dig even deeper into my cheek. Damn... that had been the arrowhead itself. That'll be a pain to dig out later, since it'll heal over and get stuck inside me.

"They're all dead!" one of the men shouted as he and his horse drew closer, to see the carnage I had wrought.

Without waiting, I stepped forward and then flung the sword at him. It flew out at him quickly, spinning wildly.

He barely noticed in time, and tugged on his horse's reins to dodge it. But all he'd accomplished is keep himself alive a moment longer. Instead of stabbing him straight through the shoulder, the blade dug deep into his thigh. Piercing not just his leg, but the horse he sat upon.

The horse let out a final neigh, leapt wildly, and then promptly fell over into the grass.

“Run!” one of the other men shouted, pulling around his horse.

The one with the bow notched another arrow, and I ignored him as I hurried back down the hill. Not towards the fallen horse, but instead towards the spears.

Bending down to pick up a spear, an arrow slammed into my shoulder. I paid it no heed as I stood back up, hefted the spear and threw it.

Before that spear hit the man who was fleeing, hitting him square center and even knocking him off his horse, I picked up another spear.

I threw it right as the man let loose another arrow. My spear hit him, but his arrow didn't hit me.

“What the hell are you...!” the man who I had thrown the sword into shouted at me. He was lying on the ground next to the horse, his leg propped up over and on top of it. It was sticking out into the air oddly, thanks to the sword pierced through it.

Stepping over to him, I pulled out the arrow that had lodged itself into my shoulder and smiled a little at the man who was foaming at the mouth. He was furious.

He was trying to tug his leg from the sword. It made nasty sounds as he pulled on it, cutting more and more flesh. Yet he didn't have the strength to completely separate it. Most didn't have it in them to pull a whole limb apart... yet he definitely was trying.

This man was likely a tough son of a bitch. Under normal conditions, if I had been a human, he might have been someone to be feared.

"What are you?" he asked through clenched teeth as he noticed me standing next to him.

"Your end," I said to him, and stepped on his head.

Once he was dead, I glanced around for any other attackers. There were none... it was just me and the horses now.

The horses that still lived all made noises around me. Some stomping their feet in frustration, others neighing in strain. I ignored them all as I picked up one last spear and headed back to the top of the hill.

Once back at the top of the hill, I scanned the horizons. Now that there was definitely more groups...

There. I found the silhouette of a dark horse. In the distance, near the main building. I couldn't tell how many others were there with it, but it was undoubtedly one of these invaders. All of the Weaver's horses were in their barn, a distance away.

I debated for a moment to toss the spear. To kill the horse at least... but instead chose to hurry there instead. Chances are they didn't know I had just killed so many of their fellows. Humans were oddly unperceptive during battle. If I attacked from this distance it might spook them, but might also make them desperate.

Hurrying along the hill, I picked up the pace as I ran past one of the horses. One of them was nuzzling at the man who had fallen off it. The one with the bow.

Quickly descending the hill as I rounded the main building, I realized that there were no men. There were only two horses here... and their riders weren't anywhere to be found.

It wasn't hard to find out where they had gone. One of the windows of the main building had been broken completely. The room was half-lit, and there were people inside it... but I didn't hear shouts or screams from inside it or the rest of the building.

Wasting no time, I rushed forward. Abandoning the spear, since it was too long to use comfortably in a house, I jumped into the building and through the window.

Before even landing, I was stabbed.

My hand shot out, to grab my attacker... but luckily I stopped myself when I noticed the sharp blue eyes.

"Vim...!" Nann shouted in relief at the sight of me, and I too breathed a sigh of relief as well... as she quickly went to pulling out the sword she had just stabbed me through with.

As her blade slid out of my stomach, I glanced around the room and found the humans who belonged to the two horses outside.

There were two men. Both on the ground. One had a cleaved open head; the other was lying motionless in a pool of blood. Right next to the lifted platform that Nasba and the rest used to give speeches.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked Nann, as I noticed Renn and Nasba near the door of the room.

Nann nodded as she stepped back and away from me, moving her large sword out of the way as if suddenly ashamed it had my blood upon it.

“Only these two men entered. I have the family underneath, in the tunnels,” Nann said.

I nodded, glad to hear it. “I’ve killed twelve so far. There might be more,” I said.

“Please go check the outskirts, Vim. We didn’t gather everyone. One of Nasba’s sons is checking on them through the tunnels, but that takes time,” Nann said.

Right. Right...

I was about to turn, to climb back out of the window and head outside... but I noticed something odd.

“Renn?” I asked for her attention. She had a weird look on her face and...

She was looking down. She looked stiff. As if hurt or shocked. Her ears were pointed oddly askew, as if trying to listen to two conversations at once. I had already sized her up upon realizing it was her. She hadn't looked hurt... And...

“Vim...” Nasba said my name gently, and I glanced at the duck. Nasba gestured with a chin, to one of the bodies, and I noted the look on her face.

Stepping over to the body, I kicked it over.

And realized what was wrong.

Although covered in blood, I recognized him immediately.

The mercenary. The one whose sister Renn had befriended.

Sighing, I glanced up at Renn... who was now looking at me. With haunted eyes. “Vim...” she said.

“I'm sorry Vim. I didn't know he was a friend...” Nann apologized softly.

Shaking my head I waved her worry down with a tiny gesture. "You're okay Nann. You did nothing wrong," I said.

I heard Renn bite back a word, and I returned my focus on her. She went still, her watery eyes holding my own.

"I do hope you had not hesitated, Renn," I said to her.

"Vim... Not now," Nasba said, stepping forward.

Right. I nodded, and turned away. "Keep guard. I'll check the perimeter," I said as I left the room via the way I had entered. Glass crunched under my feet as I jumped out into the world, and glanced around.

The same horses were nearby. Unbothered. One was even grazing.

Hurrying around the house, I ignored the sight of Renn's watery eyes lingering in my thoughts. I couldn't afford to let her distract me.

"Deal with it later," I said.

“Deal with what later?” Renn asked.

Frowning, I wondered how the hell her mental image had just spoken to me so clearly and... then I turned, and glared at the woman following after me.

I slowed a bit, and sighed at her. “Renn...”

“What...? I know. I’m screwing up. Let me fix it,” she said quickly, with tears in her eyes.

I shook my head at her, but didn’t argue. Now wasn’t the time.

“We’ll circle this way. If you see any humans or horses let me know. Don’t attack them though, from now on we’ll need to make sure those we meet are actually enemies or not. Remember many of their children are humans here,” I told her as I pointed in the direction we were heading.

“Right,” Renn answered quickly, and I noted the stiffness in her voice.

She was upset. I understood it, but something told me it wasn’t just because her friend was now dead.

She was angry. At herself.

Not a good thing to be during moments like this. Such self-depreciating anger made one sloppy.

I knew that well.

“Stay close Renn,” I told her as we neared the first building.

“Mhm,” she answered me with a tiny noise, and I felt myself grow a little tense as I neared the building’s door.

More on guard than usual, I banged on the door. “Anyone in there? It’s Vim!” I shouted.

For a tiny moment I heard nothing... then I heard someone shout back from within. “Vim! We’re heading into the tunnels!” a distant, muffled voice, shouted back.

“Okay!” I shouted and turned away, to head to the next house.

As we went from one house to another, I paid keen attention to all of the fields and hills around us. I didn’t see any more horses or people, but I wasn’t taking any chances. Last thing I needed was for Renn to catch a stray arrow.

Banging on another door, I didn’t need to wait long until it opened. A young man, with large tail feathers, quickly looked around as he stepped back. “Vim?” he asked.

“Go into the tunnels, go to the main section. There are attackers,” I told him.

“So that’s what we heard... okay!” he didn’t even wait, nor close the door behind him. He ran into the building, shouting for his family.

I sighed at him and closed the door for him, and gestured for Renn to follow me to the next.

It didn’t take as long as it felt to check on each building. But I grew more anxious as we rounded back to the main courtyard, to where it all began.

Slowing a little, I scanned the area... and noticed Nasba staring at us from the porch of the main building. She was standing at the door with her arms crossed.

If she was standing there like that I likely didn’t need to worry over having missed anyone, or the family beneath in the tunnels being in danger. She would have called for me otherwise... so...

Slowing my pace as I realized it was likely over; I glanced behind me to Renn. She was only a few steps behind me, keeping pace, and at least didn’t seem to be crying anymore.

“You okay Renn?” I asked her.

“No. Not really,” she answered.

“Hurt?” I asked, worried.

She blinked and shook her head. “No Vim. I’m okay. I meant my heart,” she said.

I nodded, I had figured... but hopefully from now on she’d make sure to clarify. Just in case.

“How about you Vim? Nann stabbed you,” Renn asked.

She had. The wound had closed already, but my shirt and pants felt weird now thanks to all the blood that had seeped from it before the bleeding had stopped.

“I’m fine. Come on, I want to check something,” I said as I hurried between two buildings, and headed for the hill behind them. The same hill I had just slain a dozen men behind.

Reaching the top of the hill, I glanced around and was glad to not only see all of the bodies still where I had left them... but all the horses still here too. They had grouped together, over near the horse that had not abandoned its rider. It was now on the ground, sitting on its knees next to his body. The rest of the horses had gathered around it, forming a small herd-like circle.

“Vim... is um...” Renn’s tiny voice broke my attention as I glanced at her. She was next to me, and fidgeting as she looked all around. At all the carnage.

“I haven’t seen her Renn,” I answered her.

She flinched, but nodded.

Yet she was right.

If that man was here, his sister should be too...

Had I killed her without realizing? Surely not. Most of those I had killed had been men, if not all of them, right...?

Glancing around, I tried to see any people in the distance. Either near or in the nearby farm fields, or past the huge plains of grass. There were trees scattered around the area, which all ended up becoming more common as a forest formed in the distance... but I didn’t see any signs of other people. I saw no glimmers from metal. I saw no movement. The only horses I heard were the ones nearby, unsettled but fine.

Fourteen people. Not as many as I’d have expected, but it was a believable number for a pillaging attempt. Especially on a homesteaded this size. Even more so when you took into account they had so many horses and weapons.

“This way,” I gestured for Renn to follow me as I went to walking along the hill. Heading back towards the main building. I scanned the dead, the horses, the buildings... I made sure Nasba was still standing on the porch of the main building. I made sure to check the fields between the buildings in the distance. Where Renn and I had just ran through.

A supposed mercenary band pillaging a random village wasn't unheard of. It happened. Especially so during moments of chaos such as the world was currently experiencing... but...

Why here and not the village? It wasn't like the village had that many more people there. Plus most of those in the village had been old, young, or infirm. It was likely the village had just as few able bodied people, men, as this place did. It would have been an easier target, all things considered.

Maybe they had thought fewer people were here than there was.

As I scanned the area, waiting for my next victim, I did my best to ignore the way Renn was fidgeting. Her tail kept twitching wildly, moving back and forth with little bursts of motion, not too unlike a whip would.

Another creature drew my attention away from Renn. Turning, I paused as I watched one of the horses. It was trotting away, heading northward. Towards a batch of trees.

Watching it, I studied the tree-line... and although didn't see anyone there, knew better than to think the horse was just running away.

It was running too slowly. In too straight a line. Through thicker grass, the kind that horses usually avoided if possible.

“Vim...” Renn said softly.

I nodded. “It’s either going to someone, or going where it thinks someone might be,” I said. It might just be where the attackers had gathered and formulated their plan, or waited for the night. But it was now my next destination.

“Mhm...” Renn agreed, though she didn’t sound too happy about it.

I sighed and pointed at the house. “Go to the house Renn. Make sure they’re all okay, and have them check on the tunnels. Shout for me if you need me,” I said.

“But Vim...!” Renn stepped forward, to argue.

Shaking my head at her I ignored her eyes. I kept my own attention on the horse, and its destination. Waiting to see a shadow move. “Go, Renn. I’m going to follow the horse. That means I’ll not be right here. Go protect them until I can get back,” I told her.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her shift, and her face contort into annoyance... but she sighed and nodded anyway.

“Okay,” she said dejectedly, and then hurried off. She ran down the hill, at a strong pace, and hurried for the main house.

I watched her for a moment, and waited until she reached the porch and started talking to Nasba.

From this distance I couldn't really make out what they were saying... but I could see Renn's tail and ears. They were fidgeting something fierce as she spoke.

She was upset. At me. The world. Herself.

Looking away from her, I stepped forward myself. To run after the horse. It was near the section of trees it was heading to. And it had picked up its pace... which meant it had likely seen or smelled someone familiar.

Picking up my pace, I ran through the tall grass field. To make sure to find, and end, those who not only threatened those I protected...

But also those that had hurt the heart of the woman I loved.

Chapter 247 To Break the Weave

"Everyone's accounted for Grandmother," the young man said to Nann.

"Good. Thank you Brandom. Please head back down to let everyone know all will be well, and to keep an ear on the tunnels. If you hear something odd, come get me," Nann said to him.

The young man nodded heavily, and then hurried down the stairs. Into the lit up cellar beneath. There wasn't anyone else in the cellar, but I could hear the voices of those not far from it. Down one of the several hallways that ventured deeper into the tunnels.

Nann sighed as she went to close the cellar door. It was a heavy wooden one. The type of heavy that a normal human would struggle with.

I shifted as the door clanked shut, and the Weaver turned to glance at me and Nasba. We were standing a few feet apart from each other, and I wasn't really sure what to say or do.

Vim had run off. To a nearby section of forest. Pursuing a horse that looked like it had been heading somewhere it had a reason to run to. Likely to a person.

The fact he hadn't returned yet told me he had found something, or someone.

"Mercenaries," Nann said to us as she stepped away, to head for the main hallway.

"They'd joined a band, supposedly, yes," I said.

It hurt so badly to admit it, to say it, but it was the truth.

The humans Vim and I had met, on the way here, had joined a mercenary band and attacked us.

“Why would a band attack us?” Nasba asked.

“I’m assuming your friends hadn’t known, Renn. He had frozen at the sight of you,” Nann said.

I nodded as I glanced at the sword in her hand. It was a large one, flat and thick. It reminded me of Nasba’s tail feathers, when she had them folded as tightly as she could. It was more like a block of sharp metal than an actual sword. Though it had obviously not been any less effective.

Reaching the main hallway, Nann glanced at me. She had wanted me to answer with more than a simple nod.

“I don’t think he had known either, no,” I said, feeling horrible.

Nann smiled at me with a gentle look and nodded. “If you wish to hate me, it is okay,” she said.

“No...! No... It’s not your fault. I’m sorry,” I said as I blinked watery eyes.

“Can we do this later...? I know Vim’s probably killed most of them off, but still,” Nasba said stiffly.

Shifting, I grabbed my left elbow and squeezed it. Nasba hadn't likely meant to make that feel like a slap in the face, but it had all the same.

"My daughter-in-law is as callous as ever," Nann said.

Taking a small breath, I shifted and glanced at the duck. She was looking away... in shame. Though likely not for what she had said, but her mother-in-law's comment.

"While running around with Vim, did you happen to see how many bodies there were?" Nann then asked me.

I nodded. "Twelve. That I could see. Eight horses," I said.

"Hm... not as many as I'd have thought. But a sizable force all the same," Nann wondered.

Was it?

This place had dozens of buildings. Big ones. There were over sixty people that lived here. It seemed foolish to attack such a community with so few men.

Though they might not have intended to take this place over... It had seemed they had attacked in two groups. The one that Vim had faced and the ones who had originally intended to break into this building.

When Nann had killed Martin and the other man, the three others had jumped on their horses and ran off. They hadn't even tried to enter the house. They had fled upon seeing their comrades die so swiftly.

I'd dub them cowards, had I not been just as shocked at Nann's ferocity. She had killed both men before the glass from the broken window had even settled.

Nasba and I had followed Nann to the sound of them breaking in... and upon rounding the corner, and entering the larger room where Nasba gave her lectures, the two men had startled at the sight of us. Martin especially. He had frozen completely, upon locking eyes with me. The other man had his head cleaved in, and Nann had stabbed Martin through from the back. He hadn't even realized she had stabbed him, I don't think.

"Do you think someone in the village had anything to do with this?" Nasba asked the Weaver.

"It's possible. But I doubt it. If they're just mercenaries they likely saw an opportunity and took it as they passed through. Under a normal situation, that many armed men willing to commit such violence could have done quite some damage," Nann said.

I nodded. Yes. They could.

"Hadn't there been another, Renn? That girl?" Nasba asked.

Gulping an itchy throat I nodded. "Elisabell... I didn't see her amongst the bodies earlier. But she wasn't a real mercenary. She was even looking for a husband... because she knew she wasn't cut out for it," I said.

"Pity," Nann said, and Nasba nodded in agreement.

Yes. It was.

Nann walked away for a moment, to go stand near one of the larger windows near the front door. She stared out it, standing calmly.

She was used to this. She wasn't rattled at all.

Though the only reason I was so disturbed and shaken... well...

Nasba sighed as she crossed her arms. "Least Vim's here to handle it," she said.

"Yes. We'd have lost a few children otherwise, likely," Nann said from her perch near the window.

Shifting, I wondered how true that was. Nann had seemed to be very deadly. And Nasba hadn't been scared either. She had joined me in following Nann... although we hadn't needed to fight, something told me Nasba would have been just as willing and deadly as her mother-in-law.

Though I guess the two couldn't be everywhere at once. And under the cover of darkness those men might have been able to hurt several people before Nasba or Nann got to them.

Nann tilted her head, and I noticed movement beyond her. In the darkness out in the courtyard. I stepped forward, to see it better, and relaxed when I saw one of the horses. It was walking across the path around the garden, to reach the garden. After a few moments it paused, to graze at the grass.

"Hm... we had been needing some more horses," Nasba said gently as we all watched it graze. Glancing at her, she frowned at me and shrugged. "What? We do. It's time for some fresh blood," she said.

Nann sighed. "Had Vim killed one? I smell the blood of a horse," Nann asked.

"Oh. Yea. I think so. One was lying on its side, near the bodies. With a sword stuck in it," I said.

"Vim's mean sometimes," Nasba commented.

Was it him being mean though...? I doubted Vim actually wanted to hurt the horse just because he could.

I gulped as I realized it was the same thing. Just like Martin and Elisabeth.

Vim, Nann, the rest... they didn't really want to kill them. But they had to. We had to.

I sighed as I realized that Vim would likely end Elisabeth's life the moment he found her. Regardless of any circumstances.

The thought made my eyes water... so I tried to ignore it.

Tried and failed.

Doing my best to not grow too emotional, I focused on my tail. It was twitching rather wildly, and it was a good distraction. I focused on it, doing my best to calm it down.

Then Nann stepped back, and raised her weapon. Nasba startled, her feathers making noise as she turned quickly to see what had alerted Nann.

Holding my breath, I waited expectantly as someone stepped into the building.

Vim entered the building, sighing as he looked around. "Everything okay?" he asked.

Nann nodded, lowering her sword as she relaxed. "Family is fine."

"I found five more. From what I can gather, we've got them all. But there's another group waiting. Near the village. At their camp," Vim said.

"Go handle them then?" Nasba suggested.

I shifted, and noted the way Vim's eyes stayed on Nann.

He nodded. "I plan to. Just wanted to make sure all is well here first."

"It is. Get going then. I'll approve of no egg breakers," Nann said stiffly.

Vim smiled and nodded. "Neither do I. Nasba, why not get some of your more able-bodied sons and go deal with the bodies and horses. I left one of the horses staked near the trees where the others are, so you can find them easily enough. I suggest burning them... none of them seem sick, but you never know," Vim said, finally looking away from Nann.

"Sure," Nasba nodded and turned around, likely head for the cellar.

Shifting a little uncomfortably, I wondered if now was a good time to ask or if Nann would feel insulted.

"How's it feel to get the blood pumping, Nann?" Vim asked, once Nasba left the hallway.

“Pumping? Please,” Nann scoffed.

He smirked and nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t catch them before they got here,” he then said.

She waved his apology away, in a way that told me she genuinely didn’t mind.

“A few of them were actually very good. One particularly was... notable. Have Nasba and the rest check them for any flags or emblems. I’m assuming I’ll figure out more once I get to their camp, but you never know,” Vim said.

“Of course. If this isn’t their whole band, you may be making a side-quest before heading back north,” Nann said.

Oh boy...

Vim nodded. “Likely. Like I said a few of them had been very seasoned. This wasn’t just some opportunistic bandit group. Though I don’t think they intentionally targeted your home, Nann. Two of them were very vocal as they died. This had not been something they had originally planned. It might have been a spur of the moment thing,” Vim said.

Oh...?

Nann frowned and shifted her sword. It made an odd noise as it brushed against her dress. "Simply snuff them out, Vim. I care not for their excuses."

Vim nodded, smiling gently at her. Then he pointed at me.

"I'll be taking Renn. If you don't mind," Vim then said to Nann.

The Weaver turned and glanced at me. I went still, and felt the tip of my tail twitch.

"Probably for the best. Though I don't like the idea of you forcing her to do something she doesn't wish to do," Nann said, while staring into my eyes.

I gulped.

"I'm not taking her to force her into battle. I simply wish her to see something," he said.

Nann sighed and tilted her head at me. "Do you wish to go Renn? He's likely trying to teach you something... but it might hurt," she asked with a warning.

Blinking at her sudden gentleness... I slowly nodded. "I'll go. I'm... bothered, Nann, but I'm not angry. I'd never choose a human over any of you, any of us, but... I'm shaken a little at how surprising it had been to me," I admitted.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Vim's soft smile. I wanted to smile back at him, but Nann held my attention as she stepped towards me.

"I've had to slay many friends over the years. I've even had to kill my own flesh and blood. It's never easy. Don't feel bad for not being callous enough to ignore it," Nann said.

I nodded, and wasn't sure what to say in response.

"Let's go then, Renn," Vim said.

"Should she not get her sword? You had one when you arrived, had you not?" Nann asked. "Actually why'd you not go get it earlier, Renn?"

"It's blunt," I said as I stepped around her, to follow Vim out of the building.

"Is it now...?" Nann spoke oddly as I waved goodbye to her, and followed Vim outside.

Hurrying to follow Vim, as he headed away from the main building and to the nearby field over the hill, I took my spot next to him.

“Even a blunt blade is deadly in our hands Renn, don’t forget that,” Vim said.

“Well... yeah...” I nodded and admitted it.

He glanced at me, and smiled softly at me.

Holding his gaze, I smiled back at him.

Reaching the top of the hill, which was a smaller mound in this area, Vim slowed to a stop.

I stopped as well, and glanced around. Nothing seemed different than when I had been out here a little bit ago.

Vim then coughed and drew my attention back to him.

He gestured lightly at me. “Stand tall, Renn.”

I nodded. “Stand tall,” I agreed.

Vim hesitated, and then sighed. "Yeah... well... I mean it. This time," he said.

Frowning at him, I nodded. "Me too...? I mean what I said back there, Vim. I'm bothered, but not angry. I wish it had gone differently, but..." I said.

"Yeah... well..." Vim sighed and then nodded.

Oh... wait...

"Vim..." I realized what he was likely implying, and he frowned at me... and then nodded.

"Her too...?" I asked softly.

"Hm... you'll see," he said and then stepped forward, heading for the tall grass.

Groaning, I did my best to keep my eyes from welling up too much with tears.

So he had found her. Elisabeth.

Just great. I almost wish he hadn't told me. Maybe I shouldn't have come.

But yet at the same time...

I needed to see her. Her body. Even if it hurt.

At least by confirming she was dead I'd not need to spend the next few months stressing and imagining the poor girl alone, suffering horribly since we had taken her brother from her.

Following Vim, we entered waist high grass as we left the Weaver's Hut area. Off to our right was a large field of wheat, but here it was just grass. Plains grass. I wasn't sure why they didn't convert all this into fields of food too, but it was likely on purpose. Probably as to better blend in and hide.

Heading for a patch of thick trees, I hesitated as I followed Vim. I could smell blood now.

The tall grass eventually became thinner... then it died down to ankle-high grass. Passing some trees, I followed Vim to where several horses were tied up. Their reins were tied to the trees, and...

Coming to a stop, I felt my tense shoulders slump at the sight of her.

She startled at our approach, and stepped back a few steps from Vim as he walked past her. She opened her mouth, to say something... but Elisabeth's voice didn't come out. She was too scared to speak.

Not far from her, near the horses, were bodies. Dead men and women. I didn't spend much time looking at them, since Vim hadn't killed them cleanly. One had his arm torn off. Another had been cleaved almost in two.

"R-r-r-renn...!" Elisabeth finally stammered my name, upon noticing me.

Taking a deep breath, I shivered... and prayed to Vim that he'd not make me kill her with my own hands.

I had never believed he would have made me do such a thing... but still I feared it. Still I dreaded it.

Because I knew it'd happen someday. Whether I wanted it to or not.

My stomach churned as I realized it might be today. Right now.

"She's going to take us to their camp," Vim said as he went to one of the trees, where three horses were tied together.

Ah...

I gulped and finally stepped forward. Elisabeth turned from me, to Vim... and shook some more. As if terribly cold.

She didn't look hurt... but she was trembling as if she were. She was holding her arms closely to her chest, and looked pale.

"Are you hurt, Elisabeth?" I asked her.

Her head spun around, to me, and she almost fell down because of it. Quickly shaking her head, she mumbled a bit... and then took a deep breath. "Uh...uh! Um... No...! N-no," she stammered.

Letting out a tiny sigh of relief, I glanced at Vim who was guiding a horse over towards us.

He ignored my stare, and I wondered what to say or think.

He hadn't hurt her. He hadn't killed her.

Yes... I knew he was keeping her alive for a reason. Using her for information. To have her guide us to her fellow mercenaries... but...

Did he really need her? If their camp was near the village, Vim would likely be able to find it without much trouble. It wasn't like this area was too dense of a forest. Especially once you neared the river the village was built next to.

Elisabell shifted, and made a tiny whine as Vim drew near with the horse. I watched the way she stepped backward, and once again almost fell over because of it.

The girl was horrified of him.

She didn't seem hurt... nor was she tied up or anything either.

She could have ran away while Vim had come and got me, and checked on us. Yet she hadn't. Though based off the way she was frozen in fear, it had likely not been because she didn't wish to. Or hadn't thought of it.

Vim must have terrified her something fierce.

She hadn't even noticed my ears or tail yet, for crying out loud.

The horse shook its head, as if disturbed by flies, as Vim stepped around it and faced us.

"Let's go then," he said.

Elisabell made a noise. One that was an obvious whine of discomfort. I stepped forward, and glared at the man who was basically tormenting the poor girl.

“Vim...!”

My companion glanced at me, with eyes of understanding knowing. “Renn,” he responded.

Elisabell glanced at both of us, her breathing became quick and sharp as she kept glancing between us.

“Come on now. On the horse you two,” Vim then said, patting the horse’s side.

Sighing, I glanced at Elisabeth. She stood up straighter, her eyes going wide at my glance.

“Let’s go Elisabeth,” I said to her gently.

She sniffed, and glanced at Vim... then looked away from him as if she had just seen something she shouldn’t have. Then she nodded, and stepped over to me.

Vim held the horse’s reins as I stepped over to him. He helped me up on the horse, and I found the saddle was bigger than expected. Perfect for two people at once... or a single, large, man.

Before I was even settled, Vim grabbed Elisabeth. She let out a tiny little cry of shock as he lifted her up, almost tossing her over the horse.

He put her in front of me, and I quickly went to holding her. To make sure she didn't slide off the horse on accident. I wrapped my arm around her waist, and immediately noticed the terrible shaking.

How was she even trembling this harshly? She was acting as if she had just fallen into a lake of ice.

Vim sighed, and reached up to hand me the reins. I took them, but made sure to keep my arms around Elisabeth... just in case. The poor girl was shaking so much I had no doubt she'd fall off if I wasn't careful.

"Follow after me, Renn. But make sure to keep the horse at an even pace until we leave the field and reach the road," Vim said.

I nodded, and realized that I was able to see over Elisabeth's head. Not because she had suddenly grown shorter... but because she was crouched and curled. As if trying to turtle into herself, and hide.

Vim nodded back, and then stepped away. I made a clicking sound with my tongue and squeezed my thighs, to draw the horse's attention. It turned after Vim... and without me needing to actually usher it, began to follow after him.

The horse strode at a good pace, following Vim into the tall grass. Vim ran ahead of us, far enough I didn't need to worry about him suddenly stopping and hitting him, but near enough that the horse obviously knew where it was supposed to go. Even when Vim turned a little, taking us up and over one of the hills the horse followed dutifully without me needing to pull or tug on the reins.

"I'm sorry, Renn."

I blinked, and squeezed the reins and the girl's waist... as I realized who had spoken.

She sniffed... and lowered her head even more. "I'm so sorry," Elisabeth cried.

My own face contorted and scrunched, as what little levity I had been doing my best to keep up disappeared. I sniffed as I nodded. "It's okay, Elisabeth. It's okay," I said softly.

She made a whine of a noise, and I knew what her heart was saying in response. Since my own heart agreed.

It wasn't okay. It wasn't okay at all.

But I was going to find a way to make it so.

Or at least try to.

"I'm sorry," Elisabeth cried again, a little louder this time.

Blinking watery eyes as we left the field of grass and onto the dirt road that led to town... I patted the girl's back.

She was shaking violently. It'd not surprise me at all if she puked, based on how badly she was crying and shaking.

I knew how she felt. I've been there before.

I've endured that same disgust. That same sorrow.

And I knew how it felt to have absolutely no idea what to do. I knew how it felt to be hopeless. Without any ability to change anything.

Which was why I related to her more than I should.

"Deep breaths Elisabeth," I said gently as I rubbed her back.

The horse wasn't trotting too hard that I worried over her, or myself, biting a tongue or falling off... but I was glad she wasn't talking too much. And I was glad that Vim was seemingly willing to ignore her.

Though... had he?

Did she know? That her brother was dead?

That Martin had died by our hands?

Had Vim told her...? Or had she simply assumed?

She had obviously witnessed Vim defeat those other mercenaries. The ones she had been with. She had undoubtedly witnessed it all.

Following Vim as we headed for the village... I wondered how this night would end.

The enemies of the Society would die. There was no doubt of that. No matter whom they were, or how many, of those mercenaries were left... it wouldn't matter. Vim would slay them all.

Vim would slaughter untold numbers if he must.

Then once done, we'd continue onward. To our next destination. Ever forward. Like the many times before.

There was no other possible ending here. There were small variances, of course... like the possibility of one of our members dying, or myself, but...

Vim would defeat them all. Save those he could. Then once he was sure all was well, he would then continue on his way. To help the next member who needed him.

There was no other end. No other possibility.

So such an ending was obvious. But...

“Brother...” Elisabeth sobbed, and I clenched my teeth.

By his rules she should be included in those numbers.

Just as the Societies enemies were destined to meet their end and die...

Her end should be destined too.

Gulping a heavy heart, I did everything I could to not panic. To not fear what was to, inevitably, happen.

Wanting to join the girl in her sorrows, I bit back my own tears.

It was always something, wasn't it? Vim was right. Like always. As he always said.

Fate was cruel. Beyond measure.

Especially to us.

Elisabell continued to sob, weeping uncontrollably. Each sob broke my heart more. Each tear she wept gave birth to one of my own.

"Martin..." Elisabell cried.

"I know," I said softly.

I know.

Chapter 248 His Attempt at Mercy

There weren't as many mercenaries as I had expected.

Approaching the camp slowly, I made sure to walk quietly. I wasn't in the mood to show mercy, but at the same time I was still gathering information.

They had a flag up, near the largest tent. I didn't recognize the weird looking lizard design, but it was obviously one they held in high esteem. The pole they had strung it up upon was comically tall. Their camp was also rather orderly, even if not as fancy or ritzy as some mercenary camps usually were.

I counted a quick fifteen tents. And a few hastily made lean-tos near the campfires. Some of the tents were big enough for multiple people, but their numbers told me that I didn't need to worry over having misplaced a large swath of them. Depending on how many were still in camp, and the twenty one I'd already killed... this size of the camp made perfect sense.

Their tents were honestly rather small. The biggest likely only big enough to hold a table and some chairs. They had a few campfires set up, but only one was lit right now. It had a pot simmering over the fire, but no one was tending it. So it was likely just food being kept warm, or tea of some kind.

The few horses they had, and a couple donkeys, were all lined on the outer ridges of the camp. Tied to hastily placed spikes, as to keep them from roaming. They didn't seem to have any dogs, unless they were asleep in one of the tents, and they only had one man on night duty.

His back was facing me, and he was more concerned with making sure he didn't piss on himself than anything else. For some reason he had decided to piss into the wind.

Maybe he was drunk.

Other than him I could hear the voices of a few other men. I heard the snore of a man who likely had some kind of breathing problem. Another man had entered the largest tent earlier, before I began approaching. It had looked like he had papers in his hand.

Half a dozen men at best from what I could discern. Add that to the twenty one I had already slain... not including the young girl, it brought their happy little band to at best thirty people.

A typical size for a smaller mercenary band. Usually ones with this few members belonged to other bands, joining under a bigger banner when waging actual war. Strength in numbers and all that.

Too bad for them, they'd never see a battlefield again. Not after tonight.

As I approached the camp, I glanced up at the night sky. The morning sun was getting ready to rise; I could see the faint hue in the distance. Odds are by the time I finished killing the rest... daybreak would be here.

Which would also explain this unaware man I was approaching. He had finished relieving himself, yet was still just standing there... staring up at the sky.

He wasn't drunk. He was simply half asleep. He was about to fall back to sleep while standing there, his pants halfway down to his knees.

Stepping out of the grass and onto the flat dirt where they'd set up camp, I rolled a shoulder as I stepped up to the unaware man. He tilted his head, right when I stepped up behind him... which told me he had heard my footstep. But he never got to find out what he had heard, or why.

I snapped his neck, twisting his head down and at an angle as I did so. To keep him from making any loud noises as the last bit of air in his lungs wheezed out as he died.

He crumpled, and I held onto his head just long enough to make sure he didn't fall too harshly. Lowering his head, and thus his body, I allowed him to collapse as I turned and headed for the nearest tent.

The tent had some boxes around it. They were unmarked, yet made of finer wood. Stuff made by craftsmen. They had stacked them in a way that helped hold the tent up, as support.

Stepping up to the tent, I reached out and pulled back the main flap.

The sleeping man inside shifted, and lazily rolled over. He had crawled in and laid down, so his feet were at the entrance.

Grabbing an ankle, I tugged the man from his bed. He let out a tiny yelp, but didn't get to say much more as I bent down and hit him in the side of the neck.

He went to twitching and spasming, from the broken neck, and I stepped over him and headed for the next tent.

This one had the man who was snoring loudly. I tossed aside the tent's flap, and found a rather large man. Heavysset. He was lying on his side... and...

I frowned at the sight of his naked body. He was not only naked, but also without a blanket.

Disgusted, I did the same thing to him as I had the other man. I grabbed a leg, and hauled him out.

This man startled awake far quicker and even tried to roll up and out of my grip. Though all he had accomplished by trying to stand up was bringing his head into range for me. I swung down a heavy fist onto the back of his neck, and likewise broke it.

He collapsed into the dirt, falling face first, and went completely still.

“What the hell are you all doing out there?” a man shouted from inside the biggest tent. Likely the one I had seen earlier, with the papers.

I ignored him for now and headed for the next tent.

Pulling aside the flap, I found the tent empty.

Huffing I went to the next.

“John!” the same man who had just shouted yelled again. He sounded annoyed now. He had expected an answer from his earlier shout.

The leader maybe. Good. I had thought I had killed the captain earlier. There had been a rather stout man with Renn’s friend, in those trees. He had acted like a commander, and had the scars to prove he had earned such a title.

I had killed him a little too quickly, on accident. I had intended to just cripple him... so I could talk to him... but when I had approached the men and found one of them about to kill the young girl; I had grown a little upset.

Their damned cruelty had made it impossible for me to not use my own.

“John!” the man shouted angrily as he left his tent.

I ignored him for a small moment as I pulled the flap back of another tent. Likewise this one was also empty.

It wasn’t surprising. Most of the band was already dead. But I still had to check.

“What...? Berry what the hell are you doing?” the man noticed the naked one first. He stepped towards him, and I decided to forget the tents for a moment.

Walking towards the older man, I noticed the stripe of white hair above his ears. It was on both sides of his head, so likely not from a scar. It gave him an odd look in the dark as the shadows danced on his face, from the nearby campfire.

Then he turned and saw me. His eyes narrowed, likely trying to tell who I was in the dark, and then he realized I wasn't someone he knew.

"Alarm!" he shouted as I reached him.

He took a stance, and swung a fist at me as I approached. I ducked it, and stepped forward and swung a leg.

Sweeping my leg, I kicked him above his knees. They both buckled and snapped, and his whole body spun in the air as his legs flew upward and his body went down.

He landed harshly, but survived. He let out a yell of pain, from his broken legs, and I turned to quickly count the remaining mercenaries who had all awoken at his shouting.

Only three. Two were sluggishly getting themselves out of their tents, and another was already heading for me. He had a sword readied, and didn't seem bothered at all by his slipping pants. They had been hastily put on and were falling down to his knees.

The man charged me, and sucked in air as he skidded to a stop in front of me and twisted his whole body, as to swing his sword at me. He had done it in a way to swing with a massive amount of force, using momentum, by holding the blade with both hands... but I simply stepped forward and up into him before he could bring the blade around.

Such an attack was something that likely worked on those afraid to face it. Since such a sword swung full swing like that startled people, and was hard to block even when ready. But he didn't have the strength to overpower me, nor did I fear the sword itself.

He let out his deep breath of air thanks to a shout of surprise at my sudden closeness, and I punched him straight in the chest.

His sternum snapped, and his eyes bulged as his whole face went beet red. He collapsed as he buckled, and I knew it was because I had likely completely popped his lungs.

The sword he had been holding flung outward, knocking over the pot that had been simmering over the fire. The fire sizzled as it did its best to not go out as the pots contents splattered all over.

"What the hell!" one of the remaining men shouted. It was hard to make out his words over the screams of the other man rolling around behind me, the one whose legs I had destroyed.

Glancing around once more, I found there really did seem to be only two other men left. Unless there were others in their tents still hiding. I highly doubted anyone could sleep through the agonizing screams of the man I had kicked, or the shouts of their fellows.

"What do we do?" the man who had shouted just now asked the other man. One was shirtless, the other was fully dressed but had done so haphazardly. His jacket was inside out.

Stepping towards the two, I noted their lack of weapons.

Although I had somewhat surprised these men... it was a little strange that they were acting so surprised.

Maybe they had only taken their better soldiers with them to attack the Weaver's Hut. The two men before had fought back, if not very well, but they had at least tried.

These two looked half a second from running away.

And in fact that was what one of them did. The man without a shirt spun on a heel and ran.

The man wearing the jacket inside out turned, gawking at being abandoned. By the time he turned back around to face me, it was too late.

I uppercut him. He lifted off the ground as his head snapped backward. Every bone in his neck, and likely most the bones in head, shattered loudly. Before he even fell to the ground I had picked up one of the smaller boxes next to a tent.

Hefting the box, I heard heavy metal bang and clank inside. It sounded like pots, but felt heavier than what they should weigh. Maybe some kind of alchemist set or something.

Aiming for the man who had left the camp, I threw the box.

At first I thought I had missed, since I had lobbed it kind of high, but the box slammed down onto the man's head a moment later. It shattered, breaking open, and a bunch of black pots and mortars flung outward.

As he crumpled, I noticed a black spray shoot into the sky. The blood splattered the ground next to him as he fell, and he didn't get back up.

Nodding, I turned and glanced around once more.

The man with broken legs was no longer screaming. He was huffing and grunting in pain... but through clenched teeth. Other than him, the camp had gone silent. Even the campfire that had been sizzling, and the contents of the pot, had gone dark and quiet.

"Anyone still alive?" I asked loudly, doing my best to sound friendly.

No answer came as I studied a nearby tent.

I couldn't hear anyone. No whispering. No breathing. But I knew better than to think that meant there were no more enemies left.

Still, I strode back to the center of the camp. To the man with destroyed legs.

As I approached, I noticed the clump of hair in his right hand. His fists were clenched tightly, white-knuckled. One was holding his pants at his left knee; the other was sprawled a few inches from his face. In that hand was a clump of white and black hair.

He had torn his own hair out. From the pain.

Sighing, I approached the broken man... and kneeled down next to him.

He noticed me, and immediately began to squirm and breathe heavily. He was clenching his teeth so hard I heard the strain on them, and he was spitting as he tried to shout at me.

“How many men were left here?” I asked him.

His eyes glared at me with full intent, yet he said nothing. He only raged at me.

“How many men? Or I’ll make you wish that the only pain you’ve ever known is the pain you’re feeling now,” I threatened.

Angry eyes narrowed, and I realized he believed me. He took some quick, heavy breaths, and then started to breathe through his nose. After a moment of heavy struggle, he flinched and nodded. “Five,” he said through his teeth.

Five.

I glanced around, and counted the men.

“Why lie?” I asked as I stopped counting five with the dead man nearby. The one with the sword. I didn’t bother counting the last two I had just killed.

“Five!” he shouted again, and flung out his balled fist. It hit my right knee... and although I could tell he had done so with all his might, I didn’t even bother to blink at it.

Studying the hate filled eyes glaring at me; I realized I probably shouldn’t have broken his legs as badly as I’d done.

They weren’t just broken. They were mangled. They looked like a horse had stampeded over them, more than once.

I sighed and realized I’d likely not get much information out of him. I should have picked a different man. I had thought he’d do, since he had been in the biggest tent... and had actually fought back.

Standing, I wondered who else would have been better. Maybe the naked fat man or the one who had attacked with a sword. This one had the fury needed to fight back, but not the capability to endure pain.

“Dam you!” the man hit me again. Slamming his fist onto my right foot.

Glancing down as he brought his fist down again, I felt a little sorry for him.

It wasn't his fault I was so weird.

His fist hit again, and I knew from the feeling that if I had been a normal man... a normal human... his blow would have actually done something. It would have broken bones. Torn ligaments. Especially after several blows, as he kept doing.

A normal man would have forever remembered him, thanks to the damage he'd have dealt to his foot.

I however would forget him in a few days. At best.

Glancing around again, to make sure there really wasn't anyone else... I decided to end this man's suffering. I kicked him with the same foot he had been attacking, and thusly put an end to this band of merry men.

Once done I looked out over to the nearby road. I raised a hand, waving, and kept waving until I saw the horse in the distance start to move.

Watching Renn and the girl approach, I sighed and wondered what to do now.

I had wanted, needed, to interrogate someone.

Glancing down to the man with broken legs, I shook my head at him. "You were supposed to solve my problems," I complained to the man who I had thought better.

That's what I get for not being more careful. Nann won't be happy with me. She'll want to know the name of this band, whom they paid homage to... all the impertinent information. And when I failed to provide it...

Though...

Looking to the larger tent, I realized I was going to have to go through their supplies. To search for ledgers, or standing orders.

Before I do though...

Before Renn and the girl reached the camp, I went to check each and every tent one more time. To make sure I hadn't missed any of the mercenaries.

As I searched tents, I tore them apart. Not just to check for any information, but so that no one could hide in them. I left a wake of crumpled tents as I rummaged through the camp.

“Did you throw a box at that man Vim?” Renn asked as the horse trotted into the camp.

“I had,” I said as I stepped away from the last small tent. I glanced at Renn, to make sure she and the human woman were fine. They were. The mercenary had even stopped weeping. She was looking around her, at the mess I’d been making, with wide eyes.

Honestly I had somewhat expected Renn to scare the girl off. To tell her to run away. As to spare her. To keep her from my wrath.

I’d doubt Renn’s belief in how cruel I could be, if not for the fact she had tear stains on her face and was glaring at me something fierce.

Heading for the center of the camp, and the large tent, I gestured at Renn. “Did you see anyone sneak off?” I asked.

“No? Other than that man who tried to run earlier,” Renn said.

Not too surprising. Thirty odd people wasn’t too weird a number... but...

They had just employed those humans. The siblings. Likely had done so because they had wanted more numbers for their attack on the Weaver’s Hut. So...

I paused as I entered the larger tent, and realized that was likely why that man had said five and not seven.

Two of the men here had been people he hadn't deemed part of the band yet. Not fellow brothers in arms, just yet. Those two I had killed last. The ones who hadn't known what to do about me.

Sighing I scanned the tent, and the oddly emptiness of it.

There was a cot, a small table, and a chest painted white. It had the same symbol painted on it as their flag. A fat lizard.

Walking over the table, I sighed as I moved some of the papers upon it. Most of the papers were letters. They were written in the language of the north, and most were just people telling each other where they were and where they were headed. One group was going to Lumen. Another was headed southwest, to see if they could scrape some deserters from the war there to bolster their ranks.

Although most of them had names on their papers, none had anything too telling. None told me who this band was, or who they were allied with. Most of the letters were addressed privately. Like a man named Harrold, telling others he had met up with a baron in the north. He was inviting others to join him for a job.

I gathered up the letters into a small pile, and then went to the white chest.

It had a metal clasp and lock. I broke it off, and popped open the chest to find a half filled chest of coin bags and booklets.

Ignoring the bags of coins, I picked up the largest book. It was half a thumb thick, with black leather. I opened it up to a random page.

I smiled at the ledger of members. I didn't bother reading more than what was needed, to confirm it was this band's member ledger. The bloody thumbprints next to the names proved it.

Tossing the letters I'd bundled up into the chest, I quickly went through the rest of the tent. I checked the bed, under it, and even under the rug that was frayed and torn on the ground.

Finding nothing else worth taking note of, I hefted the chest and left the tent.

"Careful," Renn mumbled as she helped the girl off the horse. She almost fell, taking Renn to the ground with her, and the horse shook its head as if to complain at them. As if embarrassed to have riders unable to even get off on their own.

Putting the chest down near the horse, I sighed as I watched the mercenary girl look around. Her eyes inevitably fell on the dead man nearby. The one with shattered legs.

"What'd you find?" Renn asked as she stepped away from the girl, and put herself between me and her.

Oh...?

I accepted Renn's glare and gestured to the chest. "Ledgers, letters. Enough," I said.

"Enough," Renn repeated my answer, and I didn't like how she had said it a little accusingly.

The horse stepped away, and I was about to step forward to grab it but it simply trotted over to the nearby mess by the campfire. It went to nibbling at whatever had fallen from the pot, the contents of the soup.

Renn crossed her arms and drew my eyes back at her. Her left ear fluttered, and I knew she was waiting apprehensively.

I lightly pointed at the girl behind her, who was still staring at the dead men around us. It was interesting that Renn hadn't really done more than glanced at them.

"Elisabell," Renn reminded me.

Right. "Elisabell," I nodded, and the girl behind Renn startled. She spun to look at us, and went to hugging herself. She did a mix of holding her stomach and crossing her arms, as Renn was doing, but did so in fear and not anger.

"U-um...!" the girl stammered, and I wondered if she had always spoken that way. Or if it was just the stress.

“She said you saved her,” Renn said before I could say anything else.

I blinked, and looked back at Renn. “I had,” I admitted.

“Why were they going to kill her?” Renn asked me.

I shifted, and knew that Renn had to already know the answer. Which meant she was only asking me... so that I'd say it aloud. So that I'd give her the answer, so she could then argue a point.

“Why was she there in the first place?” I asked her back instead of answering her question.

The girl flinched, and Renn's eyes narrowed at me.

“Vim...” Renn's tail began to move more violently. It started to sway side to side, and twitch. As if itchy.

“Elisabell... Who was the captain?” I asked her.

Renn's ears shifted a little, to turn and listen to the girl... who promptly hiccuped. “Him,” she said with a point. To the man not far from her.

So he had been...?

“He had been? Really? Not the scarred man? The one who gave orders?” I asked her.

She quickly shook her head, but didn't say anything more.

Interesting. Oh well. “What do you know about this band, Elisabeth?” I asked.

Elisabeth hiccuped again, and I noted Renn's tail had jolted alongside the sound. As if it had startled her, or hurt her. “They... they called it the Lizard's Perch. I heard them telling brother that they were heading back north. To rejoin another band up there,” she answered.

Another band. Maybe the one whose letter I had read earlier. The one who had hooked up with a baron or something.

I'd never heard of the Lizard's Perch, of course, but mercenary bands were fickle things. Not only did they share names all the time, they also came and went.

I'll need to send a letter to Link. He'd know.

A bird crowed nearby. I glanced at the area it had made noises from, and noticed the sun was starting to rise in the distance.

“Vim. Why’d they try to kill her?” Renn asked again.

While studying the sunrise, I nodded. “They’d been readying to flee. They realized their advanced wave of attackers had failed, or were struggling. I’m not sure what she had actually done, since I arrived as the man was hefting the axe, but it’s likely she hadn’t wanted to abandon her brother. Or they had simply decided she wasn’t worth the risk, or effort, and were going to kill her so she’d not tell us about them,” I told her.

Typical mercenary stuff.

“Then she’s not our enemy,” Renn said quickly. Too quickly to have actually heard what I had said, and process it. She had started speaking before I had even finished.

I nodded at her. I knew what she was saying. I understood where she was coming from. “I hear you Renn. But...”

She shook her head. “Vim!” she stepped forward, but only a single step. Not close enough to reach out and touch her.

“Have you told her?” I asked.

Renn startled, and suddenly looked as scared as the girl behind her. She held my eyes for a small moment, and then looked away.

Looking away from her, I looked into the young girl's eyes. "Your brother is dead. Slain in battle," I told her.

Elisabell's trembling stopped... but only for a moment. Then she blinked... and then nodded.

She had obviously expected such news.

I sighed as I stepped away from Renn and the girl. To grab the horse that had started to wander off.

Taking hold of its reins, I guided it over to the pole next to the larger tent. The one with their flag upon it. I wrapped its reins around the pole, and ignored it bumping its snout into my arm. It didn't want me to tie it here.

I didn't care. I stepped away from the horse, as its tail fluttered in annoyance.

"I told you, brother...!" Elisabell whispered softly.

Although I kept an eye on the girl, in case she did something stupid, I wasn't too worried about her.

She hadn't even fought back when that man had gone to kill her. She had simply curled up in a ball.

And based off the way she was standing there... shaking and holding herself, I doubted she'd grow the nerve to do aught else.

It was too bad honestly. If she'd just attack me or Renn, I'd be able to justify what honestly needed to be done.

Even if Renn would be hurt by it. It would have been the better outcome.

Yet Elisabeth didn't do anything. She wept silently, standing still where Renn had left her... even as Renn hurried over to me as I went to go through more boxes.

"Vim...!" Renn whispered softly as I popped open a box, and found a bunch of blankets.

"Renn," I said gently as I pushed the box over to get to the one beneath it.

"Were they really going to kill her?" she asked as she grabbed my arm.

I nodded. "Had I been a few moments late, yes," I said. I had honestly just barely made it. The man had hefted the axe, over his shoulder. He had turned upon my approach, as the rest of the mercenaries had done, which was the only reason she hadn't died.

"Then do we need to...?" Renn asked desperately.

Popping the lid off the bigger box, I did my best to not look away from the horseshoes inside it. They were useless, but right now I wanted to pretend they were valuable beyond measure.

Especially since I could see, and feel, Renn's desperation. Like always she was wearing her heart on her sleeve, and right now it was bleeding profusely.

"Ask me after," I whispered.

"After what?" Renn asked.

I stepped back, to face the girl who was walking over to us.

Renn spun, and grabbed my arm. She squeezed my elbow and arm, gripping it tightly as if for support... as we watched the young Elisabeth come to a stop a few feet from us.

Studying her, I noticed the way her eyes held my own. Not Renn's.

Yet although her eyes now had a bit of determination in them, there wasn't much else. I didn't see the eyes of someone about to do something stupid, or unthinkable. Instead...

Then she promptly fell to her hands and knees.

Renn's breath caught, and I flinched as the young girl prostrated in front of us.

"Please," she begged.

My arm got squeezed even tighter as Elisabeth sucked in a harsh breath. She was fighting back sobs.

"Please let me bury my brother. Please...!" she finally asked.

Ah. Right. If this was the area they were native to, it was likely they were similar to the folks in the nearby village. Believers in the forest spirits and stuff.

They had a very serious belief that if one wasn't buried properly then they would be haunted. Either turning into revenant spirits, or suffering for eternity because of it.

"What...?" Renn hesitated, yet didn't let go of my arm.

“Before you kill me. Please. For his soul!” she begged.

Then she began to weep. She kept her head on the ground, genuflecting. She clung to the dirt and grass, shaking wildly as she did.

I stepped forward, and Renn tugged on my arm. I ignored her, and basically dragged her behind me as I approached the girl on the ground.

Stopping before her, I ignored Renn’s tiny whine. She was clutching my arm something fierce, as if to at any moment try and pull me away.

Kneeling down, slowly, I studied the girl’s head. Her hair was dirty. Clumps of dirt were stuck in her hair, likely from when she had been rolling around on the ground. When the men had been about to kill her.

“I’m supposed to kill you,” I told her.

Renn’s nails dug into my arm as the girl went tense.

“Mercenary laws dictate it. The laws of this land would ordain it. The laws of my Society demand it,” I told her.

I heard Renn's teeth grind as her jaw clenched.

With a heavy sniff, the girl looked up. She looked a mess. Her face was covered in snot and tears.

"My brother wouldn't have done it had he known," she said with a broken voice.

"I believe you," I said.

"But that doesn't matter..." she whispered and looked down. She dropped her head back to the ground, placing her forehead on the dirt.

"It doesn't."

"And I didn't follow him. I abandoned him...!" she whispered a cry.

"That matters most," I said with a nod.

"I'm sorry...!" Elisabeth sobbed, and I knew she wasn't apologizing to me and Renn. She was speaking to her brother.

She had likely been supposed to join him. In the attack.

She hadn't done so.

"I wish you would have. It would have made this easy. She would have wept and grown angry at me, but at least it would have been easier," I said with a sigh.

"Vim...!" One of Renn's hands swapped places to squeeze. Her right hand released my arm, and grabbed me by the shoulder, near the neck. She squeezed, clinging to me. I could tell by the way she stood behind me, that she was positioning herself to tug on me. To pull me back.

The fact she thought she'd be able to was oddly funny.

"I'm sorry Renn..." the girl cried, keeping her head down.

Renn made a sad noise, but didn't respond.

I sighed and glanced around. At the camp. The mess I had made. The broken boxes I'd gone through. The tents I'd broken and scattered. The horses, and bodies.

The world was getting brighter. The sun was almost over the horizon now. We had a few hours, but it was likely that someone from the village would notice soon. It wasn't far from here. Just over a few hills. I could even smell the river in the distance. They had likely set up camp as close to the river as they'd dared, to use it for water and fish.

"Martin..." the girl wept as I slowly stood.

Renn tugged on me as I did, but all she accomplished was stretching and ripping my shirt.

Turning to her, I accepted her accusational glare. She really was adorable. She looked ready to fight. To the death. Over her. Over a human girl she had only met a few days ago, and had only spent a few minutes with. It wasn't even as if she was a real friend or anything...

Why didn't she have the girl run off then, if she actually thought I was going to kill her?

"Well Renn?" I asked the oddly protective predator.

Renn blinked, and her face went pale as her pupils shrunk. "Me...?" she barely whispered in fear.

I nodded.

Renn immediately released me, and stepped backward. Several steps.

"Please... No!" Renn nearly gasped the words.

Woops. "Renn..." I raised a hand, to calm her.

She was starting to panic. To have a full blown panic attack. She had started breathing heavily, as if gasping for air, and had started trembling harder than the girl was.

"Vim...!" Renn barely got my name out between her raspy breaths.

"Renn... calm down. Jeez. I'll not make you kill her. Do you really think I'd do that?" I asked her. Really? I mean, it was obvious she expected me to kill her... which was why she had been ready to pounce on me as to protect her... but...

Did she think I'd make her do the deed herself? Really?

I'd demand it if the girl had been an actual enemy, and she a threat... but...

Right here and now? In this moment?

This girl was more threat to herself than any of us.

Renn's face contorted as she glared at me, and shifted on a heel. "What were you asking me to do then...!" she asked loudly.

"Well, it was more of a general question than a specific one. I wanted to know what you were thinking I should do," I said, raising my voice a little too.

My companion balled her fists and stepped towards me. "Don't say it like that then! I thought you just asked me to kill her! Gosh Vim!" Renn shouted angrily.

"I'd not torment you that way Renn. You should know better," I said, defending myself.

"I had thought so! But the way you had said it...!" she groaned as she waved at me, as if I was proof enough of such diabolical intentions.

Smiling softly at her, I crossed my arms. "Now that's upsetting. I was actually just kind of looking forward to how you'd fight me on it more than anything," I said.

Renn heaved as she gasped. "Vim...!"

I gestured at the girl in front of me, who was staring at us with wide eyes. "Once you calm down, let me know what you think we should do with her," I said as I stepped away. I went back to the boxes next to the large tent to finish going through them.

"I'm calm already Vim. As much as I'm going to be at least," Renn said quickly.

Stopping, I patiently waited for her to answer me then.

Her ears fluttered as she took a small breath, glanced at the prostrating girl, and then sighed. "I'm going to guess you won't let her go," she then said softly.

"Obviously. She's not noticed just yet, thanks to the stress and panic, but she'll remember everything rather clearly once this is all done," I said.

My main concern was Renn. She hadn't hid her traits in front of the girl... but the fault in that lied with me. I hadn't warned her.

But the reason I'd not been as on guard about it was simple.

She knew where the Weaver's Hut was. And she had tried to attack it. Then of course, worst of all, her brother died in that same attack.

I'd not have allowed her freedom either way.

Renn glanced at her own ass for a moment, or rather the thing attached to it. "Right..." she mumbled.

Elisabell studied Renn for a moment, then turned and looked at me. I ignored her desperate eyes and waited for the rest of Renn's response.

"Since... since you haven't killed her yet... does that mean I can assume you won't?" Renn asked carefully.

"Well... yeah. But don't think it's not still a possibility. I'm just willing to give her a chance is all," I said.

The girl sat up, and quickly looked over at Renn with hopeful eyes.

Renn groaned and covered her eyes. She took a deep breath, and her tail actually lowered all the way to the ground in pure relief.

"Just so you know Renn, I usually regret this decision. It typically doesn't end we-," before I could finish speaking Renn rushed forward and wrapped me in a hug.

She clung to me, almost as desperately as Elisabell's eyes looked. "Vim...!" Renn cried out with a muffled voice.

Patting her on the back, I nodded. "Come on Renn. Let's go through the rest of the stuff, and then head on back. Before any of the humans come asking questions," I said to her.

Renn nodded quickly, yet didn't release me. She instead squeezed me tighter, and made a weird noise as she did.

Staring into Elisabeth's wide, disbelieving eyes, as Renn hugged me... I wondered what I was going to do with myself.

I did sometimes offer mercy to those like her. It wasn't often. But I've done it before.

Some have worked out, others hadn't. Most ended in tragedy for the ones I tried to save, more than anyone else. This girl seemed similar to those. Someone who was pitiful, yet not strong enough to even justify the mercy granted to them.

They usually ran away or killed themselves. Unable to either comprehend, or accept, the life my mercy allowed them.

The scary part wasn't the danger of her harming or threatening those I protected. The Society. She was too feeble. Too weak to do much more than get her own self hurt, really. Even if she ran off and told someone all about us, few if any would believe her. Especially right now with the plague and famine going on. They'd just think she was infected with a weird deviation of the disease, or touched in the mind after surviving it. They'd sooner burn her at the pyre than believe her.

No... those like her usually were more danger to themselves than my own people.

Which was why she was so dangerous.

Her danger to herself was dangerous to Renn.

If I wasn't careful Renn would try and adopt this girl. To take responsibility for her. To feel so strongly for her that she'd risk the Society and herself to protect her.

I couldn't afford that. So I'll need to be very careful.

That was more dangerous to me than anything else right now. To either lose Renn or let her get hurt, even if just emotionally, by becoming too overprotective of the girl.

"Thank you Vim," Renn whispered lovingly as she clung to me.

Making Renn so happy almost made the risk this was going to be worth it.

Almost.

Chapter 249 A Smell Longed For

Although the middle of the day, the Weaver's Hut was a little quiet.

Usually by now there'd be children running around. Adults working, or preparing for their upcoming meals. Yet right now, as far as I was aware, only a small handful of people were even awake. And that number included me, Vim, and the elder non-humans of the family.

I couldn't blame the humans, and younger generations, from being exhausted. It had been a long, scary, night for them. And then Vim and Nann had them working hard throughout the morning, burning bodies and dealing with all the stuff we had brought back from the mercenary's encampment.

We had even helped Elisabeth bury her brother properly. She had wanted to bury him deep in the nearby forest, next to the largest tree she could find. Although Vim had been relatively quiet throughout the ordeal, I had been proud of his gentle willingness to accommodate her.

After burying her brother Martin, Elisabeth had become rather passive and understanding. She had wept fiercely as Vim buried him, but once we had returned here from the forest she had stopped crying. Although she had somewhat grown quiet, she had also been willing to talk to me when I addressed her.

Walking through the courtyard, I passed through the small stone pathway that ran through the center. It led to something of a gazebo, but I didn't pause at it. Not even to study the strange flowers that surrounded it. Instead I went straight to the workshop, making sure not to drop the warm pot I held, or the stuff sitting on top of its lid.

The door to the workshop was open, as I'd left it, and upon entering I was glad to find that Vim was still on his chair made of solid stone... and Elisabeth was likewise okay.

She turned as I entered the room, and gave me a tiny smile as I strode over to her. I ignored Vim, as he ignored me, and I went to putting the large cast iron pot onto the table. The only table in this whole place not littered with tools or cloth.

“It’s just a simple soup, Elisabeth. But Nasba says her children love it,” I said.

The young woman’s smile grew a little. “Thank you Renn,” she said as she stepped over to the table.

I nodded as I placed the small bowl that had a spoon in it on the table in front of her. I had carried it, and an empty cup, on top of the pot. She had a water jug nearby, which I had freshly filled a little bit ago.

She was more than capable of tending to her own needs; of course... although I saw her as a young girl, she was not a child. She was old enough to have been looking for a husband, after all.

But Vim had laid down the law. He and Nann had made it very clear.

Until we three left, Elisabeth was not allowed out of Vim’s sight. Not for a single moment. And although Vim hasn’t been actually rude or cruel to her... he hadn’t seemed too attentive on making sure she was fed or anything.

He hadn’t even worried about a place for her to sleep. I had to go ask Nasba for a pillow and blanket for her. Nasba, unlike Nann, hadn’t been bothered at all by my request. She had showed me where a cot was here in the workshop, and had given Elisabeth a set of bedding.

I patted Elisabeth on the shoulder as I stepped away, to let her eat. She wasn’t anywhere near as anxious or scared as she had been last night, or this morning, but she was still stiff. She had deep dark circles under her eyes, and I knew she was likely exhausted. She hadn’t been able to fall asleep yet.

Odds are she was worried Vim would kill her in her sleep.

I didn't fault her for thinking such a thing, but wished I knew how to convey to her that such a fear was unwarranted.

Vim had promised not to hurt her. Unless absolutely necessary. Vim could be cruel, but he was also a man of his word. He'd not break a promise like that. Not willingly, at least.

But that didn't mean Elisabeth wouldn't, or couldn't, do something foolish...

Which was what I had been worrying about, while gone. The half hour I'd been elsewhere, helping Nasba prepare her that pot of food had been long and stressful.

Though maybe I didn't need to worry too much...

Stepping away, I walked over to Vim and his little workbench. I watched as Elisabeth poured some of the soup into her bowl, and sat down at the table. She quickly went to eating. The moment she took one bite, her stomach made a thankful noise and she flinched.

I looked away, before Elisabeth noticed my stare, and I smiled at Vim. "What are you working on now, Vim?" I asked him. He was no longer messing with the set of leather armor. But instead he had a large felt, with thick fur on one side. He was sewing something to the edges, likely to form a crease.

“A toy. For one of the children.”

I frowned and wondered which one. There were many children here.

Vim must have noticed my question, for he gestured to our left. I followed his thumb, and found a bundle of fuzz. Stepping over to it, I picked up what looked to be a decrepit little stuffed animal. It kind of looked like a bird, based off the shape. But it had fur though, and it didn't have a tail or wings.

It looked torn and stained. As if it had been dropped in muddy water, and left there for days.

“During the attack she dropped it while you guys were running into the building. It fell in the garden, and I think one of the horses nibbled on it,” Vim said.

Oh... So last night, when Nann and I had gathered the families around the courtyard, he meant. I did remember a few younger girls amongst that group... though I honestly didn't remember any who had been carrying such a toy. Maybe it had been one of the families that Nann had gathered.

I smiled softly as I put the toy down and stepped back over to him. “How can you be so strangely gentle like that Vim, yet so mean to her?” I asked him.

“Easily,” Vim answered simply.

My eyes twitched, but I didn't allow myself to grow upset with him.

After all... I understood it. I really did.

Elisabell was basically being forced into the Society. It was either that or kill her.

Yet... even though that basically made her a member...

It also didn't. In a way. Not because of a technicality or because Vim didn't see it that way, but rather for a more simple reason.

She hadn't proved herself yet. And until she did, Vim would not treat her like a member.

And since she wasn't a member... well...

Elisabell coughed, and I glanced over at her. She shifted on her chair, wiping her mouth, and then went back to eating.

Either Vim's comment had bothered her, or she was simply so stressed that even eating was difficult for her right now.

Though...

Watching her eat, I realized she was actually doing pretty well. She was, in a certain sense, basically a prisoner right now. Under Vim's watchful eye.

Under the eye of people, things, she now knew were not human. And not just because I was walking around with my tail and ears visible, either. She had fully witnessed Vim's strength. Its incomprehensible truth made her realize just what kind of situation she was in.

Yet... although obvious anxious and stressed... she was also not crying or weeping anymore. She was even being a little cordial with me, and Vim, and had even gone so far as to help me and Vim earlier. When we had gone through the camp, searching for anything worth taking, she had not only helped but had worked hard.

It was likely she was just trying to stay on our good side... but... well...

Had I been in her position, I wasn't sure I'd be able to be so... cordial, or accepting, of it.

Grabbing Vim's shoulder, I leaned into him a little. "What are you making?" I asked with a whisper.

His head tilted a little, and I smirked at the way he side-glanced me. Did he not like it when someone whispered in his ear?

“A duck.”

A...

Smiling warmly at him, I nodded. “Good,” I said.

“Hm,” he made a noise and rolled his shoulder. The one I wasn’t holding. I couldn’t help but giggle at his adorable discomfort.

“By the way, Nann’s going to teach me how to sew. She’s going to make you a new set of clothes, since she ruined your other pair. I’m going to be helping her tomorrow,” I told him. She had made it very clear that I was to find her at the crack of dawn, and not be late.

“You’ll be in good feathers. She’s very good. Plus she’s more like you than not, she likes to make designs and stuff,” Vim said.

I nodded. I had noticed. Most of the clothes here were pretty. Especially the ones worn by the girls and women.

“Good feathers. That’s funny,” I said as I realized what he had said.

“Is it? It’s apt, I think,” he said.

"It is... what would you say about me then? If it was me instead?" I asked him.

"Good paws maybe? Or maybe your eyes. I'd say something akin to under a watchful eye or something, I think," Vim said as he thought about it.

"Watchful eye...?" I asked.

"Your memory. Plus you notice things I don't like you noticing, so you're perceptive," he said.

I giggled as I leaned against him again. "What have I noticed recently that you didn't want me to?" I asked.

"What haven't you noticed, would be an easier answer," he mumbled.

Elisabell's spoon clanked as she went to refill her bowl. I smiled at her as she did, and I noticed the way she was doing her best to not look over at us.

"Do you know how to sew Elisabeth?" I asked her.

“Huh...!” she startled, nearly spilling some of her soup in the process. She quickly sat up straight, and coughed. “Y-yes. Though I’m not very good...” she said.

Hm... “You mentioned your family worked on roofs?” I asked.

She nodded quickly. “We did... You might not want me to sew much, but I could definitely fix any leaks in your roofs and stuff,” she said, confident.

“I look forward to seeing your sewing Renn. I bet it’s not as bad as you say it is,” Vim said.

“You have seen it, Vim,” I said.

“I... I have?” he turned, and I realized he was doubting me.

I nodded. “Remember in Ruvindale? When we met? The pants I wore had been ones I sewed. Nory had made them, originally, but I fixed them before leaving our cabin. I fixed all my clothes and bags and stuff before leaving, as best as I could at least,” I said.

Vim blinked, and then frowned... and I watched him remember and ponder the past. “I do remember those pants... What happened to them?” he asked.

“Amber burnt them. After she heard you had told me to get rid of them,” I said.

He sighed. "Had I said that? Really?" he asked.

"No... but that's how I had interpreted it back then," I said. He had just been bothered by the pattern design on them. They had been patterned with an emblem design from a nation that no longer existed. He hadn't liked the fact I had been walking around in clothes that told others how old I was.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

Smiling at him, I patted his shoulder. "It's okay Vim."

His eyes told me he didn't believe so, but I wasn't going to press it. Honestly I was just kind of glad that he even remembered them.

"Still... they hadn't been that bad had they? Why do you say your sewing is bad then?" he asked.

"They'd been horrible Vim... They had been off center, and itchy, and the seams I'd made were tearing. When I took them off after you said something that night, they had even torn," I said with a smirk, a little proud of it for some reason.

He sighed at me, but smiled all the same.

I'd not mention that I had torn them out of emotion. I had taken them off quickly; ashamed I hadn't realized what he had so obviously noticed upon first looking at me. So the tearing hadn't really been because of my handiwork but rather my hasty removal of them.

"I'd think any woman would know how to sew. Or uh... is it... well... because..." Elisabeth went quiet as we both turned to look at her.

Smiling at her, more so to let her know it was completely okay for her to join our conversation, I waved her concerns down. "I wish I could say it's not because we're not human... but the reality is it might be a reason. But my own reason is more than that. I grew up struggling with it, and learned to hate it since failing at it got me beatings," I told her.

"Beatings...?" Elisabeth and Vim both said softly, and I realized I had said something a little off for the happy moment.

Coughing, I nodded. "But I need to learn! And quick. Vim for some reason hates clothes you see, and ruins them faster than you can blink. Which means I might one day soon be the only thing standing between him being naked and not," I said.

"Naked..." Elisabeth frowned at us, and I realized she was imagining him so.

"Humans are oddly understanding of a naked man knocking on their door, you know. They usually pity me when I do," Vim said with a smirk.

Elisabell laughed, and I loved hearing it. Was this the first time she's laughed since last night?

"Probably because we'd be too shocked to do anything else, I'm sure!" Elisabell said between her laughs.

I nodded. "Yeah. You'd be nice to him just in hopes he'd go away, I think. Better to give him a set of clothes than risk being around him any longer than need to," I said.

"See, usually humans are nicer than that though. They're nice enough to not say that part out loud," Vim said.

Smirking at him, I noticed he had started to fold his little stuffed animal together. It lacked any stuffing, and looked oddly wobbly, but it was finally taking shape. It, like the destroyed one on the table nearby, had a small layer of fur all around it. To keep it soft. Yet the leather was the type of tanned hide that would be resilient and durable. Where if properly taken care of the young girl would be able to hold it for years without worry.

Vim then coughed, and remembered something. "Speaking of being naked..." he turned, to look at Elisabell.

I glared at him for a moment, waiting expectantly for what he was about to say. A joke? Something serious? Hopefully whatever it was...

"You didn't bathe did you? Probably too late now though. You look about to fall over..." Vim said with a sigh.

Ah...

Elisabell went a little still, her brow furrowing as she tried to comprehend what he had just said.

“Vim, really...” I sighed as I thumped him in the shoulder.

“Um...!” Elisabell started to say something, but then went red in the face and wasn’t able to say it.

“Just ignore him Elisabell. He’s teasing me, through you,” I said to her.

“Huh...” she got her embarrassed blush under control far faster than I ever did, and then frowned at us.  
“But I do stink,” she admitted.

“You’re fine. You need sleep more than anything else. We can bathe once you’ve rested,” I said.

Vim nodded, agreeing with me.

“Huh...” she repeated the same nod of her head and sound, but this time it had sounded less sure than before.

Smiling at her, I then noticed she swayed a little. She caught herself, and went to blinking wildly as if suddenly stunned.

She had just almost fallen asleep. While sitting and talking to us.

“Are you done eating Elisabeth?” I asked as I stepped away from Vim.

“Huh...? Oh... Yeah...” she didn’t sound too happy about it, but she nodded.

“Then let’s get you into your bed,” I said.

“Mhm...” she nodded, and although has been rather meek and mannered this whole time... she seemed even more dutifully acknowledging as she stood up from her chair.

Smiling at her, I took her by the arm and guided her over to the cot. She practically fell into it, making the thing wobble and sway a little. It was just a large blanketed netting that was suspended by two of the support beams in the room. But for her it was more than enough.

Grabbing the blanket Nasba had given her, I draped it over the girl as she grabbed the large feathered pillow and buried her face into it.

I smiled down to the girl as she rolled over and curled up. I patted her shoulder as she blinked at me... and I saw the way her eyelids slid heavily along her eyes. She was already falling asleep.

"Goodnight, Elisabeth," I said to her.

"Mhm," she made a noise and nodded... and then sure enough, a moment later, fell asleep.

A little jealous at how quickly she had done so, I patted her shoulder again. Not to wake her, but to just let her know all would be okay.

As Elisabeth drifted deeper into sleep, I stepped away from the hanging cot and back over to Vim.

"She fell asleep as soon as she rolled over," I told him.

"She's exhausted. Plus sleep is a place of sanctuary. You can hide from your fears and pain there," Vim said.

"Why don't you ever sleep then?" I asked him.

Vim frowned, and then glanced at me. "That's funny. Or are you saying I should sleep more because I'm a coward?" he asked me.

I smiled at him. "I more so meant... if that's how you view sleep, then I'd think you whose life is sometimes hard and cruel, would enjoy it. Not that you're a coward," I said.

"Ah. That's too bad. Beak would have called me a coward there," he said.

"You are one, Vim. But not for things like that. You'd never cower over such trauma. Now if sleeping could save you from me, on the other hand, I'd believe it. But you sleeping would just invite me into your bed, so..." I teased him.

Vim's eyes studied me for a moment, and I felt a tiny blush form.

He then smirked and looked away, to re-focus on the little toy he was making.

"What...?" I asked.

"I fear the day you can say something like that without blushing," he said.

My blush deepened.

Walking over to him, I hoped she really was asleep. Otherwise we were likely looking like a pair of fools.

“How are you feeling, Vim?” I asked him.

“Got a year to talk about it?” he asked back.

Hesitating at his tone, I calmed down as I realized he had just been making a small joke.

Although glad he was in a strangely good mood all of a sudden, I was half tempted to smack him for saying such a thing. Coming from him that comment had been rather serious.

Vim glanced at me and smiled. “I’m fine Renn. How are you?” he asked instead.

I gulped. “Worried,” I admitted.

He nodded. “I’m sure you are.”

“Not going to try and relieve me?” I asked him.

“She’s taken the only bed, Renn,” Vim said gently.

My face grew hotter, again, and I finally gave in to the urge to smack him. Although I did so playfully, tapping his shoulder. "Vim...!"

"What? Now we know she's definitely asleep, she would have moved or made a noise at that," Vim said.

Sighing at him, I shook my head as I glanced over to the girl. She looked just as I'd left her, sleeping soundly and all curled up.

Studying her for a moment, I realized she was likely about the age Nory had been. When I had met her. Or maybe just a little older.

"Why'd you let her live, Vim...?" I asked him softly.

"For you Renn. Isn't it obvious?" he said.

My blush grew warmer again, but not out of embarrassment. Stepping up behind him, I wrapped my arms around his neck and head. Hugging his head from behind, I buried my face into his hair.

"Thank you," I whispered as I fell for him all over again.

I had expected it, but still...

“Hm. We’re headed to the Crypt after this. So it works out fine. We’ll leave her there,” he said, unbothered by my smothering of him.

“Just to be sure... when you say crypt you don’t mean a grave, right?” I asked as I squeezed his head tighter.

He chuckled, and it felt wonderfully weird to feel it in my arms. “You were just so happy, and now you’re on guard again. You’re a pendulum Renn. But no, it’s just the name of the location. I’d not take her elsewhere just to kill her there... that makes no sense. Waste of a headache,” he said.

Taking a deep breath, I wished Vim didn’t lack a scent. I wasn’t sure what kind of smell I wanted to smell from him, but the lack of one made me a little sad. “Please tell me it’s at least somewhere she’ll be happy,” I said.

“Those there seem happy enough,” he said.

Hm. I’ll have to just wait and see then. Odds are Vim didn’t care if she’d be happy or not. To him, sparing her life was the limit of his mercy.

Vim tilted his head a little, making me have to sway to the left as he did so. Since I was clinging to him so strongly. “It’s a place of worship, basically. It’s where many of our members are laid to rest. A holy place. She’ll basically become a nun,” Vim explained to me.

Ah. He had misinterpreted my noise earlier. He had heard my hum as one of annoyance over his answer.

Brushing his hair, I sighed at him and his adorableness. "Sounds like a place you don't care for," I teased him.

He chuckled. "You have no idea."

Smiling at him, I tried to smell him again.

Really. It was so strange to have something, someone, wrapped in my arms... and not be able to smell it at all. Everything had a smell. Everything. Yet he simply didn't.

It was off-putting in a way. Disturbing. And not just because I wanted to smell him, to know what he smelled like.

He'd just gone through battle last night. And not only had he fought, and killed, he had been stabbed through by Nann. The wound had bled so much that we had tossed all of the clothes he had been wearing into the fire of burning bodies. And although he had cleaned and wiped himself off, I knew for a fact that he hadn't bathed since then. I had tried to bathe with him, to use it as an opportunity, but he had said he had too much to do. He had windows to fix, he had said.

So by all counts Vim should smell. Not just of his own scent, but of grime and other stuff. Bad smells.

But of course he didn't. Not even buried in his hair was I able to smell anything.

Though maybe it'd happen one day. He was able to smell me, and I could smell myself, even though no one else supposedly smelled me anymore.

Blinking at the realization, I laid my chin on his head as I thought about that fact.

I no longer had a smell.

So strange. It was too bad Miss Beak was dead; she probably would have had a very unique perspective on it. I wonder if she had noticed at a... "Vim," I spoke up as I realized something.

"Hm?"

"She noticed, hadn't she? That's why she called me your mate. She noticed my lack of smell," I said, feeling very stupid for not having noticed.

"Yes. Very likely. You had told her your story Renn, but it's not like you or I had been very forthcoming with our relationship. Under more normal circumstances, Beak would have just thought I'd been escorting you for one reason or another. Maybe even would have just assumed we were having fun, playing around for a short time. Yet she had noticed the truth immediately," he said.

“Right...” I nodded, and wondered how long ago Vim had realized. He had said yes rather quickly, which meant he had already thought of it.

Vim was oddly aware in weird ways sometimes.

“I bet Merit will notice right away too,” I said.

He groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

Patting his head, I smiled. “Be nice to my friend,” I said.

“I’m always nice to Merit,” he mumbled.

He was... but that wasn’t the problem. He wasn’t nice enough. Yet... if he did become nice enough...

Then I’d worry over losing him to her. Which hurt my heart. I wanted her to be happy but...

Sniffing, I did my best to not allow my eyes to fill with tears... but I lost rather quickly.

“Renn...?” Vim asked gently.

“Mhm...” I dug my face back into his hair, and clung to him as I went to crying.

Doing my best to at least keep my sobs as quiet as possible, I wept into his hair.

A lot of painful things have been happening lately. And I knew more were to come.

Yet even with all these painful things, Vim was steady. Strong. Warm.

It wasn't a stretch to say his stalwart attitude and heart was keeping my own frail one from shattering. If he even realized it though...

Clinging to him, Vim continued to work on the little toy... letting me cry into his hair without complaint.

Like always he indulged me. As he did with all of our members. As he did for everyone he protected.

However... I couldn't help but feel a little special. To be chosen over Merit, and who knows who else. To be granted such leniency, as well.

For him to have spared Elisabeth... that alone was telling. Even if no one's mentioned it. Even if Vim hasn't even realized it yet.

He had spared her because he knew it was what I had wanted him to do. What I had hoped for.

Basking in his gentle sturdiness, I hoped a day would come where I could pay him back for all of this. For being who... and what he was. For not just me, but the whole Society.

"I love you Vim," I whispered as I cried.

I really did.

Even if he refused to smell.

Chapter 250 A Weaver's Deduction

I was glad we were finally getting ready to leave, yet at the same time I was starting to fear what we'd find next.

Renn and Elisabeth were on the other side of the courtyard, near the workshop. They were with Nasba and some of her children, readying the packs that I'd soon be securing to the horses we'd be taking northward.

Honestly this had gone better than it could have. The mercenaries had all been taken care of. We had found enough proof in the form of ledgers and letters to know that I'd likely gotten all of the ones here, and that they had yet to send any letters elsewhere about their intentions. We had found a short, simple, letter written by the captain here that they had intended to send north once the raid had been

finished. It hadn't mentioned the Weaver's Hut, or its location, just that they planned to pillage a nearby community and meet their fellow in some baron's territory in the north.

I planned to make a stop in that territory on the way back to Telmik. If their band was still there by then, which would likely be the middle of winter, I'd deal with them.

So the attackers were dealt with. Without casualties. Other than a broken window and some torn up beets in a small garden near the hill, from the horses trudging through them, there hadn't been much damage. There'd been a few days' worth of work and stress, I guess, but nothing drastic.

The only remaining issue, Elisabeth, wasn't an issue either.

She had calmed down and adapted quickly. Typical of a pagan woman in this era. She probably thought herself something of a slave now, and had almost completely adopted the roll. She followed Renn around dutifully, but wasn't a walking depression. She was upbeat now, smiling and talking with everyone as if she had been a member all along.

Which was the main reason I was so worried.

Fate was doing its damndest to make Renn get hurt. Lamp and her people. Those pirates. That young boy. Now this girl. And even before Lumen there had been others. Those female merchants we had traveled with for a short time, for example.

I'd not really noticed it much before, since stuff always happened during my travels... but it was now clear that there was something amiss.

Why was it always women and children? Why was it always people Renn pitied? Why did they always tug at her heartstrings without remorse?

How was I going to protect her from such things? I could be cruel... cruel enough to heartlessly slaughter those who were as much victims as not.

But could I be cruel enough to break Renn's heart and soul?

Something told me I knew the answer already.

"Vim."

I turned to the Weaver. She waved me into the building from a nearby window.

Glancing back at Renn and the girl, I narrowed my eyes at them and debated letting her out of my sight.

I'd not allowed it. The only moments since this all started that I'd allowed the human to leave my line of sight was when she bathed. And she had done so only with Renn, and I had made sure to stay near enough that I had been able to hear everything that had happened.

Sighing, I stepped away and went to enter the main building.

Once inside I quickly found the room that the Weaver was in. It was the one next to the large room where Nasba enjoyed giving lectures. I entered the room, and passed by one of Nann's children as I did. I walked over to the window; the same one Nann had waved me in from, and once more put Renn and her human baggage in my field of view.

"Really Vim... not only is she likely not to do anything, I highly doubt Renn would allow it," Nann said with a sigh.

"From your mouth to your dead god's ears," I said.

"Dead...?"

I turned and frowned at the young girl now staring at me with wide eyes.

Woops.

Nann sighed again, and stepped around the rack of clothes to look at me. "You'll be headed to see Horn and his family after the Crypt right?" the Weaver asked.

I nodded.

“Good. I’ll send you with some nicer winter clothes. Knowing Horn they need it,” Nann said as she turned to the girl and pointed at the rack. “Pack all this as well, would you dear?” she asked the girl.

The girl nodded, but did so worriedly. She was still bothered by my earlier comment. She stepped up next to the rack, grabbed a few sets of the clothes hanging from it and then hurried out of the room.

“I’m only taking two horses. One’s the girl’s,” I reminded the Weaver.

“Says the man able to carry more than any horse could dream,” she said offhandedly as she stepped over to another rack.

Shaking my head at her I turned back to the window. I found Renn, then Elisabeth. It was easy, they were right next to each other... like always. They were with the little girl who I had made that stuffed animal for. They were all kneeling around a box, rummaging amidst its contents.

“This is where you tell me that my worry is unfounded. That she’ll likely adapt and live the rest of her life in the Society. Joining it just like all the others who’ve done the same,” I said.

“One needs not know how to solve puzzles to answer that,” Nann said.

Right.

"If not her... what about Renn?" I asked.

"Hm... thus the reason I summoned you. I'd blame the human, but she's impossible to separate from you even on a normal day," Nann said with a small giggle.

Shifting, I wondered how true that statement was. I felt like Renn usually distanced herself from me when we were visiting others. She normally became friends with someone, or everyone, and spent more time with them than me. Merit in Lumen. Herra's cousin at the armadillos. Riz at Secca, Landi, and so forth.

"Thank you for teaching her by the way. She vastly enjoyed it," I said.

"Hmph. Regrettably not as well as I'd have liked. I'm not sure why, but she really struggles with sewing. Which is funny since she seems to have phenomenal hand-eye coordination, and her memory is sharper than any needle I can craft," Nann said.

I nodded. I had only sat in on a few of Nann's guidance lessons, as to let Elisabeth spend time with Renn, but the few I'd been around for had told me the truth of the matter.

Renn was simply not very good at fashioning clothes. On any level. She was capable of making the basic stuff, but they were relatively shoddy. Prone to failure, or tearing.

As if she suddenly became stiff and uncoordinated the moment she sat down with a needle, or some other method to sew or fashion clothes.

“Might be internalized trauma,” I reasoned.

“Highly likely. I’ve heard she can paint rather well,” she said.

“She can.”

“Then it’s likely something from her youth. Time might fix it, though it could likely be fixed rather swiftly if you’d like to know a better method,” Nann said.

Glancing away from the window, I watched the young girl from earlier enter the room. She was accompanied by a couple other girls, who all went straight to the rack of clothes. They gathered up the remaining clothes hanging upon it, and hurried out of the room.

“It’s funny, isn’t it? You’d think our human members would fear you more than the ones more like us,” Nann said as the girls left.

I frowned. “Humans can’t usually comprehend me, or what I represent. So in my experience, no.”

Nann huffed at me. “Humans aren’t so simple minded as that Vim. Just because you’re currently annoyed with one in particular doesn’t mean you can generalize their whole race,” she said.

She got me there. I shifted and looked back out the window, to try and ignore Nann's smirk.

Renn was now carrying the little girl. On her shoulders, giving her a piggy back ride. Elisabeth was following after them, dutifully, while carrying the stuffed animal for the girl.

I smiled at the sight, especially so the way Renn was smiling.

Such a sight made me wish she had found someone, or somewhere, else. Something other than me.

She deserved to have every waking moment filled with such happiness and joy. To live somewhere that would enable her to be so happy every day, and maybe even one day be carrying around her own children in such a way.

Instead she was stuck with me. Constantly traveling around the world... hating every moment of it. Weeping instead of smiling.

"The one you're so desperately protecting is as fragile as I'd assumed," Nann then said.

My jaw clenched, and I realized this was also going to be a painful conversation for me. In more ways than one.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“Oh, very.”

Great.

“I can’t know her heart, of course... I don’t know her whole story. What few pieces I’ve been able to gather have made me assume some things, and expect others. For that you can blame the human, if you’d like. I didn’t want to pry too much with her there. Out of courtesy.”

Thankful for the excuse, and permission, I went ahead and did so.

“Basically Vim, your lovely partner has endured heavy heartbreak. Several times, likely in quick succession. At least for our kind. I’ve known many others, many predators even, who have broken from less. I worry for her. If you keep her with you, over time she may either break completely or become numb. She may lose that strange gentleness that exudes from her, eroded away as the two of you continuously endure hardship,” Nann warned.

My shoulders lowered as I watched Renn carry the girl to the center garden's gazebo. To let the girl reach up and touch one of the hanging lamps upon it. Or at least, she tried to. Even while on Renn’s shoulders they were still too short to reach it.

“She chose this life. And I don’t think I can convince her away from it anymore,” I said softly.

“Can’t or won’t?” Nann asked me.

My eyes narrowed as Renn swapped with Elisabeth. She gave her the girl, and took the stuffed animal. Thanks to the human being a little taller than Renn, the girl was now able to reach the lamp. She didn’t really grab it, and just touched it with a fingertip, but it had been enough to make her very happy.

“So...? What do you think I should do? Insulate her? Keep her at a distance? How? Whether I like it or not, events like this happen all the time. Most of the time they end far worse, too. And even if fate is kind, and I’m on my best guard, tragedy always inevitably strikes,” I said.

“I’m sorry Vim... I don’t have an answer for you. I wish I did,” Nann said softly.

Then what was the point in telling me what I already knew?

I blinked, and realized I had grown upset. I did my best to toss aside such an emotion. Not only was it misplaced anger... Nann did not deserve it to be directed at her or in her presence, even.

“She may be fine, Vim. If she’s survived all this, until now, she might be able to endure whatever may come... especially if you’re always there for her,” Nann added.

That’s just it. The longer this went on the more she’d rely on me. The more she’d make me her foundation.

Such a thing worked until it didn't.

Such a thing worked until her heart couldn't take it anymore.

I'd experienced such things before. I had seen it happen before.

Though in Celine's case it had started before I had tried to make myself her anchor. She had grown tired. Too tired. The brunt and weight of that which she endured had crushed her... and by the time I had stepped in, to try and alleviate some of that burden from her...

It had already been too late.

Too little too late.

"If... if Renn does survive. One way or another. If she doesn't break and crumble... where do you see her? In a few hundred years, for example?" I asked the Weaver.

"Other than right next to you?" Nann asked, and I heard the grin on her face.

I nodded, admitting I had set myself up for that one.

“Well... I suppose it depends on how many of us she forgives, and how many she won’t,” she said.

Frowning, I turned away from the window again. “Forgives?”

“Oh yes. She’s very upset. At all of us,” she said.

Renn was...? “You’re kidding me,” I said. Where was this coming from?

Renn? That girl? Hating the Society?

Disappointed, maybe, at best... but actual hate? Anger? I just couldn’t see it. She loved the Society. Its people. She pitied them... and those she pitied, she loved.

Right...?

“She does not like how we treat you. I’m not sure yet... what that means. Is she upset that we need you? Is it a selfish thing? Or are we not properly compensating you, in her view? Or is it something else entirely...? I don’t know. All I know for sure is that woman, for better or worse, feels we have slighted you. As a whole. As the Society. I don’t think she’s made a decision yet concerning it... but well... something tells me we’ll all know when she does,” Nann said as she crossed her arms and nodded.

I gulped at the heavy accusation, and shifted a little. “You’re serious,” I said.

She nodded again. "Very. Surely you've noticed it? Or has she said something about it? She doesn't necessarily hate us as individuals... but there's definitely some underlying issue in her eyes. She gets very annoyed, deep down, when such topics come up. For instance she watched you fix that window the other day, and one of my children made a small comment. They had simply joked that they wanted to ask you to fix something else in their house, since you were obviously so good at it. It was a simple comment one makes without thought, and with no ill meaning, yet Renn had taken offense," Nann said.

"What'd she do?" I asked. Why hadn't anyone said anything?

"Do? Nothing. One of her ears had simply fluttered a little. Barely noticeable. She had been in the middle of sewing something, and talking with my granddaughter. The one you gave that duck to," Nann said with a wave.

Wait... "So her ear fluttered... after a comment from a passerby, and now you think she hates all of you," I said.

"If you want to put it that way, sure," Nann said.

I sighed and looked away from the Weaver. Not because I was upset with her, or not believing her... but rather the opposite.

I did believe her. Because I knew exactly what she was talking about.

Renn has indeed made many comments about that exact thing. Sometimes she said so under her breath. Other times she did so vocally, loudly.

She didn't appreciate how the Society treated me at all. At least from her perspective.

"Do... do you think it's a woman thing?" I asked carefully.

"Woman thing?" Nann asked back, and I noted the annoyance in her voice. She hadn't liked how I had phrased it.

I shook my head. "Possessiveness. Is it sourced from a desire to keep me all to herself?" I asked.

Nann sighed at me. "Men are just as possessive, Vim. And I don't know. It could be. I don't think it is, not just because I don't want to think that Renn is that simple... but look at her. She's more than happy with what you do. She was very happy you made that stuffed animal. She likes to hear us tease you, and tell stories of you. If this emotion, or whatever it is, is sourced from her desire to keep her to herself I wouldn't see her doing such things. The people I've known to act so possessive usually didn't want to share in any way at all, not even simple memories," Nann said.

Right... Renn did enjoy it when I did things she deemed gentle or kind. She absolutely adored it when I did something simple for the Society, like helping out in little ways. As weird as it was to say, and admit it, my penchant of going out of my way to help the Society even in the little ways, like fixing a broken window, was something Renn found immensely attractive. So for her to have gotten annoyed over that very thing, meant Nann was right. She didn't mind me helping... she didn't mind sharing me... she disliked not the request, but either the individual or the method of their asking of it.

She enjoyed the little things too much to hate them. Such little things were likely what had drawn Renn's eyes in the first place. The way she had watched me hold Lomi as she slept, running from nightmares, had as I told Nann and Nasba, been the origin of her fascination with me.

"Honestly Vim it could just be a cat thing. Aren't cats known for latching onto a singular person?" Nann suggested.

"Yes. Most animals do," I said.

Nann huffed, since she knew I had just tried to include her in that statement.

Well... I wasn't wrong. Even if Nann would never admit it.

She loved her family... but there was no denying the only person she ever truly loved was her husband. The love she felt for her descendants was simply the love that spilled over. She loved them because they existed thanks to him. That was it.

I'd never voice such a thing aloud though.

I blinked as I realized that was a good example.

Renn was a little different. She would likely love her children something fierce. And it wouldn't be just because they were of my blood.

Frowning, I wondered if maybe that was the solution to this supposed fragile heart of hers.

I tossed the idea out of my head the moment it sprouted, mostly since I wasn't sure how to address the main problem of it.

If I wasn't able to have children with non-humans, how could I fix that in the first place?

Plus bringing a child into this world just because I worried for Renn's stability was rather cruel, in its own way.

Especially since I wasn't sure how big of a problem it was yet, anyway.

"You just thought something weird, didn't you?" Nann asked.

Glancing to my right, as the Weaver stepped up next to me and joined me in staring out the window... I nodded. "I had been," I admitted.

She smirked at me. "Want advice? Love her. Cherish her. Even if you really don't. Not only would it keep her mind and heart safe, it'd do both her and you good. Plus it'd do the Society good to see you having fun, for once. How long has it been since Nasba laughed like that Vim?" Nann asked as we watched the young girl who had been getting carried around by Renn and the human run into Nasba's arms. She had the same tail feathers as her, so it made sense. She was more a granddaughter of Nasba than Nann.

“A long while,” I admitted. Nasba had always been a more cheery person, but the last few decades had been rough. And not just because her husband had passed away. Her first generation of descendants were gone now too. And that had seemed to hurt her more than her husband’s death.

“Regrettably the reality is she’ll likely perish or be lost to us for a different reason far sooner than simple depression. Yet all the same. I look forward to the letters I’ll get about you two as you travel over the years,” Nann said.

I scoffed. “From Renn herself, no doubt,” I said.

Nann giggled and nodded. “She did ask if she could send letters to us. Adorable isn’t it?”

Yes. It was. But I’d not admit it.

“Keep her safe Vim,” Nann said gently as Nasba headed our way. With the little girl. Hand in hand.

I nodded. “For now,” I said as I turned.

Nann giggled at me as I left the room, heading for the exit. Renn and the human had gone into the workshop, so I needed to head there as well.

As I left the building, I ran into Nasba and the little girl.

“Big brother!” the little girl drew my attention, and she beamed a happy smile up at me as she lifted the little duck stuffed animal I had made her. “Everyone loves it!” she told me.

“Well that’s not good. You better get strong enough to protect it, then,” I warned her.

The little girl’s smile blinked into a look of pure shock. “You’re right!” she shouted, astounded she hadn’t realized it before I had mentioned so.

Smiling softly I nodded. “Keep it safe okay?” I asked.

She nodded back quickly, with a serious expression. “Right...!” then she pulled her hand free of Nasba’s, and ran off into the house.

Nasba sighed at me. “Please Vim. You forget some of our children see you like a god, so they take your words to heart,” she said.

“That’s your fault. I’m not a god,” I said sternly.

Nasba shook her head at me, telling me she wasn’t in the mood to argue with me.

Still I smiled at her. "We leave tomorrow at dawn. Anything you need from me before we go?" I asked her.

"I have a letter for you. For Merit. I'll bring it to you in a bit," she said.

I nodded, I had been expecting it... which was why I had asked. Usually she had it ready within a day or so of me arriving. But I knew the reason... the reason was staring at me right now, off in the distance, from the workshop's window.

"Thank you for teasing Renn. She's enjoyed it," I said.

Nasba smiled. "I've enjoyed it too. I really hope you're wrong, Vim, and you aren't infertile. I really want her children to mix with my own," she said.

Frowning at the duck, I shook my head at her. "You're as weird as Merit," I said.

She smirked. "Mighty fine compliment, thanks."

It hadn't been, but sure.

Nasba then reached over and gently touched my arm. "All the same, I'm glad you're doing okay Vim. I'll admit I've... never actually really thought of it. So I'm glad that you're doing good," she said.

Frowning at her, I wondered what she meant. "Never thought of what?" I asked.

"Your happiness. I used to really get upset with you... since you were so mean to Merit. I'm sorry for that. I never took your feelings into account," Nasba said.

A little disturbed by Nasba's sudden... genuine apology, I wasn't sure what to say or do.

"Uhm... sure... Thanks?" I said, and felt stupid. She was being rather serious, and I had just been sarcastic.

Nasba though smiled and giggled at me. "I also thanked Renn. She got all red and cute, you should have seen it."

Ah... I nodded. "She does get all red, doesn't she? Isn't it weird?" I asked.

"It's adorable. Those our age usually don't get so emotional so easily... so it's neat to see it when it happens. Please don't let that part of her die, okay? I know how you get sometimes... don't make a mistake, Vim."

Taking her warning to heart, I nodded. "I'll do my best to try."

She nodded back. "Good... Good..." she whispered.

For a small moment we didn't say anything more, and then one of the children shouted from inside the house. Nasba's tail feathers shifted at the shout, telling me she recognized the voice. "Someone just started a fight," she said knowingly.

"Children," I said.

She huffed and nodded. "Sometimes they make you regret giving birth to them, I swear..." she mumbled as she stepped past me, to enter the house.

Smiling at her, I watched her go for a moment... then she paused, and glanced back at me.

I tilted my head at her, and she frowned at me. "If you have a son, give him to Merit, Vim. It's the least you can do," she said.

What little bit of a smile I had died instantly, and Nasba's frown deepened as if in offense. "I'm serious!" she shouted.

"I could tell. Make sure you get me your letter before we leave, Nasba. Or else I'll tell Merit you had spent all our time visiting with Renn and hadn't had a moment for her," I warned her.

“Gah! She’d believe you too!” Nasba groaned as I left her and stepped away.

Smiling as I crossed the courtyard, I paused a moment before the workshop to stare at the small pile of stuff Renn and the rest had prepared.

I had mentioned we were only taking two horses, hadn’t I?

Two horses. Three people. Yet there was easily three horses worth of stuff there in that pile. The type of amount that wouldn’t allow anyone to ride the horse as it carried all of it.

Sighing, I shook my head and entered the workshop. To find the source of this headache... and if possible, not fall deeper into love with her.

I needed to keep some dignity, after all.

What little I had left was precious...