

## **Non Human 251**

### Chapter 251 A Bloody Hand

I was in a neighbor's home.

At least... that's how this forest made me feel.

The horse I was riding trotted along slowly, following Vim's lead, and I felt an odd mix of familiarity and anxiousness.

We were crossing a rather large mountain pass, and the dense forest all around us did look a lot like the one I had been born in... but there was a strange difference. Some of the trees were white. Pure white. Their bark and trunks were the kind of white that I'd only seen on diseased trees, or during winter when they were stained by ice and snow... and not only was it not yet winter, these trees were all healthy and fine.

It wasn't too startling, honestly... I knew trees came in all shapes, colors, and sizes... but...

Well...

It felt weird all the same. Likely because the rest of the forest looked so closely to the one I had been born in. The only main difference, other than the odd flower or shrub, were these white trees.

Another oddity was how slow we were traveling.

Vim had the horses more walking than anything else. It wasn't so bad that I was upset with the pace... but it was a little strange. The mountain pass we were treading upon wasn't the greatest, but it wasn't so bad we needed to move this slow.

Especially since Vim himself wasn't walking on the ground, but on a horse himself.

He had wanted to originally only travel with two horses, but decided on bringing a third once he realized how much stuff we were taking with us.

Glancing behind me, I smiled at Elisabeth. She looked a little silly, surrounded by bounded bags. They were stacked as high as her shoulders behind her.

I too had bags and boxes strapped to my horse around me, but they weren't stacked as high for some reason.

Elisabeth noticed my focus, and smiled back at me.

She was riding her horse. The same one she had before the... incident. Vim had asked her if she wanted to ride it, or one of the other ones, and she had chosen it... even though it still seemed upset with her. Every so often she had to guide it back onto the path, even though my horse and Vim's never seemed to even consider wandering off.

Vim had likely asked her preference not out of kindness, but necessity. He hadn't wanted her on a horse that didn't obey her properly... yet she had interpreted it as him being merciful and kind. She had thanked me in private later that night, letting me know she was very thankful she could keep the horse that her brother had bought for her.

Although glad she was happy, and had been able to keep something precious to her... I slightly wished she had chosen a different horse.

Our new human companion was obviously the main reason we were traveling so slow. Not only was she... not the best horse rider... she was also a little needy.

She had to stop often. For rest. Or to relieve herself. Plus she needed more sleep and food than not it seemed.

It made me wonder if I'd been traveling with Vim for too long. I didn't remember Nory, or the siblings, needing such constant attention and thought... but obviously they must have needed it. Elisabeth wasn't really needy; after all, she was just human. She needed more than we did and more often.

Vim had known, and expected it, before I even realized it. He had been stopping us every so often, to stretch our legs, as he called it. It allowed Elisabeth to get off the horse, walk around, and then do whatever she needed at the time.

In fact by my count it was about time for another such stop.

I sighed as I tried to focus my attention away from the forest around me, and how slow it was passing us by.

Studying Vim's back, and the new set of leather he now wore, I wondered why I was not as happy about it as I had thought I'd be.

We matched again. The leather set of armor he had made for himself hadn't been an exact replacement, but it was strikingly close. Yet... although the two of us now once again looked like a pair...

For some reason I just wasn't as happy about it as I should be.

It brought a smile to my face, of course, and for some reason it made me relaxed to know from an outsider's perspective we were a natural pair again. Husband and wife, or something akin to it... but...

"What is it Renn?" Vim asked.

I blinked, and then promptly frowned. "How'd you know I was glaring at you?" I asked him. He hadn't glanced back once. Not in at least an hour.

Vim's whole body made a tiny movement. He had just chuckled at me. "Considering you glare at me even when happy, it's a safe bet," he said.

Well... that was true... I guess...

“How much farther?” I asked.

“About a week at this pace,” he answered.

“Is it in these mountains?”

He nodded. “The dead center of them.”

Hm. That meant we’d have reached them far quicker had he and I been alone, and on foot. We’d have likely not used this path, but strode straight through the forest itself.

A part of me knew that was the main reason I was a little upset. I longed to walk through the forest... to stalk it as I had done growing up.

Yet the rest of me knew better than to voice such a desire.

Knowing Vim, if I did... he’d find a way to allow such a desire to come to be. Though I wasn’t sure how he’d do it... not only would that mean he’d need to get rid of Elisabeth, he’d also need to get rid of the horses and all the stuff they were carrying.

I didn't want to test Vim's strange capabilities. If there was a way to accomplish such a thing, without actually hurting Elisabeth, he likely knew how to do it. I didn't want to torture poor Elisabeth more than she was already being subjected to. It wasn't right.

Especially since my desire was such a silly, pointless thing.

I wanted to run through the forest. With Vim. Because of course that was what my heart longed for, somehow.

It made little sense, but I've come to realize lots of things did too.

"Do you normally end up taking so much stuff between locations Vim? We hadn't really done this before, like this," I asked. We had almost as much as that time we had left Secca. At least, it felt like it.

Difference was most of the stuff we were carrying now was finished product. Clothes, and blankets and other such stuff.

"It happens often enough, yes. Sometimes I even end up escorting large caravans, or taking entire cargo ships. It's not always simple gifts though," Vim said.

"Why didn't we leave Lumen with more?" I asked.

“Herra doesn’t like taking much to her family. The few times I’ve tried to take them resources have only resulted in huge fights. So I stopped trying,” Vim said.

“Ah... That’s a little rude of Herra,” I said.

“It is,” Vim agreed.

My horse turned a little, going to the other side of the path. Vim had guided his horse that way first, so I didn’t try to correct it. It was just following Vim. But as we trotted along, I glanced down at the ground and around the side of the road for the reason that Vim had done such a thing.

I couldn’t find it.

For a few minutes I debated his reason for doing so, and then once I decided on the most likely reason, I asked him. “Why’d we move to this side of the road?” I asked.

“There’s a family of bears downwind. They’re about to enter hibernation, so could be hungry. I’d rather not have to kill them just because we smell like easy prey.” Vim answered.

I blinked, and realized all of my possible answers had been wrong.

“I don’t smell them,” I said as I scanned the distant trees.

“Hm,” Vim made a small shrug.

“Do we uh... not fear bears?” Elisabeth asked from behind me.

“Not with Vim,” I answered.

“Hm,” she made a similar sound Vim had just made, and I smiled at her. She was strangely picking up some of our mannerisms. I wonder if she was just... that impressionable, or if it was some kind of instinctive survival mechanism.

As I smiled at Elisabeth, I realized something serious.

“Animals can’t smell me anymore,” I said aloud.

“Right. They only smell the horses and the girl now. Which is too bad. I enjoyed traveling without having to worry about animals,” Vim said.

“Wait...” I groaned as I realized the truth. Now that I didn’t smell, actively... then...

Yes... that meant when we were with others, or on horseback, the larger predator creatures such as bears and stuff were now indeed something we needed to be on guard against.

My smell alone usually kept most creatures away. And those that dared to draw near only did so to see what I was. They rarely ever drew too close because of it. Especially the larger prey and predator creatures.

“Anything else I should be aware of because of this?” I asked Vim.

“Not sure... Be ready for animals to treat you different. And to forget to brush your teeth or take baths sometimes, since neither you nor anyone else will notice,” Vim said.

Great.

“I’d like to not stink,” Elisabeth mumbled.

I smiled and turned to glance at her. “You don’t stink, Elisabeth,” I told her.

“He thinks I do...” she mumbled again, a little lower this time.

“Well...” Yes. He did. Or had. But how did I explain to her that he simply thought so because she was a human.

Vim thought everyone stunk, supposedly. Except for me.

“Do you not smell even when you fart?” Elisabeth asked us.

I turned to look at Vim, to hear his answer.

“Nothing we do or wear will have a scent. If we spend enough time in the same bed, or area, that stuff too will eventually lose their scents as well,” Vim said.

“Same bed...? You two are married yet don’t seem to share one much,” Elisabeth mumbled again.

I frowned, and then realized that she likely was whispering when she mumbled. Meaning she wasn’t intending for me, or Vim, to hear what she was saying.

Suddenly a lot of her comments made sense. She actually mumbled a lot, and I had originally thought it was just her being shy or unsure of herself... but most of that earlier anxiety was gone now. She acted normal around us, just as I remembered her back when I met her and her brother.

She was mumbling quietly. Thinking she was speaking lowly enough to not be heard.

I gulped as I shifted on the horse, and felt itchy all of a sudden.

Another thing I'd forgotten about humans. Why had I forgotten so readily...? It wasn't as if I've not spent time with any lately. Most places we went to, or stopped, had me interacting with humans. Sometimes even human members of the Society, to boot.

Most humans didn't realize how well we could hear. Jeez, there were non-humans who didn't comprehend how good my hearing was compared to theirs.

Usually this showed itself in other ways. Like the other night, when I had slept in the main building since Nann and Nasba had been working in the workshop and being noisy. I had slept in one of the rooms... alone... and had to squeeze my head, and ears, with pillows to stop the sounds from a nearby building.

I made a mental note to not forget that Elisabeth didn't realize how good my hearing was... and also to forgive her for any strange comments.

"Does a smell return Vim? Take that bed for example. If we left it, would the smell return over time?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. But I'm honestly not sure how long it takes. Could be days, could be months. I've never really cared much to test it to be honest. Celine once tried to test it, but I convinced her to give up," he said.

"How'd you convince her?" I asked, interested.

Vim didn't respond right away, and I noticed the way he rolled a shoulder.

Uh oh.

Smilingly softly, I waited... and waited... then he sighed. "I teased her. In a rather cruel method too, now that I think about it," he admitted.

Oh... "So you were mean to her," I said.

"Only sometimes," he said.

Hmph. No wonder she had placed so many tedious rules on him. It was probably her way of getting back at the man who was as oblivious as he was strong.

"Ex-wife?" Elisabeth muttered.

I bit back a response, and shifted a little.

"She stunk sometimes. Not in a really bad way or anything... she just had a strong scent. Her stupid church was also always burning with incenses and stuff, which didn't help," Vim said.

Feeling a little bad, I realized what he meant by teasing. He had likely been rude about her smell.

I didn't like how I felt a little bit of solidarity with her, but here I was... relating to her.

Though many had said my smell wasn't bad either... just startling and strong, being a predator. Maybe her being a panda was the same thing. Was a panda even a predator?

Rounding a small bend, we neared a different path. One that was not as overgrown or broken. It was a dirt road, but it had obvious cart marks from use over the years. Vim guided his horse onto it, and mine and Elisabeth's followed suit.

"Honestly... you and I are entering new grounds, Renn. We'll have to figure some of it out as we go, I fear," Vim said.

For some reason hearing that put a huge smile on my face. "Going to let me test and experiment?" I asked him happily.

Vim glanced back for the first time in a long time, only to smirk at me. "Only if I can too," he teased.

Elisabeth groaned behind me, but I couldn't help but smirk and enjoy the moment.

She'd not groan in such a way if she knew how difficult, and how long, it had taken me to get Vim to lower his guard enough around me to even make such a silly little joke.

Brushing the horse, I hummed as I studied a massive tree that we were passing. It wasn't the biggest I've seen, not anything like the giant tree at the Owl's Nest, but it was definitely one of the biggest I've seen in this forest so far.

"There should be a small stream up ahead. We'll stop and rest there for a moment," Vim said.

"Brandy and the rest once mentioned we had messengers in the Society. Who are they?" I asked Vim.

"Oplar runs them. Most are humans. They don't go everywhere, but they go to enough locations to make a difference. They're similar to your eastern girls, and sometimes they come from families within the Society. For instance Nann has a few children who go to Lumen and Telmik and back, and along the way they stop at other locations to exchange letters and stuff," Vim said.

"I heard we had orphanages too?" I asked.

"We do. Though we're down to just a couple. Most of them aren't used in that form anymore... they're mostly just charity now. Telmik has the biggest," Vim said.

Hm... "How long does it usually take letters to be delivered?" I asked, thinking of the one I had sent to Lomi.

“A month or two, depending on where. Sometimes the letter, and the one delivering it, gets lost though. For one reason or another,” Vim said.

“What happens then?” I asked.

“In Telmik is the hub. A request for verification is sent there if the sender never receives confirmation or a letter back. It can sometimes take months for that to happen. Usually that’s when I get involved. Because it usually means something bad happened. It honestly doesn’t happen often, once every handful of years. You’d think it happened more, to be honest, but,” Vim shrugged.

“So I didn’t get to see it because Oplar hadn’t been there at the time?” I asked.

“She’s very protective of her mail room. I’d not show it unless she permitted it. Even today,” Vim said to me.

Ah... “I see,” I said.

“You can read, Renn?” Elisabeth asked from behind me.

I turned and nodded at her... and didn’t like the way she was frowning at me.

“You can’t?” I asked her gently.

She shook her head. "Brother was able to read a little, but I was never taught," she said.

Feeling a little sad for her, I glanced back ahead... so she'd not see my sad expression.

"It's common in these regions. Haven't you noticed most of the signs and stuff around here have symbols and not words?" Vim reminded me.

Nodding, I admitted he was right. Most of the signs lately have been without words... "Is it just a regional thing? Or is there something else at play?" I asked.

"Numbers really. The more people the more it becomes necessary to know how to read. Religions want people to be able to read their doctrine. Merchants want people to read their prices and contracts, lords of many citizens want educated servants... so on and so forth," Vim said.

"And the less people the more one needs to spend all day working just to feed themselves," I said, understanding.

He nodded. "Basically. Don't feel bad Elisabeth, I know people hundreds of years old that still don't know how to read. It's nothing too big a deal," Vim said.

"I'd still like to..." she mumbled.

I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from promising to teach her. Such a thing wasn't easy. It took a long time to teach someone how to read and write.

Too long for the short amount of time I'd know her.

Vim then slowed... and I was about to stop my own horse as well, but he moved his horse in a way that told me what he wanted.

Coming up next to him, I smiled at my companion as our horses glanced and sniffed at each other.

"I usually carry letters often. In fact I've been doing so. This whole time. I still have a letter from Rapti, its recipient at our next location," Vim told me.

"Oh?" I perked up as he nodded.

"I usually receive a few letters every stop, really," he said.

"Where?" I asked.

"Hm...? Recently...? Well Landi gave me two, half a dozen from Secca and..." Vim started to list them as he thought about it, but I shook my head and waved him down.

"I mean... where have you been keeping them? Vim, I go through your bags all the time. They're not there," I said.

Vim paused, and then smirked at me. "I'll show you later," he said.

Frowning at him, I wondered why he had smiled so oddly. He was looking forward to whatever he was going to show me.

Although I wanted to press him, I decided to let it be. He obviously didn't want to show me right now, maybe just because Elisabeth was behind us, so there was no point in prying. I'll just enjoy it later...

Still...

It was a little odd to ride next to Vim. He was close... but not. Although it was neat, it only made me long for the ground. I couldn't easily grab his arm or hand from here.

"Back during the wars I used to need riders. Lilly and those like her, although helped, had their own lives and goals so weren't always available. You would have been useful back then," he said to me.

"Riders?" I asked.

“Messengers. People to relay information and news. They needed to be swift, yet also smart enough to remember the message even if the letter they carried got destroyed. Or even had to go to someone who didn’t know how to read or write... which surprisingly back then had been quite a few people,” Vim said with a frown.

I grinned at him. “I’d have enjoyed that. Delivering letters would have been fun. Basically just gossiping with everyone all the time,” I said as I thought about it.

He nodded. “Pretty much.”

“I heard Merit wrote a letter to Nasba,” I said.

He nodded again. “She had.”

“Was it a good one?” I asked.

“Nasba had enjoyed it, I suppose, yes,” he said.

“The way Nasba spoke about it, I was the topic of it,” I said.

“Well... you’d been mentioned, yes,” Vim admitted.

I smirked and wondered if I should tell him that Nasba had read it to me. She had enjoyed teasing me and in turn, Merit, by doing so.

Before I could say anything though Vim glanced at me and smirked. "I'll not tell you. I love you Renn, but I'll not break people's confidence by telling you their secrets," he said.

Blinking at him, my smirk turned into a loving smile as I nodded. "I know. I'm glad," I said.

"Are you?" he asked.

I nodded. "Of course I am. I don't want a pet, which is all you'd be if you bent to every one of my whims," I told him.

"Pet," Vim said with a smirk.

Smiling, I nodded again. Yes. That was what he'd be, in a way, if he just... gave in to me completely. Although it'd be fun, to a point, I knew I'd not like it all. What was the point? That wasn't a friend, or a companion, but an accessory. A...

Well...

While I pondered what word to use, our horses drew closer to each other. I startled, thinking my horse had started to go off on its own, but it had been Vim who had guided his horse closer instead.

Coming up next to me, he leaned a little as if to study me.

“What?” I asked.

Vim said nothing. He simply smirked at me for a bit, and I couldn’t help but shift in my saddle.

Why’d I feel a blush coming? What was he thinking, with that smirk?

Before I could figure it out, Vim reached over and patted my thigh, and I wished once again we had been walking instead. I had nearly grabbed it, to hold. It would have been awkward while on these horses. They were too stout. Too big. Especially so for me.

Sighing at him as he nodded at me and ushered his horse forward, to return to the front of us, I wondered what to do with him.

Yet...

Frowning, I wondered why my thigh suddenly felt a little wet.

Looking down, I blinked at the weird gleam on my left leg. It almost looked like...

Touching it, I groaned as I realized it was indeed blood. My fingertips were stained with a light, reddish, liquid.

"Vim..." I said, feeling oddly queasy.

"Hm?" Vim slowed his horse, since he had ushered it to get ahead of me again.

"You're bleeding," I said as I showed him my fingers.

Not only did Vim frown in a way that told me he didn't believe me... he also didn't see what was wrong with it.

"I am...?" he glanced down at himself, but I already saw it.

"Your hand," I said weakly.

He had put his right hand on his own thigh, to rest it. He held the reins of his horse with just his left, leisurely... so...

Yet even with his hand half curled into a fist on his thigh, I could see it. The blood gleamed a little in the daylight, and it was actually leaking at such a level that it was running down his forearm and into his sleeve.

Vim lifted his hand, opening his palm... and I flinched at the sight of all the blood. It was pouring from his palm.

“What the hell...?” he whispered as I rubbed his palm, searching for the wound.

“What’d you cut it on?” I asked. Had he touched anything lately? His reins? The bags or boxes tied around him possibly? There might have been something metal or sharp amongst the luggage, sure, but...

Just what else did he have, or the horse have, to cut him so deeply? To make his palm seep blood to such a degree?

“Is he okay?” Elisabeth asked worriedly behind us.

Vim’s horse came to a stop, and I tugged on my own reins to make mine do the same. I stopped a bit away from him, and kept back the urge to hop off the horse and go over to him.

I knew he was fine. It wasn’t as if he was actually in danger... but...

For some reason, even though I knew Vim was never in danger of dying, I still panicked when I saw him get hurt.

“Huh...” Vim frowned at his hand, and I realized he had found what was wrong.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The uh...” he went quiet, and suddenly his frown was serious. He began to blink a little, as if in disbelief.

“Vim...?” I asked worriedly.

He turned his head, to look at me... but his eyes never left his palm. They were fixated... right on a certain spot... near his thumb and...

Wait...

“Is that where you stabbed yourself? With the needle...?” I asked. Surely not. Yet...

He nodded.

A weird feeling entered my stomach, twisting it as if the sight of blood was something that made me sick.

"Vim..." I groaned.

"Strange," he said, and then wiped his palm on one of the boxes behind him.

He opened and closed his palm a few times, and then nodded with a frown. "It's healed," he said.

"Is it?" I asked doubtfully.

"It better be," he stated. My horse shifted, and flicked its ears at his tone. It hadn't liked how coldly he had spoken.

Neither had I.

Gulping down a bunch of worried questions, I ushered the horse forward a few steps. It hadn't wanted to at first, but it eventually obliged me. I brushed up against Vim, getting close enough that the boxes and bags tied to our horses brushed against each other in the process. The bumping of the luggage made both of our horses step away from each other, annoyed.

“Vim, are you okay?” I asked carefully.

Vim’s eyes hadn’t left his palm. They were digging into it, as if trying to bore another hole. “I don’t know Rennalee,” he said softly.

Not happy with that answer at all, I glared at the man who looked suddenly out of place. As if he had just learned something that changed his whole world and his outlook on it.

“I don’t know,” he said again, as if to himself.

Chapter 252 A Scent’s Meaning

Patting the horse, it huffed at me as it went to drink from the small stream.

As the horse gulped its fill, I glanced back to the nearby camp. It was a nice little area of grass, surrounded by thicker trees. I had made a larger fire, to make sure the human didn’t freeze to death during the cold night. It wasn’t winter yet of course, but we were rather high in elevation. It was cold enough I worried for her. She was a rather feeble thing as it was.

Renn was in the middle of cooking. She had set up some large flat rocks, and had heated them up enough to use them to cook slabs of meat. She was rather excited, standing in front of the sizzling meat with a happy grin. Her tail was twitching wildly, telling me that she was likely starving. She had a pair of metal tongs in her hand, which she kept on tapping loudly in anticipation.

Which was funny, since she had poured so much seasoning and salt on the rocks that I couldn’t believe her eyes weren’t watering from the smell.

Elisabell wasn't far from Renn. The two had been happily talking as they prepared the food, paying no heed to the dark world around them.

I scanned the area around us, and although didn't see anything too strange... I did smell them.

Even through the thick smell of burning seasoning, I could smell animals. Bears. Wolves. Elk and deer. Some were near; others had passed and left long ago. A few larger creatures had drawn near, when we had first started the fire and settled for the night, but once Renn and the human had started getting noisy and cooking they had mostly ran off. Either scared by the noise, or the smell.

The horse nudged me, its ears flicking as it did so. I patted it and coaxed it away from the river. There was little need to, the dang thing was trained. Smart. It had been one of the mercenary's horses, though I couldn't remember if it had been one that had been a part of the initial attack or had been at the camp.

Whosoever it had been... had trained it well. Or maybe it had simply been this smart from the beginning. It was hard to imagine a human teaching a horse to be so dutiful. This creature wasn't just a pack mule, or a tool, but a companion. A brother in arms. It'd ride into death with me if I asked it to.

Such a thing was rare even amongst men, let alone animals.

It followed me back near the camp, dutifully putting itself next to the human's younger mare. I went ahead and tied its reins to the small metal post I had put in the ground to keep them from running off in the middle of the night.

This horse wouldn't do it, nor did I think Renn's mare would either... but...

Glancing at the human's horse, it huffed at me as if to tell me it thought as lowly of me as I did it.

Smiling at it, I reached out to pat it on the nose for a moment, and then stepped away and back to the fire.

"Vim, do you think Nasba's feathers get in the way when she's lying with a man?" Renn asked as I entered the little camp. Her tapping of the tongs went quiet, as she waited for my answer.

Coming to a stop, I frowned at the woman who had asked me such a question with a serious face.

Looking away from Renn's happy grin, I narrowed my eyes at the human. She looked away, and blushed, as she suddenly found the fire much more interesting.

She was a bad influence, I swear.

But that was a pagan for you. Plus it was better than her being terrified of us, I guess...

"Does your tail?" I asked Renn as I stepped over to the flat rocks, to check the meat.

Renn's tail jolted and she frowned in discomfort. She had hoped to tease me, not be teased in return.

"Yours is rather thin, and can be kept out of the way. Those feathers though had been huge, and fanned out past their feet," Elisabeth said as she turned to Renn.

"Well..." Renn mumbled as I knelt in front of the slabs of meat.

They looked fine. They were almost done, actually, even though covered in way too much seasoning. Hopefully Renn knew what she was about to bite into. The human would be fine, since it was likely she had rarely ate seasoning enough to know if too much was a good thing or bad thing, but Renn was a different story. She not only ate such delicacies often, but had rather adept taste buds. She knew quality food, having eaten so much of it, and would thusly know when food was improperly seasoned and cooked.

"They probably do. But not as badly as you're likely thinking. Can't have been that bad with as many kids they all keep popping out," I said.

"Ah... true," Elisabeth nodded quickly, getting what I meant.

"Still..." Renn mumbled some more, and I couldn't help but smile up at her.

She noticed my smile, and although she shifted and narrowed her eyes at me... she smiled back all the same.

Looking away from her, I reached over to flip one of the larger slabs of steak.

“Hey!” Renn stepped over to me, and knelt down. She quickly grabbed the slice of meat with her little tongs and flipped it before I could touch it.

“I’m not dirty,” I argued. I had even made sure not to touch the horses with this hand, in anticipation of me helping out.

“Huh? It’s not that. We’re cooking, not you,” she argued back.

Oh. So it wasn’t that I was going to touch the meat, but the simple fact I was trying to intrude.

I nodded, and stood. She clapped the tongs at me as I stepped over to sit on the large boulder nearby. It was the reason why I had them set up camp here, mostly. It was a good place for me to sit.

“My brother hated cooking,” Elisabeth said.

“Hm, Vim likes to... but he sometimes makes weird food, so I’ve been trying to keep him from doing it lately,” Renn told her.

“Oh?” Elisabeth found that neat, and stepped forward to kneel down next to Renn. The two went to flipping the many slices of meats as Renn told her all about my strange dishes.

“Don’t tell him, but I actually enjoy the food he cooks. That’s the worst part. I can’t really yell or argue with him, because it’s not like the stuff he cooks isn’t tasty. It just normally looks weird, or smells funny,” Renn told her.

“Smells again,” Elisabeth noticed, and smiled at Renn as she nodded... as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Watching Renn and the girl, I enjoyed listening to them happily yap away. The darkness was growing deeper, and a tiny wind had arrived. Not enough to ruin the moment, or the night, but I knew it was a sign of things to come. There was likely a storm heading our way. I’ll need to be careful... Renn was one thing, but Elisabeth was another.

As much as I’d like to be relieved of the burden, losing the girl in such a way after sparing her would only make things worse. For me. Since Renn would then weep.

Studying one of the nearby trees, and the way its limbs shifted and swayed in the wind... I decided to rearrange some of the luggage before we returned to our journey. The Weaver had sent some winter clothes with us. I’ll make sure they’re easily accessible, just in case.

“Vim.”

Nodding as I glanced at Renn, I found her smirking at me. “Yes?”

“Have you ever been to... what was it?” Renn asked the girl.

“Capital of Erklo,” she told me.

“Yes. It’s North-East of here. It’s become a larger city... about half the size of Lumen, last time I was there,” I told them.

“Huh...” Elisabeth frowned and I glanced at Renn, to maybe find out why they had asked.

Renn though went back to ignoring me, and gestured at me. “Depending on how long ago he was there it might be bigger now,” she said to the girl.

Elisabeth nodded. “Maybe...! It had been so overwhelming and...” the two went back to talking, and I realized I’d been forgotten.

Although the two were lost in conversation, they didn’t neglect the food. I enjoyed watching them. Seeing Renn having fun made me feel strangely happy.

Renn and the girl enjoyed cooking together. I felt a little neglected as dinner was served, and came and went without being addressed much.

Their meals done, Renn and Elisabeth went to chatting about the town Elisabeth had grown up in. One to the east. It had been smaller than the one near the Weaver's Hut, and had pretty much been wiped out by the plague by the way she spoke of it.

Renn felt for the girl, but it was a story I've heard countless times over my life. Such tragedy was regrettably common... and likely always would be.

While they told each other stories, I watched the horses lay down to sleep. The one I'd been riding slept on the outer perimeter, protecting the two others... and I realized I was relating to a horse of all things.

Pack mule. Guard. Neglected to a point.

Yes, many similarities.

There was a poem about such a thing, I think. Father had said it once and...

"Vim," Renn got my attention again. I nodded, although I kept on trying to remember the poem. "Have you ever met people who've never met others before?" Renn asked.

I blinked as I forgot the first part of the poem I had just been struggling to remember, and frowned at her. "What?" I asked.

Renn smiled and nodded. "Like... have you ever met people that have never met other people before? Say like a town that's never met an outsider?" she asked.

"Oh... Kind of. Yes. It's more hassle than it's worth usually, but they're typically not too violent. No matter how different we look, people are still people after all. The ones that are problematic are the ones that don't look human at all. To them we're just monsters or beasts, and are treated as such," I said as I remembered the few un-contacted civilizations I'd met over the years.

"Monsters," Elisabeth said stiffly.

I shrugged, not caring for her human viewpoint of it. Or rather, her pagan inspired one.

"You speak lots of languages right?" Renn asked.

I nodded.

"Does that mean you learn languages really fast? Have you ever met anyone you couldn't understand no matter how hard you tried?" Renn asked further.

Amused by her, I smiled and nodded. "Of course I have. A..." I hesitated, and glanced to the one sitting next to Renn. The human. The pagan. I shifted on my stone, and changed my wording a bit. "There used to be several creatures that spoke a language that not only I didn't understand, but couldn't no matter how hard I tried," I told them.

“Oh...? You mean those like us or...?” Renn like always was too perceptive for her own good.

“Kind of. And I do learn languages fast. A gift from my father. He made it a point that I was able to bridge the gaps when needed,” I said.

“Bridge?” Elisabeth asked, and Renn crossed her arms at me.

I noted the way she studied me, and I knew it was because she was pondering my words. I was scared of Renn reaching certain conclusions, yet at the same time... it felt good to speak so openly for once.

I’ve never been this open with anyone before. Other than Beak. And even she I had omitted certain things.

Would those lines I had drawn for Beak end up being the same ones I made for Renn? Or would she step over them?

I clenched my right hand, scraping a nail across the spot that had shaken me to my core earlier.

Yes. A line in the sand. Here was one. One of the first...

“Brother had tried to teach me how big the world was... but it’s hard to imagine,” Elisabeth said.

“You’re telling me. I saw a map once, in Telmik, that supposedly was the whole world... but it’s hard to believe it,” Renn said.

Map...? Oh. Right. Hands. She had seen the globe, or one of them.

Interesting. I wonder if she could...

I blinked as I realized Renn had other uses. Ones I’d not thought of before.

I could use her. To draw maps. To write things.

Crossing my arms, I went into thought as Renn and Elisabeth changed conversations. Going from the world, and the places they’ve been, to some weird animal that Elisabeth had seen in the river a few months ago.

Renn was indeed useful wasn’t she? She had a flawless memory. And not only was she a good painter, and able to read and write, she has been picking up skills along our journey. She’s learned from Nebl, learned the whole process of dyes from Riz, and now had spent over a month learning from one of the best weavers to have ever existed. Even if she herself hadn’t mastered the arts, she had learned their processes. Their histories, and usefulness.

There weren’t many as knowledgeable as Renn anymore. Brandy maybe, but she lacked Renn’s memory. The few others as old, such as Merit, had their own issues... but mostly the issues with them was something different. It wasn’t their lack of capability, or knowledge, but instead their desire and drive.

Merit didn't care anymore. Brandy only cared for her desire to amass wealth. Lawrence in all his wisdom only did the bare minimum, not willing to take risks anymore.

They could be trusted to a point, and were good at their jobs... but they didn't much desire to step out of their comfort zones.

Renn not only enjoyed working, and helping, she would go out of her way to do so if she could. To the point it annoyed me sometimes... and if I added her perfect memory to her desire to help...

It'd not be long until Renn was a walking repository of knowledge and skill. Able to go anywhere, and help in any shape or form they needed. From complex tasks, to the simple things.

How funny... she wanted to be like me, and that was literally what she was doing.

I had decided to let her start taking over the responsibility of letters, and their deliveries, at least the ones I was tasked with... but maybe it was time I gave her more than such simple responsibilities.

She wanted such burdens, after all. It was rude to not give them to her.

After all, it wasn't as if I didn't trust her. Now amongst any in the Society, especially now... I didn't doubt Renn at all. Between her gentle soul, and her loyalty to me, there was little I needed to worry or fear about. I could trust her not only with my own secrets, but those of others. I could send her anywhere,

and not need to worry that she'd hurt or scare someone. I didn't need to hide certain people from her, or her them.

Though... how much responsibility should I give her? And how much would she actually want?

I'll need to ponder it.

A tiny cough drew me from my thoughts, and I looked up at Renn.

Smiling at her, she smiled back... and I felt strangely at peace. Why did her eyes make me feel so calm?

Wait... why was she standing in front of me? I glanced away from her beautiful eyes for a tiny moment. To make sure the human was okay.

She was. She was still sitting over near the log where they'd been at this whole time. She was staring at us with weird eyes, though. I must have missed something.

Renn then held her hand out, and I frowned at her. She had no food to offer. Nor had she asked for anything, not that I had anything to give... so...

Reaching out, I took her hand and smiled at her. Did she want to sit with me or something? Was she cold, maybe?

Renn blinked at me, and then smiled and sighed at me. She flipped my hand around, and went to forcing it open. To look at my palm.

Oh.

I allowed her to stare at my open hand, and enjoyed the feeling of her fingers and thumbs rubbing and brushing the spot where I had been hurt. Her hands felt warm, likely thanks to the last few hours of her standing in front of the fire. She usually had colder hands.

“Well?” I asked her, as I studied the way she studied my palm.

She really was adorable. It was too bad her little human friend was staring at us with wide eyes.

And even more so, it was too bad that Renn was a little too prideful. She’d never allow me to do anything that would make her feel too embarrassed, like putting on a show.

“I don’t see any wound... was it really the same spot you stabbed yourself before? It hadn’t even bled that much when you did it then,” she asked worriedly. I gulped my earlier thoughts away, since she had sounded... and now looked... so concerned and serious. Somehow it humbled me, even if it was even more adorable of her.

“It might have been. It healed as I was staring at it Renn, so...” I told her. It was the truth, after rubbing most the blood off my hand on the box the little hole had closed up. It had itched a little, but it hadn’t hurt or anything.

“Has... have your wounds re-opened like that? Before? I’ve never noticed,” Renn asked.

She was still holding my hand, but was now focused on me. On my eyes. I closed my hand a little, to grab the few fingers I could. “It has happened before, yes,” I told her.

Renn blinked a few times, and I noticed her ears and tail actually relax. “Really?” she asked, relieved.

I nodded. “It happens very rarely, but yes. I’ll admit it’s usually the more... bad ones. But it does happen sometimes,” I told her.

She sighed and nodded... then gave me a wonderful smile. We both squeezed each other’s hands for a moment, and then she turned and went back to sitting next to Elisabeth.

Watching her go and the happy bounce in her steps as she did, I felt horrible.

I had just outright lied to her.

Taking a deep breath, I did my best to not notice the tiny layer of sweat on the hand she had just been holding.

Wiping my hand on my pants, I thanked my parents for making me in a way that didn't allow my heart to defy me. If I had been a normal man, it'd have been thumping like mad just now. And she would have heard and noticed it and all it meant.

It was a good thing I had spent the last few hours coming to terms with what had happened... and how to handle it when she asked about it. I hadn't expected her to ask so quickly, since the human was here, but it seemed her concern for me was more important than keeping any kind of secrets.

Terrifying.

Absolutely terrifying. Almost scarier than the fact an old wound had just re-opened.

As I calmed down, while Renn sat back down with Elisabeth, I looked away from my woman's tail which had been happily swaying. I looked above, and past the two women. A little past the trees.

To the shadow moving just beyond.

Kicking off the rock, I rushed towards the two. I ran through the fire itself, since it had been in the way. Leaping over it, I landed a mere hairsbreadth from Renn's tail as she and Elisabeth shouted in surprise.

Stepping up past them, onto the log the two were sitting on, I reached out and grabbed the throat of the mountain lion. Snatching it in the air, mid leap.

I didn't stop moving. With the cat in my hand, I stepped up and over the log and continued forward. I held on tight to the cat's throat, as all its momentum from its leap came to a screeching halt as I pushed it away with me.

It hissed and yelped something fierce, as I carried the cat half a dozen large steps away from Renn and her human friend. I spun the cat, and brought it down onto the ground.

Although I had swung it, I didn't do it with my strength. I only used the momentum from its own leap, and the few steps I had taken to separate it and the camp. The cat landed on the grassy ground on its side, and its hiss turned into a yelp of pain.

Letting go of its throat, I swapped hands. I grabbed it by the back of its skull, and pushed its whole head down onto the ground. I pushed it into the earth with enough force to keep its head, and front paws beneath itself, plus it made its loud hissing turn into guttural growls since I had forced its mouth closed.

Although the cat righted itself, bringing its legs under itself, it didn't try to fight back and free itself. It let loose a deep, angry and scared growl, and its tail swiped wildly like a whip. Smacking the tree I had placed it next to.

Keeping it there, I sighed as I glanced around. I hadn't seen any other animals, but just to make sure...

"Jeez Vim!" Renn shouted at me as I looked around.

“You okay?” I asked her.

“No! Elisabeth’s bleeding!”

I frowned, and turned. Bleeding? How? I had grabbed the cat in the air, before it had even reached them and...

Ah. Renn was helping Elisabeth steady herself. She was holding her head, flinching, and I could see the blood dripping from a head wound. She had likely hit her head on the log, or a rock. She had fallen in surprise when I had startled the two of them.

She’d have a horrible headache, but she’d be fine by the looks of it. She was staring at me, and the cat I held to the ground, with huge eyes. She almost looked more shocked than she had when I had saved her life from that mercenary.

I checked Renn, and didn’t like the worried glare she had. She was really upset that Elisabeth had hurt herself... and was likely blaming me entirely. What was I supposed to have done? Let the cat get the girl? It had leapt not at Renn, but the human...

Or well...

Glancing back to the cat, I stared into its large eyes. It was staring ahead, not even at me, but instead at the fire. Its hissing and growling had died down a little... becoming oddly calm.

It knew it was trapped, and wasn't sure what to do about it. Typical animal.

Yes. I knew what Renn's anger was really about. And I knew it was justified.

I should have noticed the animal before it had even drawn close enough to attack.

But it wasn't my fault... not entirely... Renn had been captivating, and the topic of her adoration had been... well...

Sighing, I shifted a little, to prepare and let the thing go.

"You're not going to kill it are you Vim?" Renn asked me.

"I hadn't planned to," I said.

"Good," she stated.

Standing up straighter, I gave the cat's head a very tiny squeeze. Its tail immediately stopped swaying, and it let out a tiny whine of a growl.

It knew.

“Don’t come back,” I warned it, and then let it go.

The cat stayed there on the ground, lowered, for a long moment... then it flicked an ear, and then spun around.

It darted off, running around the tree and off into the darkness.

Brushing my hands off, I took a small breath to sigh... and regretted it.

“Smells now,” I complained as I stepped back towards the camp. To check on the human. The damned cat had pissed itself in fright.

“Vim!” Renn suddenly yelled at me again, upset.

I flinched. “What...?” I asked, as I glanced at the girl. She was kneeling down... and... Was she covering her face? And not because of the wound, either. I could see it now, since she wasn't covering it. It was just a small scrape. It was just bleeding badly because it was a head wound.

“Jeez, it’s okay Elisabeth. It’s okay, it happens and...” Renn started comforting the girl, and I at first had no idea what was wrong. Why was she suddenly crying? And why was I being yelled at?

Then I realized what was wrong, and why my previous comment had been interpreted wrongly.

The cat hadn't been the only thing to piss itself in shock.

Great.

Chapter 253 The Crypt

The mare huffed at me as I clambered off. I gave it an apologetic pat as I stepped away, to help Elisabeth off her horse.

She still struggled with it. Which was so weird. The horse this time wasn't even trying to mess with her, either.

Helping Elisabeth down, I smiled as she gave me a thankful smile and nodded. The tiny cut on her forehead was still red, but just barely. Humans sure did heal slowly... she had received that cut almost a week ago.

Looking away from her, I looked to Vim. He was talking with a nun in familiar robes. She was a little shorter than me, but at this angle I couldn't tell if she was older or younger. She laughed at something Vim said, and then more people arrived.

I smiled as I watched several women emerge from the massive stone building. They were all wearing the grey and black robes of those I'd seen in the Society, and other human churches. Though I wasn't sure if they were members of the Church of Songs, it was rather likely they were.

They crowded around Vim, and I enjoyed seeing Vim's calm smile as he nodded and addressed each one of them.

He was, like always, very gentle with our members.

"So uh... a church?" Elisabeth asked quietly, staring upward.

I followed her gaze, and likewise was stunned a moment. The huge stone church was as tall as the trees that surrounded it. It didn't have many windows, but I knew it was likely on purpose. Some of the trees were rather close to the building, and based off the two rainstorms we had gone through on the way here it was likely this place got lots of storms. Snow and rain. Big windows were probably not something wise to have out here in this forest.

"Renn, Elisabeth."

Looking down, I found Vim gesturing for us to come over. The small crowd around him had parted a little, and I noticed several of the women were smilingly warmly at us. Expectant.

"Let's go," I gently nudged Elisabeth, who had gone still. She followed after me, but made a tiny whine as she did.

She was worried. She knew this was the place that Vim wanted her to stay at. To live here, for likely the rest of her life. She had started fretting over it a few days ago, growing apprehensive.

Would she fit in? Was it safe? Did they have good food? She had many worries.

Hopefully these people would calm them quickly.

Approaching the large church's entrance, Elisbaell and I strode up the few stone steps and joined the small crowd.

"This is Renn, she's been traveling with me for some time now. And this is Elisabeth. I'm dumping her and the responsibility of taking care of her on all of you, have fun," Vim said as he introduced us.

Elisabeth whined in worry, and I glared at the man as he smirked and stepped away, heading for the horses. Likely to unload the luggage.

"My, my! You're human aren't you?" a shorter girl stepped forward, smiling up at the taller Elisabeth.

Elisabeth nodded quickly, and the girl squealed as she stepped forward and wrapped her in a hug. "Thank goodness!" she shouted happily.

Tilting my head at the young girl, and Elisabeth's utter worry over being hugged, I glanced around at the rest. An older woman to my right, who had a scarred nose... it was missing a piece of the tip, gave me a gentle nod. "We only have a few humans here," she told me. She also had noticeably thick hair. The kind of hair our kind had, sometimes. Those like Merit.

Ah... I nodded in understanding. So the young girl was likely human too, and was glad to have a new friend.

“My name is Frett, welcome Renn,” the woman with the scarred nose held out a hand to me. I took it with a smile, and nodded to her.

“Pleasure,” I said.

“Looks like a fox to me!” one of the women behind her said.

“Didn’t know any had tails left,” another said.

Very quickly the small group split into two conversations. Elisabeth got bombarded by questions from a few of them, and I got the attention of the rest.

“I’m a cat, a jaguar to be specific,” I told them.

The group ooh’d and awed at me, and I quickly tried to tell what most of them were. The one with the half missing nose was likely some kind of sheep. Her hair reminded me of Wool and Lughes. Another, taller and older looking woman, looked relatively human but had strange eyes. Her pupils swam in dark black and not white.

“Isn’t that one of the big ones?” the last obvious non-human asked. She had paw pads on her hands. Rough looking things, though I wasn’t sure what it meant she was.

“It is. She’s a predator. A real one...” Frett leaned closer, and I heard her sniff me. It sounded a little odd, thanks to her nose.

Doing my best to not take offense, I patiently waited.

Then Frett frowned.

“Well?” the one with odd eyes asked.

“I uh... don’t know... Maybe I have a cold?” Frett asked herself.

“Well...” I didn’t want the poor woman to misunderstand, but before I could say anything a new face appeared.

One covered in tiny white scars. Made only more apparent thanks to his dark skin.

“Come now. Let’s help Vim, we can get to know one another once we do,” the tall man said sternly.

The women all startled, and hurried to do as told. Even the ones who had been bothering Elisabeth.

Watching them go to help Vim, I felt a little out of place. Should I go help too?

“Welcome to the Crypt. I am Father Abel,” the man though introduced himself to the two of us before I could step away.

Elisabeth took his hand first and sheepishly smiled at him. “Elisabeth,” she greeted him.

He gave her a gentle smile back, and then offered me his hand too.

As I took it, I noticed he was missing two of his fingers. His ring finger and pinky. The poor man was covered in scars and missing body parts.

“Renn. I’ve a letter for you, Father,” I said as we shook hands. I made sure to do so gently, just in case he was frail.

He blinked and frowned. “You do...?”

I nodded and reached around, to open the small pouch on my belt. The one that Vim had given me a few days ago.

The small bag like thing was made of strange leather. Stuff that felt... fake, almost. Yet it was light, and had this really neat thing Vim had called a zipper on it. It made a weird noise as I opened the pouch and went to find his letter from Rapti.

It took a little longer than it should have to find the one for him, and once I did I felt a little silly. It had been the only one in a bright blue envelope. "Here you go," I said as I handed it to him.

Father Abel took it and smiled. "I see. Interesting," he said.

Hm...? Was the letter interesting, or the fact I was the one handing it to him?

"Vim brought clothes!" one of the girls shouted.

I turned and smiled as I watched them all grow excited. They hurried to untie the rest of the bags and boxes, eager to see the rest.

"We have stuff from Secca, Landi and the Weaver," I told the Father.

"Hm... indeed," Father Abel sounded unsurprised, but had a gentle smile all the same.

“Indeed my butt. Move.”

Father Abel stood up a little straighter, and then stepped aside... revealing a young girl.

A little startled, I hesitated at the sight of a tiny Clothed Woman. One wearing a hooded robe of the church.

“Oh? Look at you. A real predator. Cute,” the girl greeted me, and beneath the white bandages I clearly saw her grin and smirk at me. I did my best to calm down a little as I glanced her up and down.

She wasn't exactly like the Clothed Woman. She had cloth wrapped all around her, under her white robe, but it wasn't as thick. I could see her face, and her eyes. It was some kind of see-through cloth, like a bandage. Yet it was definitely all over her... her hands and fingers were wrapped too.

Holding my hand out, I smiled at her. “My name is Renn,” I introduced myself.

Father Abel shifted in the corner of my eye, and the girl snarled at me. “So you are,” she said, without taking my hand.

Ah... maybe she was hurt beneath those bandages...? I lowered my hand and smiled, taking no offense.

“That's no fun. Domesticated are you? Oh well...” the girl sighed at me and stepped away, heading down the steps to the crowd.

Watching her go, I felt strangely excited. She had practically just dismissed me! Plus she had ignored Elisabeth completely.

It wasn't often I was so readily treated with such disgust by our members.

I looked forward to becoming her friend.

"Please forgive her, Renn. She's... prickly," Father Abel said softly.

I nodded. "It's okay... though..." I hesitated as I watched several of the women notice the approaching girl. They all stepped aside, quickly, to get out of her way. One of them, the human girl who had hugged Elisabeth, even dropped the bag she had been carrying in haste as to do so.

What the heck...? Were they scared of her or something?

"Well Vim? Where's my gift?" the girl asked loudly as she drew near him.

Blinking at her demanding tone, I watched with great interest as Vim ignored her for a moment... then after he finished untying one of the bags off Elisabeth's horse, he turned to the young girl and smiled. "It's good to see you too Sharp," he said to her.

“Yeah, yeah. Where is it then?” Sharp said, ignoring him as she glanced around her, at the horses and the mess of boxes and bags.

The women had returned to unloading the rest, but had done so at a distance. They all moved around the girl... as if she was as sharp as her name, too dangerous to draw near.

“The woman you ignored has it. Might want to reconsider who you are so snarky to,” Vim told her.

The small girl tilted her head, and I smiled a little as I stood up straight... waiting for it.

She then turned around, and although I couldn't see it... I could feel her eyes as they narrowed at me.

I wasn't sure what gift he meant I had... since as far as I was aware, none of the letters in the pouch were addressed to a Sharp, but...

The girl crossed her arms, and said nothing. She just glared at me.

Father Abel coughed lightly behind me. “So. Elisabeth. I heard you're a human,” he said.

I glanced back and watched as Elisabeth and Father Abel went into conversation. Although Father Abel seemed genuinely interested in hearing her story... I recognized a coward when I heard one.

He had used her as an excuse.

Interesting.

Stepping down the steps, I did my best to not seem too excited as I neared the young girl. I ignored the sisters, who had gone to whispering as they watched me. "Sharp, is it? What gift were you waiting for?" I asked her.

The girl shifted, and I noticed that under her hood was what looked to be short hair. Very short hair, for a girl. Especially one of this region. Some of her short strands were sticking out of her bandages, between them. It gave her already short hair a strangely spiky appearance.

"You don't know?" Sharp asked back.

I shook my head.

The girl sighed, and then turned to look at Vim. "She has no smell," she said to him.

I blinked, and heard several conversations come to an abrupt stop.

“You’re kidding,” one of the women whispered.

“I knew it,” Frett said.

Feeling oddly embarrassed, I coughed and shifted. “Is it a letter?” I asked kindly.

The girl flinched, and then glanced at me. “Funny,” she said stiffly.

Uh oh. I had just hurt her, somehow.

The girl though didn’t look too sad, though the thin bandages on her face did make it hard to tell. Did those eyes look watery, or was it just the bandages?

Then I realized something. “Wait, let me guess,” I said as I thought of what was likely what she wanted.

Stepping closer, to smile and tell her where to find the book, I hesitated as she stepped backward.

Lowering my shoulders, I worried what was wrong. She had actually stepped away from me, as if I stunk or was dangerous.

“Don’t look so hurt. Aren’t you a predator?” she asked.

“Rather than hurt... I’m more concerned I did something wrong,” I said to her.

The girl’s eyebrows shifted under her bandages, and I noticed one of them move out of position a little. A tiny line of skin became visible thanks to it, and I was able to confirm her skin looked fine. At least, it seemed to be. I wasn’t sure why she was covered in bandages.

“What is she, Vim?” Sharp asked softly.

“Someone not even your sharp self can scare away. Good luck,” Vim said as he stepped around her, brushing past her as he did. He patted the small woman's shoulder as he did, which she tried to duck away from.

I smiled at Vim, who smiled back at me. He stepped past me, carrying a large box towards the church.

The girl shifted and brushed her shoulder, where Vim had touched and bumped into her. As if her robe was now dirty. “My name is Sharp,” she introduced herself finally.

“Rennalee,” I introduced myself once again.

“Rennalee? Strange name,” she said.

I blinked and nodded. "Sharp's neater. It's cute," I told her.

Sharp frowned at me, very obviously even through the bandages, and sighed. "Sure... whatever. Where is it then?" she asked as she glanced to the nearby horses.

"Vim's bag. Do you want just the fourth or all four?" I asked her.

"Just the fourth... wait... you know what I want?" Sharp asked, surprised. It was interesting to see the first emotion other than annoyance on her. She actually perked up a little thanks to it.

I nodded. "If not a letter, it's not like I have much else... process of elimination and all that," I said as I stepped away from her. To pick up the large bag Vim had put down.

Hefting it, I placed it on my back and nodded to her. "Shall we go inside?" I asked her.

"Can't you just give it to me?" she asked, suddenly sounding tired.

"I could, but then I'd have to wait hours if not days until you finished it as to spend time with you," I told her.

“Well... duh,” she sighed and stepped away, heading for the church.

I smiled and went to follow her. I hurried up a little, and was about to pat the small girl on the back, to cheer her up... but instead she stepped away again.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, saying it so sternly it had almost sounded more like a warning than anything else.

“Oh... sorry,” I apologized quickly, and realized she might actually be hurt. Maybe her brushing her shoulder earlier from Vim’s bump hadn’t been an emotional thing, but a physical one. Maybe he had hurt her.

It was hard to think Vim would have done such a thing if he known it would have hurt her, though...

She sighed and returned to walking, shaking her head. “He always has the weird ones following him around...” she mumbled.

I smirked, taking that as a compliment. “He does, doesn’t he?” I agreed.

We followed the rest of the women into the church. They were all chatting away, happily talking about the boxes and bags they were carrying. We passed Elisabeth, who was still talking with Father Abel, and we entered the church.

Which turned out to be not a church at all. Or at least, not one I was used to.

The entrance led to a giant room. One with massive stairs that rounded circularly up to the second floor, where a huge balcony overlooked the entrance. Even from down here I could see other stairs and hallways up there.

Most of the entrance was solid stone, even the floor, but once one neared one of the several hallways that it branched off into, wood and rugs began to appear. Thick ones, of varying colors and designs.

Rather than a church it felt more like a giant mansion.

“This way,” Sharp guided me away from where the rest of the girls were headed. To the left of where they had gone deeper into the building, Sharp led me down one of the smaller hallways, that ran along the side of the building. One with small windows littering one side, revealing the dense forest this building was hidden within.

Walking a little behind Sharp, I studied the doors we passed. Most were heavy doors of wood, and looked... a little old. Nothing looked broken or out of place, or dirty, but it was obvious this place had been built a long time ago. And had been heavily used since then.

Some of the stones in the floor, the ones not hidden by rugs, were obviously weathered and rounded. From years of footsteps.

“You’re not the author, are you...?” Sharp suddenly asked.

“Huh? Of the books? No... I’m not,” I told her.

She breathed a sigh of relief, and I smiled at her. “I’m told I’ll meet her one day, though,” I said.

Sharp’s hood shifted, and I recognized the way it did.

Did she have ears...? Like me? That had not been from a simple tilt of the head. “Will you now...?” she asked softly.

“Supposedly. Vim hasn’t told me where or when though,” I said.

“Huh...” she found that interesting, and then led me down a new hallway. Before following her down it, I glanced down the rest of the current hallway we were in. It looked like it led to another hallway down the way.

“This place is neat. Reminds me kind of the Cathedral,” I said as I followed her.

“Well duh, it’s the same.”

“The same?” I asked.

She nodded. "It's the same floor plan. We even have the same spires and stuff," she said.

Oh...!

I quickly took into account the few hallways and the overall structure of the building that I knew of.

Then I remembered the spires and towers I had noticed above it, as we neared... and compared it to the Cathedral in my memories.

"It is isn't it?" I said, a little astounded. It was obviously not as large, but... Yes. I could see the similarities.

She nodded.

"Does that mean there's a garden in the center too? With a house?" I asked.

"Oh... no. There's a garden, but no house," Sharp said, and then pointed down a hallway we were passing. "You can reach that courtyard going down that hallway," she said.

"Hm," I nodded.

“From the courtyard, follow the hallway that rounds it until you find a huge hallway. It will lead you either back to the entrance, or the church itself. Someone will be around there to help you if you get lost,” Sharp said.

“Okay...?” I hesitated as I realized what she was likely doing.

Rounding another corner, we came to a slowed stop in front of a door. One made of metal, and not wood.

She pushed it open, revealing an obvious bedroom. But before I could enter, or study it, she turned and held her hand out.

“You had told me how to get back, so you wouldn’t have to guide me,” I said as I realized what she had done.

She had done it so I couldn't use it as an excuse to linger, or have her guide me herself.

Sharp frowned at me. “Obviously?”

“I know how important these books are... but really,” I said with a sigh as I pulled around Vim’s bag. I placed it on the ground and went to opening it.

“I’ve waited thirty years for this. You’re far from neat enough to ignore that,” Sharp said.

“But I’m at least a little bit neat, right?” I asked her with a grin.

Sharp huffed at me, but before I looked away I noticed a tiny movement under her hood. She had just smiled at me, though I hadn’t seen it on her face thanks to her bandages. That movement of the ears was rather obvious.

Finding the books, I made sure to grab the fourth installment. Pulling it out, I smiled and verified it was the fourth by checking the first page and its dedication.

“Please return it once you’re done. I’m not allowed to leave it anywhere,” I told her as I held it out.

“I know the rules, cat,” Sharp said as she took the book.

As she did, I noticed not only once again that her fingers were wrapped in bandages... but she had done so carefully. And not because she worried for the book.

She had grabbed the book with her fingertips... as if afraid to touch me as she did so, even on accident.

Sharp stepped away, to head into her room... but then hesitated. She turned, staring at me... who stood before her door, with Vim’s bag at my feet.

I smiled at her. "Enjoy, Sharp," I said.

Her hood shifted again. Then she slowly nodded... and then looked away quickly. She stepped into her room, and promptly closed the door behind her. As she did though, I noticed she hadn't slammed it. She had closed it gently, as if worried I'd get hurt if she didn't.

Sighing gently, I closed Vim's bag back up and hefted it.

Although interested in the rest of the church, I retraced my steps back to the entrance. Sharp had told me how to get to the center, but...

Stepping out of the church, I smiled at Vim. He was handing a small box to one of the sisters. The horses were now gone, taken elsewhere, and there was only a few boxes and bags left.

I glanced around for Elisabeth and the Father, but didn't find them. I walked down the steps, passing Frett as I did. "Oh my? Still alive?" Frett paused, with a big bag in her arms.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "She lives up to her name, huh," I said.

"You have no idea... or wait, maybe you do. Did you touch her?" Frett asked worriedly.

I frowned and shook my head.

“Oh. Good. Make sure you don’t okay? Really,” Frett said as she stepped forward, passing me and entering the church.

“Okay...” I mumbled, a little bothered.

What was that about? Maybe she became even snippier if she was touched.

“Hey look at you!”

I turned as a new face ran up to me. It was the one who Vim had just been given a small box. “Nice to meet you! I’m Prasta!” she greeted me with a toothy smile.

Returning the smile I nodded. “My name is Renn. Nice to meet you,” I said.

She giggled at me. “You’re adorable! Wish I had ears like that! Are they soft?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” I said, and I felt my left ear flutter a little.

She hummed as she watched it move. "How nice... all I got is a bunch of scales on my butt. All it ever does is itch and snag my clothes," she said with a sigh.

Oh...? Scales... so some kind of lizard.

"Must make wearing underwear hard," I assumed.

She nodded quickly. "That's why I don't wear any!" she said happily.

Made sense.

"We'll talk later! Let me touch your ears after, okay?" she said, more than asked, as she hurried away.

I nodded, watching her hurry after Frett.

Although a little shocked by the vast spectrum of different personalities here, I found myself grinning ear to ear as I turned and hurried over to Vim.

"Vim, this place is great. Everyone's so neat," I said as I stepped over to him. He was kneeling in front of the few remaining bags.

“Well, at least someone thinks so,” he said gently.

I grinned and nodded. I knew he likely didn’t enjoy it here... especially if it really was a church, and not just a place that looked like one.

Vim then glanced up at me, and tilted his head. “Oh... make sure you don’t touch Sharp, okay?” he then warned me.

I blinked... but nodded. “Frett warned me too,” I said.

“Yeah. Just make sure you don’t touch her. She’s usually very good at not letting anyone do so, but mistakes happen sometimes,” he said as he stood, hefting most of the bags as he did.

Stepping over to the last two bags left, I bent down and picked them up for him.

“Did you get her the book?” he asked.

“Yeah. She’s already holed up in her room,” I said.

He chuckled. “I’m sure.”

Vim nodded lightly for me to follow him into the church. I followed dutifully, excited to meet the rest of our members here at the Crypt.

And also to hopefully learn not just about the people here... but the source of such a name.

I hadn't seen any tombstones or graves yet... but...

"I hear there's no house here for us," I told Vim.

"Right...? But..." Vim slowed, stopping right before the church's entrance.

I stepped up next to him, smiling patiently for whatever he was going to say.

"I'll ask for a room that has a bed big enough for both us, all the same," he then said with a nod.

As Vim entered the church... I felt oddly numb. I lingered near the entrance as robed sisters headed towards us, followed by Father Abel.

They showered Vim and me with questions... but it all became a blur. Thanks to the fact I was stunned.

Stunned by not just what he had just said, but the happy smile he wore as he had done so.

Chapter 254 A Sharp One

“I’ve learned not to let the moths incubate near the water. Even though they like to. The moisture makes the cocoons all feeble or something,” Sharp prattled on about her new hobby.

“Could just be your enclosure. Is it properly ventilated?” I asked as we rounded a corner.

“Maybe...?” Sharp frowned as she thought of my idea, and did so in a way that told me that was likely the issue.

Up here this high in these mountains, unusually, there was more humidity than one would think. Thanks to the moisture that constantly battered the nearby peaks, from the massive lakes and glacier paths nearby on the other side of the mountain pass. It wasn't common for such higher elevations to get this humid, usually.

“Least you’re not eating them or something, I guess,” I said.

Sharp scoffed. “Please. Some are big though... a batch a few months ago hatched finally, after like three years. When I opened the cage and they flew out it was like being hit in the face by bats,” Sharp complained.

“Huh...” I wondered what kind of moths she had found. Lunar Moths maybe?

One of the human girls hurried by in front of us, crossing the hallway. She was giggling, and didn't even notice us.

"So uh... Vim..." Sharp coughed, drawing my attention.

I turned to look at her, and found her keeping her gaze downward. To the ground. To the worn rugs we were walking upon.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"The uh... the cat. Rennalee," she said quietly, as if Renn was nearby to hear her speak of her.

As far as I could tell she wasn't. I couldn't smell her, or hear her. Last I had seen her, a few hours ago, was with a large group of the sisters. Heading for the south of the church. Either to the buildings behind it, or maybe the kitchens.

Though it'd likely not be long until she found me. I had promised her that we'd share a room while here... and it had recently become nighttime. The sun had set about an hour or so ago.

"Renn? What'd she do? Tear out the last few pages in the book or something?" I asked.

Sharp's shoulders jolted, and she glanced at me. "Would she actually do something like that?" She asked worriedly.

"Had she...?" I asked her.

"Well... no... but..." Sharp frowned, and tilted her head... suddenly doubting herself for some reason.

"Then...?" I slowed a little, but didn't come to a complete stop. I wanted to find Abel, as to ask him something. Before he went to his nightly prayer.

Sharp shifted, and sighed. "Is she looking for a place to stay...? Or is she one of those weird ones looking for a husband or something?" she asked.

Oh...? "What's this? Is our prickly little urchin feeling soft for once?" I asked.

She groaned a sigh. "I shouldn't have asked," she complained.

Smiling at her, I slowed to a stop as Sharp itched her chin. The bandages wrapped around her fingers and face made it sound funny. Not too unlike the sound of scraping sandpiper.

Sharp stopped too, and nodded. "I bet she hasn't found one. No one would want a full blown predator anymore, I bet... so why not leave her here? She seems to be slightly religious too, so..." Sharp offered.

Ah...

Feeling oddly humbled, I nodded. "Thanks. You can offer it to her if you'd like, but you'd probably be surprised. She's come to enjoy traveling with me... to the point it's almost concerning," I told her the truth.

"Hm...? Wait... please don't tell me she's like Merit," Sharp glared at me as she realized the truth.

I nodded.

The sharp urchin groaned and shook her head. "What the...? Really... what is wrong with women?" she asked herself.

"You're asking me?"

"Of course I'm not. You men don't make sense either. I don't understand, she's beautiful... why would she pick you of all things?" Sharp began to seriously question it as we returned to walking.

I chuckled at her.

“What of the human then?” Sharp asked, likely hoping for a more normal reason for the new member. To calm her from Renn’s abnormalness.

“I basically won her in battle. Her brother had been a part of the attack on the Weaver’s Hut, so I couldn’t leave her there. She should be fine. She’s timid, and a little odd like most pagans, but she’s harmless I think,” I said.

“She’ll not be pagan long. Not if she’s timid, at least,” Sharp said.

I nodded, though wasn’t willing to admit that the reason Elisabeth would be converted wasn’t because she wanted to... but because if she didn’t she’d be ostracized here, and likely not included in their little groups.

It was sad, and against my entire ethos, but the only alternative was to take her elsewhere. And it’d take us months to find her another location, since the next few stops weren’t places she could stay at.

“Better that than fascinated with you, at least, I guess,” Sharp said as she thought about it.

Tilting my head at her, I wondered why so many of our members found it weird that I could be attractive, or something like it. “I kind of like how odd she is sometimes,” I said.

“You would. Poor girl. Maybe she should stay here. I’ll try to convince her, so you don’t end up breaking her poor heart,” Sharp said with a sigh.

I frowned, but kept my thoughts to myself as to why that wasn't needed.

So even when I somewhat played along, our more normal members didn't realize I was being serious. Interesting.

Landi had actually not believed it either. Even at the end, she had quietly asked me to not hurt Renn too badly. That I should take a lesson from her, and not play with my food.

So far... Merit, the Chronicler... And Nasba and Nann had seemed to realize I was taking her feelings for me seriously. Brandy and a few others have noticed, but like Sharp they thought I was just... well...

Not so much toying with her, but indulging her. Playing along. As if she was but a child.

I wonder how long it'd take for everyone to realize the truth.

"Other than them... how're the rest? How's Rapti doing?" Sharp asked after her only real friend. Which was sad, since Rapti didn't feel the same way towards her.

Rapti had sent a letter to Abel. I'll need to ask if she had inquired about Sharp or not. It really was time she forgave Sharp and started talking to her again.

"Fine. I recently sent her a book. By now she's likely got it, and will have a bunch of questions for me once I see her again," I said.

Speaking of that, and remembering I had sent Rapti that book I'd written a long time ago... made me realize that Renn had started affecting me long before I had realized.

"A book...? You gave her one? What one?" Sharp asked.

"A religious one. Not like your books full of dirty euphemisms," I said.

Sharp's hood danced thanks to her hair sticking up. "Vim...! Jeez..." she grumbled, embarrassed.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "Everyone else is relatively fine... We've lost a few members and locations since I've been here last... but we've also gained some new members. Not just Renn, or humans, either," I said.

"Typical stuff then...? I overheard Rennalee telling the others about Monarchs and stuff," Sharp pointed out.

Oh...? She must have spent time with Renn, or listening and watching her for a short time before coming to find me, then. Sharp had read the book faster than I had thought. Had she read it all in only a few hours? Surprising. I hadn't thought it that good, honestly. But oh well.

"Two Monarchs since I've been here last, yes," I said. I didn't mention Miss Beak. Likely never would again, other than with Renn.

“Huh... you don’t normally run into that many anymore do you? Were they both at the same time?” Sharp asked.

We slowed to a stop as Abel rounded the corner ahead of us. He smiled at the sight of me, and headed down the hall towards us.

“They hadn’t been, no,” I said as Abel hurried over.

“Vim...! Well done. I heard from Renn what’s happened since your last visit, really, well done,” Abel praised me as he bowed his head and made a tiny gesture, one of prayer.

Sharp sighed. “I’m going to go find the cat. Maybe I can save her from herself,” Sharp said as she stepped away.

“Oh...?” Abel watched her walk away, unaware he had just been glared at.

“How’ve you been Abel?” I asked, not really wanting Abel and Sharp to get into an argument right now.

He returned his attention to me and nodded quickly. “Very well, Vim. Like usual lately, we get only a few visitors anymore. We’ve not had to bury any of our more special members... but we did have two deaths. The older married couple. The wife died, and John sadly went not too long later. I fear his broken heart hadn’t been able to endure,” Abel said.

Right. There were a few missing faces, though I couldn't remember their names really. John...? I didn't remember him.

"Well, you got a new one now. She's a pagan, but I'm sure you all can get along well enough," I said.

"I noticed. She didn't bow her head or offer prayer upon entering the church earlier... really, what is the world coming to? I really thought all the pagans would be gone by now," Abel sighed as he spoke.

Sharp left the hallway, her hood moving as she did. Had Abels words bothered her, or something else? Maybe she had seen someone down the hallway she was heading into.

"How's the rest been, Abel? Frett? Sharp?" I asked him gently, making his focus leave the humans.

"Ah, they've been fine. Quiet, like always. Last winter we had a small issue... Frett and Tim got into an argument, one that lasted months. But they're friends again... I think... You know how we are here," he said.

I nodded, glad to hear it. Though it was odd that Frett and Tim would get into an argument... Frett was like Rapti. She didn't argue with anyone.

Maybe they had tried to form a relationship, and it had gone sour. Tim was an odd man. Made even odder by his strange fascination with carving tombstones.

“Actually... can I ask something Vim? Something a little personal?” Abel then asked as he glanced around.

I nodded, but he didn't answer right away. He made sure we were alone, and then stepped a small step closer... as to whisper.

“Is she really a predator? This Renn. I can't smell her at all,” he whispered softly.

“Ah... yes. She is. In fact she's one of the last real ones. Her lack of smell is something unique about her, but it's nothing to be worried over,” I said.

“Oh... okay...” he then frowned. “Is it like you? Is she like you? She's a cat though, isn't she?” Abel asked, barely putting one and two together.

I chuckled. “Not sure. She's just special in her own way. You know how your gods were, Abel,” I said.

He blinked, and the sudden realization dawned on him as he quickly nodded. “You're quite right! They do sometimes craft unique souls, don't they?” he said happily, letting such an explanation make perfect sense for him.

“I plan to stick around for a few weeks at least. To make sure the human will be fine here, and to let Renn rest a little before we continue on. Is there any room available with a large bed?” I asked.

“Large bed...? Oh, for Renn? Cats do like to laze, don’t they?” he chuckled and then pondered it for a moment... then nodded. “Yes. Either the second floor, overlooking the rear courtyard or one of the rooms in the attachment houses if she’d rather be alone,” Abel suggested.

Right. No one was allowed to stay in the rooms in the hallways of the members here, on purpose. To keep them safe. Especially so men, what with this being a convent. “I’ll let her choose. Either of the attachment houses empty?” I asked.

“One is. The other two have members living in them, or are frequented. One’s been converted into a uh... well...” Abel coughed and shifted. “An insect nursery, I guess,” he said worriedly.

I smiled at Abel's frown. He still wasn't entirely sure what to think of Sharp. Still... So she really had found a new hobby? Good. “She’s having fun at least, right?” I suggested.

Abel nodded quickly. “Yes. Although many are worried about it... Some of the bugs get free sometimes and well...” Abel sighed, and I realized what was bothering him, or rather the community.

Sharp’s new hobby made the others unsettled. You’d think a bunch of people that lived alone in a dense forest would be used to bugs.

“I do have a small request of you, Vim, before you leave,” Abel then said.

“Hm?”

He made a small gesture, one of his little prayers, before asking it of me. "On the eastern tower, there's a statue that's shifted and come free. I fear it will possibly fall soon, during a bad storm. It's not over anyone's rooms or anything, but it'd likely do damage," Abel said.

Oh. Right. I nodded. "Sure. I'll check it," I said.

He sighed and nodded. "Thank you. Sharp offered to remove it, but she'd have destroyed it... so I was hoping you'd show up before it became that serious of an issue," Abel revealed his true worry.

"I'm sure your gods would forgive her if she had. It'd be destroyed upon falling down anyway, and better to protect their children, right?" I gave Abel a tiny suggestion.

Abel shook his head and frowned. "It's not the destruction of the Saint's figure that worries me Vim. It's the malice she'd have upon doing so. We suffer our God's wrath every day for our transgressions, yet she so brazenly incurs more...!" Abel shuddered at the mere thought of it.

I nodded, but wanted to sigh. "I'll see what I can do," I said.

"Thank you, really," Abel nodded and made another small motion with his hands, offering another prayer.

It was a good thing his gods were dead. They'd likely be annoyed hearing so many prayers so often.

“Let everyone know to come to me if they have any requests. Or to let you know, so you can let me know,” I reminded him.

He nodded. “I shall do so. You’re right, last time Sister Ursula had wanted to ask you a favor and hadn’t been able to,” Abel remembered.

“Had she?” I asked. Not a surprise. The poor woman was a very skittish thing. She was likely hiding away right now thanks to all the commotion. I hadn't seen her yet.

“I... don’t remember what it had been. I’ll make sure to have Frett ask her for us,” Abel said.

“Please do,” I said.

“Let me go remind her now, just in case,” Abel nodded as he turned hurriedly, dead set on making sure it happened.

“Thanks,” I watched him hurry away, heading deeper into the building.

It was a little sad to hear when members had wanted something of me, and hadn’t been able to ask it. There weren’t many members so fragile and timid that struggled even to speak to me, but the few who were... well...

Hopefully the poor woman hadn't needed something too important. I'll ask Renn to talk to her for me later.

Liking the idea, I decided to go find my companion. Not just to tell her about Ursula but to also have her pick out which room she wanted. I doubted she'd be willing to go to bed any time soon, but I kind of felt like lying down.

I'd already helped sort the luggage, helped handle the horses, and had walked around the perimeter. Like always this place was... quiet. Simple. But as Abel had said, it was starting to age. It'd likely not be long until I had to rebuild entire roofs and stuff.

Sighing I rounded the same corner Sharp had went around. Heading down the hallway, I eventually made my way to the center of the church. Like the one in Telmik, this place had a massive courtyard in the center. One that was open to the elements. The windows here along the hallways that rounded the courtyard weren't as large or fancy, but they still displayed the courtyard well enough.

Unlike the courtyard in Telmik, this one didn't have a house within it. Instead it had small gardens, a large tree, and a corner lot where people could gather. It wasn't too uncommon to see several members in the courtyard during the day, either tending the garden, reading, or simply enjoying the day. Right now though it was empty. And not just because it was night. I walked along the hallway, staring out the windows, and listened to the distant voices. What was interesting was it sounded like the voices were coming from different directions.

They weren't all together. Which wasn't too surprising, really, it wasn't like everyone would always be together... but...

Pausing in front of one of the smaller hallways, that led to some rooms, I listened to the voices coming from it.

That sounded like the men. The few that were here. Abel's voice was amongst them.

Walking past the hallway, I rounded a corner and entered the hallway that led to the main parlor.

The voices grew louder the closer I got, and I recognized Elisabeth's. She was talking with what sounded like Frett and the other sisters and...

I frowned as I slowed to a stop, and realized I didn't hear Renn.

It wasn't too shocking... sometimes Renn could be quiet, as she allowed others to talk... but...

As the moment dragged on, and it became obvious that Renn wasn't amongst the group, I turned and headed for a different hallway.

Returning to the center, to the hallway that rounded the entirety of the courtyard, I smiled as I saw a familiar hooded girl. She was hurrying around the bend in front of me. I could see her through the windows, to the other side of the courtyard. She turned at the sight of me, and hurried to run around the corner and into the hallway I was in.

Renn wasn't too far behind her... but she wasn't running as Sharp was.

Small Sharp ran up to me, skidding to a stop an arm's reach away.

I smiled down at her and the way she glowered up at me. "She's ridiculous. I'll not be able to put up with her. Don't leave her here," she said quickly.

My smile turned into a smirk. What had Renn said or done? Wish I could have been there. "We'll see. Did you give up trying to save her then?" I asked.

Sharp huffed and glanced back, at the approaching Renn. She wasn't hurrying, but her tail was swaying in a way that told me she wanted to.

"I'd not save her even if she was a Saint. Geh... she's quick...!" Sharp turned back to me, and pointed up at me. "Don't blame me if she bites your you-know-what one day. She's got that crazy look in her eyes!" she added.

Laughing at her, I reached out at her.

Sharp tried to dodge, but I was too quick. I snuck my hand under her hood, and went to ruffling her hair.

"Geah! Vim!" Sharp shouted at me, causing Renn to come to a stop.

Chuckling, I shook her whole head violently. Ruffling hair, and dislodging bandages. "Keep up that defense, Sharp. She'll have you weeping at her feet to not go before you know it," I warned her.

Sharp finally got away, ducking away from my hand. "Vim...! Rghah!" she made a weird noise in her throat as she hurriedly put her hood back over her head, it had slid off a little in my messing with her. Half the bandages on her head had also slid off, coming undone and revealing her face and hair.

She stepped away, glared at me with watery eyes, and then turned to point at Renn. "This is all your fault!" she shouted at Renn, then turned and ran off.

Before she was able to slip away, I noted the growing smile on her face. She darted off as Renn hurried over to us.

"I don't think she likes me..." Renn said sadly as she drew near.

"Nah... quite the opposite," I said with a smile.

Renn watched Sharp round a corner, running along the courtyard, and then turned to look at me. She smiled back at me, but did so unsurely. She wanted to believe me, but didn't.

"How's the Crypt treating you so far?" I asked her.

“Wonderful. I’ve met everyone, gave the letters to those who had any... and Elisabeth has already made herself at home. One of the human girls here is from her region, I guess. They’ve bonded already,” Renn said, sounding a little sad that she had been abandoned so readily.

“That’s for the best,” I said.

She nodded, but her sad smile told me the truth.

I studied that smile... until she frowned at me.

“Hm...?” I was about to ask what was wrong, as she grabbed my hand.

The one I had just used to torment Sharp.

“Ah. Right. Here’s why you don’t touch Sharp,” I told Renn.

“Vim...” she groaned as she carefully touched my shredded hand. It wasn’t bleeding too badly, thanks to most of the cuts being tiny, but it was still a mess. I had hundreds if not thousands of tiny cuts. Tiny, but deep. Her hair had cut to the bone.

“For reference, this is what she does to me. It’s worse to other people,” I further warned Renn.

“How...?” Renn wondered.

“She’s not named Sharp for her wit, Renn,” I said gently. Though she should be, in my opinion.

She blinked at me, and then nodded in understanding.

“Let’s go find you something to clean you off with,” Renn said as she tugged me by my wrist, pulling me down the hall.

“It’ll heal quickly, Renn,” I told her. Although deep cuts, they were thin and uniform. Such wounds healed well.

“So? You’re still bloody,” she said.

Well... that was true...

Being pulled away, I wondered if she had been shown all around the area already. She was leading me not to the kitchens, but to the room used as a hospital.

“So you’ve met everyone already?” I asked.

"I think so? By the way I like it here. Everyone thinks like me here," she said.

"Thinks... like you?" I asked, worried. Please tell me she didn't mean the religion stuff...

"They all think you're more trouble than your worth too!" she said happily, teasing me.

Chapter 255 Ursula

The tall woman peered around the door's frame, out into the hallway.

"I don't hear anyone," I told Ursula.

She nodded; her thick headdress shifting as she turned her head to look the other way.

Patiently waiting, I was a little... unsure what to think of her. She was so timid it was worrying. But...

From what I had gathered, from Vim and Frett, this woman had a very good reason to be so on guard. I didn't know her whole story, and honestly a part of me... didn't want to know. It would likely break my heart. But I knew enough to not judge her, or grow impatient with her.

"Okay," she whispered, and finally left the room.

Following her slowly, I watched as Ursula hurried to the side of the hallway. She basically clung to the wall, walking with a hand upon it as if in support. As if she had a limp leg or something. She didn't, as far as I could tell, but it seemed she needed the support all the same.

"This way," she turned to say to me, speaking quietly. Almost a whisper.

I nodded and followed her... though I didn't hug the wall as she was doing. We headed for the end of the hallway, right as a door opened elsewhere.

Gulping, I listened to the footsteps and clothes of the person heading our way. Based off the sound of the robe, it was likely another sister... but...

Ursula hurried to the end of the hallway, and hugged the wall near the corner even harder. She even tried to somewhat hide behind the corner's extended design. There was some kind of wooden decoration that had been installed in the corner. It not only made it look nicer, but it kept the sharp edges of the stones from being a problem.

The sister who had left the room appeared in front of us. It was Prasta. She paused in the middle of the intersection, and smirked at me and Ursula. "Hey guys!" she greeted us.

Ursula jumped, as if startled. Even though she had watched her walk out in front of her. "Prasta," she said stiffly.

Oh...? At least she wasn't running away.

“Where you headed?” Prasta asked Ursula.

“M-my, my room,” she answered.

“Ah... you should be fine. I just came from that way,” Prasta kindly told her.

Ursula nodded quickly. “Thank you.”

Prasta smiled and nodded back and then glanced at me. “Walking ahead of her, to let her know if any of the boys are nearby or headed her way, is what we usually do Renn,” she let me know.

I blinked and nodded. “Okay,” I said as I stepped forward, to do just that.

“Mhm...” Ursula nodded as I stepped past her, and around the corner.

Prasta giggled as she stepped away, going back to whatever she was doing.

Glancing down the hallway I assumed we were heading, I turned to Ursula. “I don’t hear or see anyone,” I told her.

“Mhm,” she nodded as she slowly peered around the corner, and then once confirming I had told the truth, she stepped around the corner and into the new hallway.

I strode forward, a little unsure if I was doing what was needed, and went to do as Prasta had recommended.

So her fear really wasn't just people in general... but the men.

How sad.

“It's a good thing there aren't many men here huh,” I said as I kept myself in front of her. I actually had to pick up the pace a little, Ursula had began to hurry. Likely thanks to the fact she was relying on me to alert her if any neared.

“Too many,” she argued.

Well... maybe. As far as I was aware there were only five. And that included the young human boy and Father Abel... though maybe she was scared of them too. Likely was, since Vim had asked me to talk to her and find out what she wanted. Abel hadn't felt confident he could get it out of her.

Reaching the end of the hallway, I glanced down the two new hallways it led to. Neither had anyone in them, nor did I hear or smell anyone nearby.

“Which way?” I asked her.

“Left,” she said as she hurried to hug the corner again.

Going down the new hallway, I realized this was one I’d not been in before. We were in the south west corner of the building, near the back exit. The one that led to the cemetery, and all the other buildings behind this one.

“What had you been reading Ursula?” I asked her. I had found her in what Frett had called the quiet library. Supposedly there were three libraries here, but... well...

What made one a quiet library? Weren’t they all usually a little quiet?

“A journal about insects,” Ursula said quietly as she hurried over to me.

I went a little still as she ran up behind me, and grabbed the back of my shirt.

Feeling very conscious, and suddenly very protective of the woman, I glanced back at her. “Everything okay?” I asked.

She nodded quickly. "So far?" she said.

Right...

I gulped and returned to walking, feeling rather strange as she clung to my back. I did my best to not let my tail bump or coil around her, even though it kept wanting to. It wanted to wrap around her waist.

"Left or right up here?" I asked as we neared the end of the hallway.

"Right. Then the stairs," she guided.

I nodded, and was thankful that we didn't run into anyone as we found the stairs and began to climb them.

She clung to me as we reached the second floor, and then she pointed over my shoulder. To a darker hallway not far from the stairs.

We hurried to it, and I realized she was much taller than me. She had easily pointed over my shoulder, even though she was scrunched up and trying to hide behind me.

"Last door," she whispered in my human ear. She was crouching rather lowly...

Reaching the door, Ursula lightly pushed on me as we neared. Realizing what she wanted from me, I went ahead and opened the door for her.

Once it was open she hurried into her room, nearly tugging me in with her.

Following her in, Ursula quickly went to shut the door. Although she did so with haste, she made sure to close the door as quietly as possible.

It latched, and I was a little glad to see she had a lock on her door. It was a huge metal bar. A steel one, that was latched into not just the door itself but the stone walls on either side.

“Did Vim make this for you?” I asked as I watched her clank it shut.

She nodded quickly, and she breathed a sigh of relief once it was secured.

I smiled as I studied the steel bar, and the way it was obviously made to be useful. It wasn't just something added on as an afterthought... it had been made to be effective.

The only way someone was breaking into this room, was either through the stone walls or tearing the thick wooden door apart piece by piece.

Vim had installed it seriously. Even though she likely did not need such a thing here at all. In fact as far as I was aware, none of the other rooms had locks at all.

The one Vim and I were sharing didn't have one, at least.

The bar wasn't a necessity. There was no one here that needed to be kept out... rather, it was for her own peace of mind.

I wonder if Vim had made it for her on request, or if he had simply done so.

It was that strange kindness that made me love him.

"Sorry Renn..." Ursula apologized as she turned to smile at me.

I smiled back at her and nodded. "It's okay Ursula. Just let me know if I ever need to do anything to make you feel comfortable, okay?"

She nodded back, and gave me a pretty smile. One that was pretty enough that made me believe the small story Vim had told me about her.

About how she had been revered as a goddess. In the town that had kept her prisoner.

“Um... I have tea, if you like tea,” Ursula then offered as she stepped away from the door, and the huge lock upon it.

“I’d love some, thank you,” I said as I turned to watch her step deeper into her room.

It was about the size of the room Vim and I was staying in. Big enough to be a personal room, and not feel cramped... but not as big as some of the rooms I had seen at Lumen. It was about the size of the room I had been staying at in Lumen, in fact. She had a small single person sized bed in the corner of the room... and she had at least a dozen long curtains hanging from the ceiling all over the place. As if to partition off the room into smaller ones.

Most of the drapes were folded up, tied with bows, so I doubted their purpose. Maybe they weren’t to section off the room, but some weird design or fashion?

She had a few tables. Some bookshelves. She had a window in one corner, but she had completely and utterly sealed it away. A huge dresser was in front of it, and behind the dresser were planks of wood and drapes to cover it. The only reason I even knew it was a window at all, was because this room was a mirror image in layout as the one Vim and I were staying in. Her window was in the opposing side and...

Turning, I noted the missing door on the bathroom entry. She had removed it completely... yet hadn’t put drapes or anything up to replace it.

Strange. She didn’t want the window, yet didn’t have a door or drape for the bathroom.

Her room smelled like her. She smelled of paper and charcoal. As if she was always near a fire. Her room did have a fireplace, like mine did, which she was currently kneeling in front of. She smacked two stones together, and sparked a fire. Most likely to brew the tea she had spoken of.

As she hummed and went to putting a small kettle onto a tiny metal stand, I glanced over at the biggest table in the room.

There was a bunch of books on it. Most were open, as if so she could remember what page she had left them on. She also had papers, and ink-pots...

“You said you were researching insects?” I asked.

“Yeah...! Sharp’s started cultivating moths lately... but she’s struggling with it,” Ursula said as she stood from the small fire she had made.

I smiled at her. “I heard about her moths. I guess some got free not too long ago?” I asked. Several of the sisters had complained mightily fiercely about them. I guess they had been huge, and ugly.

She nodded. “Lunar Moths. Pretty things. The others had gotten upset, though,” Ursula said.

Usually I’d have made a tiny joke about how people hated pretty things, and it was common, but I kept my thoughts to myself.

“So um... shall we sit?” Ursula stepped over to one of the smaller tables. The one near the fireplace. It had a couple chairs, which she promptly went to pulling out so we could sit and talk with each other.

I nodded, and excitedly went to join her. I was looking forward to not just hearing what kind of request she had of Vim, but also to spend time with her.

I felt for her. She had a difficult past, like many of our members, but unlike most... she hasn't been able to completely escape it. The fact we had basically had to sneak back to her room was proof enough over how traumatized she still was.

I wanted to be her friend. If I could. Especially since, based off the few things I had heard from others about her, she didn't really have any. Even her fellow sisters seemed to ignore her a little, for some reason.

Before sitting, I paused to look at the little cushion on the chair. It was sewn with pretty flower designs. “Did you make these?” I asked.

“Huh...? Oh... no. Sharp did. She can't sit on wood, so...” Ursula said.

Oh...? Can't sit on wood...? I wonder if it had something to do with how her skin was coarse and rough.

Sitting down, I smiled as I watched Ursula happily sit down in the chair across from me. In this moment, she looked like any other woman here. A nun, dressed in holy garbs... but also happy and enjoying life. The timid, terrified woman, that had just been clinging to my back was nowhere to be found.

"I hear you're not a sister, Renn?" Ursula asked.

"No... not officially. I've not subscribed to any of the religions I've met yet," I said.

"Not officially...? Are you a pagan then, or still searching for your answers?" she asked.

"I think I'm still searching, yes. I... really enjoy some of the morals and ethics found in your bible, but..." I started to tell her what I thought of it.

Ursula nodded before I could continue. "Right! I agree! Those here don't understand that though. So many here either think you're either one of them, or a complete outsider. They don't allow even the tiniest of doubts," she said with a sigh.

Oh... "So you're not a sister either," I said, understanding.

She nodded. "I'd like to be... but I have a few grievances and disagreements with some of their teachings. So I'm not allowed to be," she said gently.

I see. That was why they ostracized her then.

To them, she was as much a pagan as Elisabeth.

Which also made sense as to why Sharp and her seemed to be friendly with one another... even though Sharp supposedly wasn't friendly with anyone else here. Though that did not explain completely Frett's supposed closeness with her. Though maybe Frett was more generous with her judgments.

It was a little... strange to me. This place was obviously meant to be a religious one. Not only was this place basically a church, it was where one could be laid to rest. A final resting place. A holy place.

Yet there were members who didn't particularly belong to that said holy religion. And as such were... neglected, to a point.

How sad.

It almost made me wonder why she, and Sharp, stayed here. Why stay where they were treated almost like outcasts?

But I knew the truth. It wasn't like there were many other places to go anymore... and... well...

Although they were likely not treated completely like fellow sisters, it wasn't like they were abused or tormented. Like Prasta, or Frett. They both had been kind and looked out for Ursula. Their disagreements did affect them, but it didn't make them enemies.

"Odds are you and I are rather similar then," I said to her.

Ursula beamed me a smile and nodded. "I see...!"

The kettle began to make noise, so she stood and went to grab it. Before she did, she brought over a small platter of cups and placed it on the table. They were tiny wooden things... so small that I wondered if they held three gulps or four.

Maybe their small shape was related to this place. A place of worship. One was supposed to be humble and without gluttony, after all.

Yet as she prepared the tea, and went to fill one of the little cups for me... I found myself longing for Landi's strangely shaped glasses.

They had been big.

"Thank you," I thanked her all the same as I held the quickly growing warmer cup.

"The tea is grown here. There's a few dozen species of plants we have... this should be a more minty flavor," she said.

Minty...

Smelling it a little, I realized she was right. It did have such a smell.

"I've never had this tea before," I said as I thought about it. I'd have remembered such a vivid smell.

"Hm. Depends on where you're from, I suppose. It's common farther east," she said.

I nodded. "I'm from the northwest. Near the ocean," I said.

She smiled at me as she sat back down, holding one of the little cups for herself. Although she was taller than me, she was just as thin as I was. Yet still the cup looked a little silly in her hands. Which meant it likely looked as silly in mine as it felt. "Your teas are more bold usually. Probably something to do with the cold," she said.

Were they...? "Most likely," I decided to agree after pondering it for a moment.

"I'd love to hear your story Renn... if you'd be okay with me not really sharing my own, at least," Ursula said with a sad smile. She shifted as she smiled at me, turning her cup a little as if to warm her hands with it.

I smiled back at her. "I'd be okay with that. And I'd be okay with hearing even just what you're willing to share, you know? Even the boring bits," I said.

Ursula's eyes softened and I found myself once again thinking she was pretty. Even when forlorn, and demure, she looked stunning. It was hard to tell, since she wore a heavy headdress, and her robes covered her whole body rather well... but it was very likely she was as beautiful as Kaley. If not maybe even more so. "Deal," she said gently.

"Before we do though, since we might end up talking all day, want to tell me what you'd like to request of Vim?" I suggested.

She blinked, remembering that was the entire reason I was here. "Oh. Yes," she nodded, and then gulped. She lifted the cup to her mouth, and most likely took the tiniest sip I'd ever seen someone do. And tiny it was. I doubted I'd ever taken such a small sip of anything before. As she did so, I realized she was now unsure of herself again. Worried.

Was it her nature? Was she embarrassed... or was it more?

Taking my own drink, as to not be rude and stare at her too much, I did my best to not drink as much either. Not because I didn't want to or because the tea was nasty... but rather because it wasn't. It was tasty. Tasty enough I wanted to drink it all in one gulp.

Even if she wouldn't take offense, and would likely just laugh at me and fill the cup back up... I didn't want to seem so greedy in front of someone who obviously was anything but.

Vim would likely laugh at me if he knew what I was feeling right now.

She took a small breath, and closed her eyes. I watched her gather her nerve... and then she finally nodded.

"I want... well..." Ursula shifted in her seat, and I held my breath. "I'd like to spend some time with Vim," she then said.

I blinked, and released my pent up breath. "What?" I asked.

She nodded. "I... I can't. I know the men here won't hurt me... I know they're good men. Abel especially. He's suffered just as I have, in his own way... but..." she began to ramble, and started fidgeting with her hands.

"You... want to try to face your fears," I whispered as I understood.

She nodded quickly. "Yes! Vim's a man... but he's also the Protector. He saved me. There's no man better to try it with. I know it might not work, or make a difference, but..." Ursula spoke hurriedly, and although she sounded terrified... she had a tiny smile.

The sudden panic that had almost surged within me completely dissipated. For a moment there I thought I had just met another rival or something.

Still... Feeling completely humbled, I smiled at the woman who not only wanted to face her fears... but was doing so with a smile.

"I have no doubt Vim will be more than happy to help you try, Ursula," I told her.

She nodded. "I know... But each time I go try to ask him, I panic and run away... and..." she groaned at herself, disappointed.

I see. So she's had this desire for awhile. Likely the last few visits Vim's been here.

Years. Maybe even decades.

I gulped, and wondered if that meant it was likely a... fruitless endeavor. If she's been simply trying to ask Vim for such a favor, for decades, then... well...

It was likely she'd never get over her innate fears. They were likely ingrained in her. Written into her soul, even.

But that didn't change the fact she wanted to try.

"I'll let Vim know. I'll even sit with you and help you too, if you'd like," I offered.

"Oh please...! Yes!" Ursula sat forward and nodded heavily at me, sounding utterly relieved I'd offer.

So Vim had saved her huh...? Of course had.

Good job, Vim. Hopefully you... can somehow save her again, in a different way.

“Is it all men, Ursula? What about children?” I asked. There was a young boy here. Not much younger than Elisabeth. But he was a tiny, scrawny kid. And quiet. He was a human child, from one of the few married couples here.

She shook her head. “Even little boys make me panic. I know... I know it’s so stupid and makes no sense but...” Ursula mumbled, trying to defend herself.

But there was no need to. Not with me. “It’s okay. I get it. My... dear friend was like you, Ursula,” I told her.

She lifted her head, and blinked at me.

“Her name was Nory. She... suffered. Like you, I think. She wasn’t able to live amongst men either. So we lived far away from human settlements. Alone,” I told her. I didn’t mention that her true fear wasn’t really men... but rather a specific type. Men of the cloth. Last thing I needed was for her to think the men here were more dangerous than they already were to her.

“Oh...? You lived with her?” she asked.

“Until the end, yes. She had been human... so...” I shrugged.

“Ah... yes. They fade quickly, don’t they? I try very hard to pay attention to the humans here, to spend time with the ones I can before they fade away... but sometimes it happens before I can even blink,” Ursula said.

Frowning, I nodded. She was right but...

Wait...

If to her a human faded that quickly... then maybe...

“How old are you, Ursula?” I asked.

“I just recently had my six hundredth year of passing,” she said.

Year of passing...?

Ursula must have noticed my confusion, for she smiled at me. “It’s a term we use for baptism. It was when I was saved... though if you promise not to tell anyone, it’s not when I received my actual baptism, but when Vim saved me. There had been quite a few years between the two,” she whispered.

Ah... I nodded gently, feeling rather warm at being told such a sweet secret. She grinned at me, happy to have told me.

Still...

That meant... maybe to her, these last few years where she's been trying to ask Vim for a favor, and failing...

Maybe to her it hadn't been that long. If she was the type to not notice the passage of years as deeply as I did.

Which meant to her... this new desire to face her fears was very fresh.

Maybe there was hope after all.

"I'm a little over two hundred," I told her, since she had told me.

"I barely remember those years... but that's a good thing for me, honestly," Ursula said gently.

Right. Years spent as a captive.

Keeping back the shiver that wanted to run down my spine as I thought of spending centuries in such a predicament, I found myself respecting her more.

She had endured that. A genuine hell.

The fact she had endured it for that long and only was a little terrified of men... well...

Odds are she was doing better than I would have done.

"Oh. I do have another request, too," Ursula then said.

"Hm?" I perked up and nodded.

"Next time he comes back, I'd like him to bring me a pair of dogs. A few years ago one wandered in from somewhere. It latched onto Sister Lena, and it was adorable... though I think everyone else would love them too. So maybe I should say many dogs? For all of us?" Ursula wondered.

Smiling, I nodded. "I'm sure we can figure something out."

Chapter 256 A Jar of Requests

Opening my eyes, I took a small breath and calmed down as I realized it had just been a dream.

Staring up at the ceiling, shining and sparkling from the morning's sunlight reflecting off the glasses and cups on the table beneath the window... I relaxed and closed my eyes.

It had been a dream.

Just a dream.

"Morning Vim."

My toes twitched, and for a very tiny moment... I wished I had been back in that nightmare.

Opening my eyes, I turned my head and took in the sad smile on Renn's face. I looked at her smile long enough to dedicate it to memory, as to enjoy it in my thoughts throughout the rest of the day, and then looked back up at the ceiling.

"Hm," I greeted her back, and wondered what I had gotten myself into.

Renn and I had been sleeping next to each other longer than I wanted to admit. It had started from the beginning, somehow. I had allowed it, and somehow or the other... Renn had simply kept on doing it. Even before I had started to even consider having a relationship with her. To be honest I had done it without much thought originally. I had simply thought she'd be like all the rest. Someone who showed up for a tiny moment of my life and then disappeared. Someone I'd only see a handful of times over hundreds of years at best. Like so many others.

Jokes on me.

Yet although it started long ago... it was only recently she had actually been sleeping so close to me. Half the time she slept not just right next to me, but on me. Holding an arm, or something. Even now I could feel her breath on me, she was that close.

I wasn't used to this. In more ways than one. It wasn't like I didn't know what it felt like to sleep with someone, but... well...

I usually went years without such a thing happening to me. Entire decades sometimes. And when it happened, it was usually for only a few nights at best.

Never continuously. And even more so, never with the same person.

This wasn't something I was used to. Nor did I know if I wanted to be or not.

Though it wasn't like I had anyone to blame but myself. Not only was I allowing it, and sometimes finding myself longing for it... this time it was entirely on me. I had been the one to suggest we share a room for once.

Usually we didn't. Not when at a Society location. For many reasons.

Still...

Remaining in bed, I fought the urge to roll out of bed and get up. Although I could, and Renn wouldn't grow too upset with me... I knew she'd pout all the same.

For some reason she enjoyed talking for a bit upon waking. To the point she looked forward to it.

"It feels warm, but I can smell rain," Renn said happily.

I nodded. I smelled it too. The storm wasn't here though, likely a few days away. If it was even heading our way at all.

Her tail was in the air, coiling and swaying. The way it was moving told me she was lying on her stomach.

I did my best to not glance over at her. If her tail was in the air then...

Yes. The blanket was off us. Had I pushed it off? Her? It was warm, but not warm enough to justify pushing it off completely. It wasn't even on my side, or at my feet. Hopefully it hadn't been me, I usually never moved at all during sleep... so if it had been me...

If it had been me, it made her sad smile on her face make sense. That and the nightmares.

I must have been fidgeting. I didn't feel sweaty, but I usually never did sweat anymore. Not even when under duress. Though I had noticed it had happened a few times recently.

"They rang a bell this time. A few minutes ago. I think it woke you... Why'd they do it today and not yesterday?" Renn asked.

"It's because today's a morning sermon day. They do it three times a week," I said as I watched the sunlight slowly grow brighter. Better it than her.

"Ah... wait. Is that going on right now?" she asked, and sat up a little.

I nodded, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed the way her hair rolled off her shoulders.

"Hmm..." she grumbled, and I knew it was because she was weighing her desires.

Stay here in bed with me? Or run off to hear this supposed sermon?

"We'll be here for a while Renn," I told her, against my better judgment.

Damn. Even when I knew, and was doing my best to not indulge in her, I still couldn't help myself!

“I know... but I’ll also have you for many hundreds of years too,” she said.

I blinked at her very serious tone, and couldn’t help but smile at her. “That’s true.”

She grumbled again, and must have made a decision. She sat up more, and then went to clamber over me.

As she crawled over me, to climb off the bed, I used every ounce of willpower that had been instilled in me from my birth as to not grab hold of her. She hurriedly hopped off the bed, and ran over to the dresser where we’d placed our clothes.

Praising myself for letting her go, I turned a little as to lie on my side. To watch her get dressed.

She did so quickly, her tail squirming the entire time.

“Want to join me?” she asked happily.

I scoffed.

Renn smirked at me, and once she was finally dressed she stepped away and to the door.

She hesitated before the door, her hand lingering near the handle... and then glanced back at me.

“Have fun, I’ll see you once it’s done,” I said to her.

“Mhm... let me know what you dreamed about later, okay?” she asked gently.

Going still, I watched the woman who had a firm hold of my heart give me a sad smile and nod at me... then she hurried out of the room.

I sighed as she shut the door behind her.

“Careful Renn, really...!” I heard her mumble to herself as she hurried down the hallway, to the stairs.

Smiling at her, I rolled upward as to sit on the edge of the bed.

Unlike Renn, I didn’t sleep naked. Not because I didn’t wish to, but rather the opposite.

I knew why she had stopped wearing her nightgowns. At least she did when we weren't on the road. Even if she hadn’t said the reason for it aloud... it was obvious.

She was a sly scheming little creature sometimes.

Though I had to admit I was enjoying her little attempts. The barely noticeable ways she acted, spoke, and especially the way her eyes focused on me sometimes made me question if I was actually seeing what I thought I was. If I didn't know her better, I'd actually doubt she was trying to seduce me. It was so subtle sometimes I wondered if she even realized what she was doing half the time. Which was terrifying. If she could be so alluring like that without trying, how dangerous was she going to be when she no longer hesitated?

Rubbing my face, I tried to keep myself from laughing at my own thoughts.

"I'm falling apart," I whispered.

In more ways than one.

Sweating without strain. Exhaustion beyond mere tiredness.

Sleeping so often. Nightmares when I do.

Wounds reopening days later after they healed.

Desires I'd not felt in centuries.

Something was terribly wrong, and I wasn't sure where to even begin to fix it.

Hopefully Renn wasn't just a symptom. Hopefully my attraction and desire for her presence was natural and real... and not a byproduct of whatever was wrong with me.

Why did Beak have to die? I could have used her wisdom...

After a few minutes of wallowing in the chaos that was my mind, I compartmentalized my own fears and worries and stood from the bed.

Deal with it later. I had stuff to do.

Several of the members here had given me requests. Some simple and easy, others I'd need to deal with elsewhere. Like the one from Ursula... or well, one of the two she had.

Dogs. Pets. A more common request than Renn had seemed to realize. She had been so excited to tell me what the timid woman had wanted. To her it had been a very beautiful, and fun sounding, request. She was looking forward to fulfilling it. Though part of that might just be her looking forward to traveling with a bunch of puppies when we returned here later.

I was often asked to bring back such things. If not pets, then livestock, or seeds for farms or something. Or objects not commonly found, or easily made. Especially from those like the members here. Where they couldn't get it themselves, being so secluded or unable to venture into human towns. So to me it

was simple and normal... which just went and showed how strange it's been the last few years. For Renn to have such a request for the first time was a little depressing, considering she's been with me for so long.

Pausing in front of the larger window, I stared through the thin sheet that was being used as a curtain. The courtyard was down below, and it was bright. The grass, flowers, and tree were lit up well. They weren't even swaying much, from a lack of wind.

I could smell the rain in the air... but it was faint. Either the storm was far away, or circling us nearby.

In fact it was faint enough that I was surprised Renn had noticed it.

Taking a deep breath, I lost the smell of the rain. Renn's scent overpowered it.

Regretting that deep breath, I sighed as I went to get full dressed.

How'd she smell so good to me? It made no sense at all.

Maybe I'll get lucky and she really will lose her smell, even to me. Although I'd probably end up regretting such a thing, it would at least keep me from feeling like some weird pervert.

Leaving the room, I shut the door and wondered how long it'd take for the members here to realize I was sharing the room with her.

As far as I was aware no one had, yet. But it's only been two nights so far. And those here went to bed early and rarely wandered around during the night. Plus this section of the church was not very frequented. The floor beneath us was, but not this part of the second floor. It was where the visitor rooms were, and other storage rooms. When no visitors were here this hallway likely only had people walk through it once or twice a month at best.

Leaving the hallway, I headed downstairs. Instead of heading to the actual church though, I went the opposite way. To find Sharp.

It took a little longer to find her than I had expected. She hadn't been in the church at all, but in one of the small single story houses behind it. Past the cemetery, and near the barn.

Walking into the house, I frowned at the smell of bugs and insects.

"This isn't a hobby, Sharp," I told her as I walked down the short hallway, and into the room where she was.

"Yes it is," she argued. She was sitting at a desk, carefully guiding a large cave spider into a glass jar.

Glancing around the room, I counted what were likely thousands of bugs. Spiders, beetles, flying insects and more. Most were in glass containers, large jars, and not glass boxes. Likely because it was all she knew how to make. Some of them looked a little wobbly, as if about to fall over and break, thanks to the fact they weren't entirely uniform.

Hobby. Sure.

“Want me to teach you how to properly make glass?” I asked her as I stepped over to the desk. To see the jar she was putting the cave spider into.

“Would you?” she grew excited, and looked up at me with expectant eyes from behind her rags.

I nodded and reached over, to nudge the large spider. It didn’t want to go in. Once in the jar, she slid over a thin wooden lid. Pieced together with thin strips of wood. Perfect for airflow... but...

She fastened the lid to the jar with a band of twine. She had to tie it firmly, but carefully... lest it broke the jar, which had impurities all over its opening.

So this is why the rest of the girls were so bothered. It wasn’t the insects, but more likely the fact their enclosures kept breaking. Sharp had most likely made all of these jars, and had done a poor job at it. They likely often broke and shattered... Thus releasing the things imprisoned within them.

“That’d help a lot... it’d also stop everyone from bugging me,” Sharp said with a sigh.

See? Knew it. “I’ll teach you. It’s easier than you think,” I said.

“Mhm,” she nodded, and I noticed the tiny smile beneath her bandages. One of the bandages had caught on her lip, thanks to how coarse it was.

“Renn could also teach you too, by the way,” I teased her.

Sharp’s smile immediately died. She glared at me as she stood up, and stepped around me to put the jar onto a shelf.

She placed it next to other spiders. A few were even much bigger... one was a bright golden yellow, and one of the biggest natural spiders I’d ever seen.

Stepping over to it, I studied the creature. It was almost so big it didn’t fit the jar it was in. It was bigger than Renn’s head, ears included. “Where’d you get this?” I asked.

“A few miles away, near a pond. It had made this huge web, big enough to catch people,” she said proudly.

I bet. It looked like it could eat a full sized person. “It’s an orb weaver, I think. I’ve never seen one so big,” I said.

“Right? I had hoped it had been a girl, but it’s a boy. Useless,” she sighed.

Right... that was even stranger. Usually the females were bigger.

Although fascinated, I hadn't come to admire her collection. "I have a question for you, Sharp," I said.

"Hopefully I don't have an answer," she complained.

"Did Frett and Tim do something stupid? Did they try to have a kid or something?" I asked.

Sharp paused... then she stepped away from the shelf she had been studying. "Yes. They had a child together. It died not long after it had been born. I'm surprised she told you," Sharp said.

I grimaced. "She didn't. Hadn't. But Abel and a few others want me to... find a way to mend their relationship. I had assumed that something like that had happened, but didn't want to press either of them in case I was right," I said with a sigh.

I had thought maybe they had simply tried. Not that they had succeeded. Or well...

"I'm glad you're so astute. If only you'd be so aware in other ways," she grumbled.

I ignored her quip and glanced over to another shelf. The beetles in the jars on that one were numerous, and scuttling around. It looked like she had put bones in the jars, for them to eat. Or clean, maybe. Looked like deer bones. "Where're your moths?" I asked.

“Oh. Over here,” Sharp actually sounded excited as she stepped out of the room to lead me to them.

Following her back down the hallway, we went to another room. One without a window. Likewise with the other one, it had a bunch of glass jars... most having cocoons or crawling caterpillar things inside of them.

Sharp hurried over to one of the biggest jars. It was several times bigger than the other ones, and had a huge caterpillar in it. It was munching on leaves, and it was funny to see that a normal sized leaf was smaller than it. “I can’t wait to see what it becomes,” Sharp said as she smiled at the thing.

I studied the small abrasive woman, and was glad to see she seemed happy.

“It’ll turn into...” I started to tell her it was a regal moth, and would be red... but I shut up when she glared at me.

Right.

She smirked and nodded at me, glad I hadn’t spoiled it for her.

It was funny that she was like Renn in certain ways. Or maybe women in general just liked surprises? I’d known quite a few who had hated them though...

Oh wait. "Uh... I know you don't want me to say anything... but that one needs dirt. To dig into and bury itself," I told her.

Sharp frowned at me, and then turned to look at the jar.

It was full of leaves and grass, but not dirt. At least, not enough. The tiny layer of dirt and soil was far from adequate.

"How much dirt?" she asked.

"I don't know... but it might need more than that jar can give. It's huge... you might also need to keep the soil moisturized and stuff too..." I frowned as I realized I didn't know as much about insects as I should.

"Really...?" Sharp sounded sad as she reached up to touch the glass of the jar. She only tapped it with a fingertip, as to not accidentally shatter the glass by having it touch her skin.

I nodded. "How about we make a larger enclosure for it? I'll help you out," I offered.

She nodded, saying nothing else.

"So... does no one else know then, Sharp...? Everyone just thinks they're fighting for simple reasons," I said, going back to the topic I had come here for.

“As far as I’m aware only I and Ursula know. She had gone to Ursula first, to see if she knew how to save the baby. Ursula came to me,” Sharp said.

“Why did they not let anyone else know?” I asked. It was so strange. How’d she even get pregnant and carry it to term without anyone noticing anyway? Sure they all wore hefty robes and stuff but...

Though... Sharp had said born and died, but that didn’t mean she had carried it to a full term. An early miscarriage maybe.

“I don’t like talking about this,” she mumbled.

“You think I do...?” I asked.

Sharp sighed and stepped away from her giant jar, to glare at me. “Tim’s a jerk, Vim. He was sleeping with Frett and one of the human girls. The married one. Basically it’s a bunch of stupid drama that has coalesced into a horrible environment. Frett’s ashamed, and doesn’t want anyone to know. Tim’s afraid of being banished for being a piece of shit and the rest of them are too holier-than-thou to even realize what’s happening,” Sharp said.

I closed my eyes and groaned. “You’re kidding,” I said as I rubbed my temple.

“Exactly. Either take Tim away or just let it be. I offered to kill him, but Frett won’t let me,” Sharp said with a sigh.

Shaking my head, I decided I'd need to go talk to Frett. Privately. And soon.

"Why's such drama so common in these convents? Seriously," I complained. This was why I hated these types of places.

"Because there's nothing else to do?" Sharp gave the obvious answer.

I begrudgingly nodded.

"Don't torment Frett though. She's finally back to normal. It took almost a year before she even smiled again," Sharp said gently.

"I'm sure. I won't. I do need to talk to her, though. If Tim is causing such discord then I need to at least address it. Even though it's all personal stuff, which I'm not usually one to stick my nose into, I need to at least make sure Frett is okay, mentally and physically," I said.

Honestly I didn't care at all for such drama. It never ended well, so...

"If you need Tim to disappear just let me know. I've hated that man since he arrived. I knew something was wrong with him," Sharp offered.

“You hate everyone Sharp, that’s not a good indicator,” I said.

“That’s not true. I don’t hate you. I just despise you,” she said.

Smiling at her, I nodded. Right.

“Plus I think I’m pretty good at telling if someone’s going to screw up. Everyone does, always, so I think my method of hate first, judge later, is a good way to do it,” Sharp defended her way of life.

“Sure... sure...” I said as I heard the wind pick up.

Right. Incoming storm, likely.

Stepping back, I nodded to her. “Thank you for telling me...” then I hesitated... “The baby... had it been human or?” I asked. Tim was a half-breed. Though his father’s blood was strong in him. Usually a child from a mixed parent like that was normally always human entirely.

“I don’t know Vim. It was deformed... I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It just makes me angry,” she said.

“Sorry. Thank you for telling me. In a couple days we’ll do some glass work, okay?” I offered as an apology.

She nodded, and went to return her attention to the insects around her.

Stepping out of the room, I sighed as I left the small house.

Drama. I hated drama. I usually always stayed out of such drama. I didn’t force my will on anyone... and to me, intruding in personal relationships was one of the worst things one could do. Such ground was holy, and I did not dare tread upon it.

But this type of drama usually led to disaster. Tim two-timing was not a big deal. It was common amongst the men in the Society. It was why Landi had been so successful. Non-human men were surprisingly weak and easy to manipulate, when it came to such things. Though I shouldn't praise the human ones too much. They could be just as bad.

Yet this wasn’t just infidelity. It was something that might break down the social agreement here at the Crypt. It could tear them all apart, and ruin this place. If I didn't at least verify that Frett and the rest were okay, and no foul play had been involved... Then my attempt at being unintrusive could end up causing more harm than not. If I did nothing only to return and find people dead, or for others to have fled and left the Society...

I couldn’t afford to let that happen.

Maybe I should take Tim elsewhere. He’s been here for a hundred odd years, but...

Heading back towards the church, I passed by the tombstones and statues. I did my best to not stop and study some of them. They reminded me of those I used to know. Those who had earned their spots here. Buried amongst friends and fellow believers in their faith. Too many were not simple tombstones, but ones crafted with purpose and design. Some were the animals those buried beneath had been created from. Others had their life's purposes above them. As to let everyone know who they were with a glance. A few were even huge, bigger than me.

And... Although I knew the truth of their gods, I still hoped all those buried here were up there with them all the same.

I bet they were all looking down at me with sad smiles. Ashamed of how badly I had failed them all.

Considering who I hoped was watching above me was likely just as ashamed made it even worse.

Entering the church, I closed the large door behind me and turned to greet Prasta. She hurried over to me, smirking up at me.

"Vim, your wife is very adorable," she said.

My eye twitched, and I feared learning what had happened.

"Is she?" I asked. I had meant my question to verify many things, not just the fact that Renn was adorable, and Prasta had realized it. She laughed and giggled at me.

“She is! She wanted to sing with us, and got all red in the face as she did. She didn’t need to be so embarrassed though, she’s got a very beautiful voice,” Prasta said.

Oh...? I was now a little jealous. I’d never heard her sing before. Something told me she was probably good at it. Her memory and good hearing probably helped.

“Though I was looking for you not to tease you, but to ask you something,” Prasta then said.

“Hm,” I nodded. I had assumed so. She had run straight up to me upon seeing me, after all.

Prasta went to say it, but then hesitated. She glanced around first, and once sure we were alone, she smiled and nodded at me. “Before you leave, would you please make some insect cages? For Sharp?”

I blinked, and smiled at her. “Yes. I was just visiting her. I plan to teach her how to make proper glass enclosures, and she’s agreed to it.”

Prasta let out a relieved sigh. “Thank the Gods,” she said.

My smile widened and I nodded. How amusing. “It’s not her fault. I’m sure you can imagine how hard it is for her, what with her skin,” I said gently.

She nodded, knowingly. "I know... but Vim it's gotten bad. A few weeks ago a bunch of flying bugs got free. They stung and bit something fierce. Kassy got sick from them, and was in bed for days because of it," Prasta said.

I frowned. "Kassy?" I asked.

"One of the humans. She's fine now, but who knows what might happen next time, you know?" Prasta said.

"Right. I'll make sure to fix it... one way or another, before I leave," I said.

"Thanks, Vim! You know how Sharp is... It's so hard to get through to her sometimes, so I don't think she's really realized how badly her new hobby has bothered some of us. Poor Gary is terrified of bugs, to boot, and now he can't even go near the cemetery anymore. That's how scared he is of them," Prasta said with a sigh.

Gary was scared of bugs...? Funny. His bloodline subsisted on such things. Anteater and all. "Well, hopefully soon it won't be an issue anymore," I said.

Prasta nodded. "Right...!" she then turned, right as Renn stepped around the corner. She had heard her too.

Renn noticed us, and a huge grin formed on her face as she picked up the pace. She was alone, but was now wearing something different than what she had worn this morning.

“Did you convert her, Prasta?” I asked worriedly as Renn approached, her gray robes swaying thanks to her tail.

Prasta giggled. “Not yet. But she looks good in them...! See her ears? Frett made a headdress without a top a while ago, for some reason, so she gave it to her. Fits her perfectly,” Prasta pointed out.

Ah. Right. She did have something of a headdress on, like the rest of the women here, but Renn’s ears were still visible. It was more a headband than a hood.

Renn came to a stop a few feet from us, and lifted her robe to showcase it to me. “What do you think?” she asked as she twirled a little.

“I like it. You’ll never be able to seduce me in that thing,” I said.

Renn’s happy twirling came to an abrupt stop as Prasta guffawed and stepped back from me.

“What the heck Vim!” Prasta went to laughing, unable to believe what I had just said.

Thanks to Prasta’s reaction, Renn’s original and immediate disappointment faded and she returned to grinning at me. “Don’t worry Prasta. The fact he said such a thing means he actually finds it very appealing on me. He hides his little truths in his jokes,” she said.

Feeling naked all of a sudden, at being called out so readily, I did my best to hide my unease as I glanced at Renn. She was smirking at me in a way that told me her confidence was legitimate.

And it wasn't misplaced... which was what was so scary.

Renn and I smiled at each other for a moment as Prasta contained her laughing fit. She stepped over to Renn once she finished, and patted her shoulder. "That was great! It's too bad you're not planning to stay here, Renn, It's been so dreary lately," Prasta said.

I watched Renn's happy smile die a little in worry. She glanced at me, likely now fretting over what Prasta had just made obvious.

Had she not noticed it until now? Though it was likely everyone was like Prasta, using Renn as an excuse to be merry and ignore the heavy air they've all been experiencing the last year or so.

"To be honest it's been a little dreary for us too, so I'm not sure if I'd actually be any better Prasta," Renn said gently.

"Probably. But that's the world right now isn't it...?" Prasta sighed and shook her head. "Like that human girl. I'm glad she seems happy enough, it'd be tough for me to live with people who killed my siblings," she said as she crossed her arms.

"We did, Prasta, not you," Renn said softly.

"I mean the Society," Prasta clarified.

Renn frowned, and I knew she didn't like looking at it in such a way. But it was the truth. A very real one.

"I'm going to go help with lunch then. Don't tell anyone but I was supposed to be helping already," Prasta said with a smile.

"I'll tell the dead," I warned her.

She gave me a look, and then shivered. Then she turned and hurried away. "Don't you dare!" she shouted as she ran off.

Renn watched Prasta run off, and her ears fluttered. "Did... did she just believe you?" Renn asked.

"She did," I said.

"Why...?" she asked as she side glanced me.

I shrugged. "Did you join their convent?" I asked her, deciding her new attire much more interesting than Prasta's weird misconceptions.

Renn grinned and shook her head. "They've all invited me, but no. You're not getting rid of me yet," she said.

Hm. "It does look good on you though. Why is that?" I asked myself more than not.

"I used to wear this type of dress all the time. Nory wore them... so when she'd make clothes, she just made a set for me too," Renn said as she messed with the robe a little, in a way that told me she was speaking the truth. She was used to wearing such a robed dress.

"Huh..." I wasn't really sure what to think of that. I could faintly remember Renn telling me about Nory's devotion, even though she had suffered because of it... but...

"Does it really look good on me...?" she then asked.

I nodded.

"You once said it wouldn't, you know," she told me.

"I... I did...?" I asked. When?

She nodded. "In the beginning. We were clothes shopping and you told me I couldn't pretend to be a nun because I get a greedy smile when I eat and stuff," she said.

Blinking, I realized what she meant. I honestly couldn't remember that conversation... but...

Well...

"That does sound like something I'd say," I said. And it was right. Renn was too gluttonous and greedy to pretend to be a nun, or some kind of holy woman. She was scrawny enough, sure, but that illusion would disappear the moment she sat down to eat or was walking amongst a stall or store. It was why I always opted for us to be seen as mercenaries or traveling merchants.

She smirked and giggled at me. "Right...?" she said happily.

I smiled at her as she swayed a little, as if hearing some distant song. Likely did, if she'd just been singing with the rest of the girls.

"Have you noticed anything... off about this place?" I asked her carefully.

"Hm...? How so?" she asked.

"Those who live here, mostly," I fished for her insight.

“Ah... well... Like Prasta said, there’s a weird... sadness here. At first I thought it was just because so many of the members were like Ursula. People who had troubled pasts, or generally... depressed. But I think it might be something else. There’s a weird unease on everyone’s faces sometimes, as if they don’t want to be in the room with certain people. But I’m not really sure who is the issue, or who isn’t,” Renn said.

Huh. So she had noticed. Interesting.

“From what I can gather it’s Frett and Tim. Or at least, they’re the source,” I said.

“Oh...? I’ve only said a few words to Tim. Frett seems fine though? She was just with the rest of us, singing and stuff,” she said.

I nodded. “I plan to talk to her later, to hear the whole story,” I said.

“Hm... want me to ask her? Or...?” Renn asked.

Shaking my head, I glanced around to make sure we were still alone, and would be for the foreseeable future. We were, I didn’t sense anyone around us. “No. I’ll handle it. This one’s a little more touchy than Ursula’s issue,” I said.

“Ursula is the opposite of touchy, that’s for sure,” Renn said lightly.

“Right?”

Renn smirked at me, and then huffed. “Sometimes you need to be a little more understanding, Vim,” she said.

“Huh...?”

She nodded, and although her smirk had died she wasn't frowning just yet. “I get it. You're indifferent because you have to be. But... sometimes I wish you weren't so bound by your rules,” she said softly.

Hm... I wonder what I had said, or did, to make this come about. Likely something to do with Ursula. Had I actually said something rude to her somehow?

“You don't know why I'm upset with you, do you?” Renn asked.

“No,” I said honestly.

Renn smiled, but it was a sad one. “I can see that. It's okay. You didn't actually do anything too bad... it's just...” she raised her hands, and while staring at her palms... she closed them into fists. “You're like that. You're either open and accepting, or firm and unyielding. There's so little middle ground for you,” she said.

“You’re going to have to explain that little better Renn... what did I just say that makes you think I’m being too extreme about?” I asked.

“You wrote off Ursula’s issue, Vim. You saw it as something minor. Something not worth really worrying about. It’s just sad. She deserves better,” Renn said.

Ah.

I shifted, a little uncomfortably, and nodded. “She does Renn... but I cannot help her. Not enough to make a difference,” I said.

“I know. You... we... are going to do what we can. And it won’t likely be of any help. I get it. I’m not faulting you, or blaming you... I just...” Renn shrugged, and I realized she wasn’t sure what to say or think about it.

I wasn’t taking Ursula’s request as serious as Renn wanted me to... but she also knew there wasn’t anything else I could do about it. I’d agreed to spend a little time each day until we left with her. To try and help her get used to being near men. Yet... what could I do more than what I had agreed to?

Plus Renn had to know if there was a way to actually help her, in a real capacity, I’d do it. In a heartbeat.

“You’re angry at me because you hate the situation... and there’s nothing we can do about it,” I said as I understood.

She nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry," she apologized.

I smiled at her and shook my head. "It's fine."

"No it's not. But just... let me be upset, please," Renn said gently.

I nodded. Sure. Be upset with me all you want. She didn't realize it, but that emotion she was feeling was a form of love all on its own.

She loved me, and expected better from me. So when I wasn't able to be better... well...

She grew upset with me. Because she wanted the one she loved to do the impossible.

She sometimes acted like a mother. So strange. Usually I'd be annoyed over being treated in such a way. I was older than anyone. Even my own mother hadn't treated me so. Yet when she spoke in such a way, or shook her head and sighed at me... I couldn't help but feel warm and smile. It made me want to keep annoying her, just to see that face and hear that tone she got when upset with me.

It made so little sense. And...

Her ears fluttered and she huffed. "I think I'll go help them cook. The food they've been making is so simple and bland, that I just can't enjoy it... so maybe I can get my enjoyment through the food in another way," Renn said.

I nodded, and smiled at her. "Have fun," I told her. That was a very nun-like way to look at life. Fitting.

Renn was about to turn, to leave... but she didn't make it.

She paused, frowned, and then glanced back at me.

I blinked at her, and she blinked back.

The two of us looked down at our hands... or rather, mine. I had grabbed hers, to stop her from leaving.

Without intending to.

I coughed, and let her go.

She smirked at me as I awkwardly tried to comprehend what I had just done. "What is it Vim?" she asked kindly, seemingly willing to forgive me for the obvious. She could have teased me, and I'd have deserved it.

“Well...” I wasn’t sure how to say it, without making it seem serious. It wasn’t. Not really.

After all we had time. We would be here for weeks.

We didn't need to do it now. Hell, we didn't need to do it this trip either. We could do it on another visit or...

Renn tilted her head at me, and her ears fluttered. Her golden eyes bore into me in ways that shouldn’t be possible, yet she did it all the while without a hint of impatience or annoyance.

She’d be happy to just... stand here. Quietly. Looking at each other. She was that strange.

Even stranger was I’d begun to want the same.

But more than that right now...

“What is it Vim...?” Renn asked warmly. It was obvious that she was more than happy to wait for me to gather my nerve... but, knowing me better than she should, she also knew sometimes what I wanted was a little push.

I feared the day she realized I actually liked it when a woman was a little forceful.

“Don’t uh... take this wrong okay?” I said first.

Her tail went still beneath her robes, and she nodded.

“It’s not that big a deal. Though I’ll ask you to keep it a secret all the same,” I added.

Her pupils contracted, and she nodded again. This time a little slower.

Feeling stupid, I realized I had probably just made it worse. She’ll interpret it oddly now... but...

How else was I supposed to say it? How else was I supposed to handle it?

I’d never invited anyone before, after all. Never even told anyone about it either.

Which was why I wanted to tell her. It was why I wanted to show her.

I wanted her to be special to me. I wanted to treat her special. She was special.

So...

Rennalee's tail started to sway again, making her robes swish and sway, and her smile warmed and deepened. A tiny blush appeared on her face... yet she remained quiet. Waiting for me patiently.

Damn.

"Want to visit their grave? With me?" I asked her, before I became even more anxious. Before I asked for something even more ridiculous.

Her happy smile shifted, becoming one that told me she was unsure and didn't understand. "Who's grave?" she asked gently.

"My parents."

Chapter 257 A Heart's Crypt

What to say?

Standing next to Vim, we were looking down at a small stone tombstone. One half hidden by grass and weeds.

I didn't... couldn't... see any words, or symbols even, etched or carved into the stone... it was just a finely cut and shaped stone. It was in the same shape as many others in the cemetery, though lacking in the obvious dedications the others all had.

Though... That might just be thanks to time and the weather. After all if this was the grave of his parents then...

It was a miracle the stone still existed. The stuff carved onto it being weathered away was sad, but not surprising.

With a stiff neck I glanced to my left, at Vim. He was frowning in thought as he stared at the gravestone, as he had been since we stopped in front of it.

We had climbed this mountain, which had been a small distance from the Crypt, for about an hour as to get here. We had passed through a rather dense section of forest, around a large pond, and under a strange archway of rocks... like a cave that had been cut in half. A tunnel almost.

As far as I could tell, we were about halfway up the mountain. We were overlooking the dense forest all around us, and... Past the gravestone was a sudden drop. Down the mountain Vim and I had just ascended. I couldn't see it anywhere, thanks to the dense forest beneath us, but I knew the Crypt was down there somewhere.

There were a few trees nearby. Even though this area was rather rocky. One had roots threatening the grave. It was emerging and digging into the grassy earth, headed straight for the stone. Around the trees and us, on this small outcropping ledge was a small field of flowery grass. The flowers were honestly not that pretty, some kind of white tulip, but the overlooking view of the forest in front of us made up for the lack of pretty flowers.

It was a strange spot to have buried his parents honestly. There were many prettier places around here. We had passed through several flower meadows that had been breathtaking. The kind of places I'd have painted.

Vim sighed and looked away from the stone, and out at the forest expanse beyond it. From up here it was interesting to see all the mountains all around us. We really were secluded.

"Vim...?" I asked softly.

"Yeah... I know. I'm a bad son. No names. No verse. No homage. Just a stone," Vim said.

I gulped, I hadn't meant that at all. "Um..." I wasn't sure what to say.

So the reason the stone was bare was because he had done it on purpose. It wasn't because they had simply faded from time.

Vim took a tiny breath and gestured at the stone. "They're obviously not buried here. But when I was first helping build this place, years ago... I had a moment of weakness," he told me.

"This isn't a weakness, Vim," I said.

"Yes it is. I was too ashamed to make a proper one. And even more so... look at this place. Way out here. No one else knows about it. Or well... other than that walking thorn..." Vim grumbled.

Walking thorn... "Sharp...?" I asked.

He nodded. "She found it not long after I brought her here. She's an odd one. Not sure how she found it to be honest," he said with a frown.

Huh... Oh. Speaking of that strange girl who was able to cut and hurt people just by touching them...

I reached down to grab his hand. At first he tried to take my hand, but I squirmed my hand out of his and brought his up. To open his hand, and check his palm.

"It's healed already," he said as I checked him for any wounds.

"Mhm," I accepted they were as I found a healthy, undamaged, hand.

Once I was sure his hand was fine, I went to slip my own into it. As an apology for not taking his hand when he had so obviously thought I had been about to.

"You're a secretive man Vim. You've said it yourself you do it on purpose. So hiding the grave isn't that shameful," I said as I squeezed his hand.

“Yes it is Renn. Don’t try to dress up my cowardice with pretty words,” he said.

“They weren’t that pretty... but can I ask why you hid it?” I asked.

“It’s as you said. I didn’t want people knowing.”

I frowned as I studied the dark stone. “What’d Sharp say about it?” I asked.

“She just asked whose it was. I told her I made it for someone important, who hadn’t been a member so I hadn’t thought they deserved a place in the cemetery,” he said.

My face scrunched up. “Quite a fib, Vim,” I said.

“It was, wasn’t it?” he agreed.

After all it really was. His parents had obviously not been members. At least...

“So your parents hadn’t been members?” I asked.

He chuckled. “No.”

"I know you joined later in life, Vim, but you've not told me when they... died. So I didn't know if they joined with you or not," I said.

"Ah. That is true," he nodded.

"Plus I'd think anyone would be allowed to be buried there, Vim. It'd be strange for that religion to turn someone away just because they hadn't been members of our Society," I said.

"You'd be surprised. Everyone buried there are members Renn. Every last one," he said.

I blinked as I thought of the cemetery, and the smaller ones scattered around the Crypt. Hidden behind orchids and trees.

There were hundreds of graves.

"How... how? Or are they like theirs...? With a tombstone, but not actually buried there," I asked as I pointed to his parent's gravestone.

He nodded. "There are more buried there than you think. But yes, most are empty graves."

I made a tiny vow to spend some time in the cemetery before leaving. To remember as much of it as possible. The names, particularly.

“So... um... Vim...” I shifted, and glanced at the man whose hand I was holding.

“Hm?” he tilted his head, but didn’t look at me. He was looking at the grave.

A far off noise told me that a storm was approaching, and I realized some of the flowers were swaying a little strongly.

The wind had picked up. It was kind of cold.

I had smelled it on the wind this morning, so it wasn’t that much of a surprise... but...

Why now? That meant Vim would likely make us leave shortly. He was still worried for my health. Ever since I got sick he’s been notably more cautious with me, to the point it was actually a little bothersome.

I loved being so tenderly cared for... but...

“I know you and your parents hadn’t gotten along Renn... but I had been blessed with wonderful parents,” Vim then said, before I could gather my nerve.

Instantly abandoning all thoughts of anything else, I focused on Vim.

He sighed. "They taught me... everything. Not just knowledge of the world... but morality. Ethics. How to be a good man. Although I've never followed those teachings well," he said.

I gulped down a retort... since I knew Vim didn't want to hear me argue with him right now. He simply wanted to talk.

He lifted our hands, so he could point at the stone. "That stone is uh... special. It's a type of stone that can't be found anywhere else. If you ever need a rock that's quite literally unbreakable, there it is," he said.

"Unbreakable...?" I asked.

He nodded.

"It's cut to shape, Vim," I said.

He smirked. "It is. But that's because the one who created it had cut it. Not even I could break that stone, Renn."

“Wait... so that’s why it’s blank...? It’s not because you intentionally left it blank?” I asked.

He nodded. “I can’t carve it either. But that’s not an excuse, Renn, I could have just used a normal stone,” he said.

I shook my head. “If it’s special because it’s related to your parents somehow... then no. That’s a wonderful reason to use it and not anything else,” I said.

“Hm. You become very agreeable when it’s something sentimental huh?” he teased me.

“Only sometimes. I was about to add that you could have at least made this place prettier, or fancier. If you won’t put their names or anything, at least make the area around it nice... Plus it looks like a spot that could easily have a rock slide or something, and destroy it,” I said as I glanced behind us, and up the mountain that loomed a few feet away.

“It happened once. This actually used to be a larger flat area. I had to unbury it. I gave up half way through, this place should be twice as open,” he said.

Ah... that made a lot of sense. It did actually look like it kind of just... became strangely steep not too far away from here. Even though there had been a somewhat even path up to this point. Though the steep mountainside was covered in moss, grass and even had trees scattered along it. The landslide he spoke of must have happened a long time ago.

“Is the... rock special?” I asked.

“No more than anything else my parents created,” he said in a way that told me that even if the rock was important, to him it wasn’t.

I squeezed his hand. “They made you, Vim,” I reminded him.

He frowned, and thought of my words for a moment... then smiled. “Only you would say such a thing so instantly,” he said.

Wanting to argue, I sighed at him. “Did your parents not value things, Vim?” I asked.

He shifted a little. “Things...? Like material items? I guess, in a way,” he said carefully.

“So you’re indifference to them isn’t something you inherited,” I reasoned.

“Ah... I see. No. In fact... out of all the things my parents had made, I only have three of them. Or well, I only know where they are at least. One is this rock,” he said with another point at it.

“The other two?” I asked.

“One’s sealed beneath the Cathedral. I’ll show it to you when we go back. The last is in my friend’s stomach. The giant turtle I told you about? The Monarch that’s sleeping on the bottom of the sea? She ate it for me,” he said.

“Was it a heart?” I asked.

The moment I did, I felt a huge rush of heat flash to my face. Not because I was embarrassed, but because of how boldly I had asked such a question.

Vim noticed, of course, but instead of sighing at me... he instead grinned at me and chuckled. “What’s with that blush?” he asked me.

“I don’t know,” I grumbled as I looked away from him. Gosh my face felt even hotter now.

He laughed at me for a moment, and then squeezed my hand. Gently. “No. It isn’t a heart. It was actually something my mother made, a tiny little trinket. The thing was a toy. Designed as a test for me. One of my mother’s strange methods of teaching. However... although made with the right intentions, it is dangerous. It radiates a poison that kills practically anything. And it will do so for a very long time. My friend, her ability as a Monarch, allows her to survive such poison. She agreed to eat it, so I didn’t have to worry over it getting lost and causing problems,” Vim explained.

Feeling bad now for assuming, and teasing him, I reached up to scratch behind my ears. “That’s nice of her,” I said.

“Mhm... my hope is if, or when, she dies... the thing gets stuck inside her corpse or shell. We’ll see,” he said.

“How or why did your mother make a toy that was so dangerous?” I asked.

He shrugged... and did so in a way that told me not to press further.

So I didn't, and focused on something else.

“Then this stone is precious, Vim. What if someone takes it or something?” I asked.

He smirked. “No one can lift that stone, Renn. Other than me.”

Oh.

Studying the thing... I wondered if he'd be offended if I tried to lift it.

“Go ahead,” he said lightly.

I shook my head. “I believe you Vim. Plus I don't want to let go of your hand right now,” I said.

He huffed at me, but I noticed his smile out of the corner of my eye.

For a long moment we were silent... even though the distant storm wasn't doing the same. It rumbled deeply.

"Want to talk about them...?" I offered Vim another chance, since he had gone quiet.

"Not really," he said simply. Although sad to hear him say so, I was glad at least he didn't sound depressed or upset.

"Then... want to talk about the dream you had last night?" I asked instead.

Vim's arm shifted, but he didn't squeeze my hand. "Was that your attempt to make me talk about my parents?" he asked me.

"No. Just an offer," I said gently.

He chuckled. "Still... which would I prefer, I wonder...?" he asked himself as he thought about it.

Patiently waiting, I watched the way his eyes narrowed and his smile turned into a tiny smirk.

Which would he pick...?

"I dreamt of the wars. A particular moment of them. It had been hard. Harsh. I had to do something that made me so sick to my stomach I think I had an actual heart attack," Vim then said.

I gulped. "I um..."

He smiled and nodded. "I know. You don't want to hear about such sad things. And to be honest I'd rather not really talk about it either. It'd just ruin the moment," he said.

Squeezing his hand, I wished I was stronger. Wiser. More than I was... so I'd know what to say here and now, to let him know it was okay. That everything was going to be okay.

"The wars were that bad, Vim...?" I asked. He and a few others have mentioned them... but I hadn't realized Vim had been so involved in them.

"Huh...? Oh... The war I'm talking about is before the Society, Renn. A different war," he said gently.

A little stunned to hear that, I tried to process the new information.

So even before the Society... Vim had fought in wars...?

For who? Why?

“Who had you been fighting, Vim?” I asked softly.

“Does it matter Renn...?” he asked just as softly back.

A little hurt, I shook my head. “I suppose not,” I admitted.

“Hm...” he nodded.

Some birds flew past overhead, swooping down in front of us as they descended. To fly out over the forest below.

They were likely fleeing the storm heading our way.

“My nightmares are either finding Nory dead, or captured. Or they’re me... um...” I hesitated, as I tried to find the proper words to describe the other ones.

“Guilting me by making me feel bad will work, but are you really going to do it, Renn?” Vim asked softly.

Startling, I turned to gape at him. "I wasn't trying to guilt you! I... I want to share with you. So you'll share with me," I said quickly.

He smirked at me. "I know, I was just trying to make the heavy air feel a little less so," he said.

My mouth curled as it wanted to frown, yet smile at the same time. "Don't do that, jeez," I mumbled.

He nodded, and went quiet.

I sighed softly. "If they're not about Nory, it's my family. Either them dying, or me being thrown into that pit," I told him.

"A pit...?" Vim asked softly.

"They used to throw me into a deep pit. Basically an old, dried up, well. When I was being punished. I didn't like it," I said.

Vim took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. His hand tightened just a tad around my own, and I noted that it had likely been hard enough of a squeeze that a human would have likely flinched.

"Yes. That's why I don't like wells, by the way," I told him.

“You... don’t?” he asked.

I nodded. “Even drawing water from one can make me panic sometimes. I mean... it’s not so bad I can’t do it. I just don’t like it. Really... haven’t you noticed? It’s why I always let you do it,” I said.

Vim frowned, likely going through his memories to see how often it had happened.

Before he could finish, I shook his hand a little. “Also... did you just get really angry? Over what I said?” I asked.

He nodded. “Very.”

Smiling at him, I felt warm again even though a cold wind was blowing.

This robe really wasn’t very warm now that I realized it. At least it was heavier near the bottom, so it didn’t flutter and flap in the wind.

“Though it’s funny isn’t it? My dreams are from long ago too. Other than Nory dying... but most of my nightmares concerning her are when she was younger. When she had gotten captured. Yours are from before the Society, so they’re older too...” I said as I pondered the reason for it.

“Fresh memories still linger and hurt, they don’t need to intrude the dreams. They terrorize us enough while we’re awake,” Vim said.

“That’s true... until you get traumatized by something, and it haunts you from the first night,” I said as I remembered the long months with little to no sleep after taking Nory home, after the ordeal. I hadn’t been able to sleep at all thanks to the terrible nightmares.

Vim shifted and then nudged me with his elbow. Very gently. “For me lately though waking up has been scarier than my dreams,” he said.

I glared at him as I tried to comprehend how he was teasing me.

Once it clicked, I couldn’t help but smirk at him. “You do flinch sometimes when you wake up and see me,” I told him.

“Do I?” he asked, surprised.

I nodded. “It’s subtle, but I notice it.”

Although I wanted to tease him about how he’s lately been touching me in his sleep... I kept my mouth shut.

Knowing Vim, if I told him he was doing it, he'd stop. If anyone could control themselves in their sleep it was him, so I wasn't going to risk it.

I enjoyed the way he searched for me in his sleep. And how he breathed a tiny sigh of relief upon finding me, usually by grabbing my hand or arm. It was such a silly little thing but...

"Your parents, Vim... I know you don't want to really speak about them... but um... Your mother. Was she pretty?" I asked.

"Hm...? I'm not sure. I've been told my father was very handsome. I guess my mother had been pretty, but," Vim shrugged as he decided he wasn't sure or not.

"Your father was handsome...?" I asked.

He nodded. "So they said," he said.

I wanted to ask who these people were that had known them, but knew better. He'd not answer that. Not yet.

Instead I focused on something else.

"So you took after your mother more than your father, huh?" I asked.

Vim paused a moment... then smirked. "I walked into that one."

Giggling at him, I shook his hand a little. "You're crafty Vim, but can you paint or draw?" I asked.

He tilted his head. "You mean draw my parents...?" he asked, understanding what I wanted.

I nodded.

"I'm terrible at it. Carving and molding something is more... physical. It lets me attack something from all the different angles. Not just a single dimension. But, there are ways around that," he said.

"Oh...?" I grew excited.

He nodded. "I could guide you as you draw them. Some descriptions, trial and error, and so forth," he said.

"Yes...!" I grew excited at the idea, and stepped closer to him.

Vim glanced at me, and then smiled and nodded. "Not here though," he said.

“Okay...! Sure! Just let me know when,” I said, excited to try it out.

Not only would it be great to see, even if just roughly, what his parents had looked like... it'd also be immensely enjoyable to paint something with him. Together.

What a lovely idea to spend time together. Why hadn't I thought of it before?

Enjoying the moment... I basked in the happy future heading our way. Or at least, the hope of it.

“Though... I suppose there are other ways to show you...” Vim then mumbled.

“Hm?”

“Next time we're at the Cathedral. I'll point them out,” he said.

“Point out whom?” I asked. Was there someone that looked like his parents there? I quickly tried to think of those I'd met and saw...

Vim chuckled. “Not someone, but something. You'll have to agree to never let anyone know, though,” he said.

I tilted my head at him. "Is it possibly one of those paintings? The ones Hands look after?" I asked.

Vim went still, for a tiny moment. I noticed his hair that had been slightly swaying in the light wind had come to a complete stop... then the moment passed.

"You saw those, did you?" he asked softly.

Shifting, I gulped as I stared at the man who now looked sad. More sad over realizing I had seen those paintings than he was seeing his parent's grave.

"I only saw one. Hands hadn't let me look at any of the others," I said honestly.

"Ah... funny. Which one had it been? Hands is weird, so it's hard to know which he had shown you," Vim asked.

Doing my best to not let Vim feel my worry, I nodded. "One of you," I told him the truth.

He frowned. "Which one?" he asked.

There were multiple...? "You were in armor. Before an army," I said.

“Ah...” he sighed as he nodded.

“You looked very handsome there, by the way,” I said.

He scoffed. “Sure. But no. I didn’t mean the paintings. Did you see the hallway of motifs and statues?” he asked.

I shook my head. I had seen plenty of statues but... a whole hallway of them? I couldn’t remember seeing one.

“Next time then. And while you’re looking at them, I’ll go bury Hands in a termite mound. Teach him to stick his grubby little hands where they don’t belong,” he said.

I sighed. “He had been terrified you’d see him showing me. Would you actually do that to him?” I asked.

“Well...” Vim shifted, and I knew he wouldn’t. He just was upset.

“One day you’ll not be so bothered to let me see and know about you Vim, I promise,” I told him.

Vim glanced at me. “Hm...” he said with a tiny nod of the head.

Smiling at him, I nodded back.

He took a small breath as to sigh as he looked away, back to the grave.

“Want to make one before we leave, Renn?” Vim then asked.

Before I could ask what he meant, he pointed in front of us. To the ground.

“Huh...?” Make one? A grave?

He nodded. “For... your family,” he whispered.

Oh...

I gulped, and my tail coiled beneath the robe. “Uhm... well...” I wasn’t sure how to say it. I wasn’t even sure how to even think about what I wanted to say, or feel.

“Oh. I uh... I more so meant Nory, and the siblings, Renn,” Vim spoke up, intruding into my mind as it started to panic.

Immediately that panic came to an abrupt stop. Washed away by his words.

Smiling as my eyes began to water, I quickly nodded. "Oh yes. I do. Very much so," I said.

"Hm... we'll carve the stone together. And I promise to not force you to leave it blank, too," he said.

My smile grew as I sniffed. "I'd appreciate it... I actually made a grave for Nory... it had been sad now that I think about it. Especially after seeing some of the ones here. Hers had just been a couple of plank sticks for a cross," I said.

"I've made many of those," he said gently.

Blinking watery eyes, I glanced at him. He smiled in a way that told me he not only understood... he was hoping I'd feel better hearing so.

"Mhm," I nodded at him.

"Plenty of room here. Bet we could fit a couple dozen at least," Vim then said.

"Let's not," I groaned a happy cry.

He chuckled at me, and I stepped forward. I snaked my hand out of his, as to wrap him in a hug.

Vim not only allowed it... he reciprocated. Feeling strangely warm, even as the cold wind picked up, I snuggled into him as tiny sobs tried to break free, but his chuckling kept them at bay.

"We'll make new ones for your parents too," I said as I squeezed him.

"Yeah, let's not," he said.

Smiling, I buried my face into him as a rumbling sound echoed above us.

The storm was here. Likely would be drenching us before we made it back to the Crypt.

But that was fine. He was warm. And my heart and soul were too, now.

It wasn't often Vim let me hug him. Really hug him, like this. And it was even rarer that he'd actually wrap me in a hug back.

Although a little sad that it usually took... such sentimental moments... for this to happen... I still enjoyed every moment of it.

“So...” Vim then said.

“Hm?” I clung to him harder, since I knew he had likely just decided enough was enough.

“I can either carry you back. And run. As to avoid the torrent about to hit us... or we can both get soaked as we go back normally,” Vim said.

Sniffing, I turned my head a little, as to see the sky. It was indeed suddenly much darker. And now that my nose wasn't pushed up against him, I could smell the heavy rain nearby.

“If we get soaked, can we take a bath together?” I asked. The baths here were separated. Entirely. They were in two different buildings, on purpose. So that there was no chance for any mistakes. I knew only part of it was because of the religion aspect, though... since several members here like Sharp weren't necessarily followers of the faith here. Our room didn't have a proper bath. Though I had noticed Ursula's did... but her having one made a lot of sense, really.

Vim sighed at me.

“Well, considering you've already gone and told them all you're my wife, we probably could yes,” he said as the sky rumbled.

Grinning happily, I nodded in victory.

## Chapter 258 To Wander A Crypt

Ursula, like always, kept her eyes on the ground when around me. She wasn't hyperventilating but she was taking short and sharp breaths. She was tense, her thin shoulders shaking a little, and she kept fidgeting with her hands.

Although the sight of her on the chair, looking about ready to flee at the any moment's notice, looked bad... I knew better.

The fact she was sitting in the same room with me, so close, was telling. She'd not have stayed in the room had any other man entered it. Let alone sat down in a chair only a few feet across from her.

We were in the little secondary library that she liked to spend her days in. It smelled a little of old paper and books, though there was also a new smell of dense rain thanks to the storm.

I sat opposing the two women, and with my back near the window. Opposing the door. As to let Ursula have a clear path of escape, if she needed it.

So far, she's not once looked back to the door. Even though we've been in here for almost half an hour already.

I'd be proud of her, thinking she had made progress... but the truth was Ursula had always been able to withstand my presence. Maybe not for long, or well, but it was doable for her.

Other men made her flee in terror. Made her unable to breath. The mere sight of them sent her into a panic.

Yet around me she simply felt discomfort. Unease. I didn't make her feel so bad as the others.

Not a surprise, really. Not only had I been the one to save her, and bring her here to safety...

She also had a slight misconception of me... which helped her feel safe...

"I get it though, Ursula. Vim's strong, and dangerous, but... he'd never force himself on anyone. It goes against his entire being, his beliefs. I bet he'd stop his own heart before he even had such a thought enter his head," Renn said happily.

She was sitting next to Ursula, but at an angle. As to be somewhat between me and the timid woman. To act as a small buffer. So that Ursula could look at her, while talking to me.

Ursula nodded, and actually gave Renn a tiny little smile... though she had only glanced at Renn for half a moment. "Right? But that's to be expected of a god's creation," Ursula said.

Renn's ears fluttered, and she glanced at me.

She had noticed Ursula had said that a little too literally. Not in the sense of one with simple faith, speaking in general.

“She believes I’m an angel,” I told Renn.

“Because you are one. You can lie to the rest, but not me, Vim,” Ursula argued.

Renn sat up a little straighter, and for a moment glanced between us. She then gave me a small, sad, smile and then returned her attention to Ursula. “Some of his beliefs are pretty much the epitome of certain aspects of faith, even if he doesn’t admit it,” Renn told her.

Ursula looked up from the floor again, to nod in awe at Renn. “You’ve realized it too?” she asked, excited.

“Well... I can see the similarities, at least,” Renn nodded back.

“Isn’t it weird no one else notices? They simply hear his disdain for their religion, and assume! Not realizing that their faiths are for them. He’s different. He’s a servant. A creation. Of course he wouldn’t have the same rules!” Ursula rambled about her personal beliefs of my existence.

I sighed as Renn, sitting with wide eyes, listened to her intently.

Please, oh please, don’t believe the woman who clings to a fantasy as to keep sane...

“So... if he is an angel... why do you still worry?” Renn then asked, and I wanted to kiss her. Yes. Thank you. Finally someone else brought it up. Someone other than me.

If you’re going to firmly believe I was some kind of deity, at least act it.

Ursula opened her mouth, to say something... and then she glanced at me. “Why do I?” she whispered at me.

“How do I know?” I asked her back.

The tall woman went into thought as she frowned and debated it. I wanted to roll my eyes as Renn glanced at me and smirked, as if she’d just accomplished something mighty.

Please. Knowing Ursula she’ll just delve deeper into her misconceptions and...

“When Vim saved me. He did not know I was there. He simply knew something was wrong. Guided by his lord, I’m sure,” Ursula started.

I shifted in my seat.

“Yet without knowing my circumstance... he didn’t hesitate once he laid eyes on me. He saved me without a word. Without question. Even though I at the time had been... less than cooperative...” Ursula added.

Renn tilted her head at me. “She stabbed me,” I explained to her.

“With a knife. In the head. I’m sorry about that, again,” Ursula apologized.

I shrugged.

“Well... I don’t know the whole story Ursula, but I’m sure he understands. Plus a little knife isn’t much to him,” Renn said.

Please. She had jabbed it through my eye and brain. It had made the entire left side of my body numb for a week.

“Not only had he saved me... he put up with me. Endured for me. And brought me here...” Ursula said... then she took a heavy breath. “Yet still. He saved me... I know... especially after all these years, I’ve nothing to fear from him. Yet here I am, shaking,” Ursula said as she stared at her hands. They were half clenched together, and even from here I could see the clammy sweat.

“Yet you’re able to talk to him too,” Renn noted.

“Yes. His voice doesn’t make me startle either, like the voices of the other men,” Ursula added.

“I’ve never been very loud,” I agreed.

“Do you think some kind of separation would help, Ursula? What if we chained... say, Abel, to a wall? Would you feel comfortable talking to him then?” Renn asked.

I scoffed at the idea.

Ursula too shook her head. “I’ll not do that to him. Making that poor man endure chains again would not be right at all,” Ursula said quickly.

“Ah... right. Sorry...” Renn glanced at me, and it was obvious she felt bad. She hadn’t realized she had somehow randomly pointed out a very tragic past.

Not her fault. She didn’t know his story. Few did.

“I’d be willing to do the chained thing, if you want,” I said.

Not that the chains would be able to actually hold me.

Ursula was the one who scoffed this time, and then laughed afterward. Her laughs sounded funny, as if she wanted to scoff again and again. "It's fine Vim... but um... uh..." she hesitated, and then her shoulders rose a little. She became a tad more tense, and then she nodded. "Can I try to touch you?" she then asked.

"Sure."

I remained seated as Ursula stood. Renn was the one who started fidgeting, unsure if she should remain seated or join Ursula for support.

The tall woman stepped towards me, and after two steps paused. She took a tiny breath, and I did my best to not stare too directly in her eyes. She was focused on my own, but...

Then she stepped forward again, and after a couple more steps... was within arm's reach of me.

I remained still, and smiled gently at her. "Well done, Ursula," I told her.

She made a tiny noise as she nodded... and then with a very shaky hand reached out to me.

Without moving, I watched her hand reach for my right shoulder. Thin fingertips touched me, for but a few moments, and then she pulled her hand away.

"See? Flesh and bone. Not a god at all," I told her.

Ursula froze for a small moment... then smirked at me as she giggled. "Vim...!"

"What? Still doubt me? Want another knife? A few good stabs can help prove it too," I said.

Renn groaned as Ursula giggled some more, and noticeably relaxed because of it.

Then... Ursula sighed and reached out again.

This time she didn't stop at a few fingertips. Her whole hand placed itself on my shoulder... but she didn't squeeze, or grab. She simply laid it there.

I felt a tiny tremor in her hand, running down from her body, and she took a small breath as to steady herself.

Although it felt a little ridiculous... especially since Renn was smiling happily at us... I had no choice but to genuinely praise the woman.

As far as I was aware, this was the first time she's touched a man in likely hundreds years. And that's just in general.

I could be the first man she's touched, willingly out of her own intention, for the first time in over half a millennia.

Such a thing was a little strange. Concerning. It made me appreciate that I didn't have such phobias or fears.

What was it like to have such fears? To be so terrified of something the mere presence of it destroyed your very sense of reason?

I'd likely never know.

"Try to ruffle his hair, Ursula. It's really calming," Renn offered a suggestion.

Her thin fingers squeezed my shoulder, and she shifted on a foot. "Hair..." she mumbled as she glanced at my head.

I lowered my head a little, to let her.

At first I thought she'd not give it a shot... but Renn must have noticed something in her. A will I hadn't seen.

Ursula's thin fingers slid into my hair, and at first she didn't really move them... then she did. For a few moments she brushed my hair, although rather stiffly. As if she was an embarrassed child.

But I knew this wasn't embarrassment. This wasn't fun to her.

Ursula was facing her fears. Nothing more.

"Feels... the same as back then, Vim. Though no blood is clumping it," Ursula noted.

I frowned, and realized she was likely right. She had likely felt my hair when she had attacked me with that knife. She had stabbed it downward, after all...

Funny she still remembered that. Though to her, that day... those moments...

She'd likely remember them clearly until she died. They were that momentous to her.

"Well, least I'm not going bald?" I suggested.

She and Renn giggled, and Ursula finally pulled her hand back.

I waited, to see if she'd go at it again... but she didn't. However, even though she didn't return to touching me... she didn't step away.

Looking back up at her, I smiled at the woman who no longer looked... well... completely terrified, at least.

“Those were small but mighty steps, Ursula,” I told her.

“Yes, good job,” Renn happily agreed.

She nodded. “Yes... I uh... think I’m done.”

Ursula promptly stepped back, and hurried back to her seat. She sat down next to Renn, and then released a mighty sigh of relief.

Amused, I nodded. “Want me to step out, Ursula?” I asked her.

She blinked at me, and shifted. “Um...”

Taking that as a yes, I went ahead and slowly stood. Ursula didn’t try to stop me as I stepped away, and headed for the door.

Glancing at Renn, she gave me a tiny nod with a smile. She was okay with being left with her.

Reaching the door, I opened it slowly... as to not startle Ursula with any loud sounds or quick movements.

“Thank you, Vim,” Ursula said as I went to leave.

Pausing a moment, I glanced over at her. She was smiling at me, and staring me straight into the eyes.

“We’ll try more again tomorrow. Don’t forget your knife,” I told her.

Her face scrunched up as she laughed, and I left the room and shut the door.

Once out of the room, I waited until I was far enough down the hall and around a corner before letting out a sigh.

I didn’t mind helping someone. Let alone for something so serious... but sometimes things were unsettling.

Poor woman was still so traumatized all these years later. I was glad she was finally willing, and wanting, to make a change and see if she could overcome it... but...

“Some scars never heal,” I whispered as I headed towards the courtyard.

Her getting calm enough to sit and talk with me, to touch me even, was a big step... but...

To her I was a god. Or at least, the servant of one. And on top of it, I had been the one to save her. To free her from that hell of a life.

Was her progress transferable to another? If she could barely get over my presence, being the man and thing she thought I was, then... could she do the same with any other man? Was it possible at all?

I highly doubted it.

Though I'd been proven wrong before.

Entering the hall that opened to the courtyard, the sound of constant rain pelting the windows and stone roof tiles became louder.

Walking along the hallway, I studied the courtyard beyond the windows. There were tiny little puddles forming on the stone paths that ran through the gardens. Nothing too bad to worry over, and I knew they'd rarely actually flood, but it meant the paths here would be murky and muddy for awhile. It was a good thing we didn't plan to leave anytime soon. But it meant I might want to consider leaving once this storm fully cleared, before another started.

I could traverse such mountains easily, but Renn...

Well... honestly she wasn't as bad as I kept thinking she was. Especially since she was more than happy to let me simply carry her if I needed to.

Thinking of last night, as I carried her off the mountain and back here as to avoid the storm, I wondered if I should try running at a fast pace with her on my back before we returned to the more populated areas.

It'd be a good test. To see not only if we could accomplish it but if she'd be willing to oblige. Renn actually enjoyed traveling, and seeing the sights. Riding on my back as I ran would likely be boring to her after awhile.

I doubted Renn would ever actually deny me from carrying her, if the need was there, but...

"Oh, Vim!"

Pausing, I turned to nod at Abel as he hurried over. He had one of his bibles in his hand, tucked under his arm. Likely had just been in one of their little prayer groups. It was about that time.

"Abel," I greeted him as he drew near.

“I heard you’ve been helping Ursula. Very well done, Vim. It’s a mighty task to attempt, yet I could think of no greater one for our protector,” Abel said happily.

“She’s making tiny steps. She actually ruffled my hair earlier,” I told him, pointing at my head.

Abel’s eyes went wide and he went to quickly make a small motion with his maimed hand. “Oh praise the lords!” he said.

From one extreme to another, I swear.

I gestured for Abel to join me in walking. I didn’t have any destination in mind, but if we were just going to have a small chat I’d prefer to look around while we did.

He obliged, and I kept our pace slower. Not just so we could talk leisurely, but also out of courtesy for him. He could run, and hurry, but I knew it wasn’t easy for him. I knew it pained him just to stand and walk... so...

“I have a dinner date with Frett by the way. To hopefully find the source of the issue,” I told him.

“Ah, yes. Frett informed me during our prayers. I’m thankful for that as well, yes,” Abel nodded quickly.

I studied him for a moment as he walked, and I wondered if he knew the truth. He didn't seem to act as if he did... but for as firm of a believer he was in his religion, I knew he wasn't as strict to its doctrine as people thought.

He'd not blame Frett and Tim for what they did. He'd pray for them, but he'd keep his internal disgust to himself.

Yet he seemed genuinely confused by their actions. To the point that I doubted he knew at all.

"It'd do us all good to overcome the heavy air. Each storm that comes I pray for it to wash it all away, but alas," Abel said with a sigh.

"I fixed two of the statues too, already. There's another I want to check, but I'll wait until the storm passes," I tried to change the topic a little.

"Oh good! I heard some banging earlier, so that was it," Abel nodded, happy to hear it.

Banging...? I hadn't hammered anything. Wonder what he had heard.

"Other than all that..." I tried to think of anything else, and then remembered as the one in question appeared in front of us.

Sharp noticed the two of us, scowled at us, then continued on her way.

Smiling I nodded. "Plus I plan to teach Sharp how to properly make glass. So her little hobby stops bothering everyone," I said.

"Ah yes... thank you. I'm actually very glad she's found such a hobby. She's learned to appreciate even the smallest of our gods' creations, but yes... it's caused some discontent, and even physical suffering too," Abel said gently.

"I heard," I said.

He sighed as we neared the end of the hallway. It intersected, leading either down another hallway that rounded the courtyard, or either deeper into the church or back towards the entrance.

"How's the human doing?" I asked.

"Elisabella is doing just fine. She's already taken an interest in our lord's good word, and she's become attached to Yasa. I doubt you'll need to worry over leaving her here," Abel said.

Good. Good...

"Wait? Elisabella? I thought it was just Elisabeth," I said.

He frowned. "It might be. Forgive me, Vim, but... she is still just a human," he said.

Right. Although very religious, and believed his gods had created the humans and so they should be cherished...

He like all the rest still had that strange disconnect. Humans in the end were still humans.

I'd not find it strange, since I did it too... but...

I mean...

I did it to non-humans too, sometimes. So I was even worse.

Or was it that I was just indifferent...? I remembered certain people, after all. The ones I cared for. The ones I found interesting, or...

"Would you like to join us, Vim?" Abel then asked.

"Hm...?" I glanced at him. Had I missed something?

He smiled gently at me and gestured at the bible in his hand. "Tomorrow morning. It's a holy day," he reminded me.

"Renn's been joining you all, right?" I asked, ignoring his invitation.

Abel knowingly nodded.

"She seems to like your religion," I told him.

"She knows a lot about it. I had thought her indifferent, as many of our people, since she had not opened the bible offered to her during our readings. Yet she had known the gospel word for word. It had been rather shocking, even I struggle sometimes to remember certain passages," Abel said.

Right. Her memory. "Scary isn't it?" I said.

Abel sighed. "It worries me you find the word of our gods so terrifying," he shook his head as he said.

Well... that hadn't been what I meant. But sure.

"Have you read Rapti's letter yet?" I asked, changing topics.

“Hm? Yes. I’ve prepared a response too, for when you leave,” he said with a frown. He wasn’t sure why I had asked. It had likely been the first time I’d ever inquired about his letters, or their contents.

Doing my best to not pry too deeply, I gestured lightly. “She didn’t happen to mention Sharp, did she?” I asked.

Abel shook his head slowly. “No, Vim. Every letter I send I tell her how Sharp’s doing... but she’s never even acknowledged it, or asked of her,” Abel said softly.

I nodded. “I figured,” I said.

The holy man sighed. “I’ve asked Sharp to write a letter too. She just threatens to hang me upside down and bleed me or one of her many other fanciful ways to kill me,” Abel said.

“She doesn’t mean it,” I said with a smile.

Not entirely at least.

“May I ask why you brought it up?” Abel asked carefully.

“I’m not sure. It had simply bothered me earlier,” I told the truth.

Abel hummed as we neared another hallway. A bend, which led to the right. We followed the hallway, and entered the new one, but slowed to a stop a few feet after doing so.

Shifting a little, I sighed at the look he was giving me.

It was somewhat similar to the look Renn gave me. When she wanted to ask a thousand questions, yet knew I'd not answer a single one.

"I have rules, as you know," I told him, before he could say anything.

Abel gulped, but then nodded. "I do. Somewhat, at least," he said.

"One of those is I don't intrude. Not in personal beliefs, or their actions of them. No matter what," I specified.

He nodded slowly, listening intently.

I tilted my head and gestured lightly, as if unsure of what to say... but I did know what to say. I knew the exact words.

I simply didn't wish to say them aloud.

Instead I glanced around, to make sure we were alone. Sharp had run off, but we were near the kitchens now. A place typically frequented, at all times of the day. Even here where gluttony was seen as something wrong and to be avoided at all cost.

"You're not a god Vim. None of us are. We can only do what we can," Abel then said.

Noting the way he had spoken, and the kind tone he had used, I knew that he had just did his best to... forgive me, for not being good enough of a protector to help everyone with all of their problems.

Half tempted to tell him that Renn would have chastised and ridiculed me instead, I instead smiled and nodded. "That is true. But recently I've been thinking... it's a little sad we have so many members who won't talk to one another, just because of what had happened so long ago," I said.

Abel shifted, and I noted the way he squeezed the bible under his arm "Yes. It is terribly sad," he said gently.

I could hear in his tone that he had a lot more to say about it, but was keeping himself from speaking those thoughts aloud. Not because he feared what I'd say, or hear, but rather because... like Renn... he was afraid to say too much. They knew if they did all it'd accomplish was make me clam up and go quiet, or change topics.

Funny. Renn was so different than most of them, yet at the same time so similar.

“Basically I was just wondering that it’d be nice for Sharp and Rapti to be friends again, is all,” I told him.

The pious man nodded slowly. “It would. Yes. Though... I’m not sure how to accomplish it, to be honest. As... hard as this is for me to say, I believe the true issue is Rapti. Sharp, as abrasive as she is, at least still cares and thinks of her. Rapti however won’t even acknowledge Sharp exists,” Abel said with a sigh.

“Hm,” I nodded. It wasn’t surprising to hear from Abel what I had already assumed.

“Do you um...” Abel hesitated, and I glanced at him. He smiled, a little unsurely, and shrugged. “Do you have ideas? On how to fix it?” he asked after a moment.

“Not at all. But I figured I’d try all the same,” I said.

Abel relaxed a little, and his smile warmed a little. Pleased to hear me say so.

Returning to walking, I decided to ask Renn for help later. She was surprisingly good at becoming friends with people... so she might know how to heal broken friendship too, or at least have a few ideas on how to do so.

Not that I didn’t have a few ideas but...

I blinked, at the sudden realization that Renn was in a very peculiar situation. For me.

I couldn't intervene. It broke my rules. My personal beliefs, too. It made me uncomfortable.

But... Renn on the other hand...

She had no shackles. If anything she was more than happy to snick her nose in such things half the time. And most of the time people seemed to not only allow it, but enjoyed it when she did.

As soon as I thought of it though, I tossed the idea away. Not completely, of course... just to the back corners of my mind.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to burden Renn in such ways. Not just yet, at least. Especially not when I was only recently starting to make her carry more responsibilities as it were.

Too much too quickly was tough for anyone.

Abel then coughed, drawing my attention to him. He gestured lightly... and came to a stop again.

We paused in front of one of the few windows in this hallway, and I waited for whatever he had to say.

“Um... Vim...” Abel stuttered a moment, and he flinched. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head a little, as if something had just stabbed him in the temple.

I knew better than to ask if he was okay. He wasn't. But there was nothing I could do for him. His body simply had endured too much damage. He was simply suffering from ailments and wounds that had never healed right.

Waiting for his little fit to end, he took a deep breath as he regained control. A tiny layer of sweat had formed on his forehead as he opened his eyes again, and took a small breath.

“I uh... what had we been talking about?” Abel then asked, with a weary voice. He now sounded tired.

“My foolish rules and how bad I am at following them,” I told him.

“Ah... right...” Abel gulped a dry mouth as he blinked and pondered for a moment. He looked hurt, and ashamed, as he tried to remember what we had just been talking about... I resisted the urge to reach over and pat him on the shoulder. To let him know it was okay. To not be embarrassed or ashamed of his infirmities. Doing so would just make him hate himself even more. So I kept still and waited for him to find his voice.

It didn't take him long, and clarity returned to his eyes. “Ah. Right. Sharp. Her and Rapti. Two souls adrift,” he remembered.

I nodded.

Abel sighed. "Sorry Vim... I remember we were talking about them, but not much else... had one of them asked of the other? Rapti's not brought up Sharp to me in so, so long," Abel then said.

Smiling, I shook my head. "No. Regretfully. I was just lamenting on the sad state of our members. Of friends and family separated, and not because of distance," I said.

"Indeed... and they not the only ones, either. Look at Prasta and her mother, or Herra and her family. So many of us, children of our gods yet as if not," Abel said with a shake of his head.

Right... I guess.

Though he was right. Prasta was the same. Why had I forgotten...? Her mother was at the Bell Church.

Maybe that was why I never tried to fix such relationships or addressed such drama.

It was too much. Especially so for one man to attempt to fix. An impossible task, even for me.

Abel stepped forward, returning us to walking... but he did so slower than before. I did my best to stay even paced with him, and let him control the speed at which we walked.

I knew pain. I knew it well... but I didn't know his kind of pain. I didn't know what it was like to have your own body to betray you. To feel as if a prisoner in one's own skin.

It made me wish I could somehow share that which I had. If I could just... give Abel a few moments of what my parents had given me...

A tiny moment of hesitation made me roll a shoulder, as I thought of the heart in my back pocket. Hidden in the belt loop made of a monarch's hide.

Glancing at Abel, I wondered if I should let him try or not. Would he risk it? In his condition it was dangerous. His body was already broken. Already maimed. It'd be unlikely he'd survive.

Not to mention he was so religious... and his religion didn't allow the acceptance of monarchs. They saw them as demons. Devils. Malignant. He'd likely think my offering of the heart to be something sacrilegious and wrong...

Yet...

"I think I'll go rest a bit, Vim... before dinner," Abel then said as we reached the end of the hallway again. This time it branched two different ways.

I nodded. "Of course. I'm sorry to bother you Abel," I said, tossing my thoughts away.

“Nonsense Vim... maybe later we’ll talk more of this. I’ll... pray on it,” Abel said as he frowned and nodded.

If I hadn’t known him better, I’d have thought he had just made a joke. “Please do,” I said gently, and nodded at him as he stepped away. To head down the dimly lit hallway. To head for the front of the church, to where his bedroom was located.

A tiny hole in this massive church. A room with an uncomfortable bed, a single rack for the single set of robes he wore... and nothing else.

Likely not even a single candle or lamp, knowing him.

I sighed, and turned to look down the hallway we had just come from.

Sharp’s small figure jumped at my glance, and she at first stepped back behind the corner. To hide herself... then after a moment she sighed as she stepped back out into the hallway.

Smiling gently at her, I nodded as she strode towards me.

“I thought he’d never leave,” she complained quietly as she drew closer, and glanced down the hallway Abel had just ventured down.

He was far enough that he hadn’t heard her, hopefully.

Looking down at the mumbling woman, I wondered how tall she was.

Small Sharp wasn't as tiny as Merit, but she wasn't far off. Rather what made her really seem small was her frame. She was a scrawny, thin, woman... especially when one considered that she had several layers of bandages and clothes wrapped around her. They made her seem bigger than she was, and yet she was still skinny. She was honestly so thin that I'd worry she was sickly, or starving, if not for the fact she's been like this for as long as I've known her.

"What...?" Sharp asked, noticing my gaze.

"What yourself?" I asked back. Did she forget she had been the one to stalk and approach me?

Sharp sighed, and looked around... as if for an excuse to run away. "I don't see your pet anywhere," she said.

"Renn's with Ursula... or at least she had been," I said.

"Hm? What for?" she asked.

"Ursula wanted to spend time with me. She's trying to overcome her fear of men," I said.

Sharp's bandages shifted as she tilted her head and frowned at me. "Seriously?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Huh..." Sharp sounded shocked as she pondered my nod.

"They're likely still in that library she likes... or maybe back at her room, if you'd like to find Renn I'd check there first," I said.

"Hm..." Sharp nodded, and I realized that was exactly what she had wanted.

So when she had passed by earlier... she had been looking for Renn. And had returned to find me, and Abel, when she hadn't been able to.

"Want to go find her together?" I asked Sharp. I wanted to see what she wanted Renn for. It wasn't often that Sharp took an interest in anyone.

"No..." Sharp stepped away, likely to go find her... but then she paused a moment.

She turned back, and I smiled gently at her. It was good the two seemed to be becoming friends. Even if Sharp would never admit it.

“Don’t bother Rapti, Vim. She has a right to hate me,” Sharp then said.

I blinked, and realized she had been following closer than I had thought. “I won’t Sharp. You know my rules,” I said.

“Yet you had asked about her,” she accused me.

“I had. A moment of curiosity, nothing more,” I said.

“Hmph.” She obviously didn’t believe me. She turned away and went to head down the hallway she had come from. To head for the library as to find Renn.

“Stand tall, Sharp,” I told her.

The small bandaged covered woman paused and glanced back at me.

I nodded. “Stand tall,” I said again.

“Last time I did the whole world cursed me, Vim,” Sharp said softly.

Frowning, I shrugged. "Let it. Stand tall anyway," I said.

Sharp stared at me for a moment... and then slowly nodded. She then turned and hurried away, as if to get away before I said anything more.

Turning away from her myself, I returned to walking around... to see if there was anything else I could occupy my mind and time with.

Hopefully I'd find something soon, since it seemed I kept trying to get in trouble.

Chapter 259 A Tombstone

Although the storm had ended, it was still a little cold. A little damp.

The tombstones and statues were all dark, most of them made of the type of stone that got darker when wet. It made the place feel a little... more somber. Even though most were actually made very well, and with happy and pleasant designs.

Some were actually very fancy. Carved and chiseled into strange shapes and motifs. The one I was standing in front of right now was as big as a tree, displaying rows of animals stacked on each other.

The bottom row had large creatures with strange ears. Above them was a mix of smaller animals, then another row followed by another... growing smaller and smaller until at the very top a fancy cross stood above them all, dangling with vines.

I recognized only a few of the animals... but it was safe to assume each and every one being displayed were those found in the Society. From bears to mice.

This one didn't have names upon it, but on the cross up top, half hidden by the vines... was a simple phrase.

"For the Society," it read.

"This was the first made. We expanded from here, laying them in circular rows... as you can tell," Frett said as she gestured around us.

I nodded. I could see it. Although now there were trees, rows of flowers and stuff all over... I could very easily make out the pattern.

Dedicating as many of the statues and graves to memory, I turned and went to walk around the large circular one with all the different animals.

"Who made this one?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I know Vim's made a few, but over the years we've had many grave keepers..." Frett sighed and gestured lightly. "Right now it's Tim," she added, as if regretfully remembering so.

Right. She and Tim weren't getting along right now.

It was actually why Frett and I were alone right now. I had been walking around, looking for Vim, and Frett had shouted at me from a distance. She had hurried down the hallway, and grabbed onto me... to pull me away.

Seemed she had used me as an excuse. To escape from an uncomfortable conversation. Though with who, and why, I wasn't sure. I hadn't been able to see the one she had hurried away from. It had looked like a small group. A few had been humans, and I'd really not spent much time with them yet.

Thus why we were here. I had wanted to find Vim, to have him tell me the stories about all these graves... but well...

I didn't mind though. Frett reminded me a lot of Rapti. I felt comfortable with her. Plus she was nice... she had given me the robes I was wearing. And even more so the headdress, which allowed me to not have to cover my ears.

"Vim is crafty, sometimes," I said, deciding to steer the conversation away from the man who she seemed to dislike.

"Sometimes," Frett smirked as she nodded.

Stepping away from the tower of animals, we stepped off the stone path and onto a dirt one with large circular stones. I did my best to step on them, since the grass was still a little wet. I didn't mind getting my feet or shoes wet, but this robe wasn't mine it was Frett's.

"Whose grave is the um... most recent?" I asked, unsure of how to phrase it without sounding rude.

"Most recent were humans... the last non-human to be laid to rest here was Sally."

I paused. "Sally...? Monroe's wife?" I asked.

Frett paused as well, and tilted her head at me. "Monroe...?"

"Ah..." So it must not have been. They had just shared the name. I suppose it was somewhat common.

"I didn't know Sally. She had lived in Lumen. Brandy and Merit brought her remains here... oh... fifteen or so years ago, I guess?" Frett tried to remember.

"Then yes... it had likely been her. I had thought she had died a long time ago," I said. Hadn't I heard that Sally had died before Merit had joined Lumen? That had to have been longer than twenty years ago, at least so I had thought.

Frett nodded with a shrug. "Likely, Renn. Some of us don't get buried here until much later. Most the time we don't even have a body or anything to bury, just memories. Brandy likely just brought her remains when she had been able to," Frett explained.

Although that made sense... it still for some reason bothered me.

To go that long without being laid down to rest...

Why hadn't Vim or someone come earlier? Why hadn't they prioritized it?

Why not just bury her there in Lumen then? There had been a cemetery there. Just outside of Lumen's walls, near a large farm owned by the Animalia Guild. We had buried one of Lamp's people there. I had thought other members of the Society had been buried there too... In fact...

Hadn't Sally been buried there? I could have sworn someone mentioned they had gone to bury Monroe next to her...

Maybe though... this place wasn't really being used as a final resting place. Maybe every member who died eventually got a grave here. Or something like it. Or maybe it was only those who somehow earned the right, or something... Though... it might have been a request of Sally's to be buried here. From what I could gather that was kind of how it worked. One had to ask to be rested here. It wasn't something that just was given. That would explain some things, I guess.

"Did you know her?" Frett asked as we stepped past a smaller tombstone. I had studied it but it had made me sad.

It had been the grave of twins. The graves had been small. Too small.

“No... but I had met her husband. Before he passed. I had heard she was a very nice person,” I said.

“Hm, that’s what they had said too... her grave’s over there, if you’d like to see it,” Frett pointed over the row we were near, off toward the rear of the cemetery. Heading for the other buildings.

I nodded and decided to head that way. I did want to see it.

Still...

“Merit came here too then?” I asked. So she had been a friend of Sally too? I hadn’t known.

“Probably because she visited the Weaver. They just stopped here on their way back, likely,” Frett explained.

Oh. Right. Nasba.

They were near to each other, so it made sense.

“Does Nann or Nasba ever visit?” I asked as we passed two larger blocks of stone. They were as tall as me, and had neat little stories carved into them. Telling of feats or moments of those laid to rest around them.

“The ducks have visited a few times, yes. I’ve gone with Vim to visit them too, alongside others. We uh... don’t really mingle to be honest, Renn. The ducks are pagans,” Frett said.

I frowned and glanced at Frett. “You don’t seem to mind,” I said.

“I don’t. But many here do. I know better than to judge someone. That is our god’s responsibility, not ours,” she said.

Oh. So it wasn’t that she wasn’t bothered by it, she simply overlooked it out of faith.

“There it is,” Frett pointed at a small circular tombstone. We stopped before it, and I read the words carved into what looked like a big plate or maybe a platter.

“Here lays one of the best of us. Sally was too sweet for this world, may she be sweeter in the next,” I read.

“Mhm... it had been a lovely funeral. Several people had wonderful things to say about her,” Frett said.

I shifted a little. "Had Vim been here for it?" I asked.

Frett shook her head. "No. But like always... he always visits the new graves when he arrives. He's sometimes late, but never forgets anyone," Frett said.

Somehow I had expected such a thing. Vim was sweet like that.

Sweet.

I smiled at the descriptor, finding it neat that it had fit the thought.

"To be honest... I'm surprised. As morbid as it is to say, we usually do have a new grave more often. If I'm remembering right and it really has been about fifteen years..." Frett wondered about it.

"Who was before her?" I asked. I didn't want to hear that it was a surprise we'd not have had to bury anyone in fifteen years. It wasn't a good thing, because it wasn't true.

I knew we had far more deaths than Sally. I had seen one of them myself.

"It wasn't too long before Sally that we buried Flak and his sister. They're... that way. Near that tree," Frett said, pointing behind us.

Oh. So they didn't just bury them in a row. Was there a pattern, maybe, or was there more to it?

Staring over at the tree she had pointed at, I wondered how to ask... or if I even should.

It'd hurt to hear that they buried certain people in certain locations for an actual reason. If I found out they prioritized certain people over others...

I'd make me very upset to hear such a thing.

In death at least we should all be equal.

"Before them was Yangli. That had been a weird funeral," Frett then said.

I blinked at the name. It was one I recognized. "Yangli?" I asked.

"Huh...? Oh. No. Not the one you know. I'm talking about his father. As far as I'm aware Yangli's still alive," Frett said, gesturing lightly at me as to calm me down.

Shifting, I nodded. "I uh... don't know Yangli. I just have heard his name before, but had heard him spoken of as if he was still alive... so..." I said.

“Oh. Yeah. That’s my bad. Yangli inherited his father’s name. You’d have to ask Vim if he’s still alive... Even if he is dead, I’d likely never know,” Frett said.

“Why not?” I asked. Wouldn’t he be laid to rest here too? If his father had been?

Frett smiled gently at me. “Yangli’s a murderer, Renn. He’s killed our own people. He’s not welcomed anywhere anymore, thankfully.”

Hesitating as we turned, to continue walking around the cemetery... I wondered why then Vim and others had spoken of him so...

Well... wait...

Quickly running through my memories, I gulped as I realized that the only times I had heard of his name... was usually when being warned.

Don’t become like him or Lilly.

That was usually when his name popped up. As a warning. To me.

It was a little upsetting to realize I was basically being told not to become a murderer. Did I appear to be someone who'd do such a thing? Really?

And why was Lilly's name included in that...? She had been nothing but pleasant to me.

"Yangli... I mean... his father, tried to stop his son. To punish him. Poor man," Frett said with a sigh.

"Wait..." I paused as I realized what Frett was saying.

She blinked at me, and then nodded. "Yes. Yangli killed his own father," she told me I had assumed correctly.

Huh... I hadn't realized anyone else in the Society had done what I had.

The realization made me shiver. Maybe everyone's warnings were right then.

Wait...

I blinked as I realized something horrible.

She spoke as if Yangli was banished. From the whole Society. Because he had killed his father. He had not just murdered another member... he had murdered family.

I had done the same, so...

Before I could start really panicking over the obvious, I forcefully changed the focus of my mind and gulped.

"You said he was banished?" I asked.

She nodded. "As far as I'm aware, from everywhere yes." Interesting. I wonder if... he was still alive or not.

I'll need to ask Vim about him. It was hard to think Vim would let someone who killed our members just... live and let be. Yet I could see how it could happen. Maybe Vim knew more of the story, and had decided his actions even if wrong not so bad to require violence as a punishment.

"Like I said. Weird funeral. Vim promised Prasta he'd kill Yangli if he ever saw him again, I wonder if he ever found him," Frett then said, putting all of my thoughts into disarray.

"Prasta?"

Frett nodded. "Yangli is her brother. He supposedly had been banished a long time ago, but when Prasta came to live here she asked if her father could join the rest here. So they held the funeral then, even though a long time later."

I groaned. "Poor Prasta..." I said.

"Right? Brother kills her father. She barely survives Yangli's wrath when she confronts him, and her mother ends up blaming her and disowning her after all is said and done. And I thought my family had been bad," Frett said with a huff.

Feeling horrible as I thought of that happy woman, who didn't seem to have a mean bone in her body, I wondered what to say.

"Is her mother here?" I asked. Surely not right?

"Thankfully no. I could only imagine the yelling," Frett shivered. "She's at the Bell Church. Near Lumen."

Huh... I wonder if I had met her.

Prasta had mentioned scales... had I met any with scales? I didn't remember any... Though maybe beneath the robes... Prasta had said hers were only on her rear.

“Did you visit the Bell Church yet?” Frett asked as we returned to the main path. This section of the stone path had little puddles, thanks to small dips. The bricks had sunken into the ground a little over the years.

“Yes. But only for a moment... I uh...” I hesitated a moment, but knew there was no point hiding it. Especially since it was likely not something I was supposed to keep secret. “I was banished. From there,” I told her.

Frett stopped, and frowned at me. “What for?” she asked.

“One of the women there. An elder... she claimed my family had once attacked hers. She said she remembered my smell,” I said honestly.

Staring into Frett’s eyes, I watched her frown and tilt her head. “You don’t smell though, Renn,” she said.

“Well... I had back then, I guess,” I said, unsure how to explain it.

“I see... So your family had its problems too then, huh?” Frett sighed as she gave me a smile.

A warm emotion filled me as I nodded. “I guess so,” I said, thankful for Frett’s understanding.

“Worried I’d blame you or something, huh?” she then asked.

“That obvious...?” I asked with a small smile.

She nodded. “Yeah. But it’s okay Renn. I know Vim would not have let you travel with him had you done something bad. So I assumed you were likely similar to Prasta, or the many others who’ve had the same issues. It’s sad but it happens sometimes. My uncle killed himself, right in front of the whole family. Traumatized us all horribly. We all just... have those troubling members, I think. There’s always one,” Frett said.

I nodded, and gulped down a tiny whine.

It hurt to think and admit that I was the troubling daughter in my family’s scenario.

Great.

Wonder who had been Vim’s, though.

We stepped up to a pair of stones. They were square tombstones, and each had a metal bowl on top of them. Built into the stones. The bowls were a gleamy black. Right now both of them were full of water, rainwater.

“Here sleeps a pair of siblings. May their bickering not annoy the gods too much,” I read the tiny plaque sitting before and in-between the two bowls.

One bowl had the name Flak, the other said Fractal.

“They’d been here. Had lived here. Fractal often left though, sometimes traveling with Vim. I don’t really remember where she’d go... but she’d not be gone long. They used to argue all the time, but they did it by betting stuff. They’d bet each other their dinners, snacks, and stuff. It was funny, until one ended up losing many times in a row and ended up starving,” Frett said with a sigh.

“Starving? Really?” I asked.

She nodded. “Really. They took their bets that seriously. It was a good thing they weren’t human, else one may have died from hunger,” she said.

Huh...

“They died at the same time?” I asked.

“Yeah... Fractal got hurt. She died from the wounds. Flak stopped eating, and then asked Vim for a final favor,” Frett said.

I blinked and my tail coiled around my leg beneath the robe. “Final favor...?” I asked, hoping I was misunderstanding.

“Hm... Vim calls it the plight of the endling. He’s willing to oblige and perform the deed... but you need to be really convincing. Flak hadn’t eaten in years, and was so weak he couldn’t even get out of bed. It’s sad... but I guess I understand it,” she said.

Plight of the endling...

“Vim’s mentioned it before. That he’s been asked to end someone’s suffering or misery,” I said.

“It happens. Some see it as a great blessing. To be killed by someone so close to our gods,” Frett said.

Glancing at her, I studied the way Frett smiled as she stared down at the graves.

She had meant that. Truly. She hadn’t just spoken about the general perspective of Vim’s actions by the Society... but had said her own beliefs.

She not only saw nothing wrong with it... she praised it. Saw it as something positive, and good.

Scary.

“Speaking of Vim, I have a dinner date with him,” Frett remembered.

Ah. Right. "You do," I nodded.

She sighed and glanced up, at the darkening sky.

Darkening because it was night, not because of clouds.

"Don't want to?" I asked her.

"It's not that. Vim's cooking is just..." she shook her head.

"Right! It always smells so bad, doesn't it?" I stepped towards her, and nodded.

Frett stood up a little straighter upon my approach, and nodded quickly. "R-right...! It does...! It's tasty usually, though..." she said quickly.

"It does..." I admitted reluctantly.

She smiled, in such a way that her scarred nose twitched a little weirdly. Likely thank to it missing a large piece off its tip. "I'd invite you, Renn, but we uh... we have something to talk about," she said gently.

“Hm? Oh it’s fine. I’m not in the mood to smell that nasty stuff, so,” I said.

“Right...” she nodded, and seemed relieved I didn’t feel insulted over it. She shouldn’t though. After all, why would I? I knew they had something private to talk about. Something important. I’d not intrude.

Not unless she or Vim asked me to, at least.

Frett sighed as she shifted and nodded. “I might as well go get ready then...” she mumbled.

“Get ready?” I asked.

“Hm. I always pray before a meal. Vim doesn’t care much for it, so I’ll do it in my room before,” she said.

Oh. Really? We had eaten together a few times; mostly just lunch and snacks, but I’d not seen such a thing from her yet. Maybe a snack wasn’t considered a meal to her.

Plus although Vim would sigh over it, I highly doubted he’d actually tell her not to do so. But I didn’t mention it, since I knew that Frett was just trying to be kind to Vim. To save him the awkward moment, more than anything else.

“Thanks for showing me around, Frett. I appreciate it,” I told her before she could step away.

“No, thank you. Prasta and the rest had been getting annoying. I’m glad you and Vim are here to help distract everyone, it’s too bad you’re not sticking around,” Frett said with a sigh.

Hm... this wasn’t the first time someone had said such a thing here. To me. So strange.

“If you see Vim before I do, let him know I’ll meet him upstairs in an hour or so,” Frett said as she stepped away.

Nodding, I waved her off as she hurried away. To go do her prayers.

Prayers. Before a meal...

That wasn’t really in their bible as far as I was aware. Maybe Frett wasn’t necessarily a believer of this religion then. She acted like it though, and seemed to always be amongst those praying together and during the sermons.

It was interesting that everyone had their own... interpretations and beliefs. Even though they all read from the same book.

It made my own beliefs feel more justified. If everyone else’s could be a little different... why couldn’t mine?

Though...

Looking back down at the graves, I sighed at the reality they forced me to admit.

Vim had killed him. This Flak. The brother.

Because his sister had died... and he had not been able to endure her loss.

It was such an odd line for Vim to cross.

He didn't believe in forcing his will on anyone. Yet he was willing to kill someone... just because they asked it of him?

Was not the act of taking a person's life one of the greatest enforcement of one's will on another person? Did him killing them not equate to Vim forcing his will, ultimately?

It was one thing to kill someone because they were a threat or a danger to someone else... because in a way that was him stopping the individual, the attacker, from forcing their will on another. Particularly someone he protected.

Yet Flak had not been a threat to anyone but himself. Vim didn't need to kill Flak as to protect another.

So killing him was... well...

“Not only against his beliefs, but in a sense the ultimate failure,” I whispered.

He had not only broken his rule of enforcing his will on another... but he had also taken the life of one of those he was meant to protect. It was the same as breaking every cardinal rule that Vim not only followed, but firmly believed in.

It was crazy to think Vim would be willing, or even able, to do it in the first place.

Yet... here I was. In front of a grave of proof... and likely surrounded by others.

I'll need to talk to him about it.

Deciding to do so now, since I both had been looking for him originally... and now needed to tell him Frett's message, I went to find him.

Leaving the cemetery, I re-entered the large church and quickly went to circle the main hallways.

Although luckily I didn't get side-tracked again, by encountering anyone who wanted to talk to me, I also didn't find him. However as I rounded a corner, and saw Father Abel down the hallway, talking to one of the human members... I realized Vim was somewhere alone.

Other than Sharp, I had seen practically everyone as I walked around. And Frett. But I knew that Frett was likely in her room so...

Hurrying upstairs, I rounded one of the main hallways and headed for the one where our room was located. It took me a few moments to reach it, since I had gone the complete opposite way originally.

Reaching the door, I smiled upon finding it slightly ajar. Not enough to see in it... but...

Slowly opening the door, I sighed gently at the sight of Vim on the bed.

He was lying on his back, and had an arm over his face. I couldn't tell if he was actually asleep or not... but as I stepped into the room, and closed the door behind me, I quickly realized he was.

Vim would have turned to look at me if he had been awake. If even just to check if I was okay, or to tease me about something.

Shutting the door as quietly as possible, I smiled excitedly as I stepped over to the bed. Vim was lying near the edge of it, which told me he had known that he'd sleep until I arrived. He seemed to try and lay as close to the edge as possible, as if it allowed him to keep a distance from me.

It was a silly attempt at best. It wasn't like his placement changed where I'd sleep, after all.

I actually hoped one day he'd try to lay on the floor or something, in his attempt to avoid sleeping next to me. Him waking up on the floor, and finding me right next to him, would probably put a funny expression on his face.

Vim's pinky finger twitched. A tiny movement that I had barely noticed. Like always, he barely moved at all while sleeping. And thanks to how slowly, and how lightly, he breathed... it almost made him seem half-dead. Even his heartbeat felt slow while he slept, though when it did thump it did so strongly. I could feel and hear it through the pillows sometimes.

Staring down at the sleeping man, I smiled at the sight of him.

I was glad he was getting rest. Even if it didn't seem to be helping much. I hadn't said anything to him yet... but it was obvious his sleeping wasn't doing much to get rid of his exhaustion. He had even yawned earlier, before Ursula showed up for her little... meeting.

Vim. Yawning.

It made me smile, to see a side of him I hadn't known... but... it also terrified me. Because I knew it meant something was wrong with him.

Reaching out to him, I gently touched his elbow. The shirt he wore was thin and short sleeved. It was better than the one he had worn last night. That one had been thicker and long sleeved. It had been kind of itchy, so I hadn't slept against his arm last night. This one would let me do so comfortably.

Gently laying my fingertips on his elbow, I paid keen attention to his hand.

It didn't twitch or budge even as I touched him.

I knew it.

Either Vim was so deep in sleep... or he had genuinely become used to my presence.

I had tested it the last few nights, and it seemed I was right. As long as I did so gently and carefully... I could touch him. Even as he slept. And he'd not wake from it.

He had let me mess with him once. Back on that cart, before we reached Landi... but I had assumed it was simply because of how exhausted he was.

So either he was still that exhausted... or...

Laying my whole hand on his elbow and arm, I gently ran my fingers along his arm as he slept. He was warm, and there was a rather thick vein that ran around his elbow and disappeared deeper into his forearm. It pulsated when his heart beat.

Enjoying the moment, I continued to gently touch and feel him. Nothing too crazy, of course, because I didn't want to wake him... but...

As I grabbed a few of his fingers with my hand, the fingers that hung a few inches from his face, I smiled as they gently squeezed. As if he somehow knew we were holding hands, even in his sleep.

Then, just as I heard the footsteps coming from down the hall outside... Vim's fingers twitched a little harshly.

"What is it?" he asked as he woke.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed and did my best to not grow too angry with whoever was about to knock on our door. It was likely Frett, come to find Vim.

Letting Vim's fingers go, I turned to glare at the door... as someone then knocked upon it.

Stepping towards the door, I calmed myself as Vim rolled up, to sit on the edge of the bed.

Opening the door, I felt my anger dissipate at the sight of the small bandaged woman.

"Hey Sharp," I greeted the one glaring at me.

“Where’ve you been?” she asked me.

“Well... here?” I answered. At least, for the last few minutes...

She sighed, then turned her head... and did a double-take.

I smiled as I stepped back, as she stepped into the room and pushed the door open more.

“Evening Sharp,” Vim greeted the small woman as he scratched his elbow. The same elbow I had been messing with earlier.

“What the heck...? Really?” Sharp then turned to look at me.

“Really, what?” I asked her back.

“You’re actually sleeping with him? Really?” she asked with a point at Vim, she was in complete disbelief.

“Well, that’s a topic of great debate,” I said with a sigh.

"I'd hope so!" Sharp said.

Smiling at her, I nodded. "I do sleep with him... but probably not in the way you're thinking," I said.

"Of that I'd agree. Sharp's very dirty minded," Vim added.

Sharp quickly turned at him, and I noticed her robe's hood shift.

I really wish I could just... take her hood off for a moment... Vim had called her an urchin once, and I wasn't sure what that was, but she definitely had ears, I think. I wonder what they looked like... I bet they were cute. They had to be small, based off the way her hood shuffled. It laid rather flush with her head.

"Please tell me it's not true Rennalee," Sharp then said to me.

Hesitating a moment... I realized she was being serious. That hadn't just been some teasing tone, or playful joke.

"We do sleep together, yes... I've actually been calling myself his wife for some time now, though it makes him twitch and flinch when I do so," I told her.

Sharp stared at me, for a very long moment... and then sighed and shook her head. "Ridiculous," she said.

"Isn't it?" Vim agreed.

"Shush Vim," I said to him.

She then turned to look at Vim. "You better not be playing with her," Sharp said to him, coldly.

Oh...?

I stayed silent as I glanced from Sharp to Vim... and the way they were glaring at each other.

"Name one time you've known me to play with any of our members," Vim said to her.

Sharp shifted, and her bandages made noises as she clenched her fists. I heard them tear and snap from the pressure.

"I'll not forgive you if you are," Sharp then said.

Smiling at the suddenly protective woman, I found myself completely forgiving her for interrupting me earlier.

Vim sighed. "To tell you the truth, if anyone's playing with anyone it's her. With me," Vim then said as he leaned back, to lie back down.

Sharp stepped forward, as if to confront Vim... but paused, then glanced over at me. Because of how she had turned, some of her bandages slipped out of her hands. They started to dangle from her hands, revealing a few fingers. They were pale... but I didn't see any wounds or scars upon them.

I nodded at her. "He's kind of right... I'm the one who keeps messing with him, honestly," I admitted.

The small woman took a deep breath, and then sighed. "Jeez," she mumbled as she looked away from me.

Vim shifted on the bed, and it creaked loudly in protest. I glanced at it, half expecting it to break, but it didn't.

It hadn't even creaked that loudly when we were both on it. He really was odd sometimes.

"I love that you're worried for me though, Sharp," I told her.

She startled, and then glanced back at me... but only for a moment. She looked away again, but this time to the floor. "Just... be careful. He's not normal. You'll get hurt if you're not careful," she warned.

Smiling, I nodded. "I believe you. But... I've decided to try all the same," I said.

"Mhm..." she nodded, and then sighed again. "Great. Now I feel weird. It's not fair that you two don't smell, you know? How am I supposed to know not to intrude if I can't smell what you're doing?" she asked us.

I blushed as I realized she was completely right.

We didn't smell...! That meant others really wouldn't know when to let us be or not... and... if Vim was right, and eventually we both became quieter and stuff...

"Is she blushing right now?" Vim asked.

"She is," Sharp told him.

Glaring at Vim, who was still lying on his back and staring up at the ceiling, I was half tempted to throw something at him. Maybe Sharp herself, since she was so dangerous.

"We hadn't been doing anything. Don't forget... I had mentioned before, that our sleeping together isn't what you think," I said.

“Heh,” Sharp snickered at me, and my blush grew hotter.

Vim raised a hand, gesturing softly with a wave. “Go tease her elsewhere. Or I’ll start teasing you both,” Vim said.

Shifting a little, I wondered what that tone was. Was he really so tired he wanted us to leave him alone?

“Hmph.” Sharp scoffed at him.

“He has a dinner date with Frett,” I told Sharp.

“Huh...? Oh. Yea. Sure...” Sharp glanced at me, then back at the man doing his best to ignore us.

“I do don’t I?” Vim said with a sigh.

“You do. She’s praying right now, but will be ready soon. Are you cooking her dinner?” I asked.

“Yes. Frett belongs to a culture that when a man invites them to dinner, he better actually have dinner there waiting for them,” Vim said.

Oh...?

Sharp noticed my thoughts and nodded at me. "He's telling the truth. If he doesn't have dinner prepared, she'll interpret it as a night-call," she said.

"Night call...?" I asked.

Sharp tilted her head. "If you don't have food to eat, then he's eating her, basically," she explained.

My face went red again, and Sharp actually snickered at me because of it.

"She's red again!" Sharp told Vim.

Vim slowly sat up, and I glared at him as he smirked at me.

"You better go make food then," I warned him.

He nodded, and sighed as he stood up.

Sharp giggled, sounding very happy as she gestured at me. "Maybe I should be warning you and not her, Vim," she said to him.

"You have no idea," he grumbled as he stepped between us and headed for the door.

Watching him leave, I smiled at the way he tilted his head and rolled his shoulder.

He was still tired.

"Well come on then," Sharp then said to me.

"Hm?" I perked up as Sharp went to leave, as if to follow after Vim.

"You and I are going outside," she said.

"We are?" I asked as I hesitated.

She nodded. "Oh. Maybe take that robe off. You were wearing heavier stuff when you got here right? We're not going far, but we'll be getting a little dirty," she said.

“Uh...” I nodded as I glanced to the dresser. I did have my normal clothes...

“We’re just going to gather some leaves,” she told me.

“Leaves?” I asked as I went to change clothes.

“For my bandages,” she said as she lifted her hand, to show the dangling bits.

I see. So I had a date too, then.

Neat.

Chapter 260 Frett

Frett sighed as she sat down next to me. Her robe fluttered a little, thanks to the light wind, and she leaned a little closer. Likely for warmth.

“See that one? That’s my next project,” I said as I pointed at a medium sized statue. A winged creature sitting on the edge of the roof beneath the spire we were sitting on.

“Hm. Why are there even statues up here anyway?” Frett asked.

“Abel’s father made them. Just something he did,” I said.

“Ah... right,” Frett nodded, finding that to make perfect sense.

Which it did. Abel's father had been a strange man. He hadn't been religious at all, but he spent every waking moment of his life... especially near the end... On shaping and crafting religious motifs. Usually in the form of stone statues.

Some were actually very detailed and delicate. The one I had fixed the other day had been a slight pain, because it had hundreds of tiny little designs carved all over it. They were thin and brittle... I'd broken a few when I had put it back into place, and secured it better to the roof.

“You know I’ve never been up here Vim. I’ve looked out the windows of course, but never up here,” Frett said as she looked around.

I nodded. “No point endangering yourself,” I said.

It honestly wasn't that dangerous. Especially for a non-human. We had crawled out of one of the several windows in the spire, and climbed up above the windows. Here on the roof, even though it was pointed and rounded, there was enough room to sit comfortably. The sloped shingles that kept the rain from damaging or getting into the tower were flattened out and angled at the bottom, which made perfect little seats... if a little wet.

This spire was the second tallest... but the taller one, the one behind us near the edge of the church, didn't have windows near the top. So climbing to the top of it would have required actual effort. Frett was a non-human... but she was also a small, clumsy thing. So I had chosen this one.

Our little... dinner date, had ended quickly. She had eaten quickly, telling me the whole story. From beginning to end.

She had wept after eating, but not for too long. Frett was actually a rather strong woman, it seemed.

Frett was angry. Upset. Sad. Hurt... but she wasn't in danger of killing herself, or others.

If anything she was just... disappointed. With herself. For letting her get her own hopes up. For expecting great things.

She had tried to have a child. And it had not only failed... she had also gotten betrayed by the one she had tried to have it with.

A sad pity. Because I knew it meant Frett would likely not try to escape her comfort zone for a long while... if ever again.

We needed more members to try and give birth to children. Especially the pure blooded ones. Yet, like always... fate was being cruel to them. Making them suffer for no reason.

“My Gods say the worst pain one can endure is that of the soul being eaten,” Frett said softly.

“It is painful,” I admitted.

Frett shifted, and glanced at me. Her hooded headdress shifted a little, thank to the angle, and her bangs barely hid the look of pure fear in her eyes. “I didn’t feel bad, Vim,” Frett said softly.

I nodded. She had told me already.

About her relationship with Tim. How he had lied. The child, its early birth... its death.

How although it had hurt, and she had wept and spent a year in depression... She hadn’t allowed the early death of the child to ruin her. She wasn’t allowing it to destroy her.

She was more so upset she had simply looked forward to it. She had been looking forward to raising a child. She had been so excited. So... when disaster had struck...

Then of course Tim had threatened her. To not tell anyone. Making it all the worse for her.

Adding a layer of stress she hadn’t needed.

I'd deal with him later.

Right now Frett needed closure. Or at least, the end of it.

She'd already told me everything. Already cried. She had already come to terms herself, long before I arrived.

Now I needed to play the part. To be the final actor in her little play, her play of coming to terms and acceptance.

"I was just so relieved... relieved I'd not be banished. Relieved I hadn't brought a child into a world of suffering. Relieved Tim wouldn't be able to do anything..." Frett continued.

"Your Lords call that fate, Frett," I told her.

She gulped and nodded. "Is it though...?"

I shrugged. "There are lots of ways to argue about it. How come it happened like that? Why'd the gods let it happen in the first place? Why didn't it go another way?" I said. I could have kept going, but there was no point.

Frett's hands ruffled her robe. Squeezing it, as she fidgeted. "I shouldn't have tried. I allowed myself to indulge in hope. Misplaced. Now I must carry the weight of sin and..." Frett spoke softly. Quietly. As if afraid to admit it even still.

"Nonsense, Frett. Even your holy scripture makes it clear that having children is the duty of all creations. The only burden you must carry is the sadness of losing a child. A painful memory. One you'll never forget, but also something you can endure," I told her.

"Have you lost a child, Vim?" Frett asked.

"I've lost countless children," I told her.

She looked up at me, her blurry eyes reflecting in the night.

I nodded, to tell her I was speaking the truth. I lifted my hands and arms, extending them a little before me. As if I was carrying a child right now. "Countless times. In these very arms. Even with all my strength... as I hold them... they've still slipped away," I told her.

None had been my own child, but... at those moments... In those moments, where their tiny lungs stopped struggling...

They may as well have been.

Frett took in a sharp breath, and her right hand slid over to my thigh. To grab my pants. She gripped them tightly, as if suddenly afraid of heights.

“But Frett...” I lowered my hands, and placed my own on hers. To pat her hand gently. “If I allowed their deaths... my failures... to overpower and burden me too greatly... all it would accomplish are more losses. If I wallowed too deeply in despair, or sadness, I’d simply lose more children. I’d lose more of you. And not only is that not right... it’s also a sin all in itself,” I told her.

“But Vim... I don’t save anyone, ever,” Frett whispered up at me.

“Says who?” I asked her.

She blinked, and I noticed the tear slide out. A large, solitary, tear ran down her face, and rounded around her nose. If she hadn't been missing the tip of it, it would have dropped there.

“Who are you to know if you’ve saved someone or not, Frett? How are you to know if you don’t save someone every day?” I asked her.

“But...” she went to argue, but I patted her hand again.

“How many people do you talk to every day?” I asked her.

Frett shifted, and gulped. “Every day?” she asked.

I nodded.

“I... well...”

“Exactly.” I said, and waved at the church beneath us. The other spires. The roof. The faint glow coming from the sunken and open section not far from us, the courtyard. The windows weren’t all lit up, since it was the middle of the night, but enough were to give it a nice glow. “You talk to everyone here. You spend time with them. You live with them. You’re their friend. Their family. I know this might sound strange but... trust me. Your presence is valuable. It’s life-changing. Those little moments you share with all of them, every day, is what keep them all alive. It’s what keeps them happy,” I told her.

Frett’s hand squeezed my leg a little more. “That’s a thin way to look at it, Vim,” she said softly.

“Possibly. But it’s not wrong. If you had any idea how many we’ve lost over the years from simple loneliness... you’d not doubt me for a moment,” I said.

Frett sniffed, and looked away from me. To the church I had just waved at.

“In a way Frett, that desire for a child is the same thing. A way to fend of loneliness. A way to feel a sense of worth and belonging. Friends and family are not the exact same, of course, but they’re similar fulfillment and desires. You’re hurt now, for good reason, but just think how much worse it’d be if you were alone completely. With no one and nothing,” I said.

She sniffed. "Ursula did spend days with me after. If not for her I might have done something stupid," she said gently.

Well done Ursula.

"Exactly. How are you to know you don't offer the same reprieve and help? Or won't here shortly in the future?" I suggested. "What happened to you Frett is a tragedy. A sad blight on an otherwise happy life. But don't let it be the end of your story. You can not only continue making an impact on everyone here... who are you to know you'll not give birth again someday? Right now you're hurt and betrayed, but one day you may find another reason to try again. Don't allow this loss to stop you from the possibilities of another down the road," I said.

Frett gulped and nodded. "You really do preach the same things as our gods, even if you say it differently," she said softly.

Well... I had been slightly trying to tug at her devotion. Though I'd never say that aloud.

"I'm not smart enough to remember such complex prayers and stuff. You'll need to go to Renn for that," I told her.

She leaned closer and giggled. "She does seem to have wonderful memory," she said.

I nodded as Frett laid her head onto me. Resting it against my shoulder. I was a little slouched, so she was able to do so comfortably even though a little short.

The wind up here was a little more than a simple breeze... but it wasn't too cold. Luckily the recent storm had made the place a little warmer than before.

I knew it'd not be long though before the wind started to chill and bite.

This place got covered in snow during the winter. To the point that it stacked higher than the first two floors. It was why there weren't many windows.

To be honest when it got like that this place became rather... nice. Quiet. Simple. At least it would be if it wasn't full of those like Frett, who sang hymns and prayed all day long during such snowed in days.

"What do I do, Vim?" Frett asked softly.

"Whatever you need to do."

"Do I get angry at him?" she asked.

"I am," I told her the truth.

She sighed, but not in an unhappy way. "I'm not supposed to get angry," she said.

Well technically neither was I.

“Your gods got angry too, Frett,” I told her.

She shifted a little, to glance up at me. “Had they?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Hm...” she studied me for a moment, and it was obvious she believed me... but...

“I know you didn’t actually love him... but it’s okay to hate him all the same, Frett. He had betrayed your trust,” I told her.

She blinked a few times, and then looked away. “I’d rather just let you hate him for me.”

Smiling, I nodded. “Done and done.”

Frett took a deep breath, held it in for a moment... and then released it with a great sigh.

Glad she hadn't returned to weeping... I went quiet.

The two of us sat in silence for a long moment. Clouds passed by. The moon got brighter. Some of the lanterns and lamps went out, causing the courtyard to grow darker.

A small breeze went by, carrying a colder draft. Frett shivered because of it, telling me it was time I let her go to bed.

"You know what's odd about all this Vim?" Frett then asked.

"Hm?"

"Ursula. She's been super supportive. And has helped me understand it all too. I... I honestly hadn't spent much time with her. Before all of this. Since she's... well..." Frett shifted a little, to raise her hands and shrug.

Right. A pagan. At least in her eyes.

"She's endured your pain many times. She knows how it feels," I said gently.

She nodded. "Right... and Sharp's been kind too. Though she keeps asking for permission," Frett said with a sigh.

I smirked, and wondered what Sharp would say if she knew Frett had given me permission instead. She'd be jealous.

"You have good friends, Frett. Your family is stronger than you think. You're strong than you think."

She nodded and went to shifting her robe. It had folded upward a little thanks to the wind.

Reaching around, I gave Frett a small hug. Her thin shoulders squeezed up as I wrapped them with an arm. "Just let me know Frett. Any time. For any reason. I'll do anything I can for you," I told her.

She nodded and sniffed. "Thanks Vim." I gave her a tiny squeeze, and she leaned even closer.

As I held her for a moment, I wondered if this... incident, would end up being good for her.

Although painful... it had obviously benefited her in certain ways. She now knew Ursula and Sharp were genuinely good people, even if they didn't exactly subscribe to her religion. Those friendships would grow and harden, and give Frett more... well...

Another buffer. Another strong foundation. For many things in life.

“I think next time I’ll just ask you, Vim,” Frett then said.

My eye twitched, and I hoped she hadn’t felt it. “Me?” I asked, hoping I had misunderstood.

“To take me elsewhere. I should have known this was why Fractal left all the time. There’s no drama if you just go elsewhere and do it,” she said with a sigh.

Oh. Jeez.

I smiled a little, out of relief of having misunderstood her. “Well, that’s not entirely the reason. But yes. If you get that weird itch again just let me know and I’ll take you to Lumen or something,” I said.

“Weird itch,” she said, and then giggled.

Patting her back as I let her shoulder go, I nodded. “It is in a way, you know,” I said.

“Right...!” she nodded, still giggling.

Frett happily giggled at me, and then patted my thigh. “Okay, Vim,” she then said.

“Sure...?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Yeah. I’ll be okay. Though um... don’t tell me. Or show me. Or let me hear it,” she said.

I nodded gently to her. That was understandable. Even if she now hated Tim, and wanted him gone, she was still very religious. If Tim was hurt, physically or emotionally, because of this then she’d have to blame herself. Her religious doctrine was to never do harm.

Frett sighed and looked away, out at the church. “I buried the baby near the lake. The one where Sharp grows those plants. For her bandages,” she then told me.

Right.

“That way... hopefully she’ll grow into those plants too. I like the idea of becoming a bandage. I think I might ask to be buried there too,” Frett said.

“There’s great pride in being something that heals people,” I said, agreeing.

She nodded. “There is...”

Frett then coughed, and nodded. “Okay. Before I start weeping again. I know you’re okay with it Vim, but I’m not. The Gods tell us not to cry too much,” she said.

"Gods cried too, Frett," I told her as I turned, as to stand up.

"Did they?" she asked as I stood, and then held my hand out to her.

She took it as I helped her to her feet. "A lot. More than you'd think," I told her.

I'd not tell her I had been the reason they had wept so much.

"Huh..." she mumbled as we stepped over a few steps, to get in front of the window. Or rather, above it.

"Ready?" I asked her.

She nodded.

Holding her hand and arm, I gently helped her down. She swung a little, and made a tiny noise as she quickly swung her feet and legs into the window. Half a moment later she was back inside, stepping away.

For a tiny moment I lingered outside, both to let Frett have a chance to get away from the window... and to glance around.

The church was dark and quiet. Typical here.

Then I too returned inside. I carefully climbed down back into the window, and did my best to not break the small shelf that was sitting right under it. Frett had used it as a footstool... but if I did that, it'd likely just shatter.

"Can I ask something, Vim?" Frett asked as I went to close the window.

"Hm?" I made sure to firmly shutter it. Since I knew this place wasn't frequented often. If I left the window unlocked, a strong storm would blow it open... and all the rain and nature would hastily lay this tower to waste.

"If you um... find any children. Orphans. Would you bring them here?" she asked me.

I paused a moment as I turned away from the window. "You sure?" I asked her.

She nodded, and her sad smile told me how serious she was.

Nodding gently, I smiled back at her. "Then yes. I will. I've also been asked to bring back some puppies," I said.

“Puppies...? Oh my, that would be nice,” Frett perked up at that.

“Children and puppies,” I said as I thought about it. Quite a combination.

I’d like to think it’d be near impossible to find such orphans... but...

Well...

Lomi had been one too. And then Fly, to a point.

They were far more common than one thought. Than I’d like to admit.

“Sorry to ask something so weird, Vim,” Frett then said.

“It wasn’t, Frett. You’d be surprised actually... I regretfully run into more orphans than you think. Though if you’ll forgive me... I do hope I never need to bring any to you, yet all the same I promise I will if the need arises,” I told her.

She nodded quickly. “Right...! Right,” she said.

I stepped towards the door and opened it. Revealing the spiral staircase that would lead us back down into the church. "Though you might have to fight for any I bring. You holy women are usually very motherly," I told her, and gestured for her to descend first.

"Gosh, don't remind me. Lena would definitely be pushy about it," she mumbled as she stepped past me and into the stairwell.

I nodded, though wasn't sure if she was right or not. To be honest most of the people here I wasn't very close with. Sharp was the one I knew most about... but honestly that was just because her personality allowed me to be more normal with her. The rest of them here, like Frett and Ursula, saw me as something akin to a religious deity.

Not really something that enabled friendship to form. I always had to walk on eggshells around them.

"Though I might need to also fight Renn too," Frett said as I followed her downstairs.

I flinched. "Yeah she's very protective of children."

"Is... is she like me then? Like Ursula?" Frett asked softly.

"Yes and no," I said, and left it at that.

“Hm... She’s so upbeat too. Wonder how she does it,” Frett wondered.

“She’s an open book. You can talk to her about it if you’d feel okay doing so. I can promise you Renn’s surprisingly good at keeping secrets, even if she’s horrible at keeping her own,” I told her.

Frett paused before a door. Not the one we were heading for, though. It was another small room in the spire. “Is she?” she asked as she turned to look at me.

I nodded down to the robed woman. “She is. Though don’t be alarmed if she starts crying and wraps you in a hug,” I warned her.

Frett smiled up at me. “I’ve actually started to enjoy that. I think I might just talk to her, then, before you two leave,” she said.

Nodding, I was glad to hear it. It’d do Frett good... and honestly, it’d do Renn good too.

We descended the rest of the way in silence, reaching the bottom of the spire. The stairs led to an open room, but one full of boxes. I could smell the grains, particularly the rice hiding within them.

Stepping out of the storeroom, and into one of the smaller hallways of the church... I nodded to Frett who paused a moment. “Wasn’t so bad, was it?” I asked.

She smiled at me and shook her head. "No. It really wasn't. Your food didn't smell half as bad as last time," she said.

"I hadn't meant the food..."

She giggled at me. "I know...!"

Frett slowly stopped giggling... and then smiled up at me. Before I could say anything else, she stepped forward and wrapped me in a hug.

Patting her back as she squeezed me, I realized she was actually about as tall as Renn was with her ears. Her head came to a stop right where Renn's ears did.

"Thanks Vim," she said into my chest.

"Mhm."

Frett took one last deep breath... and then nodded as she let me go.

"Goodnight, Frett," I said as she stepped away.

She sniffed and nodded. "Goodnight Vim. May the gods keep us all safe," she said as she left.

I watched her go for a moment... and wondered if she really was okay or not.

It was so hard to tell sometimes. It was more than just being strong... because even the strong broke.

Though usually those with such deep religious beliefs ended up being okay more often than not. It was a good anchor to cling to during a troubled storm.

Crossing my arms as I watched Frett hurry down the hallway, I turn to look down the other direction... at Renn.

She jumped at my glance at her, and then sheepishly smiled as she stepped forward.

She had been sitting at the end of the hallway. On one of the many small benches that were everywhere. Thanks to how far Renn had been and how still she had been sitting... it was likely that Frett hadn't even noticed her.

Renn slowed as she approached, and then came to a stop as Frett rounded a corner.

"How was she?" Renn asked quietly.

“She has another scar on her heart and soul... but I think she’ll be okay,” I said honestly.

“That’s good. Or well, it’s good she’ll be okay,” Renn corrected herself as she stepped forward, coming up to me.

It was.

Studying Renn, and her robes... I noticed the faint smell of a bath on her. “Did you take a bath?” I asked.

She nodded. “With Sharp.”

“With...” I sighed and shook my head at her.

“What? We had been filthy. We went into the woods, to gather up some plants for her bandages,” Renn defended herself.

“At night?” I asked. I knew of the plants she was speaking of. They were near the lake. I had brought the seeds for them, for Sharp. She had asked me for a way to make as many bandages as she needed. And those plant fibers had been my solution.

Renn shrugged. “Sharp thinks the plants are more delicate at night, I guess,” she said.

Delicate... maybe she thinks if she harvests them at night their fibers were more suited for bandages?

I mean... it wasn't entirely an impossibility... but the difference had to be so insignificant...

Though... knowing Sharp, she's actually proven it. Interesting.

"She's a kind woman. She kind of reminds me of Merit, being so prickly, but she's actually not as sharp tongued as Merit. She just has a different perspective of life, so it's easy to misunderstand her," Renn told me.

I nodded. "Yes. Her small stature also helps relate her to Merit, too. And Sharp is not as human as most of you. So her view of life is skewed more animalistic than not." Which was funny, since she was a romantic. Usually such people were the farthest thing from it.

Renn nodded, happy to hear me speak of her friends. "She is a little short. Not as bad as Merit though," she said.

Right. Merit was a whole different kind of tiny and...

"You said you bathed with Sharp?" I asked.

“Hm? Yeah?”

“How’d she look?” I asked.

Renn blinked at me. “Uh... fine...? I didn’t see any wounds or anything, if that’s what you mean. I thought she wore the bandages as a way to keep her skin from cutting people or things on accident?” she asked.

“That’s their main purpose yes... but because of how rough her skin is, she sometimes gets sores and wounds. It’s rough and dry. I’m glad to hear she’s okay,” I said. I once found her bleeding all over a few visits ago. I had helped nurse her during that visit, and had felt for the poor girl.

“Ah... I didn’t realize it could hurt her too,” she said softly.

I nodded.

Renn frowned in a way that told me she was now sad. She wasn’t enjoying hearing about her friend being someone who suffered for no reason.

Though...

Shifting, I wondered if I should ask her or not.

Studying the woman I had chosen as my partner, I realized I had suddenly been placed in a peculiar position.

It was time to make a decision. A real one.

Renn noticed my stare, and her sad frown turned into a gentle smile. "Vim...?" she asked.

Right. She was a gentle soul...

And Nann had made it very clear that Renn was more fragile than I thought. Though I wasn't sure if I agreed with her yet. Personally I thought Renn was made of stronger stuff. She'd cry, sure... but break? I wasn't so sure of that.

So... should I let her get involved?

Should I shield it from her? If at least not forever, at least for now?

After all it wasn't like she didn't have time. I could give her years. Decades. Centuries. A millennia or two, I didn't care. However long that was needed for her, I was more than happy to wait patiently until she was ready to see and even be a part of the darker sides of the Society.

But...

Renn's ears fluttered, but she didn't say anything. She calmed down and just went to smiling at me... locking her eyes with my own.

How was she so patient with me? I swear.

I hope she'll always be this patient with me. Although I enjoyed it when she became a little pushy... I relished these moments. It was moments like these that proved just how much she trusted me. How much she loved me.

Which was why I wanted to shield her from the sad things. Not just because of what Nann and Nasba had said... but also just because I cared for her. Even if she could endure the chaos and despair that would come from it... That did not mean I wanted her involved with it at all.

I wanted Renn to be happy. Always. I wanted every day she existed to be one full of joy and laughter. I didn't like it when she cried. I didn't like it when she got hurt, or had to accept a cruel reality that didn't fit her own.

Yet at the same time...

It was what she wanted. It was what she desired. To be my partner. Not just my wife... but...

She tilted her head again, this time a little too sensually. It made me want to reach out and touch her.

“I need to do something rather sad,” I told her, before she could seduce me.

She blinked, and her smile slowly died.

“I know you want to... support me. So you wish to know all I do. And how I do it. You wish to learn, and see, and be there for me...” I told her.

She nodded slowly.

“But I also wish I could shield you from such sorrows. From that which would make you cry, and not smile,” I said softly.

“That’s adorable, Vim,” Renn said, just as quietly.

Blinking, I shifted. “Huh?”

“You wish to cherish me. Yet doing so would be forcing your will on me. It’s adorable that your love for me can make you so conflicted. You, a man of such firm beliefs, being so conflicted because of me is... well... lovely,” she explained.

Ah... I smiled... and then I sighed as I nodded at her. “I’ll let you decide, Renn. If you wish to witness it or not,” I decided.

“Witness what Vim...?” she asked softly.

“I’m to banish Tim. For what he had done to Frett.”