

Non Human 281

Chapter 281 A Wheel Turns

The largest of the waterwheels towered in the sky... which was a little overwhelming since I was standing on the dock it was attached to. The river that the waterwheel was in, and being spun by, was several feet below the dock. This wheel was likely as tall, if not taller, than the house Vim and I were staying in.

Yet as massive as it was... the thing was moving oddly quietly. The thing didn't really creak, or even splash. I'd blame the river being so noisy, being a larger and fast flowing one, but... well...

My ears weren't fooled so easily as that.

Plus there was another noisy device.

A rather well kept shack was made right next to the huge waterwheel. A part of it, even, by the looks of it. There were little sections where the dock extended outward, up to and against sections of the waterwheel. Likely so that it could be assessed and worked on, if needed be.

Inside the shack were not just supplies and tools... but two more intricate machines. The largest that took up most of the building was something I'd seen before. A wheel that was spun thanks to the force generated from the waterwheel. It was capable of grinding things. Grains and other stuff could be smelled even from out here.

The other device however was something I'd never seen before. And it was obvious that Vim had been the one to make it. It matched not just the design and smoothness of the waterwheel but also had the same wooden grains and tones in its material.

Not far from the shack, and the dock, was a rather deep irrigation channel. One that not only ran almost all around the village, but also supplied dozens of smaller water channels that fed and filled who knows how many fields and wells... even a few small ponds too.

Now a waterwheel being used to bring water out of a river constantly wasn't new to me. I'd seen it before. Most villages had at least one, even if rickety and small... but...

Stepping over to the long, tube-like, mechanism... I frowned as I watched water pour out of its opening, filling the irrigation channel dutifully.

Seeing a pipe wasn't new either... but this thing wasn't some little spigot in one of the Societies' buildings. This thing shot out of the ground, and dock, upward at an angle towards the sky. Its opening, where it ended, was above my head... and the whole thing was as wide as me.

The pipe was strangely not making much noise. Even the water flowing out of the pipe was doing so in such a calm and fluid manner that it wasn't splashing at all. It was pouring out with such grace, even though in large volume, to not really splash much upon landing in the reservoir below.

There was a rather large square of water before it turned into an actual channel, like a small river, but it seemed to be flowing rather well.

Putting my hand on the large pipe-like thing... I felt the slight vibrations and trembling of the mechanism within it. It almost felt like it was spinning, somehow.

Turning, to look at the shack nearby, and the waterwheel which lay just behind it... I realized what was happening.

Unlike a normal waterwheel, that I knew, which had small buckets to lift and bring out the water... This wheel was instead just converting its entire purpose into force. And that force was then used to spin both the grinder, and this pipe thing which pulled water up and out of the river and to the aqueduct. It honestly at first thought seemed less efficient. Why power another machine to do the same job? Yet...

Stepping away, I furrowed my brow as I realized there was a lot I needed to learn.

This was obviously how water was brought upward. Like back at Lumen, or Landi's palace. I had wondered how they had accomplished it. Water was heavy. Especially in great quantities. This must be one of the ways they moved the water. A similar design, at least.

With this tool, this machine... you could grow so much more food so easily. No wonder this place had such huge farms all over.

Some of the towns and villages I'd seen throughout my life had always been so poor. So small... but not because the people weren't hard working, or because they didn't have good soil or plentiful water and rivers nearby. It was rather because they simply couldn't move enough water, or earth, fast enough to make a difference. One could only carry and pull so much at one time. I have even seen carts specifically made into large barrels just to store water. Just to water fields and crops. Or bring water to farm animals.

But this tool... It could move water so well, for what seemed to basically be forever. As long as one had flowing water, you had the ability to use this thing... as long as you made sure it didn't break of course.

A good example would be the cabin I had lived in with Nory. There had been a stream nearby. We had constantly needed to carry water from it. We had made this large bucket we could both carry at the same time, as to do it one trip and not several.

If we had this thing instead... we could have just diverted the river that was a tad farther away instead. Adding to that stream, and then digging a similar trench like crevice...

We could have had fresh water right outside our door...

One could even have made it underground, surely. Why not? This irrigation system they had here was so smoothly built, you could even lay wood or metal over it... making a makeshift cover. A few re-enforced sections and you'd have something you could easily walk over. The water wouldn't mind after all.

"Like always Vim's handiwork is flawless. Not only this one, but the others he had tinkered with before have all been running smoothly. Those in charge of keeping an eye on them sometimes complain over the lack of anything to do," Thrain said happily from the edge of the dock. He was rather proud of something he and his people hadn't built.

He had accompanied Oplar and me here upon noticing we had left the house about an hour ago. It was midday, not long until when I'd expect Vim to start thinking about making lunch for me. His quick approach as we left told me he was watching us. Or rather, maybe Vim. I hadn't noticed which building he had come out of, but I assumed if I asked Oplar I'd learn his house or office was not only near the place we were staying, but likely situated perfectly as to keep an eye on us.

I wasn't too bothered by it, really. To these people Vim was basically a being of destruction. A calamity. They were getting ready to execute a man here for murder... what then would they do if Vim was someone they could enforce their rules upon?

I paused a moment to consider that. These folks had rules. Policies and laws. If Vim was just a normal, or more normal, man... then...

Yes. They'd have executed him too.

Yet they instead use him to build waterwheels and irrigation channels. They use him as the executioner. They hate him, banish him, yet still make him do all this...

Maybe Vim was right. Maybe this was his way of atoning for what he had done, and even these people recognized it.

"How long does something like this last? Before it breaks down, usually?" I asked as I stepped over to Thrain.

He hummed as he crossed his arms. "Well... There had been one about this size when I was younger. It broke during a bad storm and the flood that followed it. I'd argue that was not because of normal wear and tear, but in my experience it normally takes something like that to break something Vim makes. That or dozens of years," Thrain said.

Stepping off the dock and onto the brick path that separated the dock and the nearby grassy field, I glanced over at Oplar. She was a ways away, near the irrigation ditch, talking to a pair of people. I could

hear her voice on the wind, but not theirs... though I couldn't hear the particulars of what she was saying.

Probably asking about the latest gossip. The people she was talking to looked dressed in typical sturdy farming clothes, though I wasn't sure what they had been doing out here. The fields around us were mostly simply grass.

"So you don't have any that Vim needs to check on?" I asked as I looked away from Oplar, and out over the distances. It was a little hard to see some of the other waterwheels, since some were blocked by tall fields of wheat or hills.

"No. Nothing we can't handle. Everything is fine on our end... other than the matter with my nephew, of course," Thrain said, a little sadly.

Was he saddened over the mere fact they needed to execute someone, or did he genuinely feel for his relative? It was hard to tell. The man sometimes seemed aloof, and then other times looked cold and calculating. I wonder how old he is.

Though...

Glancing back at the dock, and all the stuff around it... I wondered if I should have Vim teach me faster than he had been doing. Right now I had no way to tell if the wheel, or any of the devices connected to it, needed any attention at all. I couldn't hear any creaks, or strains, in the mechanisms... but that didn't mean much.

If I really wanted to be able to help Vim out, even just by checking on stuff like this to see if it needed his attention or not... I really needed to learn more about them. How they worked. How they were made. How to check for problems, and the common solutions needed to fix those that were found...

It wasn't really Vim's fault. He had already promised to teach me... we just were always busy. And his teachings were scattered and without focus. One day he'd teach me how to make a new type of bread snack, another he'd teach me how to properly make tombstones. Plus it wasn't like I pushed him on the subject. I was happy to take it slow and easy... it made things feel more natural...

But maybe I should push a little harder. Maybe from now on I'd really stick with him when he built, fixed, or studied something. I have done so a few times, like that time at Secca while he made that vat. But usually I was distracted... by either other people, or the location we were at itself.

"Have you seen enough...? If so would you like to see something special?" Thrain asked a little wearily.

"Special...?" I asked. Although this place was neat, and massive, it was mostly just large buildings and plentiful farmland. I wonder what he meant.

Maybe something similar to the Keep or the Weaver's Hut? A heart, or an egg...? Surely not right?

Thrain happily nodded as he turned and raised a hand. "Oplar!" he shouted. I flinched at his suddenly loud voice and stepped away in case he shouted again.

He could be as loud as he was big, it seemed.

Oplar turned towards us, moved in a way that told me she had just made a joke and laughed, then she bid farewell to those she was talking to and headed our way.

I shifted a little as Oplar drew near, and I wondered why he had shouted at her. Why not just have us walk over to her? Or simply wait for her to finish? It wasn't like we were in some big hurry or anything. Maybe he didn't like Oplar talking with others, or something. Or maybe I was just reading too much into it, and he simply wanted those farmers to get back to work.

As Oplar stepped into talking range, she smiled at me in a way that told me she hadn't been offended at all. Which bothered me a little. Oplar seemed at first to be someone who would happily voice any complaints she had, but I knew her better now. She was the type of person to keep her personal feelings to herself. She hated confrontation of any kind.

"Oplar, would you mind showing Renn around? Particularly the cliff, if you would," Thrain asked of her.

"Oh...? Sure. Done checking out the wheels?" she asked as she glanced at me.

I nodded, though was unsure if I had actually done anything or not. All I'd be able to tell Vim about them was that they were still spinning, seemingly fine, and that Thrain didn't think they were worth the attention I had wasted on them.

Some help I was.

"I'll leave you two to it then," Thrain said a little happily as he stepped away.

“Hm!” Oplar nodded as he headed for the main path back to the village. His footsteps were oddly light upon the brick, yet sounded heavy on the dirt path.

As he left, I sighed a little and nodded to Oplar. “So... some kind of cliff?” I asked.

“Aye. A great mural. Thrain tell you about it or someone else?” she asked.

“First I’ve heard of it. Thrain just asked if I wanted to see something special,” I said as I watched him leave. He walked a little slowly, and had that same slouch I had seen him with as the other night. He hadn’t walked so slumped with us here, so either that was his relaxed walking position or...

“Well, it’s this way. Honestly other than the fields, that cliff, and these waterwheels there isn’t much to see here. They’re a rather simple people, really, for all their rules,” Oplar said as she stepped towards the path as well. She however headed eastward, along the river.

Following her, I hummed a little as I thought of most of the Society locations I’d been to so far. Although each had their own... uniqueness... the reality was most were simple. The Crypt but a giant church. The Weaver’s Hut was similar to here. A bunch of buildings surrounded by farmland. Lumen a giant building for business. Telmik another church.

Of course each had something neat about them, that I’d never forget... like the Weaver’s Hut having that giant egg underneath it, and all those tunnels... or the Crypt’s graveyards... but...

“So... Oplar,” I said as I took my place next to her. “What do you think of uh... Vim’s...” I hesitated as I wondered what to call them. From what I could gather they weren’t his inventions. He had been taught about them. From his parents, if I’ve gleaned enough into him as I thought I had.

“His what...? I’m not attracted to him at all Renn, so you’re going to have ask someone else anything about his-” Oplar started to tease me, and I couldn’t help but laugh at her.

“Not that! I mean the stuff he makes. Like those things,” I said with a thumb over my shoulder, at the wheel we were leaving behind.

“Oh. Well... I mean he’s old, Renn. So it’s only to be expected he’d know a lot of stuff,” she said with a smirk, still enjoying her earlier joke.

Right... Hundreds if not thousands of years old. “How old do you think he is anyway?” I asked.

“Well... my father and Eyes, Hands’ father, tried to figure that out. They cross-referenced stuff, and even went on long journeys to figure it out. They eventually concluded that he’s older than current history, but likely not known history,” Oplar said.

I frowned. “What’s the difference?”

“Current is basically today. Think the last thousand or so years. Stuff we can verify if we looked hard enough to prove. Stuff we could find proof of if we needed to. Known history is of the legends and stories that we couldn’t prove even if we wanted to. For instance we can prove that this place used to be a massive city, with something called a god ruling over it, because there are records of it. But there

was also supposedly a giant city over the Keep too... but I only have Vim's words to prove that. As far as I'm aware there's no proof of it. No ruins. No written history... you know?" Oplar explained.

My frown deepened, and I was about to bring up the underground castle like structure... but decided not to. Oplar likely knew of it, but as far as I was aware she wasn't allowed into it. "So basically he's so old we can't figure it out even when we try," I said, comprehending her words.

"Aye. They concluded that he was fully involved in the era of the gods... but honestly Renn, who knows how long ago that was? So many think it was thousands of years ago... but look at this place," she said with a wave around us.

"Do they know how long ago it was? When Vim did what he did?" I asked.

"Five hundred and so years last I heard," Oplar said with a nod.

Five hundred... It was a staggering time, yet...

I nodded. "That does seem not too long ago, compared to the legends," I said.

"Right? So either our history isn't as old as we think it is, or gods were around a lot longer than anyone realizes," Oplar said.

Realizing something as the field of grass we were walking along turned into a field of wheat, I shook my head. "Just... how old is the Society then, Oplar?" I asked.

"Um... it's nearing its millennia I think."

"Oh!" I recognized one of Vim's words and smiled. "So almost a thousand years," I said happily.

She glanced at me, likely noticing my weird joy as she nodded. "I think it's eight or nine hundred years to be clear... but yeah. Who is counting anymore, you know?" she said.

I wanted to.

Still...

A thousand years... and Vim was much older than that... he had told me he hadn't joined the Society until after his little trip to those islands. And he hadn't gone to them until after he had made his horrible mistake... which had to have been during all those wars he spoke of sometimes.

"It's daunting isn't it? I wish you luck Renn... Vim's a special case, but all of the old folk like him usually have a screw loose. The kind that makes them kind of weird," Oplar said.

Giggling at that I nodded. "Vim is weird, but it's okay. I enjoy it."

“You do don’t you? If anything it makes me jealous,” she said, then sighed.

Oplar happily continued to tease me as we talked about the Societies age, and little tidbits of history she found interesting

The two of us walked for about an hour until we I noticed we started to descend. What had been continuous flat-farmland with the occasional small hill in the distance, suddenly started to degrade. It didn’t take long until I realized we were basically walking down the side of a mountain.

At one point looking behind us had the path, and the ground, rising up high above us. It reminded me of all the mountains we had passed through on our way here. But what was surprising about it was how long it had taken me to notice the change in elevation.

One of the main reasons it took so long for me to notice was the fact we were still walking around and basically through, farmland. It had kind of just blended together...

“What’s wrong Renn?” Oplar asked.

“Nothing... I just hadn’t noticed us walking down such a hill until now,” I said.

“Huh...? Oh... Well it’s not that steep at first,” Oplar said as she glanced back at the path we had been walking upon.

Still... maybe I was distracted...

As we descended, one side of the hill became steeper and steeper... until it was a genuine cliff. One that we rounded, and at the bottom of was a large flat meadow with the occasional tree. Oplar led me down a path into the meadow, and it didn't take long for me to realize both where and what our destination was.

Upon the cliff... overlooking the meadow, was a massive mural. Cut into the stone, seemingly the same stone found all over the village in the form of bricks, were statues and artwork... that genuinely dwarfed us in size.

"They don't really have a name for it, though I think they should. It's a little too fancy to just be called the cliff," Oplar said as we slowly stopped in the middle of the meadow, as to look up at the side of the cliff.

I wasn't entirely sure what to take in first. The people carved into it? The scenes? The center of the artwork was obviously the two people in the middle, bigger than even the trees around us, but there were hundreds if not thousands of smaller designs carved and chiseled all around them. Some were people. Some animals. But all of them were surrounded by fire.

Or at least... I think it was fire.

"Oh boy..." I groaned as I looked up at what was obviously Vim... with a spear in his hand, and a dying person under his boot.

It was quite obvious. It was Vim doing the deed. Killing their god... and the slaughter that had accompanied it. There were hundreds of other people, though much smaller in size to Vim and the one he was slaying, and now that I really studied them it became clear they were all dying too. Some were on fire. Others missing their heads, or limbs. There was a group of what was obviously women in one corner, all huddled together and visibly praying and pleading as they covered little children.

It was a giant remembrance of that fateful moment.

“Yeah. Quite a sight... makes one wonder, doesn't it?” Oplar said as she crossed her arms.

Wonder...? Not at all.

I knew Vim was capable of such brutality. I'd seen it before. Though... maybe not used against women and children. But to him did it matter? He was so strong a mere blow from a foot or fist was enough to not just kill a person, but completely destroy them. Tearing off heads, limbs, and sundering their bodies in ways that shouldn't be humanly possible.

But...

I gulped as I studied the woman beneath Vim's heel. He had his spear in her chest, and she was grabbing at it... but it was obvious she was defeated and dead. They had carved and crafted her to be beautiful, but she had obvious wounds and injuries. Fingers were missing, and not from a broken rock of the cliff from age or wear. Her hair a matted mess, from what was supposed to be blood. A look of utter distraught and terror marred what would have likely been a beautiful expression, though her eyes were strangely calm and finely detailed. They were staring up at Vim... not as an enemy, but as if she pitied him.

And such a look was only further enriched by the way Vim looked troubled. They had given him a frown, and his brows were furrowed. This Vim was not some cruel diabolical enemy that I would have pictured in my head had they described this scene to me before seeing it. They portrayed him here as if he was as much a victim as the one beneath him.

“Is... is this um...” I shifted as I wondered what to say.

No wonder they didn't want to name it. Why would they? It was crazy they had even made it in the first place. It was the scene that most represented their terrible past. The thing that had brought them low. Their god, being killed...

I'd seen similar statues and artwork before. Not just in the Keep either. I'd seen such sights in the churches. Particularly Telmik's Cathedral. They had similar displays of their saints and gods being struck down, or their gods doing the deed themselves to what were considered evil beings.

Yet this one was affecting me far deeper than any of those ever could... for the obvious reason.

“I was once told... that Vim didn't like being painted or drawn. That he destroyed such things,” I said softly. It had always made sense to me. Hands had been so worried about showing me that painting in the Cathedral. Vim hated people even knowing what he did let alone such things, for crying out loud. It was one of the reasons I'd not yet drawn or painted him, even though I so desperately wanted to.

“Hm? Yes. He doesn't like it. He allows nearly anything else, but he hates being painted or anything. Though I don't know if he actually destroys them or not,” Oplar said.

Amber and the rest at the Sleepy Artist had said so. They had even hid them... afraid he'd see them...

"So he allows this because he feels he made a mistake," I said softly as I understood.

"Allows it...? Well..." Oplar hesitated and I glanced at her. She sighed and nodded. "He doesn't know about it. If you'd... please keep it a secret, yeah?" she finally said.

Oh geez.

I slowly nodded and my tail shivered. "Yeah. Definitely," I agreed.

"Thanks. I forgot to mention it. I'm glad you brought that up, I'd have forgotten to remind you... and knowing Thrain he likely hadn't told you either. They're rather ashamed of this, you know," she said.

"Ashamed...? Why?" I asked. Although the scene was brutal, and made me sad, it was very finely done. I wanted to step closer to it, and maybe find some kind of ladder or something, as to inspect it closer. Some of the detail looked... very intricate.

"I can explain that."

I startled, turning a bit as Oplar did. Since we had been standing so close, I bumped into Oplar's elbow on accident.

Once I realized it was just a young woman, I calmed down and stepped back from Oplar. "Sorry," I apologized to her, who ignored me and huffed at the woman who had suddenly appeared.

"Don't scare us like that! Where'd you even come from?" she asked.

"I'd been sitting there," the woman said with a point behind her. I tilted a tad to see past her, and sure enough found a small bench... with what looked to be a small bag next to it. Had she been doing something? Maybe having a meal?

"Sheesh. You're lucky Renn's so good-natured. Doing that to other predators would have gotten you eaten," Oplar said with a laugh.

I frowned at her. Really Oplar? Even if it was possibly true, saying stuff like that was one of the reasons so many of our kind were so skittish and afraid of those like me.

"Either way... I feel like this is fate. I had kind of wondered if I should speak with you," the woman said as she stepped a little closer.

As she did I noticed the strange look in her eyes. She didn't look as if she'd been crying, or was weary... but...

Yes. Definitely some kind of exhaustion. Was she sick...? Or simply troubled?

“My name is Sillti... I’ve heard that you’re Vim’s wife,” Sillti introduced herself, and asked.

The moment she had said her name, Oplar had tensed up.

I nodded slowly. “My name is Renn,” I said.

“Hm...” Sillti nodded as she studied me.

Should I be worried? Oplar had uncrossed her arms, and hadn’t said a word... but I could feel her strange tension. She had only done so the moment the woman had said her name... so...

“Hm... can we talk? Wife to wife?” she asked with a gesture to the bench nearby.

Unsure a little, I glanced at Oplar who I was surprised had a weird frown on her face.

The woman noticed, and smiled a little gently at us. “It’s okay, Oplar. I swear by Vita’s name,” she said.

Vita... Thrain had said that name too. Was that the name of their god?

Oplar shifted, and I smiled too. "I'll be okay, Oplar," I said gently to her.

She glanced at me, and I appreciated that look of pure concern on her face. She didn't say anything but she slowly nodded as she stepped back. As Oplar stepped away, slowly, I went to join Sillti on the bench.

As we walked over to the bench, I glanced around the area... and realized there were a few other places nearby with benches and tables too. How had I noticed them? Maybe something was wrong with me. Not noticing the slight decline earlier as we descended was one thing... but not noticing her, and all these items here in this field of flowers and grass? There were trees, but they weren't dense enough to block such things from sight.

"I appreciate this, Renn... I really do," Sillti said as she went to sit down on one side of the bench.

As she did I noticed the way she sat. She did so slowly... as if she was stiff or hurt.

Yet I didn't smell, or see, any wounds on her. In fact she was kind of pretty. A little taller than me. Long flowing hair. Pretty red eyes, fair skin... her clothes were finely sewn too and... yes. Even her hands were free of stains or calluses. She had a feeling of calm stillness around her... as if she had never hurried before in her life, for any reason.

If we had been at a human town I'd think her some kind of noble. Like the many I'd seen in Lumen.

Sitting down next to her, since the bench wasn't really that big, I nodded gently. "I..." I was about to speak, but then realized something.

Oplar had gone nervous the moment she said her name. She was still nearby, fidgeting a little in worry. Gentle Oplar who didn't like confrontation was worried about me, and looked half a moment away from jumping at her as if ready to fight at a moment's notice.

And that was the only reason she'd be so wary right now. Oplar was not a fighter. She despised violence. A self proclaimed coward. She loved to laugh, and talk to anyone. Although the whole village hated and were afraid of Vim, they weren't necessarily so of us. Many had waved and spoke to Oplar and me as we walked around earlier. Although only usually giving greetings in passing... none had seemed dangerous at all...

She had even laughed earlier, making a joke... before Sillti had said her name and...

So...

Wait.

"You're his wife..." I said as I realized it.

Sillti slowly smiled and nodded with her heavy eyes digging into my own. "Yes. Your husband is set to kill mine in three days."

Chapter 282 Ollie

The heat of the day woke me up.

I blinked a few times, unsure of where I was for a moment. I was sitting down, not lying down, and...

Yes. I was on the couch. In the little house at the Summit. The windows had their blinds shuttered, but the bright sun was peering through... and was strangely a little warm... Maybe this winter would be a mild one.

Taking a small breath, I caught myself and reached up to pull something out of my mouth. Or rather, from between my lips.

For a small moment I had absolutely no idea what I was staring at. Some kind of bug? Fuzz? But as my mind finished waking up... I recognized the few strands of Renn's hair dangling on my fingertips.

"What the...?" I frowned as I tried to figure out how and why they had been stuck to my lips... but it was rather obvious after a few moments of pondering it. She had been basically lying all over this couch since we got here... so I must have...

Glancing around, I realized I was still in the exact spot I had been in when I had sat down after Renn and Oplar had left earlier. Other than me moving my arm and hand, to grab the hairs, I'd not budged.

No chance for the hairs to have gotten into my mouth by rolling around then. Which meant...

“On purpose? Or had her hair just dangled over my face too long?” I wondered lightly. Sometimes she did like to stare down at me as I slept. When she did her hair sometimes brushed against my face, but she was usually more aware than that. Though that might just be because her hair had started to grow long again. I had noticed that the other night. It was no longer just at her shoulders... and it was now far below her chest, and was starting to get wild again.

Rubbing my eyes, not of sleep but despair, I wondered what to do with myself. She was so odd sometimes.

Listening a bit, I confirmed Renn and Oplar weren't in the house. No one was here but me. I heard voices and activity beyond the shuttered windows and walls, however from the sounds and the heat of the midday I knew it was likely time people sat down for lunch.

Which meant Renn would either be back soon, or would not be back for hours. It depended on if she and Oplar got distracted and or ate with anyone else.

Odds are they would... Renn and Oplar were both the friendly types. The outgoing ones.

Yet...

“Just in case...” I mumbled as I slowly stood.

I'll prepare something light. Light enough to have food on the table for if she returned early, but not so much it'd be wasted if she didn't. Plus while she munched on that light meal I could prepare her a proper one, something a tad heavier...

She enjoyed cooking, but I've noticed she also enjoys it when I make her food... though not the meals I myself would prefer. I wonder if she'd ever grow to not mind them, over time, or if she'd groan and mumble when I make them even hundreds of years from now.

Before stepping away from the couch, I noticed the book on the table nearby. It was shut close, without any hint of a bookmark of any kind. I'd wonder if she had finished it without me noticing, but I knew Renn didn't need a bookmark. Her memory was flawless.

It was a little amusing she didn't seem to be enjoying it much. It wasn't the plot or the characters... but instead the little ways the characters interacted she found displeasing. She didn't like the main character's personal attractions towards the first love interest.

Was it because she wanted to relate to the main character, and now couldn't... or was it because she now found herself strange and odd? For not sharing what so many others not only enjoyed, but likely agreed with?

I'll need to ask her later. Maybe after more of the story. Near the end, and during the second installment, things got spicier. More heavy in themes and topics... so...

About to step away, to head for the kitchen, I paused as I felt something odd in my hand. I lifted it as to stare at the things wrapped and tangled around my fingers, and smirked at Renn's hair. "Really?" I asked myself.

I had absentmindedly wrapped several of the hairs around my index finger. As to not drop them.

The hairs had a very slight gleam to them... and were a tad darker than the rest of her hair, telling me they were sections where her rosettes would be. Usually only visible under the right light, like the glare of the setting sun.

Spots...

She had mentioned once that her family had been darker. Some even a pure black in color, particularly the ones with more fur on them. That was interesting. I'd not ever asked if she had seen or known other family members with similar markings and colors as she possessed, but...

It wasn't usually very common. For a non-human child to inherit different traits such as that. A non-human's colors were dictated similarly to a person's eye colors. You had to have the right traits in the bloodline for them to arise. Plus each trait had a dominant and recessive aspect to them. And although jaguars did indeed come in different colors, I could have sworn such dark coloration was considered dominant amongst large cats.

If all of Renn's family had black fur and hair... she really should have had it too. At least statistically.

Though it did not matter her hair color. Renn was Renn.

About to walk into the kitchen, to make some kind of salad snack for the woman on my mind... I paused as I heard feet scrape a dirty brick.

Glancing down the hallway, I sighed as I confirmed someone was approaching... and it wasn't who I wanted to be doing so.

Ollie did not even knock on the door. She simply opened it.

She noticed me rather quickly, and frowned at me. "Vim," she greeted me.

"Ollie. Come on in," I greeted her.

Turning away, I went to the kitchen even though it wasn't Renn... but not to make food. Not because I didn't want to be rude to my guest, but rather the opposite. She'd have interpreted it as me inviting her to lunch if I did.

Ollie entered the building but didn't close the door behind her. I listened to the sound of her steps as she walked down the hallway, and heard a few tiny rocks stuck beneath her shoe. She must have been walking out in the dirt, or fields.

"Hm..." Ollie paused at the doorway as I went to put on tea. She preferred tea over just plain water, or alcohol.

"How've you been?" I asked. I was actually a little surprised it had taken her this long to show up. She usually came to say hello not long after Thrain left the moment I got here.

"Is... she not here...?" Ollie asked softly.

She...? "Oplar?" I asked as I turned to look at the woman.

Her arms were crossed... and she looked a little troubled. As if she had just heard some hurtful words or something. "No... I had come to meet your wife," She said simply.

Oh. Renn. "She's out with Oplar. Not sure when they'll be back," I said.

"Hm..." Ollie hummed.

After lighting the small cook-stove fire, I went to fill the teapot. The one here was rather large, made of cast iron. It was honestly a little crude, but it worked and it allowed one to make a lot of tea at once. Perfect for me lately, since Oplar and Renn really did sometimes chug the stuff down. When we were on the road, particularly at camp, we usually had the pot boiling constantly as to make enough for them. It was annoying enough to make me consider bringing along another pot or kettle specifically for them.

I heard Ollie sit down in the next room. At the table where we all ate dinner. Either she was content sitting here and waiting for Renn... or was simply waiting for her tea before speaking up.

"I'm surprised you didn't notice her while walking around. She and Oplar can be quite... noisy, sometimes," I said as I placed the full teapot onto the stove.

“I hadn’t really looked for her. I had heard from Ash that she hadn’t left at all, so I figured she was a skittish creature or something... hiding in here with you,” Ollie said.

Huh... was that how they had interpreted Renn’s lack of wanting to meet them all and see their village...?

It made sense, I suppose. From their perspective.

I stepped away from the teapot as to glance at Ollie in the next room. She had sat with her back to me, and oddly in the same chair Renn had been sitting in too.

She looked... fine, I suppose. Ollie was one of the oldest living members here. She herself did not remember my actions, but her parents had. In fact she had been born not too long after...

Frowning as I tried to remember if Ollie had been born before or after the Societies creation, I realized once again that I really should pay more attention. I didn’t have Renn’s memory, but I really should be doing better...

“I can smell Oplar, but not her...” Ollie mumbled, and I was about to respond... but realized she hadn’t been talking to me. She had been simply speaking her thoughts aloud.

Right... her lack of scent...

Stepping back to the stove, I crossed my arms as I realized that her lack of scent... and maybe even my own, was actually a good thing.

I had noticed that some members, like those at the Crypt... had been very comfortable and happy around Renn. Same with at the Armadillos and the Camels. Most of our more recent stops, bar Landi, had members like those here. Frail and timid creatures.

Thrain and Ash had been wary of Renn, but not because she was a predator.

Her lack of smell could very well be the reason she hasn't, lately, been avoided by our more timid members. Lumen hadn't been that big of a problem, thanks to everyone there being more compatible. Those there dealt more directly with humans and those like Renn... and have most of their lives. But the Crypt? The Armadillos? Both of those places had members who would run and hide at the first sign of danger or distress. Yet I hadn't remembered anyone there outright ignoring Renn, or acting uncomfortable near her.

I'd entertain the argument that Renn introducing herself as my wife could be factor, but something such as that really shouldn't have overcome natural instincts so readily. For instance at Tor's village she had nearly been banished on sight. And although I still didn't know the full story yet about the Bell Church incident, it was safe to assume it was something similar. Her smell alone had gotten her banished... for right or wrong.

There was a very good possibility that Renn's lack of scent would... allow her to easily circumvent barriers and defenses of those susceptible to their instinctual terrors. Them realizing she's still a predator would obviously happen... even if one ignored Renn's obvious ears and tail, and their likeness, her personality was not something one could ignore. She was a kind woman, but she did have a bit of a headstrong attitude toward certain aspects of life. Plus when life got rough, Renn became firm and unyielding. She had un-waveringly been willing to vote against the whole of Lumen. Her doing so several times in a row had partially been why she had been banished. They didn't want more people like Merit there, and thus endangering themselves by doing so.

There was a lot more to it of course but...

Smells...

As I pondered the strange revelation, the teapot began to release a bit of steam. Thanks to its crude design it didn't whistle like some would, but the steam told me it was ready.

I picked it up, gathered a couple cups, and went to sit with Ollie.

Ollie accepted a cup, and I filled it with tea. She only nodded lightly as she studied it as I sat down across from her.

Putting the teapot, and the other set of cups aside, I relaxed a tad as I stared at the only woman in this whole settlement that has ever tried to flirt with me.

"You look tired," I noted.

"Because of you. I was the one chosen to handle the execution," she said without looking at me.

Oh...? Maybe because of her age. "With respect comes responsibility," I said lightly.

She smirked at me. "Funny, coming from you."

True. Especially when said here, in this town, I suppose.

"I've been told of the vote by the way. Very funny," Ollie said, and then took a drink.

"Isn't it?" I agreed.

Ollie's smirk grew a tad as she put her cup down back onto the table and tapped it with a nail. "Does it bother you?" she asked.

"The vote? No. I'd be a tyrant, I'd think, if it did," I said.

"Hm... likely true. You've always been able to separate yourself from us in that way. A little too much sometimes, I think," Ollie said.

"My wife would agree with you," I said.

She paused... and then sat up a little straighter. "So... you really did get married?" she asked.

I sighed as I tapped the table with a thumb. "Not technically. But I'm sure she'll eventually fix that, whether I like it or not," I said.

Ollie's smirk died rather slowly, and upon seeing the look of disappointment on her face... I realized something rather sad.

So her little attempts over the years hadn't been just whims of fancy...?

"Ollie...?" I asked carefully.

"Mhm... I suppose I should be sad. I feel a little disappointed, but I'm not angry. I wonder why," she said as she stared her cup.

As I stared at the woman who looked defeated, I tried to remember if she had gotten married or not. Surely she had... right? This town had many people... and she was one of, if not the oldest, here. I couldn't remember. And the fact I couldn't made me feel like an ass. Not just because it meant I had never paid attention to her, but...

Surely I wasn't mistaking that look on her face... right...?

"I... I've never gave you false hope... had I?" I asked, feeling bad.

“No. You’ve always been very upfront, Vim. Plus it’s not like I’ve ever actually thought it possible... but it still hurts... and...” Ollie raised a hand, putting it flat against her chest as if to feel her heartbeat. “I feel like I’ve just lost. You’ve made me feel inadequate, suddenly... which is silly,” she said.

Watching her closely, I was glad to see she wasn’t crying... and that a tiny smile had wormed its way on her face. “I’m sorry for doing so, Ollie... but really, it’s not like I’m much a catch myself. You shouldn’t feel bad for losing out on me, of all things,” I said to her.

Her tiny smile returned to that smirk as she nodded. “Right...? That’s very true. If anything I should feel sorry for her... you’re a very troublesome man,” she said.

I nodded. Right?

Ollie and I smiled at each other for a moment and then she sighed and took another drink.

Once she finished, she leaned forward and put her head on a hand, as if to rest. “Is she pretty?” she asked.

“To me she’s adorable, yes,” I said.

“Adorable...? Hm...”

“You’re beautiful Ollie. I’ve always found my eyes drawn to you,” I said honestly.

Ollie perked up, and then giggled. “What... giving me hope after all these years Vim?” she asked.

I smirked at her and shook my head. “Simply stating a fact.”

“Hmph... Well, it’s fine. I’ve been told we’ll need to send someone to Telmik for that vote of yours. Maybe I’ll volunteer and find myself a catch or two,” Ollie said.

“You’d have better luck than most, to be honest,” I said.

Ollie scoffed. “If most of our women are like Oplar then I’ve no doubt. I love the girl, but who could ever put up with so much noise from a single person?” Ollie said.

Surprisingly more than you’d think. Oplar was just a tad picky. What with her religious antagonism.

Ollie took another drink, emptying her cup, so I went and filled it back up for her.

“When’d you meet her...? This Renn?” Ollie asked.

"A few years ago. This winter will be our third," I said.

"Huh... So... a new member then?" Ollie asked further.

I nodded. "She'd be more than happy to share her story, if you'd like to hear it. She's... a very open person, for certain things," I said.

"Hm... I wonder if I could endure it," she wondered.

Endure the stories, or hearing Renn lovingly recount how she had fallen for me, I wonder?

Ollie drummed her fingers on the table for a moment in thought, and then sighed. "The execution is set in three days, by the way," Ollie then said.

Oh? Sooner than I'd thought. Good. "I'll be there," I said.

She smirked at me. "Do you want to meet him first? To speak with him?" she asked.

I pondered that, and sat back a bit.

Usually I would. To hear the accused story. But...

"I'll let Renn meet him," I decided.

"Hm...? Really?" she asked.

I nodded. "I'd be interested in hearing her views on it. So yeah. Let her meet him," I said.

Ollie sighed. "Maybe I really should feel sorry for her..." she mumbled.

Maybe.

"Fine. I'll have her do so in the morning. Thrain might not like it though," Ollie said.

"He'll get over it," I said. He was a man of rules, but unlike many here he didn't have a heart attack the moment one was broken.

"Sure he will."

Oh? She disagreed. Oh well... If he really threw a fuss then I'd just have to go myself and bring Renn along. He'd not be able to do or say anything about it then.

"Hm...? Scheming something are you?" Ollie asked, and I forced a frown to hide whatever thought she had seen on my face.

Scheming...? Me...?

Maybe.

"If you're in charge... does that mean you investigated it too?" I asked.

"Hm...? Yes. I was a part of it. It was rather clear, Vim... he killed the boy in front of dozens of people," Ollie said with disgust.

"Boy...?" I hesitated. He had killed a child?

"Young Silti's husband, yes. I suppose you're right, he had been a man... man enough to marry after all. But lately everyone seems so young to me... maybe I really am getting old," Ollie grumbled as she explained.

Feeling a little relieved, I nodded. So she had just been speaking relatively, then.

Not that it was any better. He had still killed a man. But...

“His name is Rollo. He’s not taking his execution well, but what do you expect from a man so spineless he’d kill another just for waving at his wife?” Ollie said with a sigh.

“Is... is that all the other man did?” I asked. Waving? Really?

“Hm. They had been friends I guess. Sillti and he had been friendly. But there was nothing to validate Rollo’s actions, Vim. The man had no reason to court or desire Sillti,” Ollie said.

“Yes. So I heard.”

She sighed as she lightly twirled her cup, staring into it at whatever was left inside as it sloshed around. “Wish I knew what it felt like. To love someone so strongly that I’d be unable to control myself because of it,” she said.

Hopefully she wasn’t thinking of Renn right now.

“Such strong emotions usually end badly, like this Rollo,” I said lightly.

“Hm... so Ash has told me repeatedly. Oh... she’s his aunt, by the way. Rollo’s. It’s why she’s been so prickly lately, she’s very embarrassed her bloodline is causing this mess,” Ollie pointed out.

“She had seemed a little off earlier. As if she and Thrain had been fighting or something,” I said.

Ollie giggled. “Because they have been, Vim. Thrain made a stupid comment in front of many people when he heard of what Rollo had done...” Ollie sat up, coughed and lowered her head. “Typical of Ash’s family. So hardheaded,” she repeated what he had said with a deeper voice.

I smiled softly, and kept the fact that he had said basically the same thing the other night in front of Renn and I. “Typical marriage squabbles.”

“You’d know now, I guess, wouldn’t you?” Ollie said with a smirk.

Would I...?

Renn and I really didn’t argue much. Which was honestly a little too bad. I enjoyed debating with her. Though usually when we did it was because of something a little too serious and personal, and thus only made her sad... and I didn’t like that.

Ollie sighed and then downed the rest of her tea. Before I could grab the teapot to refill it, she waved me down. “I’m fine. I’ll just meet her when she comes to meet the fool,” she said.

“You sure...?” I asked. “She might be back soon.”

“Yes. This way I can meet her alone, without you... so I won’t feel so weird about it,” she said.

I smiled at that. “Okay.”

Ollie stood from the table and stepped away... but only once. She paused, and then turned to stare at me.

“Hm?” I noted the way she was glaring at me.

“Maybe you two will have a son or something, I guess,” she finally mumbled, and then turned around again and left.

Watching her go, I couldn’t help but groan as I rubbed a temple. I did not like that at all. First Nasba and now her...

Really. What a bunch of cradle-robbers. If they had been human saying such a thing would have been absolutely shocking.

“Is it like that though...?” I wondered as I heard Ollie shut the door behind her as she left.

After all... I was so much older than Renn. So if I judged them that way, then in a way I needed to do the same to myself.

Rubbing my temple for a new reason, I glanced at the teapot nearby.

"Things used to be simpler," I mumbled.

War had been easy. It was direct. Simple. You had enemies. That was it. There might have been a million or more ways to kill them but the bottom line was the same. Defeat them.

This though...?

The Society was one thing. As annoying as it was. As numerous the problems were... they were things I could handle, or at least not bother me too much.

Renn however...

Everything about her made me so unsure of myself. She made me question my own beliefs. Beliefs that hadn't wavered or changed in over a thousand years. Plus she was starting to make me realize I'd not been as observant as I had thought myself to be.

Ollie had desired me. Even if only a tad... and I had never even noticed it. I had noticed her flirting, of course... hard not to. She tried to sneak into my room here when I visited just like others did, sometimes. Particularly like those in Lumen. Yet I had not realized how serious she had been.

Which meant I had likely not realized, or even registered if I did, that others had not been as frisky either.

Merit had taken me a long time to realize, but that was because she had taken many years before she even said or did anything obvious. Herra, Ollie, and the rest though had done so very clearly. Their attempts had been so obvious that I had not taken them seriously because of the intent behind them. I had simply thought them trying to enjoy the moment, not attempting to genuinely form a relationship with me.

The fact it took until now for me to realize something so obvious was depressing. Not just because it meant I was thickheaded, but also inconsiderate. I should be kinder to those I protected. Not in the sense that I should have indulged them, but rather I should have made it more clear to not even entertain the idea at all.

I sighed as I wondered if I should ask Renn's opinion about it or not. It was her fault I'd realized it, after all. She should be responsible for some of these strange thoughts and emotions I was feeling and... well...

"A son..." I mumbled as I tried to imagine it.

Ollie may have said that just to tease me, but Nasba had not. She had been very serious in her statement. That I should give Merit a son, as if to apologize for all these years.

Such a ridiculous thought. It really was. Only a non-human could think like that... but it was startling how quickly they both had come to that conclusion... even if... well...

That was typically what followed wasn't it...? When one settled down... children usually always appeared shortly after. How many times had I left somewhere, bidding goodbye to newlyweds and upon my next visit find myself greeting a tiny child? Or at least a larger belly?

More often than I could count.

But... was it even possible...?

And even if it was...

Lowering my hand from my head, I paused as I noticed her strands of hair still wrapped around my fingers.

Really... what was I going to do with myself?

Chapter 283 Sillti

Walking slowly next to Sillti, I studied the field of scraggly and thorny looking bushes. They were in neat rows, and not very tall, but dense enough that I couldn't tell what they were. I saw no signs of anything growing on them, but they did kind of remind me certain vegetable patches.

“To be honest I had simply thought I could change him. I thought he was just... young. That I could teach him to not be violent. To not hit me... or others. I’m... not sure why I thought so,” Sillti said softly.

I studied the woman as she stared down, as if at our feet. She looked lost in thought, but I’ve come to realize she was just... well... depressed.

We’d been walking and talking for a while now. We hadn’t sat very long on the bench, since she supposedly needed to return home to prepare dinner. Strangely most of our conversation had just been... simple stuff. What we liked to eat. How long I’ve known Vim, and such... but...

Well...

“You... must have had your reason. Sometimes the hope of something is enough to risk things you wouldn’t consider, usually,” I said carefully.

Sillti scoffed. “I married an abuser. The sad part is if he had kept his abuse to just me, he’d still be alive and I would still be content to be with him... It’s horrible to say, but in a way Rollo’s stupidity has freed me from such a life. I suppose I should be thanking him, in a way,” Sillti said.

Frowning, I wondered if that was a better way of looking at the outcome than being depressed or sad over it. It felt kind of... gross, but...

Glancing behind us, at Oplar who was following behind, I smiled at her to tell her all was well.

She was very worried. And since she kept a far enough distance as to not intrude in our talk, she likely couldn't hear what we were saying. She didn't realize that Sillti was not a threat to me... and hadn't been from the beginning.

The poor woman was just heartbroken. Not because her husband was being executed, but because of what he had done... and who he had done it to.

Looking forward again, I gestured lightly ahead of us... at nothing in particular. "Were you there...? When it happened?" I asked.

"No. Thank goodness... I couldn't even bring myself to go to Ivan's funeral..." Sillti shivered at the mere thought of it.

Hm...

It was rather remarkable.

Her situation was very peculiar. Full of drama and lifelong issues, ranging from youthful indiscretions and even abuse. But what was most startling about her... was the man who had been murdered.

Sillti had been Ivan's friend. They had been close since their early years... and to a certain point... It almost seemed like...

“You loved him, didn’t you?” I asked as I realized it.

Sillti came to a stop, so I did too. She blinked a few times, while staring down at her feet... and then looked up at me.

With one of the saddest smiles I’ve ever seen on a person, Sillti nodded.

I gulped, and did my best to not squirm. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

She smiled at me in a kind way, and nodded again. “It’s okay, Renn. I have only myself to blame. I couldn’t get Ivan to look at me, really look at me... and then I went and settled for a bastard. I’m... well...” Sillti hesitated, and I felt horrible.

This poor girl was a victim... yet she blamed herself. For all of it. Ivan’s death. Rollo’s brutality and abuse...

“What... what does your god say? About something like this...?” I asked carefully.

“Vita... didn’t lay rules down for marriage, as far as I’m aware. We are simply to never harm one another. So in that sense... I guess Rollo broke Vita’s rules long before murdering poor Ivan,” Sillti said as she thought about it.

Great. So no way to free this poor girl of the chains currently burdening her heart through scripture or faith... Or... was there?

“Do you feel like you’ve harmed anyone?” I asked.

“A better question is who haven’t I harmed?” Sillti said with a sigh.

Well... “Did you kill Ivan?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. And no... I didn’t abuse Rollo either. You’re a kind woman, Renn, to suggest such a thing,” Sillti said with a smile.

Ah. “Caught on fast. Was I not the first to suggest it?” I asked, amused she had seen through it already.

Sillti smiled and nodded. “Ollie said something similar. She was a little more frank about it, but it was the same. That’s interesting that you so quickly attempted what she did though... the two of you must be similar, or maybe as old as one another. Or maybe the common factor is Vim?” Silltie wondered.

“Vim...?” I asked. Why would Vim be the common factor between the two of us...? I had not yet met this Ollie, but as far as I had figured other than Thrain and Ash no one really ever even acknowledged his existence here... so...

“What would he say, you think?” Sillti asked, ignoring my concerns.

Putting them aside, I smiled as I returned to walking. Sillti followed. "He'd tell you that no one is responsible for another's actions."

She nodded. "I suppose he would. I've heard he's actually very patient with us."

Patient...? Not exactly the word I'd use, but... well... she wasn't wrong I guess.

Sillti sighed as she glanced up at the sky. The blue sky was starting to darken, the sun about to set. "The worst part of it all is I now question everything. I had been so foolish, so inept at seeing what was happening... that now I wonder just how badly I mistake everything else. What if I'm an idiot? What if all this time I've not understood certain things, or misunderstood others?" Sillti wondered.

I smiled a little. "I know that feeling. It gets worse when you start realizing more and more mistakes," I said, remembering my early years with witch.

Sillti looked down and gave me a weird grin. "How'd you get over it?" she asked.

"Honestly...? I'm not sure I ever did. I think I just accepted the fact I might be odd, or something. So I stopped trying to comprehend it and simply live the only way I know how... as myself," I told her.

"Huh... that's... probably very wise of you," she said.

I'd have thought she was making fun of me if not for how seriously she had said such a thing, and how focused she was on me.

Shrugging lightly, I let out a tiny sigh. I was hungry... and I was starting to like her. I wanted to help her, to save her, so I really needed to run away. Vim would not be happy with me if I tried anything funny here, I think.

"I'm sorry I don't have more to say, Siltti. I wish I had the right words to give you... but..." I said softly.

She shook her head. "No... Thank you Renn... for talking with me. I know it seems weird... but I wanted to meet the wife of the man who would kill my own... who killed the only man I truly loved."

Sheesh. "That's... a complex weave of emotions," I admitted.

Siltti laughed. "You have no idea."

"Still... thank you for talking with me, as well. I'm glad you called out to me... and... well..." I hesitated, as I realized I wasn't really sure what to say. I didn't feel like I had helped her at all. I had offered no closure. No wise words. No help. The few insights and opinions I had given had already been given by others, it had seemed... "If you'd like... you could talk to Vim too, if you want," I suggested.

Siltti paused a moment, and then shook her head. "I couldn't dare bother him."

“Hm...?” I frowned, but then realized what might be the problem. “Oh... you can hate him if you want, Sillti. He’s very understanding... you would be right to, and...” I started to say, assuming that was the problem.

She laughed for a tiny moment, and then quickly shook her head. “No...! No... That’s not it. Hating a god makes no sense. I just... think I’m okay. It’s fine. Ivan is gone. Shortly so too will be Rollo. I’ll just... need to move on... and hopefully not make any more mistakes for the rest of my life,” Sillti said.

Feeling awkward, mostly because she had just claimed Vim was a god without any sarcasm, I slowly nodded as Sillti sighed in relief... as if saying it aloud had helped her somehow.

“Can I hug you?” Sillti then asked.

Oh? “Sure...” I nodded.

She smiled, hesitated a moment, and then stepped towards me. For a brief moment I felt oddly stiff and unsure of myself as the two of us hugged each other.

She was taller than me. And felt strangely dainty. I felt like she was... strangely thin, or weak, in my arms. It worried me, but I wasn’t sure what to say about it. She felt as if she’d snap from a light breeze.

“Thanks, Renn... Really...” she whispered.

“Mhm...” I didn’t know what else to say or do.

Sillti took a deep breath as we held one another, and then she released me. She sniffed just once and nodded at me... and then we stepped back from one another and she turned away.

Watching her go, I realized she had just... closed the book on this chapter of her life. On me. On Rollo, and Ivan. On all of it.

“Stand tall, Sillti,” I whispered softly as she stepped away. Heading for the village in the distance.

It was awkward, since she was walking slowly. If I too wanted to return, to go back to the house we were staying at, I’d likely keep up with her or even pass her at her pace. Since she had just basically said goodbye... well...

I’ll need to linger a bit. To make sure I didn’t make it awkward for either of us.

As Sillti left us behind, Oplar stepped up over to me. She had started to approach, slowly, the moment Sillti had wrapped me in a hug.

“You just hugged the wife of a man Vim is about to kill,” Oplar whispered in awe.

“Hm... she wasn’t sure what she wanted from me. She’s just... lost. Confused. Hurt. I sadly don’t think I really did much to help her,” I told her.

“Help...?” Oplar mumbled, as if unsure of why I’d even say such a thing in the first place.

I sighed as I glanced at her. The tall woman had a strange look of unease on her face as she studied Sillti. After a moment Oplar glanced at me, and gently smiled. “You okay, Renn?” she asked.

I nodded. “I’m... just sad, Oplar. Far too many of us suffer. For such horrible reasons and in even worse ways. I wish I could somehow stop it all, and keep everyone safe from it all,” I said.

Oplar shifted next to me, and gave Sillti an odd look. “So...”

“She had been abused. By this Rollo. She didn’t tell me... how badly, but... does it matter? Abuse is abuse,” I said.

“Well... that is true, I suppose,” Oplar mumbled.

“The worst part is, Oplar, I’m starting to realize how common it is. Sillti, Frett, Landi... my own family...” I said softly.

“It only feels common because of how disastrous it is, Renn. Many in the Society live happy, if simple lives,” Oplar said.

Glancing at the bear, I hoped and prayed she was right. "You're saying my view is tarnished because, by being with Vim, I get to more-so see the bad things than the good?" I asked her.

"Well... I guess...? Frett for instance was... bad. But the Crypt has been there for hundreds of years. Almost since the creation of the Society. As far as I'm aware that was the first time anyone's been banished from there. Or here...? Vim's had to kill a few of those here over the years, but you're talking a handful over a thousand years Renn. We have problems, sure, but we're not as bad that I think," Oplar reasoned.

Hm...

I wanted, wished to agree with her... but...

How could I? So many of us had horrible pasts and turmoil scarring us. So many have had horrible losses, or pain, or...

"Renn...?" Oplar worriedly tilted her head at me, and I did my best to smile at her.

"I'm okay. Thank you Oplar... for worrying about me. And keeping an eye on me," I said to her.

She squirmed as she shifted, and shrugged a little sheepishly. "You'd do the same for me, so..." she said a little shyly.

I smiled and nodded. Yes. I would have.

“She thinks Vim’s a god,” I told her.

“Ah... yes. A lotta’ them here do. What with him slaying theirs and all,” she said as she nodded.

Right... “That does make it a little more believable in that context, doesn’t it?” I reasoned.

Oplar hummed as she nodded. “Honestly I never thought much about it. There are many places, or people, in the Society like those here. People who had been slaves or children of great beings. Monarchs. Saints... gods, even. Vim’s the one who ends them all. Makes me wonder if we’re all just easily swayed and tricked, or if something else really is at play. What if all these gods were just people like Vim? Stronger than us, but no more special really,” Oplar wondered.

Oh...? An interesting outlook. Oplar didn’t believe in deities so... That perspective made a lot of sense. “What do you think they are...? Monarchs and stuff?” I asked her. She obviously knew, and had seen, monarchs before. I had heard not too long ago Oplar had been with Vim when he had slain one of them. In fact they had done so not too long before I had met him, in Ruvindale.

“Not sure. My parents had believed another race of beings existed before us. Just as we were numerous before the humans came into existence, another type of peoples were around before us. And that Vim is likely one of them, as are all the supposed gods and monarchs too. It makes sense if you think about it, Vim being so old and hunting them all down... as if he was making sure their time was over,” Oplar said.

My tail wrapped around my leg as I pondered her words. "My grandparents had said we used to serve our ancestors. Our gods. I now know the being we had served was a monarch. The way they had explained it was very common, and there had been many more of us back then. I find it hard to imagine a world full of those powerful and dangerous creatures, but stranger things have happened," I said.

"Hm... Then why are all the monarchs so mindless...? How could we serve creatures that eat and destroy us on sight? It makes no sense," Oplar said.

Frowning, I wondered if Oplar had never met a monarch capable of reasoning. But... she had to have, right? She knew of Tor, after all... and...

"Shall we return home, Renn? It's about to be dark, and honestly other than fields and buildings there's not much else to see here," Oplar asked before I could say anything more on the matter.

Nodding slowly, I glanced down the path to find Silti. She was far enough away I felt it was fine we started walking. Though we'd need to do so slowly.

Stepping forward, I joined Oplar as we headed back to the center of the village.

"She said the execution is to happen in three days," I said.

"Oh? Good. I don't mind it here, and I'm glad to visit my friend, but I'd really like to get back to my stomping grounds. I have a lot of ground to cover," Oplar said.

Ah. Right. The vote. "You'll be going everywhere, right?" I asked.

"Pretty much. I'll be on the road for a year or so at this rate," she said, but didn't seem to sad over the idea.

"How'd you know Vim would be at the Crypt anyway?" I asked her.

Oplar grinned and waved her hand. "That's easy. He always heads that way on his path up north. It's one of the few places that he always passed through no matter his route. Basically I knew if I beat you guys there I'd just need to wait, and if I missed you I'd be able to then figure out where to go next," she said.

Oh. Right. That made a lot of sense.

"Really, once we get back to Telmik I'll likely just go the opposite direction you guys head towards. Vim and you can let everyone know about the vote as you do your thing, so no point me wasting my time going that way," Oplar said.

"Hm... it's interesting that no one finds it strange to trust Vim on informing everyone about the vote of his own possible banishment," I said.

Oplar paused a moment, and my tail twitched and uncoiled itself from around my leg as she laughed heartily and reached over to pat me on the shoulder. "Isn't that a very true statement! I never even thought of that!" Oplar happily bellowed as she laughed.

Smiling at her, I kept myself from telling her I had not meant to make her laugh... but instead point out the ridiculousness of the situation.

They didn't trust Vim anymore. Yet trusted him to share the news all the same.

Though... maybe their true issues with Vim weren't a matter of trust. Maybe it was something simpler. Something more...

Oplar giggled for a short while as we rounded a small bend along the strange bushes. Ollie was now far enough away that I bet she hadn't even heard Oplar's boisterous laughing.

The field really was big. As were most of them. Right now I didn't see anyone out working on them, likely since the sun was starting to set, but earlier in the day it had been common to see one or two people per field toiling.

"So uh... what did she really want then? Just to talk to you?" Oplar asked after a few moments.

"I think so, yes. She basically feels like she's made horrible mistakes, and now the world is suffering because of it. She's lost. But I think she'll be okay. She'll just need time," I said. In fact she was rather like how I had been a long time ago. After the kids died. I had just kind of... wandered around, with no real goal in mind. Though she might not wander much, and just stay here.

"Strange. I'm not sure I'd be able to talk so comfortably with someone who killed my husband," Oplar wondered.

I frowned at her. "Vim's doing it, not me," I said.

"Well... yeah? But you're his wife, right? Basically the same thing. It'd be like me talking to the Chronicler... and that would just be..." Oplar shook violently as if suddenly disgusted, and made an odd groan of a noise.

Raising an eyebrow, I was a little startled to learn something like this. Though it was likely something everyone knew about her, and I was just hearing of it for the first time. "So... how do you deal with that though? Don't you basically live at the Cathedral?" I asked.

"Well... yeah, but it's fine. It's big enough and our offices are far enough away we basically never meet. Plus it's not like I can't... well... be around her. I just don't want to associate with her. We can pass each other in the hallway fine, just don't ever expect me to break bread with her," Oplar said simply, as if talking about the weather.

Huh... Though...

Gulping softly I wondered if that meant the Chronicler's sisters, the ones Vim had spoken of before, were the cause of Oplar's parents deaths. If so that really was... well...

That would explain her distaste for their faith, at least. To a point. I didn't think it was wise to despise a whole faith based off the actions of a few of its believers, but... well...

“Could you do it Renn?” Oplar then asked.

“Hm... Yes. My friend, the witch, killed a member of my family. She and I had been very close,” I said.

“Yeah but... you killed the rest of your family, right? That means they weren’t that good of people, doesn’t it? What if someone killed Vim? Would you be able to hug them?” she asked.

I paused a moment to ponder her words. She had a point. Maybe the reason I found there to be nothing too drastic and wrong about it simply because of my own experiences.

In fact I had proof of this. I did not mind my family dying much at all. Even if it had hurt and made me sad, I hadn’t faulted the witch at all. That snake arriving and throwing everything into chaos had been because she had been hunting it. It had come to my family as to hunt and eat, in an effort to become strong enough to flee or kill her. So their deaths were not just indirectly but directly caused by her... yet...

Yet I didn’t mind.

The moment I considered others though, like Fly or Brom for instance, it became a different story. If one of those sewer dwelling bastards had showed up again right here and now, I’d not only disregard everything they said and did I’d likely try to end their lives... or at least, go get Vim so he could do so. Like that man with fins on his arms. If he showed up again, somehow...

“I suppose you’re right, Oplar. If someone hurt or killed someone I loved and cherished... someone I genuinely liked, I’d not be able to talk patiently with them or hug them either,” I said as I concluded.

“Right...? Yet she had. I know this Rollo had committed a crime, and all, but still...” Oplar said.

Right indeed...

I sighed at the strange thoughts and emotions they brought, and returned to walking. “I bet Vim could, though,” I said.

“You think so? He seems to kill his enemies rather quickly in my experience,” Oplar wondered.

Yes. He did. But...

He also didn't see certain people and things as enemies, either. How many in the Society were those he genuinely didn't like or care for, yet didn't hesitate to visit and help if needed?

Though she was right in the end. Like Tim. Vim had ended his life the moment he even hinted at the fact he had murdered Frett's baby.

But... Vim had also told me he had acted hastily. That he had allowed his anger, his emotions, to act. He had been in the right, as the Societies Protector, to take Tim's life... but he had seemed to think he had chosen wrongly.

“Are there... actual rules, Oplar? About when and if Vim is allowed to take someone’s life?” I asked her.

“Hm...? Well... yes and no. Vim has the right to defend himself, us, and to of course protect any and all information of the Society... but at the same time he’s supposed to get authorization before doing anything drastic. It’s why there are votes,” Oplar said.

“So... he broke the rules by killing Tim?” I asked.

“No? At least I’m not sure why you’d think so. Tim had both been banished, and had not only killed a fellow member but had threatened to kill others as well. If Vim hadn’t dealt with him, that would have been more of a rule breaking incident in my perspective,” Oplar said.

Seemed like a very convenient way to look at it... but who was I to say differently? I personally believed such a cruel man deserved death without question, so...

“Are you worried about the Society judging Vim for this execution Renn? If so there’s no need to. It’s sanctioned by the people here,” Oplar asked, telling me she had slightly misunderstood me.

“No... I figured this was fine, since you weren’t too bothered with it. Plus it’s not like I think there shouldn’t be rules and laws. Even the humans have them... I was just wondering about how Vim’s sometimes spontaneous and brutal actions are taken, I suppose,” I said.

Oplar hummed as she crossed her arms. “I mean... that’s part of the reason the vote’s been called, I’m sure. Most complaints about Vim are either his lack of doing something, or him doing too much. Take

Ruvindale for example, since you're related to it. Crane and the others on her side think that Vim had not done enough. That he had neglected to properly foresee and stop the damage and deaths from happening," Oplar explained.

If I hadn't known Oplar better I would have thought her picking the Sleepy Artist of all things as an example to be her way as to insult me. But I knew she meant nothing by it. "But what could he have actually done, Oplar...? The nobles who had done what they did and the knights who obeyed their will... it's not like Vim could have done anything to prevent that. Short of living there constantly and keeping an eye on them, I suppose," I said.

Oplar nodded. "I agree fully Renn, but they're not really acting on reason I don't think. Plus you got several of them trying to claim he's some kind of god or something... so maybe that's what their trying to imply? If he's some omnipotent being, why isn't he more efficient at protecting us?" Oplar tried to reason.

"What are you going to do if they actually do remove Vim from his position?" I asked her.

She chuckled. "It won't come to that Renn. Odds are they'll just vote to impose some kind of new rule, or something. I'd not really worry about it Renn," Oplar said.

Wait... I slowed to a stop again. "You had warned Vim not to take it lightly earlier. Why the sudden change in heart?" I asked.

The taller woman also stopped, and gave me a strange smile. "To be honest...? You. Seeing the two of you together told me all I needed to know. Part of their argument, other than him being some weird god or something, is you. That he didn't properly assess how dangerous you were and whatnot... I think they've recklessly accused you of being a danger without hearing the whole story. They're going to be quite shocked at how badly that accusation will fall apart. You're not a threat to any of us... if anything I

think you'll do us good. Not just you yourself, I mean, but Vim. I think you're changing him, but for the better and..." Oplar started to blush a little as she spoke, telling me her thought process and reasoning... and...

Stepping forward, I wrapped the taller woman in a deep hug. Far deeper than the one I had just given to Silti. More so because I knew Oplar was strong enough to not be bothered by it. I still wasn't sure yet what a guinea pig was, so I didn't know if the people here were strong or feeble.

"Huh...?" Oplar went quiet upon being embraced by me, and then she chuckled softly as she returned the favor.

For a long moment the two of us just stood there. Hugging. And I gave her a tiny squeeze and promised to myself to once again help her find someone. Whoever, wherever, whatever they were. I'd help her... somehow.

It was the least I could do for such a sweet person.

Chapter 284 To Catch a Tail

I wonder if this was going to be a nightly occurrence from now on.

We weren't on the couch, but instead on our bed. But that wasn't because we were sleeping. Renn and I were sitting back to back. She was happily humming a tune that had no rhythm to it, and reading the second installment of the Queen's Lament.

It was a little late in the night. We had a couple lamps lit, burning softly on either side of the bed. Although they had little reflective panels, as to more evenly enhance the light they gave off, it still

wasn't much. A human would likely be struggling to read, or at least not doing so comfortably, but for Renn it was more than enough.

I too was reading, but not the smutty drivel that the Society enjoyed. Instead I was reading Ash's report of Rollo's deeds and his summary sentencing. It was the report that was to be sent to the Cathedral, to join the other records of such deaths. Renn had a similar letter in her pouch, about Tim, written by Abel.

Unlike that letter by Abel, however, this was no letter. It was almost a book in itself. Ash like always was a stickler for the rules and methodologically followed the process to the letter. She had taken testimonies, reviewed evidence, compared it all and then deduced her own conclusion based off what little evidence she herself could scrounge up. Then she even wrote a several page diction, as if she was telling her findings to a crowd. There was a single, solitary, blank page at the end. It was saved for the day of Rollo's execution. She, Thrain, and I would all sign it as proof the deed had been carried out rightfully and honorably.

A pain, really. Few locations were so structured anymore... but I'd never complain or argue. If they wanted to be a people of law and order, I'd oblige. Just as I'd oblige those who carried out mob justice, as they did in the smaller villages.

Still...

Any doubt I had over Rollo's guilt had been swept away in the first few pages, let alone the dozens of others.

Turning a page, I did my best to not read too quickly. I didn't actually need to read this, and sometimes I didn't at all, but I was using it as a distraction.

It was one thing to sit so close on a couch, or to have her lay upon me while we slept. But this was something else entirely. Why was it having our backs together felt so comforting? Especially since most of my back was cold, since she wasn't big enough to touch most of it. In fact, with us back-to-back like this...

"Isn't it funny, Vim?" Renn asked, speaking up for the first time in about an hour.

"What is?" I asked. I stopped focusing on how small her frame was and tried to remember all I could about that book she was reading. It was when the main character truly became queen. The central plot, other than the romance, was centered around the troubles of a freshly crowned monarch and all the political strife that followed. It was honestly a boring tale, since it tried to be dramatic yet never seemed so to me since I could recount actual living proof that had been several times over more interesting. Real monarchies were far more entertaining than fiction.

"I'm small. Compared to you. I should know this, you're taller than me... of course, and I lay against you all the time, lately. Plus I've been hugging you more often, too... Yet I don't think I've ever realized just how much bigger you actually are," she said.

I frowned and wondered if she had suddenly gained the ability to read minds or something. I was half tempted to lean back and check her eyes, to make sure they weren't suddenly glowing. "Well... I'm not much taller than you, really," I said.

"Only if you include my ears, Vim," she said.

Although that was true, it wasn't like her ears were huge. Maybe the size of her outstretched hands at best?

I blinked as I realized I didn't really know how big her ears, or tail, were. I'd never actually tried to touch them, so...

Her tail, as if to remind me it was there, thumped against my lap. She had coiled it around my waist, which was partly the reason I was so uncomfortable. I wanted to touch it. "Would you prefer me to be smaller?" I asked as I stared at the wiggling thing.

I felt her back arch up a tad, and I smiled as she sat up a little straight and turned, as to look at me. "Could you...?" she asked wearily.

Chuckling softly I shook my head. "No. I can't change what I am, I'm sorry. I can't even get fatter or build muscle, either... for that matter," I said.

"Huh... Now that I think about it, I really never change either. I've actually wondered why I've not gotten a little plumper since joining the Society. I've not eaten this well, or this constantly, in my whole life," Renn wondered.

She did eat a lot. "Perks of being what we are, I suppose," I said.

"Hm... can monarchs change their shapes? Or grow in size?" Renn asked suddenly.

I frowned as I watched her tail slowly rise upward, then back down. The tip was basically waving at me. "No. They can have strange abilities but nothing like that," I said.

“Right...” Renn mumbled, and then relaxed again. This time she even rested her head against my back, which told me she had likely put the book down on her lap. Maybe she had finished it...? “Vim...” she said my name, but didn’t continue.

“Yeah?”

“I met his wife today. The man you’re to execute,” she said.

“Oh...?” I lowered my failing attempt at a distraction, and placed it next to me. Her tail swayed too much for me to put Ash’s report on my lap.

She nodded. “Her name is Silti. She’s... pretty. A little taller than me, and a dainty thing. She... was just sad. She’s depressed. She wanted to talk to me but wasn’t really sure what she wanted to say or ask,” Renn said.

“She sought you out?” I asked. That was surprising. This village, these guinea pigs, were very timid people. Some were strong, or could be, but they were no warriors. They had no confidence. No bravado.

“She had wanted to meet the wife of the man who would widow her,” she then said.

“Oh.”

Renn giggled at me. “Surprising huh? I hadn’t expected it either,” she said.

That was concerning... “I’m assuming all was well...?” I asked. Neither she nor Oplar had mentioned it when they returned earlier. Hadn’t said a word about it as we ate dinner, at all. So...

“Yeah. It was fine. She even asked me for a hug at the end,” Renn said.

Of course she did.

Renn’s tail tapped my thigh, and my eyes lingered on it as it swayed as if absentmindedly.

“He abused her. She just thought she could... teach him. She thought he was young, and he’d grow to be normal. And the man he killed, this Ivan, was someone she had been friends with since birth... and she basically said she had loved him too, and...” Renn began to prattle on about the woman, the victim, and the murderer.

I did my best to focus on her as she spoke, but her damned tail was just so alluring. It was right in my lap. She likely wasn’t even registering where it was, but...

Closing my eyes, I did my best to not sigh. Women usually liked to lay their hands, or run them, along my thighs when flirting. And that was exactly what her damned tail felt like it was doing, even though I knew it was not at all what she was attempting. Odds were Renn wasn’t even currently aware where her tail was, let alone what it was doing.

“Does it bother you, Vim?” Renn asked as she finished some question I had barely heard.

Yes. It does. But seeing your sad face after telling you not to touch me with you tail would bother me even more.

It regrettably was something I couldn't tease her about. As much as I'd like to make her blush and stutter, I knew she'd take it too deeply. She'd then from now onwards do her best to not allow her tail to rest upon me if I even hinted that I didn't like it.

Which was not what I wanted at all... since that was the very problem. I did like it.

Her tail twitched, a little more strongly than usual.

Oh. Right. I was ignoring her. What had she asked about...?

Opening my eyes as I quickly remembered, I nodded. “Killing him doesn't bother me, Renn. As I've said, I have no doubt he was the murderer. He has been banished, and they have decreed him guilty. If I don't do it someone else simply will,” I said.

She huffed. “I really don't like that though, Vim.”

“Why not...? You had not been bothered I had killed Tim,” I said. Or well, she had been... but only by the suddenness of it. It wasn’t the deed I had done, but how noisily and startling the act had been instead.

“Because they could just as easily take his life. They’re making you do it so they don’t have to. And yes, I know, we’ve talked about it already... and I get your viewpoint, and I know I’m being hypocritical. I thought about it earlier... even if today, again, I needed to end a family member’s life... I’d still ask you. Even though I’d snivel and complain when others ask you to do it too,” Renn said honestly.

I smiled at her and was half tempted to reach around and pat her head. “Well done Renn. I’m glad you’re able to confidently say such things,” I said.

“Don’t tease me, Vim. I know it’s bad... I know I should be better, but...” Renn grumbled, not realizing I had been completely serious in my praise.

Hm... “Remember Celine’s book, Renn? There’s an agreement in there concerning this,” I reminded her.

She nodded. “Yes... I asked Oplar about such rules and she was rather vague about it so I thought of her book. The closest I can think of though is the one about how you are to do what they cannot out of mercy,” Renn said.

Of course she remembered... “That’s the one,” I said.

She sighed rather heavily. “That’s so vague, Vim. If that’s the case it encompasses many things. It could even be stretched to say you should feed and house and...” Renn slowly went quiet, and I smiled as her tail thumped even harder as she pondered her own words.

Patiently waiting for her to realize how true her words really were, I glanced at the nearby window. It was closed this time, which told me that Renn had not enjoyed waking up as cold as she had. It was a good thing; really, it meant she'd not so desperately cling to me tonight. Maybe she'll just hold onto an arm or something..

She eventually sighed as she reached her own conclusion. "Please tell me it wasn't vague on purpose, and you actually negotiated it with Celine at the time," she said.

"If I hadn't?" I asked her, amused.

"Then I'll likely join Rapti and the rest, and force the Society and you to sit down and write a proper contract I think," Renn stated simply.

I flinched, and did my best to not wonder if she could accomplish such a thing or not. It was a terrifying aspect. "Please don't..." I begged.

She giggled, but I didn't let her happy banter trick me. I knew better than to think she was just trying to tease me.

"I know the rule is... well... a broad-stroke of one. But its original intent was basically what's happening here. To kill. To dirty my hands for those who simply couldn't bring themselves to do so, no matter how horrible their torment was. Back then it had been more attributed to other non-humans than humans, or ourselves, but the idea remains the same," I said, hoping to steer away from that vote as a conversation piece.

“Hm... You phrase it kind of as if Celine is the one who formed it that way,” Renn noted.

“I had not wanted to join the Society, Renn. Not really. She had wanted more than I was willing to give, and then some. So our agreements on what I would and wouldn't do are the way they are because of her attempts to encompass many ideals and rules in each one, yes. But it's fine... she agreed to many of my own terms as well, so I have to play along,” I said.

“Wait...” Renn turned around, and her tail finally left my lap. It didn't go far though. “Are you saying if you had a choice, Vim... you'd leave the Society?” she asked worriedly.

I blinked at her question, and frowned as I pondered it.

Leave...?

“Don't actually debate it!” she shouted, shocked.

Changing my frown's focus from my thoughts to her, I spent a small moment to listen above us. To a room on the other side of the house, on the second floor.

Oplar was still snoring away. Renn's outburst hadn't woken her.

“She’s still sleeping,” Renn noted, her ears fluttering a little.

“You could tell what I was doing?” I asked. Maybe she had suddenly gained the ability to read minds.

“It was obvious? You tilted your head a bit and unfocused your eyes. You do that when you hear and notice something in the distance. There was no reason for you to do that right now, so Oplar was the most likely thing,” she told me how she came to the conclusion.

Hmph. “You’re lucky she’s a heavy sleeper. And no. I’d not leave it Renn... I’ve told you. I made a mistake. My allegiance and service to the Society is my attempt at paying my dues,” I said.

“I’m not asking about you righting your scales, Vim... I’m asking for your personal opinion on the matter,” she said gently.

Staring at the woman next to me, who had a strangely sad look on her face... I wondered where that happy humming song had gone. Why’d I always seem to make her sad? How’d we go from happy silence to this?

“Of my place in the Society, or this execution...?” I asked wearily.

Her eyes narrowed at me, and a bit of her lip curled... as if to snarl at me. “I want to say both, but if you’re going to only answer one... well...” she was about to ask the more serious question, but hesitated.

Realizing she had just forcefully quelled her own curiosity and worries... because she didn't want to annoy me, or make me go silent on her, I couldn't help but feel horrible.

I really was an ass, sometimes.

"The Society annoys me, Renn," I told her.

Renn's scrunched up face of worry instantly disappeared as she looked up in shock. Her ears went straight upward, and her tail went still.

Taking a small breath I turned a bit, to properly face her. So that we weren't both half turned around. Renn quickly did the same, and even crossed her legs under her, as to properly sit in front of me. I couldn't help but smile a little at her, or rather at us. I went ahead and mimicked her, crossing my own legs as well. By doing so though, our knees bumped into each other. She didn't seem to mind, however.

"They do. Greatly so. This vote for instance... I would never stop it. I would never complain about it, and I would obey any conclusion they come to. Even the worst one. But... I'd be lying if I didn't admit I'm a little insulted because of it," I told her the truth.

Renn took a sharp breath and nodded, and leaned forward. She put her hands on my knees, as support and to grab me. "Mhm! I agree!" she said; glad to hear I thought so.

"That being said... I also understand where they're coming from. The Society at its height had tens of thousands of members, Renn. We had entire nations under our banner. Whole continents were under our rule and domain. We're a shadow of ourselves. Even if we take into account the many that left... there is no denying I've not been a very good protector. I've allowed many to perish, and be lost, under

my watchful eye. And there are many who have suffered, as well. Even those who have not died have lost everything. Abel is a good example... and so is your dear friend Merit. She had a whole kingdom, Renn. She had been a queen, surrounded by friends and family. Now she is alone, and the few friends she has like Nasba and you are distant... though admittedly not on purpose," I told her.

Renn's brow furrowed at me. "Vim... you're not a god. You can't be everywhere at once and," she started to defend me, and I quickly raised a hand to stop her.

"I'm not willing to argue that point right now, Renn. I'm simply saying you cannot deny the truth, and the results," I said.

"But... who is to say without you it wouldn't be much worse? What if without you there'd be none of us left at all? Which honestly, isn't that the case? You and many others have made it very clear there aren't many non-humans left anymore. That I'm the last predator to join in over a hundred years!" she said.

"That is another argument, Renn. I'm willing to debate that with you, but not right now," I said, reminding her.

She made an odd whine of a noise, and leaned back a bit. She sat back down, but her hands remained on my knees. She looked hurt, and likely was. I wasn't allowing her to defend me, and she didn't seem to like that at all.

Renn really was adorable. Her ears were twitching, and her face was a mess of worry. Yet she was still willing to face me, and stare me straight in the eye. As if ready to argue and debate with me the moment I gave her permission to do so.

“Per my belief in free-will... I have to entertain and oblige other’s opinions. No matter their stance, and even if they’re wrong, too. One cannot be truly free without the right to their own thoughts,” I told her. Renn sighed softly, but nodded. “That being said... it’s not that I don’t agree with you, Renn...” I softly added.

She perked up at that, and gave me a beautiful smile. “Do you?”

“Somewhat. We can debate that later, you and I... maybe after we hear the thing they’re actually wanting to vote on. Until then though, just know if given an option to stay or leave the Society... I’d stay. But if they truly vote to relieve me, then I will oblige without a fuss or a fight, as well,” I answered her original question.

She slowly nodded. “Okay. Later. Promise,” she agreed.

I nodded back... and reached over to grab one of her hands. I tried not to notice the way she went wide-eyed and sat up straighter, suddenly alert.

Holding her hand gently, I smiled at her. “So you met his wife,” I brought up her earlier statement.

She nodded a little briskly, and stared a little sheepishly at our hands. “Yes... she was pretty. She’s depressed... I feel bad; I really didn’t say anything good. The few times I tried to relieve her, or say something wise, she simply giggled and told me she had already been told such things by someone else. An Ollie,” Renn said with her focus on our hands.

Ollie...? Oh. Right. Ollie had mentioned she was involved with the man's execution. She had likely also taken on the burden of helping this soon to be widow through the troubling experience. Ollie was an odd one, but she was a gentle type of odd.

Renn then sighed. "I think she came to me hoping to have someone to hate. She thinks, like most of the ones here, that you're some kind of god... so she can't hate you. At least in her perspective. Yet as we talked she came to the conclusion she couldn't hate me either... maybe I should have been mean to her? On purpose? Would that have been better, you think?" she asked me.

"I've played the bad-guy many times. It works... but it's a form of a lie, so it always leaves a bad taste in the mouth," I said.

"Mhm..." Renn nodded, and her hand moved around in my own. She squirmed her fingers between my own, and once our hands grasped tightly a smile wormed its way onto her face. She looked pleased with herself.

"I'd rather you didn't do such things, by the way. Let me play that part... if it's necessary," I said.

She sighed softly and nodded, still focused on our hands.

"Not to change the subject much... but how's your book?" I asked. It had fallen off her lap next to her when she had turned around, and shut closed, so I hadn't been able to tell if she had finished it or not.

"Oh? I'll allow it... but only because I'm in a good mood," she said with a smile at me.

I nodded and squeezed her hand ever so softly, as thanks.

Renn coughed and nodded. "Well... I'm about half way through. It's not bad. I don't like this other man the queen is trying to force herself to like. I get it, I mean... she's a queen. Royalty. She has a duty to her kingdom, and responsibilities... and this man would help her fulfill many of them. It would help her have peace and stuff... but... well..." Renn squirmed a tad, and her tail thumped the book next to her. If she had done it on purpose or not I couldn't tell. "He's portrayed as a good man, but I don't like him," she finished.

"You hadn't liked the other one though, had you? The man from the first book?" I asked. She had complained over the main character's attractions to him. How they had not been things she would have noticed, or liked, about a man.

"Oh shush. I know. I had been so happy he had been abandoned, yet here I am wanting him back. Between this and my selfishness about this execution I may as well just admit I'm a bad person," Renn complained.

I chuckled at her. "So terrible," I teased her.

She smirked at me as her ear fluttered. "Plus uh... well... the book is getting... well..." she then blushed a tad, which I was glad to see... but also a little disappointed. I had been wanting to make her blush like that myself.

I had lost to a book.

“Spicy. As they call it. Yes,” I said as I enjoyed her squirming smile.

“Yeah... I’m surprised Merit likes this so much. Everyone else enjoying it makes sense. Like Sharp. She was very open about how she enjoyed romance and love. But Merit...? It makes me wonder if she’s more like Sharp than I thought... maybe I hadn’t gotten as close to her as I assumed,” Renn said with a small sigh.

Smirking at her, I shrugged. “They do say those with the hardest shells have the softest insides,” I said.

Renn paused a moment, then her tail thumped near my leg. “Explains Sharp and you, I guess,” she said happily.

“Oh...? Me?” I asked, really?

She nodded with a frown, as if shocked I’d disagree.

Hmph. “I think I’m rather soft all over. Aren’t you always saying I need to stand up for myself more? Can’t be very callous and hard then, I think,” I said.

She huffed at me. “You should. But that’s not you being soft, Vim. You’re not timid and letting them walk all over you because you’re afraid of confrontation or something. You’re not letting others dictate your life... you instead simply allow it, out of mercy if anything else. You willingly place shackles upon you, which at any moment you could break if you wished to... so I’d not say you’re soft at all. Unless you mean your heart. You allow it to swell quite mightily for our weaker, softer, members... but I don’t view that as something soft. I view that as the proper thing a man should do,” Renn said.

A little surprised to hear such a serious answer to my light teasing, I softly nodded and accepted it.

Renn shifted a tad, and her tail found its way to my lap again. I did my best to ignore it as it slithered up over my leg and onto my lap.

If not for her happy smile and her still complete focus on our clasped hands, I'd think she was doing it on purpose.

"By the way, Renn..." I brought up another topic, as to best distract myself from her tail as it continued to squirm and tap my thigh.

"Hm...?" she tilted her head, but kept her eyes on our hands.

"The people here... they're an odd group. They have rules, and such," I started.

Her eyes finally left our hands and she frowned as she nodded.

"I... don't need to. Thanks to this report. And their seriousness of the matter," I said as I gestured at Ash's report with a nod. "But they... would prefer it if I spoke to the man. This Rollo."

Her frown deepened and her tail paused in its movement. It went still on my lap. "What for...?" she asked.

I sighed. "Oh many things. To hear his side of the story. To hear his last words. Stuff like that," I said.

"Hm... you don't want to?" she asked, noticing my opinion on it.

"Rather... I wanted to know if you wished to do it instead," I asked.

Her ears shifted a little. "Talk to Rollo...?" she asked back, and to herself.

I nodded. "If you want to. You could go with Oplar, and Ollie, and talk to him. He's likely in their cells. They have a small prison... a remnant of their old ways. You don't have to. There's likely no point to it. I've heard he's not taking it well, which means he's likely a bubbling mess. So..."

Renn hummed and her thumb began to softly caress my hand. "You mean by myself... not with you," she said as she realized my meaning.

I nodded.

"Do you want me to?" she asked.

“Do I want you to bother with a depraved man unable to control his own emotions...? Of course not. But...” I hesitated a tad.

“But...?” she asked and leaned forward a bit.

“But you want me to teach you. You want to learn. And... there may come a day where you have to be the one to judge someone. What if I wasn’t here, but on my way, and it was you who needed to discern if this man was guilty or not? I’m not saying you should do that, Renn, he’s already been declared guilty. He’s already been tried and judged. But... there are things to learn by talking to a man who knows he’s about to die,” I said.

Renn’s tail moved with a tiny twitch. “Do... you want me to be sad, Vim? Or angry? Because I think talking to the man who killed another, and subsequently ruined other lives in the process, would only do such things I think,” she asked me.

I smiled at her. “No. I don’t want you to be sad or angry. I just... wanted to give you the option.”

“Hm... You let me choose Elisabeth’s fate. Landi’s. Roslyn and her people... are you saying I can choose his fate too?” Renn asked.

Pausing a moment I shook my head. I should have not said it the way I had. I should have explained it better. “No. As I said, he’s already doomed. I’ll be taking his life no matter what.”

“Right... you didn’t let me decide anything about Tim, either,” she said as she thought about it.

Well... no. I hadn't. "That is my job, Renn. I know you kind of want to be like me, but..."

She nodded. "I know. Plus you're the type of man to not want me to take another's life, or cause such stress, if you could avoid it..." Renn then nodded again, a little firmer. "Ok. I'll talk to him. If anything to see what a man like him looks like."

"Looks like...?" I asked.

"Well... I can't say I'm not interested. Silti was beautiful... and from what I gathered from Oplar, she could have had her pick of men here. Yet she chose this one? A man who abused her on top of it? Known for violence...? Violence in a town of people who are passive and timid, supposedly...? I'm interested in seeing why," she said.

Ah. "Already being stained by those books are you?" I teased her.

Renn startled, her hand tightly gripping my own as she sat up straight. "W-what? No!" she said, shocked.

Smirking at her, I enjoyed the vibrant red face that had quickly taken over. Yes. That was what I had wanted to see all this time. "What do you mean no...? Isn't that what you wanted to see? If he was sexy or not?" I asked.

"Wha...! Vim!" Renn grinned as she tried to wave at me with the hand I held. I let her violently shake my hand all around as he tail thumped my lap rather strongly.

Glancing down at the thing, I had to go completely still as I realized my free hand had been about to grab it. I quickly pulled my arm away and grabbed the bedding instead. It seemed grabbing my knee hadn't been enough of a deterrent.

Luckily Renn hadn't noticed, since she was still hastily trying to defend herself with a stutter.

"R-really! Jeez! I didn't mean that! I just meant... like... well... like Frett! Why'd she choose Tim? There had been other men there. Abel, Gary, or even one of the humans! Not only was Tim a bastard, and rude, he wasn't really someone I'd... well..." Renn's face got redder as she realized she was basically saying she couldn't believe Frett had chosen a man she had found ugly.

"Found Tim ugly did you?" I teased her even more, which only made her groan and lower her head, to cover her blushed face with her longer hair. She even lowered her ears at an angle, as if to hide her face even more from me.

"Well..." she mumbled as she squirmed.

So she had. Interesting. As far as I had been able to tell, Tim had been the most attractive of all the men at the Crypt. There was a reason he had been the target of even the married human women there.

I'd be humbled and honored to think she found me more attractive than Tim and other men, but the reality was I knew the truth. There was a reason I was able to easily blend in no matter where I went. I wasn't necessarily ugly, but I wasn't handsome either.

“Gosh...” Renn groaned as I studied her, and wondered if I had hit the nail on the head with my teasing. Maybe she really had wondered if this Rollo had been chosen because of his looks, and had been interested in seeing him because of it. Or maybe Renn was just very vulnerable to such teasing during moments like this, between us...

Glancing around the room, I had no choice but to admit we had a really good atmosphere at the moment. The dark room, lit by the candles... alone... Holding hands, even.

Yes. Maybe it was mostly just the moment. The teasing was effective because of the moment.

Her tail thumped me again, and I glanced down at it... and found my hand once again near it. My eye twitched rather strongly as I made a fist, and pushed it back down to the bed.

What the hell. I needed to be careful. If I grabbed it absentmindedly like that, I might accidentally hurt her.

“So...” I was about to tease her again, in a different way. One that would hopefully make her show me her flushed face again. Why was she hiding it?

Yet before I could say anything more, a loud thump shook the whole house.

Renn’s squirming came to an abrupt stop as she looked up to the ceiling, her ears perked and her tail gone stiff... and I sighed as I watched her flushed face quickly dissipate into one of worry.

Then her worry wiggled into a grin.

“Did... did she just fall?” Renn asked, staring up at the ceiling.

“Very likely. As I said, she’s a heavy sleeper when truly relaxed. It not only makes her hard to wake, it takes her time to fully wake up sometimes too... so sometimes she does indeed fall out of bed, or walk into walls while half asleep,” I said.

As if to prove my words true, we both heard another thump. This time it was accompanied by what could only be the sound of a dresser or box skidding across the wooden floor.

“See?” I said with a smile.

Renn’s grin broadened. “How neat. They do say bear’s hibernate, huh? I wonder if that’s why,” she wondered.

“Likely,” I said with a shrug.

Renn hummed as she mulled for a moment... and then nodded. “I want to see her when she’s half asleep,” she said excitedly.

Without any hesitation she released my hand and crawled off the bed. She did it so quickly, I felt almost abandoned as she hurried to the door of the room and opened it.

Before running out of the room... Renn paused and turned to look at me. Her tail twitched a little wildly as she studied me, and I smiled at her while wondering what was wrong.

“Next time just grab it, Vim.”

A little shocked at being called out; Renn gave me a happy grin and nodded... then ran out.

Sighing as I listened to Renn hurry down the hall and then up the stairs, to see the loudly stumbling bear... I shook my head at myself.

She was no tiger, but I'd say catching her tail would be far more dangerous.

Especially for me.

Chapter 285 Rollo

“Not coming in Oplar...?” I asked my friend who had not entered with me.

“I'll be out here, Renn. Take your time,” Oplar said gently with a smile. She pointed to a nearby bench, a few dozen feet from the building.

Studying her for a tiny moment... I softly smiled and nodded at her. "Okay. I'll try not to be long," I promised.

"No worries!" Oplar said as she turned, to go sit at the bench.

Looking away from my friend who hated confrontation so deeply that she'd not even enter this supposed prison, I entered the building.

The place was made of the same brick as all the rest... but it was somehow even more boring and plain than the other buildings. It had no windows. Only a couple floors tall... and honestly seemed smaller than even the house we were all staying at.

And... There was a familiar stink in the air. Though surprisingly, not one of dirt or grime. It was one I'd not smelled in a long time, yet used to all the time amongst the humans.

It was the smell of heavy liquor. Was this place being used to store wine and spirits or something?

Walking down a rounded hallway, I eventually found a room. A room without a door, not much inside it for furniture, and two people sitting at a plain table. They were both women... but one was older. Noticeably old, too. I was a little startled to see her. It was very rare to see a non-human with such age upon her.

"Oh my...?" the older of the two noticed me, and the younger one turned around to see me. Upon locking eyes with her, I somehow knew.

She was Ollie.

“My name is Renn... I’ve come to see Rollo, if it’s okay,” I said, unsure of what to really say.

“Hm. Vim did mention you might come. I assume you want to take her, Ollie?” the older woman asked, smirking softly at her.

For a small and heavy moment... Ollie said nothing as she stared at me. And then she sighed as she scooted her chair back and stood up.

I shifted a little as I studied the taller woman. She was pretty, like Silti, but looked a bit more mature. Not as fragile, or demure. She had a harsh glare in the eyes, reminding me a little of Nory somehow.

She stepped away from the table and up to me. I smiled up at her, and realized she was likely not just taller than me... but maybe taller than Vim too.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Ollie,” I said.

“Mhm...” Ollie hummed as she studied me, and I couldn’t help but wonder what was wrong. Her glare suddenly looked... well...

A little sad somehow.

“Well... um...” I shifted, and wondered if maybe I was imposing more than I had thought. Maybe Oplar hadn’t stayed outside because she hadn’t wanted to talk to a man about to die, but instead because she had expected this...?

But Vim had said it’d be okay... he had even asked me to do this, and...

Ollie then sighed as she looked away from me, and turned to look back at the older woman. “She is adorable... but I’m not that much worse, am I sis?” Ollie asked the older woman.

“Hm... Rather than attractiveness, I’d say she’s simply of different temperament. A predator,” the old woman noted.

Huh...?

“Think it’s because she’s shorter? But her ears make her almost as tall as me...” Ollie mumbled as she looked back at me.

“Um... may I ask what this is about?” I asked. I had a weird idea, but was hoping I was wrong.

“Oh she’s just jealous. She’s been trying to snuggle her way into Vim’s bed for decades, and isn’t taking your presence very well. Don’t mind her, she’s harmless,” the older woman said.

Oh jeez. Another one? Really?

“Geuh...” Ollie made a weird sound and flinched at me.

“Huh?” I flinched too; she just made a sound as if I had just punched her in the gut!

The older woman chuckled as Ollie groaned and sighed. “You just thought—great another one! Didn’t you?” Ollie asked.

“Um...” I felt my face get a little warm at being so readily seen through, and Ollie covered her eyes and sighed again, in defeat.

“It’s okay... My name is Ollie. It’s nice to meet you Renn...” Ollie then said, albeit a little dejectedly, and she held out her hand.

Taking it gently, I smiled softly and nodded. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

She seemed to calm down a little and gain back some confidence as we shook hands, and then she gestured behind me. “He’s in the rearmost cell. This way,” she said as our hands separated and she stepped around me as to enter the hallway.

I stepped back and nodded, and glanced to the older woman. I waved at her lightly in goodbye and thanks, and she smiled and nodded back at me.

Turning to follow Ollie, I felt a little excited. I was now more interested in talking to her than this Rollo.

Another one that has tried to woo Vim. It was starting to become obvious there were far more than I'd thought, but... well...

It was also starting to become very clear that not only has Vim been denying their advances, but likely doing so in a rather rude and direct way. Did he even know Ollie had been vying for his affection...? Or was she another Merit?

"You must be something, Renn. I don't know how you did it, but I admit I'm jealous," Ollie said with her back to me.

I perked up a little, and although was excited to talk to her... I was also regretting my sudden joy over it.

She had sounded rather sad.

"I uh... I don't really know how I did it, to be honest. So... um..." I hesitated, and felt stupid. Come on Renn, do better.

“Hm... that’s probably true. Vim’s odd. Who knows what caught his eye. It could have literally been something so simple and small, like a certain smell or something. Still it’s surprising,” she said as she thought about it.

“I’m... honestly rather surprised, myself. I had thought most here saw him as either some kind of god or devil, so...” I said honestly. To think someone here actually found him attractive, let alone a potential partner candidate.

Or well... I suppose I shouldn’t assume she wanted to marry him. That old lady had mentioned his bed, not his hand in marriage. Maybe all Ollie wanted from him was a child.

But... would she have been as bothered by me then? If all she had wanted was a child from him, why care at all about me?

Ollie chuckled a little, disrupting my thoughts. “Right? You have no idea how weird I’m considered to be in the village for even trying. But it’s fine... I don’t regret the couple hundred years of trying. At least I can say I tried,” Ollie said plainly.

Pausing, I shivered at what she had just said.

Hundreds of years.

Granted... she likely meant her efforts over the many hundreds of years as Vim came and went. So only while he was here, or maybe while traveling with him for a short time. And with his inability to come

here except when requested... that could only add up to a few years at best of accumulative time between those centuries. But those short windows of opportunities didn't change the fact she's been trying for so long.

It was so daunting. To hear that someone has been trying to earn his favor for as long as I've been alive... if not longer.

Just like Merit.

Nearing the end of the hall, Ollie slowed to a stop and turned to glance at me.

"Oh my..." Ollie likely noticed my internal strife, and she gave me a very gentle smile as if to apologize. "You're rather kind, aren't you?" she asked me.

"I... I'm sorry. I don't even know what I should say," I said, unable to find the words. Once again my thoughts had been so obvious.

If I was having difficulty with this here, now... just what was I going to say to Merit when I see her again?

I already felt like crying, somehow... and although I felt for this woman... I didn't know her well enough to really comprehend just how badly I've likely hurt her. My mere existence probably made her feel sad... and...

"It's okay, Renn. I'll just snivel and get drunk for a bit, blaming Vim. I've already decided on who I'm going to try and seduce later, once you leave," Ollie then said.

Shifting a tad, I ignored my tail that was swaying wildly behind me and gulped. "Still... I'm sorry. I feel like I should apologize, or say something important... yet..." I struggled to find the words.

"Apologize for what? For your information, had our positions been reversed I'd not have apologized at all. In fact I probably would have been rather smug about it," Ollie said with a smirk.

Although I could tell she was doing her best to make the moment as light as possible... I could see and hear the truth. I barely knew this woman, yet I could see the sadness upon her. And not just because her smirk was slightly forced and stiff.

I could see the tired circles under her eyes. The slight redness in her eyes from tears. I could smell the alcohol on her breath. She was already drinking heavily, as she had hinted at.

This building was not the source of the smell of liquor, it was her.

"Still... I'm sorry all the same," I said to her.

"Hmph... it's fine. Next time you visit I'll show you how happy I can be too," Ollie said as she turned back and stepped away.

Smiling, I nodded. I looked forward to it.

The two of us came to a thick wooden door, with a window upon it. The window had bars of metal, like a cage, and through it I could see a dark room.

Ollie paused upon grabbing the door's handle and turned to me. "He's behind bars... but stay on guard and don't get near them. He broke his chair and threw pieces of it at us yesterday," Ollie warned.

Oh...? "Okay..." I nodded, and smiled at the memory of me doing something similar once long ago. Back when I had met Nory.

"Also... make sure you let him know who you are, and who will be doing the deed. We haven't told him yet," Ollie said with a smirk.

Wait...

Ollie opened the door, and I frowned at her smirk. Was that smirk for me, or Rollo?

Stepping forward, I held my breath for a moment as I entered the room... but began to breathe again shortly after. I was glad to find it didn't stink or smell weird in here, even though there seemed to be no windows.

The room felt strangely small, but only because of the cells on either side of the room. There were four, and I was a little surprised to see how nice they were. Each had a bed, a table and chair, and a small commode in the corner. The furnishings were real wood, with bedding and other things... not made of stone or without comfort. They were nothing like the cells I'd seen before.

Glancing behind me, I found that although Ollie had left the door open... she had not entered behind me. Instead she had stepped back a bit and had found a chair to sit in.

"What? Lunch time already?" a man's voice asked, drawing my attention away from Ollie, coming from the end of the room. Hidden behind the wall of the last cell.

Stepping forward, I kept myself as near the other wall of iron bars as possible as I found the only prisoner here.

Sitting on his bed, slouched forward... and looking strikingly thin, was a young man.

He glanced at me, looked away... and then hurriedly looked back at me in shock. He sat up straighter at the sight of me, his frown telling me he had not expected me at all.

"Who... who are you...?" he asked wearily.

"My name is Renn," I introduced myself.

He shifted on the bed, and I noted the bedding beneath him. It was a mess. The blankets and pillows were all over and messy.

“Renn...?” he sounded more worried than confused, and...

Well...

I was a little disappointed.

This man was not handsome at all. In fact he looked young. Too young. Sillti had been pretty, and youthful, but this Rollo... Well...

He was likely as tall as me, but he looked as if he was more of a young boy than anything else. Although skinny he still had a bit of baby fat on him. Particularly in his cheeks. His frame was as small as my own, with maybe just his shoulders being a tad bit wider. If he had been a little shorter, I would not have considered him a man at all. Especially not one able to start a family.

It made his worried eyes look almost pitiful. I did not see a cruel man in front of me, but rather a young boy who had lost his way.

Or at least, that was his appearance. I knew better than to think he was actually a young boy, being a non-human, and I knew even a younger man could be just as lethal and cruel as a full grown one.

“What do you want...? Who are you?” Rollo asked, without introducing himself.

He was still seated on the edge of his bed... but he was antsy. His fists were clenched tightly on his knees, and he looked half a heartbeat from jumping to his feet. If he hadn't been locked in a cell, he might have ran away at the mere sight of me.

Feeling a little awkward... I decided to just get this over with. I had thought of the few questions I had for him this morning, before leaving Vim's side.

“Are you a religious man, Rollo?” I asked him, starting there.

“Ha...? Of course I am. Everyone knows Vita made us,” he said carefully, studying me. I noted his eyes lingered more on my tail than anything else.

“Then... Do you not regret killing one of Vita's creations?” I asked.

Rollo shifted and looked away, but only for a moment. “Another pointless lecture, then. Go ahead. Not like I can stop you,” he said stiffly.

Hm... I wonder how many had tried to see if he'd find remorse or not. I should have asked Ollie. Maybe I will after this.

Though...

Studying the man, I looked for any signs of injuries or scars. Supposedly the fight which had ended in Ivan's death had been a brutal one. One that had lasted for some time. Many long, struggle filled minutes.

Yet I saw no wounds. No scars. No bandages.

Either this Rollo was strong and these people were stouter than they seemed, or the incident had been long ago. Months maybe... and all of his wounds have healed and even the scars have faded.

Still...

"Feh...!" Rollo scoffed and looked away from me. His fists clenched tighter, and he went to staring down at the floor. To his feet. Yet I could tell his reaction was not one of defeat, but rather simple annoyance. He was tired of being talked to. Of being reasoned with.

He... was like Tim. In a way.

Like my brothers. My father and grandfather.

He was a man who saw no wrong in his actions, and felt the world was being cruel to him for no reason. Full of pity for himself, and not a drop of it for his victims.

I found myself not pitying him at all... but somehow his attitude and appearance instead made me pity Silti even more than I already did.

“Do you regret killing Ivan?” I asked him.

“Of course I do. Look at me, I’m in a cage,” he waved around himself.

“So would you not regret the act if you were free?” I asked.

Rollo shook his head at me, but not as an answer. He waved me off, as if to dismiss me.

“You do know you’re to be put to death for what you did, right?” I asked further.

“So they’ve all incessantly told me. Yes. Get it over with already then,” Rollo said as he looked away. He had even turned a bit on his bed, as to better not look at me.

Hm... he was acting rather childish. Like a young boy being put in time out for neglecting chores. Lujic had not acted this way, but many of his sons had. Brats as his wife had called them.

But this was no little boy getting a slap on the wrist.

“Have you apologized to Sillti?” I asked.

Rollo finally looked at me again. He turned towards me, snarled at me and looked away. “Why the hell should I?” he asked.

“Do you not feel bad for her?”

“Oh, just shut up would you? That stupid whore hasn’t come here once. But I’ve heard she’s spent plenty of time at that bastard’s grave and at the cliff of prayer. Plenty of proof to see where her infidelity is!” Rollo said loudly.

Cliff of prayer... So that was what they saw that cliff as? A place to pray? That explained why there were so many places to sit in front of it, and also why Sillti had been there.

And...

Studying Rollo... I wondered if this was how Tim had treated Frett. He looked agitated. His left leg was thumping up and down, and he was breathing heavily.

Odds are if the bars weren’t between us he’d be in my face right now, shouting at me.

Just like my brothers.

So many of our men were not like this. There were plenty like Thrain, or Gerald and Windle. Or Link, even though he didn't look it at all. Kind. Gentle mannered. Unlikely to raise their voices, let alone hurt someone.

So then... why were there those like him and Tim? Like my brothers and father? Why was it one extreme or the other? Either completely submissive and docile, or quick to anger and violent? Just like this Yangli I've heard of.

Humans had every type of temperament in-between... so why didn't we?

Was there possibly a way to change them...? Was it something we could remove at an early age? I'd blame the parents, but I highly doubted Rollo's parents were like this. Most people here seemed rather docile.

Plus that wouldn't explain me. My parents had been horrible, by all counts, yet I didn't think I was like this at all. Quick to emotions, sure, but I didn't think I was violent.

And how could it be bloodlines if even those like this man could act like this?

So if it wasn't our upbringing... nor our parents, or our ancestry...

Just what decided it...?

Miss Beak had said such evil just... sprouted without reason. That even those born in the deepest peace could have black hearts. But...

"The hell do you want, woman?" Rollo then asked as he looked back at me.

"I was just wondered how we could stop men such as you from coming to be," I said honestly.

Rollo's eyes narrowed at me. "What...?" he asked and I could tell he had not understood my meaning at all.

No matter.

After a moment he scoffed and looked away from me in disgust. "You look at me just like Ollie and the rest. As if I'm scum. Just you wait," he said.

"Even if you not behind bars, I'd need not fear you," I told him.

He shifted and glanced at me. "I didn't mean that...! I meant you'll know what it feels like yourself, some day. You're married aren't you?" he asked.

Hm...? "Yes. I am."

"Your pretty... but not beautiful enough to stop wandering eyes. One day you'll know what it feels like to be tossed aside, and you'll know my anger," he said confidently.

Ah. So that was what he meant. That was his defense of his own actions. That we all simply didn't understand him, since we hadn't yet experienced such supposed emotional pain as him.

"That'd be interesting. Unluckily for you however, I already know jealousy very well... but that's exactly the problem. I don't see how you can think it justifies your actions. If anything you should have done the exact opposite," I said.

"Opposite...? Like what? Let him have my woman?" he asked, offended.

"Well... yes. If that was what she actually wanted. If it would have made her happy. After all... why wouldn't you want the one you love to be happy?" I asked him. I wasn't going to go into how he should have tried harder, and been a better man. There was no point.

Rollo guffawed at me, in absolutely shock... and then shook his head and looked away. He didn't say anything, as if my response had not just disgusted him but made me seem completely pointless to acknowledge from this point onward.

Which was fine. It wasn't like I was actually trying to convince him to change his ways or see the error of his ways. Even if I could do such a thing, it didn't mean anything. No matter how much remorse or sorrow he could find within himself, it would not change the fact he would die by Vim's hands.

Plus...

Studying the man, I decided to wrap this up. Talking to him any longer would just get me angry too.

"Have they told you when you're to be executed?" I asked him gently.

"Must be soon, what with all of you bothering me so damn much," he said stiffly.

I wonder how much of his snarky attitude was simple bravado, as to stay the fear about what was to come?

"I've been told you know not who will do the deed," I said.

Rollo shifted and turned to look at me... his eyes narrowed at me. "You...?" he asked wearily.

Me... Strangely, I could see Vim asking me to do it. A part of him so desperately didn't want me to stain my hands, but another side of him saw me as an equal. The type of equal to share in the burdens he suffered. So...

“Not this time,” I told him.

“Hmph... who is it then? Thrain? Ollie?” Rollo asked, and then scoffed. “Sillti? As revenge? Feh!” he further asked as he stood up, and then laughed at the thought.

Studying the way he smirked and laughed as he stepped away from the bed, I saw through the young bravado... and clearly saw the evil man within.

He had the same smirk on his face that Tim had, when Vim had confronted him of his deeds.

Yes. He was not worth my time at all, it seemed.

“Goodbye Rollo...” I said as I turned to step away, but then remembered I hadn’t told him yet. Glancing back at him, I found he had stepped up to the bars... staring at me intently. He had been about to say something.

“You...” he started to speak, but I ignored him completely.

“I told you my name, but not who I am,” I said.

He frowned and grabbed one of the bars.

I held his gaze, and instead of seeing him I saw Silti. That poor woman who he had scorned. In more ways than one.

“My name is Rennalee. I’m Vim’s wife,” I told him, and left.

“Wha...!” Rollo’s stunned shock echoed a little in the stone room. But I didn’t wait to hear or see his realization of my meaning, as I stepped out of the room and nodded to Ollie.

She smiled lightly at me as she shut the door behind me. It latched a little loudly, and through the small window in the door... I heard a strange groan. One of utter despair.

“Good. Maybe he’ll actually think about what he did, knowing who’s waiting for him,” Ollie said, a little loudly. Likely on purpose.

“Hm. In my experience few do,” I said as I thought of Tim.

“That’s a scary thought...” Ollie said as we both stepped away.

Leaving Rollo and his prison, I glanced at the tall woman who now was walking a little brisker. She now had a weird grin on her face, as if pleased. Maybe she had enjoyed my conversation with Rollo. She had definitely heard it all, being so nearby.

“You meant what you said to him, didn’t you?” she asked, not noticing my look.

“Hm...? About what?” I asked.

“That if you love someone, truly love them... you want what’s best for them. Even if it hurts,” she said.

“Well... yeah? Isn’t that the point? You want them to be happy,” I said.

Ollie sighed at me, but her smile remained. “Yes. That is the point.”

Hm... did she not agree...?

A loud bang startled me, and I turned around. To look behind us. The hallway looked fine, as did the door we had just come from...

“He’s breaking stuff,” Ollie noted as we heard another loud crash. It made my ears flutter, thanks to how the sounds shook the air in the stone hallway.

Yes. That was indeed the sound of something heavy and wooden crashing into stone. Likely the chair in his room. Or his bed. Being banged and tossed around.

“Hopefully he does not throw anything else at you guys,” I said worriedly.

“I had suggested we not give him another chair,” Ollie said with a sigh.

Ah. Right. Why do that if he had already proven not trustworthy...?

Was it an attempt to be humane...?

“Still... Did you get what you wanted, Renn?” Ollie asked as we left behind the man violently throwing a fit.

“I’m not sure. I think so,” I said. I had simply figured out he wasn’t worth even trying to help, even if there was a way to.

“Hm...”

Nearing the end of the hallway, we paused in front of the open room. The older woman was still sitting at the table, but now had some cups on the table. The light steam coming from them told me she had just made tea.

There were four of them, which told me she likely thought I'd join them... and also maybe Oplar.

"I'm afraid I've made him get violent again. He's breaking stuff," I told the older woman, apologizing.

"I can hear it. It's fine. Let the boy waste the end of his life breaking chairs and tables that will simply be used as firewood," she said.

Hm... I nodded, agreeing with that perspective. Yes. Let a worthless man's final deeds be so insignificant.

"Oplar's out there right? Why not invite her in, so we can have tea. I'd like to hear about this vote, anyway," the older woman then said.

Oh...?

"Oh. Right. Yes. Do you mind if we sit and talk about it Renn?" Ollie asked me.

Tilting my head at her, I was about to ask why she'd even ask such a thing... I didn't mind at all, of course, plus I wanted to hear other people's opinions about it too... but then I realized the obvious.

I was Vim's wife. Or at least, that was what I was projecting myself as.

So...

Smiling softly at her I nodded. "It's fine. If he doesn't stop breaking things though she might not come in, she hates violence," I said, a little happy to hear that even if she didn't like me much because I had taken Vim from her... she was still kind enough of a person to worry I'd be hurt or offended over hearing of the vote about Vim.

"Well, then let us simply go sit out there shall we?" the old woman said as she stood.

I nodded. Yes. A much better use of my time.

"She always takes up the whole bench, so let's grab a few chairs..." Ollie mumbled as she stepped into the room.

"Oplar does like to laze and relax," the older woman said as she grabbed a chair too.

Smiling, I giggled as I went to help her and join them outside.

Chapter 286 An Execution

It's been a while since I've had to play executioner.

I of course had killed Tim not too long ago, basically doing the same act as I was doing now... but this was more proper.

More serious, somehow.

Standing on the wooden platform, overlooking the village center, I studied the large crowd.

Odds are most, if not all, of the village was here. I only recognized a few of the faces, and there were even a fewer I had names to attach to. They were all standing before the wooden platform, and rather silent. I'd been up here for about an hour now, and I think I've only heard a few dozen words shared between all of them as they gathered.

It was a moment of reverence and modesty. Yet I knew once the deed was done they'd grow noisy. Not to celebrate, of course, but instead to pray.

I glanced at the large halberd in my hand. It was longer than I was tall, and the head of the blade was wide and heavy. I had recently sharpened it, since they hadn't done so. I hadn't needed to, of course. I'd not fail at cutting off a head no matter how dull a blade was... but that was disrespectful. In its own way.

Not far from me was a block stand. It was clean, finely crafted, and smooth. It had a small divot for a person to rest their neck upon, and beneath it was a deep basket full of thick cloths. Akin to a large bucket. It was made to both catch the head, and to stop the blood from leaking out of the basket when it gets carried away.

The basket, the head-block, and this platform had all been recently made. And would be torn down and burnt once used.

Typical of such places and people, really. Humans usually re-used such things, but that was more so because they hated wasting resources and also because of how often they had to use them. In the Society one could go decades without needing anything like this.

Within the Society, decapitation was the form of execution most accepted and expected. Hanging or strangulation was difficult, thanks to a non-human's basic strength and durability. Burning was seen negatively because of its inhuman aspect, plus the many we've lost to the burnings from the wars and church over the years.

Still...

Glancing again at the halberd, I thumped the shaft with my thumb and noted the heavy metal. The whole thing was made of metal, not just the sharp bits. A very uncommon thing. I doubted any normal human could lift this thing, let alone use it properly.

Though I suppose it was more a ceremonial tool than not, I guess...

Sighing a little, I glanced around the crowd for any sign that this would start any time soon.

Not far from the crowd was the prison. The dull building was very solitary, and also other than the few people who had entered it earlier... not a single soul had dared to draw too close to it. Even the villagers who had arrived to watch the event, that had come from that direction of the village, had done so in large berths.

Renn had entered that building, alongside Ollie and a few others... but not Oplar. The bear wasn't in the crowd either, and I knew she wouldn't be.

She did not like violence, let alone death. I knew she'd not be found for many hours, not until long after this event was said and done.

I was surprised that Renn had joined Ollie. She had not said much about this Rollo and her meeting with him... only that he was not worth thinking about. Which was likely true. She may not have joined them as to participate but rather instead to simply help people she now viewed as friends. She and Ollie, and that older woman, had become closer it seemed. They had joined us last night during dinner. The large house which usually felt too big had felt cramped. That large kitchen table had nearly been full... for the first time I'd ever seen it, at least.

It was a strange thing. Oplar was a talkative, and friendly, person... but even she didn't usually bring others with her to dinner while we traveled. She usually joined them instead. Most of the time Oplar traveled with me, I barely saw her since she was busy hanging out with others.

Though that might just be because of Renn's affection for me. Had she not fallen for me, she may have been like Oplar.

Friendly, but distant. At least to me.

"Is it soon, mommy?" a small child's voice asked from the crowd. She hushed him, but I wanted to agree with the kid.

Let's get this over with already.

A few more people arrived, notably more children, and I listened into the small conversations that whispered here and there. It seemed with the kid speaking up, others had found their voices too.

People wondering where the wife was. If Rollo would say anything or not. Why I looked bored...

"She's nice, but he still looks scary," another whispered.

I kept myself from smirking at their gossip, and noticed Thrain approaching in the distance. He was walking with a few others, and the crowd went quiet again upon his approach.

He rounded the platform to the back, to where the stairs were, and stepped up onto the platform alongside me.

The platform didn't even creak as the larger man walked up to the ledge, and gestured lightly at the crowd before him. "Everyone...!" he greeted them somberly, and nodded. "We've gathered today for justice. To put an end to the dark stain upon our community. Vim has graciously accepted our request, and as such will perform the deed. I ask any of you here now if there is any discontent, or challenge to our decisions," Thrain asked the community.

No one said a thing.

Thrain nodded and then turned to me. "We shall then bring Rollo out, Vim. May Vita forgive you, and all of us," Thrain said loudly, more so to the crowd than me, and then he turned and stepped off the stage.

He left the area alone and headed the distant dull building. Not even the children in the crowd made a noise as we all watched him enter the building.

Finally. I didn't mind playing along, and it wasn't like I was actually upset or anything but... well...

Glancing at the crowd, and the worried expressions all over the place... I felt a little uncomfortable.

I got it. I did. In a community like this, trust was paramount. And trust could only be truly had when those who broke that trust were punished firmly, without any kind of favoritism or mercy. And the act of executing someone publicly like this was a part of that process. It was why they had all brought their children to witness it, even though gruesome and would likely traumatize a few of them.

It taught them that breaking the tenant core rules of their society was a terrible crime. One that would bring forth a punishment most foul.

A punishment delivered, possibly, by yours truly. The man who had killed their god.

Renn firmly believed that their asking of me to be the one to do the deed was because they weren't capable of doing it. That they were too weak to do the act.

Although it was... partly true... it also wasn't.

I glanced down to one of the younger boys. His eyes went wide at my look, and his whole face went pale. He held my gaze for a few long moments, and then looked away as to grab his mother's dress. She didn't even notice his actions, or the slight tremors that followed.

Gently sighing, I looked away from the crowd as Thrain finally left the building... and was followed shortly by a line of people. About half a dozen individuals left the prison, with a man clad entirely in pristine white robes. They had a white rope tied around his wrists, and he was being pulled by most of the group. As if it took that many to pull him along, and to equally share in the burden of leading a man to his doom.

They had wrapped his head in white cloth, to block his sight... but it looked almost as if they had also firmly wrapped his ears. Maybe he had requested such treatment.

Renn was with Ollie, following the group from behind. I was a little glad that she herself wasn't the one pulling his rope.

She noticed me, and her ears fluttered a tad as she studied me. I did my best to not smile at her as the group slowly approached the crowd... who quickly parted to form an open path for the man clad in white.

His arms were outstretched a bit, telling me he really was being pulled along... but he wasn't stumbling or trying to fight back. He followed dutifully, without a word as he was pulled through the crowd.

In a human settlement... This was when he'd be pelted by rocks or words. Scorned and shamed.

Here there was only silence. Judgmental silence.

Once they reached the platform, everyone but Thrain released the rope and stepped aside. They remained with the crowd as Thrain pulled the man around the platform, to the stairs, and brought him onto the stage.

Upon stepping onto the platform, the man noticed the strange wood beneath his bare feet. He paused a moment, causing the rope to go taught.

Thrain turned, and I kept a close eye on the man. Thrain was strong, probably the strongest here in this village, but he was a gentle man. He'd hesitate, and thus could get hurt. So I made sure to be ready to intervene if needed.

However the man didn't do anything. He simply stood there, fidgeting a tad. Maybe in fear.

Thrain looked at me, and I nodded. Thrain stepped forward, undid the man's ropes around his wrist... and then grabbed him gently by the arm and shoulder. The man looked strangely thin and small, especially when standing before Thrain as he was led to the head-block.

"Kneel down," Thrain whispered.

The man obeyed, and knelt right in front of the block. Upon doing so, I noted the size and shape. It fit perfectly, which told me that they had either measured him or checked already.

Thrain grabbed the man's head, and with a firm yet slow push he forced the man to lower his head.

The whole crowd held their breath as the man rested his head and neck against the block. Thrain held his head there for a moment, and then released him and stepped away. He gave me a small bow and then turned to leave. He hurried off the platform with a little more speed than necessary, almost ungracefully, but no one had noticed. Their eyes were all on the man about to die.

Studying the white robed man, I noticed the way only his toes were fidgeting. He was remaining rather still, other than his curling toes. From the angle I bet no one else could see it. Either brave... or what was about to happen had simply not registered yet.

It was hard to tell. And not just because his face was covered in cloth. I knew those here, like Ollie, had explained all of this to him. They had rules about it. They had likely tried to save his soul, in their own way through their religion. I wonder if he had accepted.

Stepping forward, I moved for the first time since taking a stance. I lifted the halberd, but not to strike. I hefted it outward, at an angle, away from his body.

Taking a few steps up over to the man, I wondered how old he was. Ollie's report had been detailed but had only mentioned that he had married that young woman half a dozen years ago, not much more. She had written more about Ivan than the man who killed him.

He looked young. Too young to be kneeling here.

But no matter.

“If you have any last words, young man, say them now,” I said.

The man, and the crowd, froze upon my voice.

For a long heartbeat... nothing and no one moved. Then the man began to tremble, and not just in his toes.

I waited for a bit... knowing full well it sometimes took time for a mind to comprehend and sort their thoughts under such stress. Yet as the moments came and went... and his silence only followed, I realized he had no plans to say a thing.

I'd think he had been gagged, if not for the fact I could see his clenched mouth. He had bitten some of the cloth hanging over his face as he shook. Some of it was moving with his heavy breaths. He was not gagged, but he was clenching his teeth very tightly.

Thrain had not asked him to say anything... He had not asked for any final words, or prayers, and I knew it was likely because he had already been asked to give them. In his prison.

But to me that was rude. One's last moments were always precious. Things changed in one's heart and mind during them. What he had said in that prison could be completely different than what he'd say now. People changed that much, that quickly, during their end.

Still he said nothing.

“At least say something to your wife,” I said softly.

Ignoring the crowd that shuffled and murmured, I gripped the metal halberd tighter as his silence continued.

Even as his trembling increased and sweat began to stain his robes... he still remained silent.

Taking a small breath, I simply nodded. So be it.

Lifting the halberd, I aimed it at the man’s neck. He had clenched up in his trembling, as if gripping the block with his chin and chest. It gave his neck an odd angle, and if I wasn’t precise my strike would not just cleave his neck but parts of his sunken chin.

He’d not feel it, since he’d be dead instantly, but that didn’t mean I wanted to cause issues. They expected me to not cause too much damage to him. In their religion, after his death, he’d be free of sin. He’d once again be a member of their village. They’ll perform last rites and a proper burial.

Don’t cause so much damage that they’d have to cover his face.

Lifting the weapon, I focused and ignored the gasps and cries. From children and adults alike.

Then brought the weapon down.

I cut his head off, and his body immediately went limp. The head fell into the large basket below, and I kept the large halberd's axe-head upon the block. To block the sight of his decapitated corpse. The blood squirted onto the blade, and I turned to stare out at the crowd.

Ignoring Renn's look, I took a small breath.

"The man's punishment has been dealt. His crimes a part of the past. Your grief is over. It is time for healing," I told them.

Not a single person nodded, but the crowd did seem to relax a little. I turned to face Thrain who quickly nodded and hurried to join me up on the platform.

Others went to follow him, albeit not as hurried. As they stepped up onto the platform, one of them began to unfold a large blanket like cloth. A deep gray one, which they went to cover the body with.

I moved the halberd out of their way as they covered the body, and Thrain stepped up to the edge of the platform. He did so at a small distance from the body, and the people working to deal with it. "Everyone...! Please... let us all join each other in prayer to Vita and..." he raised his voice, to draw their attention and join them in prayer.

Stepping back, I glanced one last time into the basket. The head within was at an angle that I couldn't see much, other than the stains from the blood.

Rollo, was it?

Looking away and heading for the stairs as the crowd went to offer their prayer to the man I had just killed, I wondered if the man's wife was in the crowd or not. Usually they cried out during the moment of death, yet although I had heard gasps of shock... I'd not heard the familiar sound of a woman's heart breaking.

Stepping off the platform, I shifted the halberd in my hand as I stepped away. To head for the house I was confined to during my visit here.

Turning the halberd around, I studied the blood dripping from its sharp axe-head. The blood was of course not from the deed itself, but the splatter of blood from the neck and body after the cut. From after the fact, since I had held it there as to cover the sight from the crowd. It dripped rather thickly, leaving a small trail on the bricks I walked upon.

I should have wiped it off, but that would have been seen as rude to them.

I was already seen as something wrong here, so... I didn't want to make it worse, if I could.

"Well done, Vim."

Slowing a little, I turned to Renn who gave me a sad smile. "Think so?" I asked.

She nodded as she took her place to my side, though I noted she did so on the side I wasn't carrying the weapon with. Even though she had approached from that side, from the crowd.

"Did you... not know Sillti wasn't there?" Renn asked me softly.

"Hm...? Oh. His wife wasn't?" I asked as I glanced behind us, to the crowd we were leaving behind. They were all bowed in their heads, praying.

The man's body was already off the platform. Being carried away by several people, with Ollie carrying the basket.

"No. She wasn't," Renn said gently.

Hm...

I turned back around and huffed. "So he must have apologized to her before, then. I had asked him something cruel," I said. I should have said something else to him in his final moments.

For a few moments there was an odd lack of Renn and her sounds, so I frowned and turned... and found her behind me. She had stopped walking.

“Renn...?” I asked worriedly. Why did she suddenly look distraught? She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

She was an emotional woman... but would she actually cry over what just happened? Over the just death of a man punished and guilty? Had she not said herself he wasn't worth a thought?

Renn stepped forward, and gulped and sniffed. “I'm okay. I was just... well...” Renn went quiet for a moment, and then reached out to grab my hand.

I accepted her hand, of course, but didn't like the way she was looking at me. She looked as if she were pitying me. I mean... sure. I was pitiful sometimes. But why now?

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked her gently.

“No. You just proved once again why I love you and no one else,” she said with a shake of her head.

I sighed at the strange woman, and decided to let it be.

We returned to walking, albeit a tad slower than before.

Glancing at her, I smiled gently at her troubled face. She looked sad, yet happy. It was obvious she didn't know which to be at the moment.

She really was adorable. Why couldn't all of my people be like her? I'd not be so disgusted and upset with them all if they were...

Renn squeezed my hand, reminding me we were holding hands.

A weapon in one. Her in another.

How quaint. It made me feel at home, somehow.

"I figured you'd chop that block in half too, by the way," Renn then said.

"Hm...? Oh?" I smirked at her as she nodded, rather seriously.

"It didn't even get stuck did it? How are you so accurate even though so strong, Vim? How do you know how to so precisely do something like that?" Renn asked as she pointed at the weapon I carried.

Amused that of all things to take from witnessing me chop someone's head off, it was how precisely I'd done it, I went ahead and smirked at my companion. "Lots of experience," I said. Her happy demeanor quickly subdued, and I realized I shouldn't have teased her in such a way. I tugged on her hand a tiny bit, to make her get a little closer. "Even a human can do it, so why is it surprising I can too?" I asked her.

“Huh...?” Renn perked up at that, her frowning face disappearing as she went into thought. “I mean... you’re just so strong, Vim. But I guess you do a lot of things gently, too. I wonder why it surprised me, then?” she wondered.

“It shouldn’t. I’m always very gentle with you, aren’t I?” I asked.

A giant grin planted itself on her face as she giggled. “Sometimes you are!”

Sometimes...?

Renn continued to giggle as she shook our hands, swaying them as if she was some kid and we on a stroll.

Hmph.

Glancing behind us, at the distant crowd and platform... I noted the people slowly starting to disperse. It was only a few at a time, but I knew soon the village would return to normal. Thrain was still on the platform, giving some kind of speech.

“Vim...?” Renn paused, to turn around as well.

"It's nothing," I said as I looked away and back at her.

"You sure...?" Renn asked worriedly, not realizing I had simply just been checking to make sure nothing odd had happened. It rarely ever did amongst the Society, but sometimes during such emotional events people became rowdy.

"I am. Are you hungry?" I asked. We had not eaten breakfast together, since she had ran off to join Ollie earlier, to help prepare.

She laughed at me. "You sure have been feeding me a lot lately!" she said.

Had I been...?

Maybe. I liked to watch her eat. She enjoyed every bite, even if it was simple meal. It made me happy to see her just... enjoy life.

Nearing the house, I smelled a recently lit fire. A few moments later, some dense gray smoke began to emerge from the kitchen chimney.

Oplar had likely noticed our return, and had started lunch. Kind of her.

“She doesn’t like violence at all, does she...?” Renn asked quietly.

“Oplar? No,” I said. So she had noticed too. I wonder who had noticed first, me or her?

“I kind of like that. Maybe I should do that too,” she said softly.

“Do... what...?” I asked carefully.

“Be like her. Avoid it. Not look at it,” she said.

“Hm...” I hesitated a tad, and wondered if maybe all this time I’d been doing a disservice to her. I’d shown her a lot of violence lately... and...

Renn noticed, and giggled at me as she squeezed my hand again. “Jeez Vim... don’t look so sad! It was just a thought,” she said.

“I’ll shield you from it from now on, if you’d like,” I offered. Hopefully she’d accept... otherwise... well...

If she became like Oplar there was no way she’d stick with me for much longer. And the mere thought of losing her just because of who and what I was...

She sighed at me. "I didn't mean it that way Vim. Really. I was just... considering different ways of life. I like the idea of it. But I know it's not realistic. Plus it's not like it really bothers me that deeply," she said.

"Hm..." I nodded, but didn't feel much better.

"Though I'll be honest your way of doing it is nice too," she then said.

"My... way...?" I asked, wondering what she meant.

She nodded. "You kind of treat it like... well..." she hesitated a moment, to find the words, and then glanced at me. "You treat violence like something normal. Like how I would the weather, I guess," she said.

Approaching the house's front door, I frowned at her. "Are you saying I should have treated his death with a little more reverence?" I asked.

"Huh...! No! I just meant... it's normal for you. I noticed it back in the beginning... that night by the river, when you killed all those men. Those naked men. You just... to you it's normal. You can fight and kill as calmly and easily as I would make tea," she explained.

Naked men...? The hell was she...?

Oh. Right. When we had returned to Ruvindale to check on the Sleepy Artist.

The memory brought a smile to my face, which Renn immediately noticed and groaned at me. "Don't smile while thinking of that night!" she warned me.

"Why not?" I asked. I could remember her shocked expression. The way she had grabbed her tail in worry, and...

Renn groaned as she shook her head at me.

Chuckling at her, I stopped before the door... and heard Oplar's heavy steps as she hurried to open it. As to greet us.

Before she could though, Renn lifted her hand... which held my own, to her face. I half expected her to bite my hand for some reason, but instead she simply gave it a tiny peck of a kiss. "Well done, Vim," she praised me again in a strangely lovely voice.

Smiling soft at her, I wondered why I'd not heard such a tone before. It was the type of voice I wanted to hear whispered into my ear.

"If you think so, then that's all that matters."

Chapter 287 A Doubtful Fate

A few more nights and we'd be leaving the Summit.

I was honestly a little glad we were going to leave soon.

As much as I enjoyed these moments alone with him... I was ready to leave this strangely somber place. To head back towards lands I knew, and see people that I called friends. Supposedly there were only a few more stops after here, and we'd be heading back towards Telmik.

Honestly I was not as angry or upset over this village or its inhabitants anymore. Their way of treating Vim had... disturbed me greatly, especially at first, but now I was at least able to understand it. Plus Ollie and the rest had been very welcoming of me... and... well...

Smiling at the memory of listening to Ollie and the rest complaining about the vote against Vim's position in the Society, I found myself respecting the people here a little more. They had their own grievances with Vim... but they were justified. And they didn't allow their grievances to conflict with their trust in him. They hated what he did... but they knew he would protect them without question.

Like this house. If they truly hated Vim... they'd not have made it so nicely. Not have kept it so clean, and stocked full of food and supplies.

We were in our room since it was about to be night, and Oplar had left to visit her friend for the night so we were alone.

It felt good to be alone with him. It made me want to linger here in this place longer... almost. It was a little odd to think on how hard it was for us to have these moments alone lately. Oplar was now traveling with us, so our alone time while traveling was now gone. And while we were at locations, usually, Vim was busy. This place was unique in the way he didn't really do much.

Being alone with him made my heart beat faster than usual. I wasn't sure why, since it was something normal now. Even touching him didn't really bother me anymore. It used to make me so self-conscious to even brush against him while we walked. Now I was able to lay on his lap for hours, uncaring of how silly or weird I looked or acted.

But... I knew these moments were still dangerous. For me especially.

Turning the page, I found myself unable to focus on the words. Which was surprising... since the book was almost over. This was the climax. The end. The big hurrah. The main character had just found out about the betrayal of her closest aid, her closest friend, and also the infidelity of the man she had almost convinced herself to marry and love. It was a tragic scene of her being forced to end the lives of people she had trusted, and had wanted to trust.

Yet instead of the book, and all its action...

Glancing up a little, over the top of the book... I as carefully as I could stared up at the man who looked half asleep.

I was lying on his lap, with a thick pillow beneath my head. It was comfortable, and had allowed me to keep him in my sight as I read. I enjoyed resting against him as I'd read, as I'd done lately, but tonight I had wanted to lay down and be a little more relaxed. Vim, being the man he was, had been more than willing to oblige me. Unlike the other nights though, he had nothing to occupy his time as I read. He had no book for himself. No piece of wood to whittle and carve...

Studying his half-closed eyes, I wondered how far he was from falling asleep. Had he been a normal person, I'd assume he'd fall into a deep slumber at any moment... but he wasn't normal. Plus he's had that look for several hours now, since almost a quarter of the book ago.

Vim's head was slightly drooped, resting on a closed fist. His arm in turn was resting on an upturned knee, which was likely a little uncomfortable for him. I knew if anyone peeked into our room, they'd think he was asleep without question. But I knew better. I could tell by the way he was breathing. By the way his eyes sometimes glanced at me, focused.

He was trying to sleep... yet couldn't do so.

And it wasn't because I was talking to him, or being noisy. I was doing all I could to be as quiet and calm as possible.

His lack of sleep, or being unable to, was starting to really become a worry. Especially since I just couldn't comprehend it.

If he was really as exhausted as he sometimes looked... why then couldn't he just sleep? If anything going weeks without sleep should knock him out... whether he liked it or not. So for him to actually try and sleep, yet be unable... was... well...

Biting back a small whine of worry, I glanced away from his face and back to the book. To try and distract myself.

It didn't work of course.

Was it nightmares? Was he in pain? Was there turmoil in his heart I couldn't comprehend...?

Was he sick? Dying?

And why wouldn't he talk to me about it?

The worst part was it wasn't like I could ask others for advice. There were many in the Society who were older, wiser, and knew more about Vim than they let on. Yet I knew the moment I asked them about his lack of, or inability, to sleep... he'd grow upset with me.

He didn't want them to know. For crying out loud, Vim rarely even slept at all at certain locations just to keep up a front that he didn't need to. For as much as he didn't seem to have pride for certain things, keeping up his almighty protector persona was something very serious and real to him.

Vim would not be happy with me if I even hinted to other people that he was struggling. In any form.

So...

I sighed gently as I tried again to read the new page. I got through a single sentence before my eyes started to glaze and the words blurred.

Why hadn't Narli noticed anything...? She was some kind of powerful saint, able to see and know things us more normal creatures couldn't. I had been hoping she would have. She hadn't even hinted at Vim being odd... other than the same thing everyone in the Society noticed and talked about. Neither had

Miss Beak... though I suppose she hadn't been given much opportunity. Plus I couldn't fault her... she had been dying...

Yet Nasba and Nann hadn't noticed either. Even though we had stayed there for some time. And they were both not only very old, but had known a lot about Vim.

The only thing anyone ever noticed off about him was his affection for me. Nothing else.

Though... I suppose even if someone did notice that something was wrong with Vim...

What were the odds they'd say anything? Or bring it up? Let alone in front of me?

Just like me, they too might keep their worries and opinions to themselves. Out of respect for Vim.

I bit the inside of my cheek, and wanted to grumble. It made me happy to think that maybe others had noticed, like me, but saw Vim so favorably that they'd not say anything either. It meant he had more friends than I thought he did... even if it upset me all the same.

"What's wrong, Renn?" Vim's voice drew my attention to him, and I scowled at him.

"You."

His eyebrow rose as he smirked, as if glad to hear it. He suddenly didn't look tired anymore.

Sighing at him, I lowered the book to my chest and rested it there. "Do you want to lie down?" I asked him.

"It's not that late yet, is it?" he asked as he glanced to the nearby window. The setting sun was still bright enough to not need to light the candles.

"Well... no... but..." I grumbled and once again was happy and mad at the same time. How was it he cared so little to notice his own issues, while at the same time being so gentle with me?

He knew I liked to stay up late with him. To talk. To spend time together. His worry hadn't been if I was tired, but rather if I was upset for some reason.

To be more worried about my happiness than his health was really...

"Or are you hungry? Want me to go get you a snack?" he asked.

Closing my eyes, I groaned at him.

“What...? Don’t you dare say you’re worried about your weight. You said yourself you’ve not gained a pound,” he teased me.

Well... I didn’t feel like I had. “Have I though?” I asked. He’d know, since I was always clinging to him.

“No. If anything you may have shrunk,” he said.

“Shrunk...? How?” I asked. Really? What’d he mean?

He chuckled at me, and tapped the book on my chest. It was an odd feeling. “Aren’t you almost done...? Why stop?” he asked.

“I can’t focus on it,” I told him honestly.

“Hm...?” he hummed in a questionable way.

Taking a small breath, I nodded. “I’m worried about you. You look tired,” I decided to just tell him.

“Hm...” he hummed again, in a different way.

“I know... you’re fine. You’re dealing with it... but...” I carefully spoke, trying to sound as gentle and calm as I could. Even though I really wasn’t. I wanted to scream at him.

“Hm.”

Sighing at him, I heard and felt my tail slap the bed. “I’m being serious, Vim.”

“Mhm,” he nodded this time at least with his hum.

Glaring at him, I wondered why he was teasing me. Especially since I was serious, and...

But as I stared up at him, and his little smile on his face, I realized something a little sad.

“Do you not worry Vim?” I asked him.

He blinked. “Worry...?” he asked, finally saying a real word for once.

“About yourself. Your health. What if something really is wrong with you...? Aren’t you scared?” I asked.

“Not at all. Or well... I guess I do worry. I can tell something is wrong with me, but...” he shrugged a little, telling me that he genuinely didn’t mind much.

“What if you’re dying?” I asked softly.

He frowned at me. “I hope not. That means I’ll miss out on seeing all the different faces you make,” he said.

My face got hotter, since his words meant I had likely made an expression he’d not seen before just recently. But I ignored his teasing and coughed. “Please Vim, be more serious,” I mumbled.

He chuckled at me as he nodded and sat back a little. He was sitting too far from the edge of the bed to rest against the wooden board against the wall, which made me feel a little mean. I should have made sure he could have rested against it before lying down.

“We’ve talked about it before Renn,” he said.

“Not enough, Vim...”

He glanced away from me, and to the nearby window. “I promise to let you know if it gets worse. How about that?” he offered.

“Is it worse than before? Then since we last talked about it?” I asked.

"I don't think it is," he said, and sounded honest as he did.

Although for some reason I didn't believe him... I did my best to do so anyway. "Okay... you promise, then?" I asked.

"I do. I'll let you know right away," he promised.

Staring up at him, and his stupid smile... I sighed and nodded. It was hard to tell with him. He seemed to keep his promises, but when it came to stuff about him... well...

Tapping the book, I grumbled a little about him. It was like all of his rules and beliefs went out the window the moment his own self came into account. Free will, his sharing of knowledge, his openness and honesty... It was as if none of those key character traits existed when it came to his personal existence. His past. His self. His thoughts and opinions on certain things... his health and worries...

"I really do promise to, Renn. If you must know I've actually got a few hours of sleep here," he told me.

"Oh...? Really?" I asked. When? As far as I had been able to tell, he'd been awake nearly the whole time I'd been next to him. Even when I slept.

He nodded but didn't specify.

Although a little relieved to hear it... I also knew the truth. A few hours. We've been here for over a week. And he was probably being very generous with how much he'd gotten. So maybe an hour or two at best...

I sighed and rolled a tad, to stare at the window instead of him. He still had that stupid smile on his face. It wasn't fair that he could look so...

"By the way... I think this is the first place in some time that you've not been invited to, isn't it?" Vim then said.

Frowning, I rolled back to look at him. "What...?"

"You usually get invited. In one form or another. I think the last place was... the Armadillo's place?" he wondered.

"They asked me to marry into their family, Vim," I reminded him.

He paused a moment, and his smile faltered. "Ah... they had, hadn't they?" he remembered.

Smirking at him, I nodded. "I don't think I got invited at the Weaver's hut," I said.

“You had been. Nann told me I could send you there whenever, they’d welcome you,” he said.

Oh...? I smiled at that. “Actually Nasba kind of offered too. Though she said I should send my sons to them, instead,” I said.

“Sons...? Oh. To mix bloodlines. Cats and birds. Funny,” he said.

Glancing at him, I wondered if he actually found it funny or not. Did he somehow think such sons wouldn’t be his too? He sometimes acted as if he wasn’t related or involved in such matters when we danced around such topics.

Though... maybe that tone wasn’t about my, or our, children but instead the bloodline stuff.

“You’ve mentioned your dislike over such things before,” I said. Was that maybe why he didn’t consider having any with me?

“Says who...? What I don’t like is the fact it dilutes the blood. Makes it more human. But there are benefits to it, too... plus it’s not like many have a choice anymore, really,” he said.

“Benefits?” I asked.

“Some benefit from it physically. They may become more human, thanks to how all of your traits are recessive, but it’d help in other ways. Take the ducks for example, with your blood mixed in they’d likely

become stouter. Stronger. Healthier. Who knows maybe they'd get smarter too," he said as he thought about it.

I giggled at him, and gently rolled my head back and forth. What a wonderful conversation! It was almost as sweet as the ones in that book! "So you think my children would be smart and strong, huh?" I asked.

"Well duh..." he huffed, and then I felt him shift a little. "Speaking of children... did that man have any? The one I killed?" he then asked.

My happy moment died a little as I stopped rolling and looked up at him. "Rollo...? No. Sillti and he didn't have any children. Neither did Ivan," I said.

"Right..." he sounded a little relieved.

I smiled at the gentle man and glanced at his hand nearby. He had tapped the book earlier, and afterwards had left it resting near my arm. It would be an odd angle, but I could grab it...

Or well...

Squirring my tail upward, I did my best to not look at it as to hide what I was doing.

Vim sighed as he shifted ever so slightly, and then he lifted his hand to scratch at the side of his head.

I glared up at him, and wondered if he had done that on purpose. Had he really noticed?

Looking away from him, I shifted a little which made the book slide off me. I grabbed it, to make sure I didn't ruin any of the pages, and went to close it. There were only a few pages left, but I was in no mood to read them at the moment. I'll do so later.

"Oh. Wait." I opened the book and quickly found the page, and then the word. Sitting up a little, I turned to show it to Vim. "What's this mean?" I asked as I pointed at it.

He lazily read the word and smiled. "Kismet basically means your lot in life. Think of it like another word for fate or destiny," he explained.

Fate... "I figured, but wanted to make sure," I said as I nodded and closed the book again. I hadn't asked as I had been reading it since I had been trying to let him sleep, but he was awake now.

Putting the book aside, I smiled happily as I sat up fully next to him. I curled my legs under me and crossed them, and went ahead and grabbed the pillow off his lap for him. I put it to my side, so that I could grab it again if the opportunity presented itself.

"Speaking of fate... Can I ask something a little personal, Vim?" I asked.

"No."

I startled, until I saw his smirk.

“Sorry. Yes. You can,” he said happily, amused at me.

Jeez... I did my best to frown at him, but a smile wouldn't leave my face. “Why do you tease me like that?” I asked, doing my best to be upset.

“You're right. I shouldn't... I'll feel really bad now if your question is actually something I don't want to answer. So...? What is it?” he asked with a frown.

“Well... I assume you don't believe in fate,” I said, doing my best to not notice the odd frown on his face. He looked troubled even before I had asked my question.

“Not in the way you're asking, no.”

“You mention fate though. Sometimes. And do so seriously, when you do,” I pointed out. I've heard him speak of it before.

“It's an easy word to use to describe things beyond our own control,” he said.

“Do you not like it because it insults free-will?” I asked.

“Something like that,” he nodded.

“Yet... you believe in a form of it,” I repeated what he had said.

He nodded again. “I do.”

“Care to explain?” I asked, since it seemed he wasn’t going to just do so.

He smirked at me. “Not really.”

I glared at him a moment, wondering if he was just teasing me again... but his smirk and the silence that followed told me he wasn’t. He was being serious.

My tail slapped the bed a few times, and I sighed. “Fine... can you at least then tell me if it’s real or not?” I asked.

“Fate...?” he asked as his smirk slowly died.

I nodded.

“Hm...” his smirk returned as he studied me, and I decided if he did fall asleep tonight I’d definitely mess with him. I’ll ruffle his hair, and...

Vim then sat up a little straighter and shifted enough to make the whole bed move. It didn’t break, but I paused a moment since it had almost sounded as if it would have.

“A long time ago, something very peculiar happened to me,” he then said.

My ear fluttered enough to shift my hair. I nodded as I brushed my longer bangs out of my eyes. I needed a haircut again.

“There was a man who I considered my enemy. A vile man. He was infuriating in ways I can’t really explain. But he was strong. Powerful. Enough so that it had been... difficult. To kill him. Anyway, he had a peculiar personality alongside many tics and traits that were... well... unique, to say the least,” Vim said.

I blinked and nodded slowly, enthralled by both what he was saying and the strange smile on his face as he talked. He was speaking about some kind of horrible person, yet looked as if he was talking about a friend.

“Anyway... after killing him... a long time later, I... well...” he hesitated, and my heart missed a beat.

Oh no. Was he going to stop? I hadn't even said anything!

Before I could truly panic though, he sighed and continued. "I thought I met him again. I ran into a man who on our first meeting did something that reminded me completely about that terrible enemy," he said.

Frowning, I tried to comprehend what he meant... "You mean... someone different, yet the same," I said as I tried to understand.

"Yes. I met a completely different person, who looked completely different... yet reminded me of my enemy from the past. That religion you like calls it reincarnation," he said.

My eyes went a little wide as I nodded quickly. So it was true? One could come back after death?

Vim took a small breath and shifted again, though this time the bed didn't move. "So of course... I panicked. I'd never encountered it before. In all my long years, meeting all the people I've met... I have never once met the same person twice. You die, you're gone. You don't return. That is something I had been so confident in, that... well... when it happened I had nearly had a heart attack," he said.

I gulped and nodded even though Vim wasn't really even looking at me. His eyes were a tad dull... as if he was deep in thought.

"It was so startling that I hadn't killed him on sight. I can't explain it... It terrified me so much, the reality that people could come back... but also that of all beings it'd be him! You probably would have laughed your tail off if you had seen how frustrated and stressed I had been over it," Vim said, smiling as he remembered. It made me smile back at him.

Vim raised his arms and held them out wide... almost as if he was inviting me into a hug. "So there I was. Dumbstruck. But being the man I am... I got it under control. So I waited. I watched. I tested. I contemplated," he said.

"To see if he really was your enemy," I said as I understood.

Fascinating. I wonder if his initial shock he speaks of had been the reason he had been able to keep his wrath in check.

He nodded. "At the time I had figured... well... if he was? Then it'd be quick and easy to tell. Then I'd just destroy him again. Hopefully for good. After all I'd done it once, I could do it again," he said as he clasped a fist hard enough to make noises.

"And if it was... then you'd know it was possible," I said softly.

Vim's fist lowered to the bed, thumping it lightly. "Yes. As weird as it would be... it would be proof. And would then mean a lot of things would change for me. Plus... it would go against my beliefs if I just outright destroyed an innocent soul, just because I had assumptions I couldn't properly explain," he said.

Oh. Right. Without real proof... if Vim killed that man, he'd just be a murderer.

Vim smiled as he released a deep and heavy sigh. "So years passed. I came and went. Watching from a distance... saying and doing things strange on purpose, just to see his response... and although the similarities continued and the odd personality remained..." Vim went quiet and shook his head.

"It wasn't him," I said.

"No. Rungle was not that man at all. He was the complete opposite. He was a very good man, almost without any faults at all," Vim said softly.

Rungle...! "Wait..." I leaned forward a little, shocked.

Vim nodded. "It became obvious after a few years... and even until his death; I still had that weird hesitation in the back of my mind. The what if? But no. Rungle was not an evil man. At all," Vim said softly.

My eyes watered a little as I tried to imagine it. Vim had called him his friend. A genuine friend. A good man. Merit had said the same.

Vim had doubted him. For years... "Did... did you ever tell him...?" I asked softly.

"No. How could I? In fact... you're the first person I've ever told," he said as he frowned.

Uh oh. "So if... if he proved himself not to be your enemy reborn... why bring it up? How does fate have anything to do with that?" I asked, not so much because I wanted to know... but so that he'd not go all quiet on me, or simply leave the room.

Vim's frown turned into a sad smile. "The idea of fate is that there are things beyond our control. Either by natural order or a higher power. My point of bringing Rungle's odd personality up is... well... To both prove and disprove it," he said.

"I uh... need you to explain that, then," I said, a little embarrassed. Should it have clicked already for me? Maybe I wasn't as smart as I'd hoped.

His smile grew a little. "Basically, Renn... if Rungle had not been the way he was... I would not have noticed him. He would have just been one of the thousands of members in the Society. I'd never have become his friend. I'd never have even remembered him, likely," he said.

I slowly nodded. That made sense. Vim had taken an interest in him because of those similarities between Rungle and his enemy... so...

"Yet..." Vim raised both hands with them open-palmed on either side of him. As if to mimic scales. "His tragedy... his families tragedies," he corrected himself softly. "Are because of my friendship. Because of the Society. Had I not gotten so involved with them, they may have not joined the Society at all in the first place. So... they might have lived much longer, more fruitful, lives. In fact... there are many who I could say the same about."

My tail coiled around my foot worriedly. "You can't say stuff like that Vim," I said quickly.

“No. I shouldn’t. But we’re talking about fate. What I’m saying is... there are countless odd things that happen. That not even I can explain or comprehend. Yet, at the same time... some things make no sense. For instance, the very first time I met Celine... have I ever told you about it?” he asked.

I shook my head quickly, to the point my hair fluttered oddly.

He chuckled. “I had happened upon a village. Being attacked. At the time I was... honestly not in the best of mental states. I was wayward. Unsure of what to do. Caught between different promises and vows. So... I stepped away. I rounded the village being plundered and burnt, as to not get involved in it,” he said.

Grabbing the bedding beneath me as I stared at his sad expression, I did my best to not say anything and interrupt him. At any moment Vim would stop talking, like he always does... and I really, really, needed to hear the rest.

He gulped and sighed. “Anyway. As I was stepping away... I heard her name. Her fellow, her companion, had shouted her name. To tell her to run. To hurry. They were being chased by their enemies,” he said.

I nodded ever so slightly since Vim had glanced at me.

“Now that’s not odd... but you see, not long before this... I had been enjoying myself in a port town. I spent a few years there, I think. Hard to remember...” he paused a moment in thought, and then shrugged. “So while there... I met an adorable woman. A librarian.” He smirked. “Funny. I’ve not thought about her in so long I’d thought I forgot all about her,” he said gently.

Although very bothering to hear, once again, about another past lover of his... I kept my mouth shut and grabbed my tail so it'd not squirm too wildly and distract him from continuing.

"Her name just so happened to be Celine. Said the same way. So... when I had heard her name shouted like that, I had turned and focused. I firmly believe had Celine been named anything else... or if her name hadn't been shouted as it had... I would have likely not joined the Society," he finished.

"You wouldn't have saved her...?" I asked softly.

"Oh. I would have," he said and nodded. "But she had been a saint. A non-human one, yes, but a saint all the same. I don't like saints, Renn. At all. And as I mentioned, at the time I had been... well... not in the best of mindsets to say the least. I likely would have abandoned her and Lilly after saving them, and then continued on my way," he said.

I gulped.

So... "So how could you not believe in fate, Vim?" I asked, unable to comprehend his lack of it.

"Many women are named Celine, Renn. We have a few in our society as we speak," he said with a smile.

I shook my head. "That's not the same...!"

“Ah... but it is. There are many names that would have made me pause. My parent’s names for example. A few of my vassals. Friends. Yours, even, right now would make me hesitate if I heard it elsewhere, especially if from a voice I don’t recognize,” he pointed out.

“But...!” I wanted to argue, but didn’t know how to do so. He was of course correct. It could have not just been a name either... it could have been her appearance, his mood, a cloud in the sky...

“So my opinion on fate is damn her. I’ll kill her if I ever see her again. But I’ll... begrudgingly admit, I suppose, that there is an odd factor at play sometimes. Take you, yourself, Renn,” he said with a point at me.

“Me...!?” I startled.

He nodded. “What are the odds the first city you venture to after your lovely Nory’s death... is one with members of the Society? And what are the odds you find them, all based off a familiar painting you recognized?” he asked. “Especially so if fate was real, then the Sleepy Artist’s destruction was destined... so if you had been any later, you would have missed them completely,” he added.

My heart warmed so much my chest became hot. “You... you remember all that...?” I asked, completely shocked.

How...? That was such a tiny little detail... something I’d only said once in front of him! And even then only offhandedly...!

Vim gently smiled at me. “Why wouldn’t I, Renn...? It’s why we’re together now. I’ll remember it forever,” he said.

I wasn't able to stop the tears that filled my eyes... so I looked downward, to try and hide my face as I tried not to cry. "Really...?" I whispered.

"Hm. The reasons and the whys are of course... sad and not impressive. A silly painting. The death of a loved one. Lomi's village burning down... so on and so forth. Most are sad reasons, and the rest are... well... minuscule. But they're all pieces to the puzzle. Each one a necessary step for us to have reached the spot we're in now. Like little pebbles on our paths," he said.

"Mhm..." I nodded, agreeing with him.

Vim chuckled at me, and I felt him shift a little. A moment later, I heard him reach over to light the candle. The room filled with a slightly annoying smell for a moment as the flames adjusted. A quick glance to the window told me it was now dark outside... I had just not noticed.

Which made sense. My face was burning hot right now and... well...

Really. I had wanted to learn more about his personal beliefs, yet instead all I had done is get my heart shaken and teary eyed...

Reaching up, I cupped my face and squished it... as if in an attempt to squeeze out all the hotness from it.

"You don't like saints, Vim...?" I asked him after a moment of messing with my face.

“Not at all.”

“You didn’t seem to mind Narli,” I said.

He took a small breath and nodded. “I don’t mind her. I pity her, if anything. But... there will always be a part of me that wants nothing to do with her,” he said.

“Why?”

“For the same reason I hate monarchs, Renn,” he whispered.

Suddenly my face wasn’t hot anymore.

Looking up at him, I stared in awe at the sad smile on his face... as he nodded gently, to confirm I had heard him correctly.

“Why...?” I asked with a tiny voice. It had been so tiny I had been about to take another breath to ask again, in case he hadn’t heard me.

Yet he had. "Because of a reason I can't properly tell you at the moment. But... know I don't think that way now. I still hate them, yes, but... I'll not kill a saint on sight anymore. Not without a damned good reason, at least," he said.

Shivering a tad, since the room was suddenly very cold; I wondered how long ago he was speaking of.

It had to have been long before the Society. After all, Celine had been a saint... but...

Staring at the man who looked ashamed, I dared to ask it. "Is it related to your mistake...?"

Vim's expression hardened a little, but only for a brief moment. It then softened again... and he gently nodded at me.

Ah...

Reaching over, I took Vim's hand. Half a moment later his other hand reached out for my own, and then we were holding hands again.

For a long moment we sat there in silence, staring at each other. Thanks to the angle of the candle, small shadows danced on his face. It gave him a slightly tired look, which I was hoping was thanks to the shadows and not because he really were.

Squeezing his hand, I hesitated a moment... I didn't want to break this happy silence we were sharing. I didn't want to ruin this lovely moment.

But... at the same time, I had many questions.

It wasn't fair. It was so hard to get answers out of him, and when I finally did they were half-answers and tidbits of information... and even then, on top of it all, they only gave birth to more questions.

So...

Staring at the man, who had a smile on his face, yet looked more exhausted than before... I decided to end my prodding here for the night. Even if he seemed willing to answer more, at least in part, I didn't want to make him any more uncomfortable or bothered than he was.

I could be patient. I would be patient.

Shaking his hands a little, I smiled at him.

"So... you've had two Celine's then? I suppose I can forgive you if I look at them like little pebbles on our paths, as you say," I said, hoping to tease him.

He raised an eyebrow... and then a large grin slowly shaped into a wry smirk. "They had more than little pebbles, though, I'd say," he said.

My face got hot again, and I shook his hands even harder as I groaned.

“I was trying to be nice...!”

“Any nicer and I’ll need to have you in small doses, and that’s no fun,” he said.

“Gah!” I tossed his hands up into the air, as if at his face. They of course didn’t fling out at all, remaining in the air where I had released them.

He chuckled at me. “Fate can have them, Renn. As long as I can have you,” he then said.

Squirming, I groaned as I grabbed my tail. “Maybe being alone with you really is dangerous,” I mumbled.

“Just now figuring that out...?”

Chapter 288 Sillti’s Smile

“Our vote,” Ash said as she held out the thick ledger for me to take.

I hesitated a small moment, and felt strangely unnerved. I almost didn’t want to grab it.

“Already...?” I asked as I reached out and took it. It was oddly light for how thick it was.

Ash nodded. “I... We care not their reasons, or their true plans. We have no intention of releasing you from your debt,” she said, speaking simply as if about the weather.

I sighed as I nodded and shifted the leather pouch, to make sure it was sealed shut. “You hadn’t needed to tell me, you know,” I said.

“Why not...? We already told your wife. Or does she keep secrets from you...?” Ash asked with a smile.

“She has a few,” I said as I did my best to not think of her face. Last night I had seen some mighty fine blushes and smiles, and they still dominated my thoughts.

Ash sighed. “She’s not bad, by the way. You chose a good woman,” Ash said.

Oh...? I smiled a little. “Thanks.”

She nodded and glanced around. “Will you leave soon then?” she asked.

“Tomorrow morning. I believe they’re saying goodbye to everyone,” I said. I was alone in the house. Or well, Ash was here too I guess... but she was standing at the doorway. As if she didn’t want to come in by herself.

“Hmph. May as well. Hopefully I’ll not need to see you again for many years,” Ash said as she nodded and turned away.

“Goodbye Ash,” I bade her farewell as she left.

Closing the door, I sighed as I stepped down the hallway to our room. I made sure to store the leather ledger away securely, as to not forget or lose it. It was very important, after all.

To be honest I had thought they would have given it to Oplar if they had prepared it already at all. As far as I was aware the Crypt had given Renn theirs when we left. She hadn’t told me about it yet, though, which made me wonder if it was a bad one.

She hadn’t wept much as we left, nor had she grown irate, but... she hadn’t seemed very happy either. So it made sense.

But it was fine. Everyone had their right to decide their own lives.

Though...

I hesitated a moment as I thought of my parent's tombstone and the one Renn had made for her loved ones. If I got banished from the Crypt... getting them would be a pain. Renn could, or should, be able to go there even if I did get banished... but...

She'd not be able to lift that stone.

Technically that grave site was far enough away from the Crypt that I could sneak in there and out without being noticed... but... well...

I personally saw it as part of the Crypt's area. Its influence. So...

"Worry about more important things, Vim," I mumbled as left the room.

A part of me wanted to lie down, but the damned room and bed stunk. Not the stink it had originally but instead a new one. One that I actually didn't mind at all.

The bed and room smelled of Renn. A little too strongly. It was unnerving.

I'd really like it if her scent would disappear already, if it was going to. Otherwise...

Entering the kitchen, I went to finish cleaning up the mess from Renn's and Oplar's breakfast. Renn could eat and drink a lot herself, so she usually always had a few plates and cups to clean... but Oplar

was another mess entirely. She not only left behind plates, but used several cups when able to. Plus she left a lot of crumbs, somehow.

It wasn't like she was necessarily a messy eater... she was just always laughing and boisterous, so things just got messy.

Usually the two cleaned up after themselves, but I had ushered them out to say their goodbyes to the village. They had begun to talk about topics that I had not wanted to be a part of, so I was glad for once I didn't need to worry about saying goodbyes myself and having to join them. It was a good excuse.

Oplar really was a pain. The closer she and Renn became, the more she teased the two of us. It felt lately as if Oplar was trying to see how far she could take it, before I put my foot down.

"But really. To ask why she never heard the bed creak at night... What a thing to ask," I mumbled as I picked up one of the buckets and went to draw water as to clean the kitchenware.

Renn had of course found the question hilarious, but I hadn't. Didn't. Because it made me feel bad. I couldn't laugh it off like Renn could. Renn herself was likely not long from being genuinely concerned as to why I wasn't being a little more... proactive in our relationship. She'd already voiced her concerns several times, not too long ago she had even done it in a way that had shocked me. In that port town... she had asked me if she was ugly. All because I hadn't even tried anything.

Talk about making me feel like an utter failure as a man. To make my partner feel so self-deprecating as to allow her to wonder if she was unattractive... My father would have beaten me. Then, after healing my wounds from that beating, my mother would have finished the job.

Though I of course haven't really done anything to rectify that terrible misunderstanding... She hadn't voiced the same concerns in some time. Our recent drama and busyness helped distract her, but...

Eventually no amount of chaos in the world would be enough. Eventually Renn will put me on the spot, and I'll have to make a decision whether I wanted to or not.

Last night had been a dangerous moment for me. She really was adorable. Especially since she wasn't even trying to be.

Stepping up to the well, I went to drawing it. My mind wandered, thinking of all the ways she had laughed and blushed last night. The bucket clanked against the wooden lid of the well as I stopped spinning the lever. It hung there on the rope, the water it had collected splashing inside it.

Staring at the small bucket, I tried to remember something I didn't want to.

When had I last done anything? Who had it been that I had done it with?

I couldn't remember her. But it had to have been years ago, at least. But who had it been...? A human, likely. I normally never allowed myself to get involved with non-humans, especially so those in the Society. It went against my rules, several of them in fact. The very few who had slipped past those defensive rules had done so by making it very clear that they expected nothing else afterward. They knew they'd never get my heart or a child from me.

It was why Celine had been so damned problematic. She had been fully willing to give me her body, but the price to have it had been far too steep. I hadn't been willing to pay that price.

It had cost Celine her life... and her daughter.

Grabbing the bucket, I poured its contents into the larger one I had carried out here. Once emptied, I released it back into the well and unhooked the little locking mechanism that held the circular lever that operated the bucket's rope in place. The mechanism slowly unwound, lowering the bucket deeper into the well.

I listened to the mechanisms parts squeak and clank, telling me it was getting a little rusty. Not a surprise since it was likely not used as often as it should be. Although they kept this house clean and stocked, it was likely no one really ever lived here or spent much time here at all.

The bucket hit the water and I waited a bit before messing with the rope. Like most well designs in this era, the bucket was heavily weighted on one side of the lip. It would allow the bucket to easily sink and fill as to be brought up... but it sometimes took a moment for it to do so.

"Vim?" I heard my name being called from inside the house as I began cranking the bucket's lever again.

"Outside," I said a little loudly, so Thrain could hear me.

I got the bucket out of the well by the time Thrain joined me in the backyard. He stepped out of the house and onto the brick patio to watch me fill the rest of the larger bucket with water.

"Taking a bath?" he asked, amused.

Frowning, I paused mid dump of the bucket.

Me? Taking a bath...?

Turning around, I smiled at him. "What kind of weird thing has she said now?" I asked him.

Thrain smiled at me with a huge grin and chuckled. "Oh, Oplar just mentioned something about you complaining about Renn's stink upon you. Which is quite funny, since she doesn't smell at all," he said.

Of course she had.

I finished with the buckets and well, but didn't pick the bucket up. Instead I leaned against the well a little, as if about to sit on it. The dishes could wait a few minutes more.

"You know, I do believe I've never seen you take a bath?" Thrain pointed out as he pondered it a moment.

"Why would you ever see me doing such a thing anyway, pray tell?" I asked him. Really, why did people become so weird around Renn? It was as if the whole world had gone mad the moment she stepped into it.

Thrain chuckled. "Quite so! But... hm... that is interesting indeed. You of course do bathe. You eat. You sleep. Yet for some strange reason I had not ever considered it or thought it possible. Maybe, against my own beliefs, I still deep down consider you a god?" he asked himself.

"Did you really come here to get all philosophical on me?" I asked him. Really?

He startled, his large body jolting as he realized he was indeed about to think deeply on something that might have changed his perspective. Any other man his size that had jumped like so would have jiggled. He hadn't at all. "Quite so indeed! I'll save those thoughts for later. Ash would enjoy them over dinner, I think," he said.

Yes please. Share them with her, not me.

"I hear you're leaving tomorrow," Thrain then said.

"Yes. Unless you have another task for me," I said.

He shook his head a little somberly. "No... You've done well enough, Vim."

Hmph.

I crossed my arms and waited to hear why he'd come, then. His wife had just left, so it was likely they had passed one another. It didn't make much sense for him to come just to say goodbye. Thrain was a good man, in his own way, but we'd never really been friends. Not the type where he'd go out of his way just to joke and bid farewell like this, at least.

Thrain mimicked me and crossed his arms as well. His thick sleeves made no protest as he did so, even though they became stretched. "I'm sure Ash told you of our vote," he said.

I nodded.

"It was about three to one, in your favor," he said.

I frowned. "As I told your wife, you really don't need to tell me such details. In fact I'd prefer if you didn't. And please don't tell me who voted what, if possible. I'm supposed to be indifferent, so I'm not supposed to know such information," I said.

His brow furrowed. "I see. That is definitely a way to look at it, I suppose..." He went quiet a moment, and then scratched his chin. "You know... I don't think you and I have ever actually talked about this stuff. Rules. Laws. What to do and what not to. Why is that?" he asked.

"Has there ever been a need to?" I asked.

Thrain nodded as he smiled. "True. There hasn't been, I suppose..." he said.

The fact that I was likely going to be having very similar conversations like this soon, with likely everyone I deal with for the next couple of years was a little daunting.

But it was a simple fact of life. I'll need to deal with it... if I can, at least.

"So... well... Vim," Thrain got my attention, with a little hesitation. He suddenly looked worried.

"Hm...?" What was wrong now?

Thrain sighed as he stepped forward, stepping off the bricks and onto the small patch of dirt and grass. I studied the way the large man approached, and wondered what was wrong now.

"My nephew's wife. Sillti..." he said.

Hm...?

Thrain rubbed his head and flinched, as if he had a severe headache. "She's decided to leave. The village," he said.

Oh...? "Where does she plan to go?" I asked. There weren't many locations nearby. Most were small families... too small and close knit to accept her, at least not permanently, so...

Thrain shook his head. "She's not going elsewhere, Vim... she means to leave for good. Not just us, but the Society. As a whole," he said.

Oh.

"That would be unwise. I understand she must be under quite a bit of stress, but..." I spoke carefully, as to not take too hard a stance on the matter.

"No. It wouldn't be. But she's is adamant. In fact... she plans to leave tonight. I was... well..." Thrain took a deep breath and shook his head again. "Would you speak with her?" he asked me.

I nodded slowly. "I would."

He sighed and nodded. "Thank you. She's with Ollie and your wife. I uh... I'll go get them. Okay?" he said as he turned to go.

"I'll be here," I said simply.

Thrain gave me a weary smile and nodded as he headed back into the house. He picked up the pace as he hurried to leave, heading through the house to do so.

Sighing, I picked up the bucket I had recently filled and went to take it into the kitchen. I'd not go to cleaning things just yet, but I would make a batch of tea. In my experience a good cup of warm tea was useful for moments like this.

Still...

Renn and Ollie. Likely trying to convince her against leaving the Society.

Great. So I was going to have to be the bad guy.

The front door made noise and opened just as the tea finished.

I took the kettle off the fire, but didn't go to pouring it just yet. I put it aside as I listened to several pairs of feet enter the house... relatively quietly.

Renn's footsteps were obvious. She was the first to enter. The person behind her had small, light, steps. The third was likely Ollie. Her steps sounded unsure of herself, as if afraid to follow the ones ahead of her. They weren't Oplar's steps. Hers were heavier than that, even when she was worried and being careful.

Without a word Renn found me in the kitchen. She stepped into the room and up to me with a sad frown.

“Vim... Um...” she hesitated a moment, and then nodded as she turned to point behind her. The ones who had followed her into the house had not joined her into the kitchen, but were instead standing in the nearby room. The one with the large table.

Ollie was there... as was a frail looking woman. One who was staring at me with a worried look.

“Hm...” I smiled gently at the three of them, and turned to prepare some cups for the two of us.

“Vim...?” Renn asked what I was doing as I grabbed the two cups and the teapot. I gave Renn a gentle smile and nod as I stepped around her and headed for the table.

“I hope you like winter teas, Sillti. I personally don’t care for them, but moments like this can do with a little bitterness,” I said as I placed the cups down and went to filling them.

“Really Vim...?” Ollie grumbled at me, but I ignored her.

Renn also stepped into the room behind me, but thankfully didn’t say anything. There was a heavy silence as I filled the cups... but it didn’t last the whole time. Right as I finished filling her cup, Sillti stepped forward and around the table... as to sit across from me.

“I don’t like them either... but you’re right. It may fit the moment,” Sillti said softly as she grabbed the headrest of the chair in front of her. She didn’t pull it back yet, but instead stared at me.

“Renn, Ollie, would you mind giving us a moment?” I asked gently while staring at the woman full of determination.

She had spoken softly, and looked frail... but her eyes told me all I needed to know.

This woman had made her choice already. And nothing anyone said would change it.

“But...!” Ollie protested first, but I heard Renn’s tail bump into the wall. Something she never did accidentally.

Turning to look at Renn, I smiled at my companion. “Just for a moment,” I asked again.

Renn’s face contorted into worry and hurt, but only for a few seconds. She calmed down and nodded, and then stepped away to head for the hallway. She didn’t reach it though, since Ollie still remained in the doorway.

“Renn...!” Ollie continued to protest, but Renn gently grabbed her by the arm. Ollie gave me a rather deadly glare, likely the worst I’d ever gotten from her, but she allowed Renn to take her away.

The two walked down the hallway, and luckily didn’t just go to another room. They actually left the house, closing the front door behind them.

Once they were gone I pulled my own chair back and went to sitting in it.

As I sat back slowly, as to not accidentally break the chair, Sillti took a seat as well. She oddly sat rather close to the table, either because she had accidentally not pulled her chair out back far enough... or because of habit. As if she was a child, afraid to make a mess or spill food.

“I’ve enjoyed talking with your wife, Vim. I... honestly always thought you some kind of god. But after talking to her, I feel like you’re more like us than not,” Sillti said quietly.

I wanted to frown at how lowly she was speaking. As if she didn’t want to be heard by anyone... but I knew that wasn’t the case. She was just... a demure person, maybe. Quiet. Reserved. Modest.

A far cry from the supposed rambunctious young man I had just executed. They couldn’t have been more alike had they tried.

“I’m happy to hear that... even if that means I’m seen as a more modest being thanks to the fact I’m married to a woman full of flaws,” I said.

Sillti startled and quickly shook her hand at me. “N-no! I didn’t mean that...!” she quickly spoke, as if to apologize for insulting Renn. Funnily enough she still spoke a little quietly. Her supposed shout had been about the typical volume and loudness as Renn’s typical inside voice. Which was honestly not that loud either.

I smiled at the worried woman. “I know. Just let me make fun of Renn when I can, would you?” I asked.

Stillti hesitated... and then smiled at me. "Oh... Yes. Oplar did mention you like to tease her," she said.

"She gets this adorable blush when I do. But don't let that fool you, she can be quite strong when on the attack herself," I said as I reached over for my cup.

I wasn't thirsty. Like always I rarely was. But I wanted to give her the illusion I was.

Taking a small drink, I pretended not to notice her relax a little. Her stiff shoulders lowered, and her whole body shrunk a bit as she slouched. "I'm sure. She... can be rather blunt. I recently experienced it myself," she said.

"About what you're about to do...? Please don't be upset with her. She has a huge heart, and likely feels terribly protective of you... thanks to all that's happened. She simply doesn't wish you to be anything but happy, is all," I said.

Sillti softly smiled. "I thought so. So her worry for me is because you killed my husband. She feels indirectly responsible for the insult, does she?" she asked herself as much as she did me.

I nodded. "She's like that. Weird huh?"

"I find that to be lovely. Most of my own family are blaming me for what happened. As if I had been the reason Rollo had been violent. Renn's the only woman so far to actually say otherwise to me," Sillti said.

Oh...? "People blame you?" I asked. That was news to me. Ash's report, and the other witness testimonies written in it, had said otherwise. They had all known of Rollo's violent tendencies, even since his youth.

She nodded. "Not... directly. But they make comments. I was the wife. The woman in the household. It's my duty to control the house, and I couldn't do it," she said, telling me what they meant.

"Hm. Hollow words said by those who can't even imagine such strife. Pay them no heed," I said.

Sillti sat up a little straighter, her eyes widening a little. "Your wife said the same thing," she whispered.

Had she...? I gestured lightly, but only to hide the smile I wanted to allow on my face.

"So... you agree with her then...?" Sillti then asked as she reached out and grabbed her cup. She didn't take a drink though, and instead simply held it. Maybe either for its warmth or just to have something to fidget with.

"Renn's opinion...? Of that man's actions not being your fault, or your decision to leave the Society?" I asked her to specify.

Sillti fidgeted a moment... and then coughed. "Well... my leaving," she said.

"Does Renn think you shouldn't...?" I asked. She had implied it, but I should verify it just in case.

She frowned a little oddly, and I noticed she had a strange way of smiling. Her lips curled a little oddly when she frowned or smiled, though likely not because of a deformity of any kind. It was just a unique trait. It was likely something a man would find cute, thanks to it being something only she had. As she pondered for a moment, her lips quivering as she searched her mind, it became all the more apparent it was mostly on her left cheek. Her left upper lip had a slightly off curl. As if she was sneering, even though she wasn't.

"She... thinks I should leave here. But not the Society itself," she finally said.

"Her perspective has a lot of justification behind it," I pointed out.

She nodded. "Yet... won't the issues just continue elsewhere?" she asked.

"What issues?"

"The drama. The snide words. The pain in my heart. The lack of sleep," Sillti listed.

I smiled softly at the poor girl, and hoped Renn didn't fall too hard for her. I was glad I had asked them to give us some privacy now.

"I'll admit you may encounter some of those, yes. But in certain ways you'll find them elsewhere too, even outside the Society..." I hesitated a moment as I studied the woman, and wondered why I couldn't remember her age. "How old are you, Sillti?" I asked.

“Oh...? Oh. Thirty two.”

So young. “Have you ever ventured out before?” I asked.

“Only three times. I’ve gone with my aunt, Ash, and others to the nearby human settlement. To trade and experience it,” she said.

I wanted to sigh, but kept it inside. Three times. It was nothing.

Sure, this village had a proper educational system. It was rather close in rules and laws of human societies, and even culturally it was similar. They wed. They had faith and religion. They had rulers and jobs...

But...

“Not enough... is it...?” Sillti then asked softly.

“No. But... that does not mean you’re not capable of going. You know of my story. My god, my faith, is that of free will. I’d not stop you even from choosing death. So long as you truly wished it. I’ll support you in any choice you make,” I told her.

She slowly nodded. "It's why you killed Vita," she said.

I nodded back. "So yes, Sillti. I support your decision. If you wish to leave the Society... feel free. I'll never stop anyone from doing so. But, if you'll hear it... I would offer a little warning and advice," I offered.

Sillti gulped and slowly nodded, accepting it.

"You can blend in with humans. You, like the rest here, are basically human in appearance. Your temperaments, your faith, your mindset... it would not take long for you to adapt out there at all," I told her.

She blinked.

"And yes, it will free you from the heartache. All the new sights, the new experiences... and the rush of danger and excitement will be a great distraction. But, and take this from not just a man who has experienced it himself but also someone who has seen it many thousands of times... it won't go away. No matter how far you run, no matter where you go or who you become... The pain you feel now will always exist. In one form or another," I said.

"Then what's the point...?" Sillti whispered as she squeezed the cup.

I raised a hand. "I'm not saying it isn't effective, though. I'm just warning you to not expect true freedom from it. You'll still feel that same ache you feel now out there. Even years later. And even if that ache did go away, somehow, you'll find it just replaced by another form. Typically loneliness," I said.

Siltilti nodded understandingly, likely already having thought of such things.

“But that’s not what I’m warning of. Your struggles of the heart are your own. I can’t understand them. No one can. Everyone deals with grief differently...” I leaned forward, to rest my arms on the table. “Just know that most who venture into the human lands end up dying within the first year. It’s that dangerous for our kind out there. Even those able to blend in,” I told her the real warning.

“I’d rather risk death than live hundreds of years here,” she said, without a moment of hesitation.

I smiled at her. “I believe you. I truly do,” I said.

Siltilti startled, and shifted as she looked down, to her hands. To the cup. I noted a tiny blush on her face as she went to take a drink, likely to hide that very blush.

Studying the blush on her face... and how quickly she got it under control, I couldn’t help but think of Renn’s face instead.

Now that was a blush.

“They don’t want me to leave,” she said after lowering her cup.

“They can’t force you to do anything,” I said.

“I’m not strong enough to defy them. I’m just one woman. A small one, at that,” she said.

I smirked at her. “I think I’ve proven rather unequivocally no number of your kind could change anything if I got involved,” I said gently.

Silti startled again, her thin shoulders jumping up... and then she laughed. “That’s so very true...!”

I nodded, glad she understood. “If you truly want my opinion... I agree with my wife. Leave this place, if you wish, but don’t abandon the Society so quickly. There are perks to it, you know? You’ve lived your whole life here in this valley. To you this place is the Society, so you see it that way, but the reality is far different. Throughout the Society are mighty differences. Different people. Different cultures, faiths, and beliefs. You’ll find people so different from you, you’d never believe it. There are even many places that not only won’t judge you for your ex-husband’s foolishness, there are plenty like Renn who will happily sit with you all night while drinking and badmouthing him for you,” I said.

She grinned at me. “I’ve never drank alcohol before.”

“See...? That alone would be enough reason for me to leave this place. I completely forgot this place didn’t have liquor,” I said.

“You like to drink, Vim...?” she asked.

“No. But I don’t like the idea of banning things,” I said.

Silti’s mouth opened a tad, but she said nothing. It was clear she completely understood my meaning right away.

“Then... where should I go...? I don’t even know where another village is, Vim,” she said as she tapped her cup.

“Depends on what you want. Do you just want to go somewhere and relax? Do you want to find another husband? Find a new faith? Do you want to go somewhere with humans or without? How do you feel about monarchs? Are you okay with the severe cold or extreme heat?” I rambled off several of the different questions one normally was asked during moments such as these.

Silti hesitated, soaking up my questions... and she slowly smiled. “I’m half tempted to say I want to experience all of that,” she said.

Ah, a traveler. Fascinating. “Then I suggest going to either Lumen or Telmik. From either of those locations you can then go elsewhere, once you truly find what you’re searching for. Plus both of them will let you adapt and learn how to truly survive amongst humans. To blend in, and learn how to hide your traits,” I said.

“Traits...? We don’t have any, anymore, Vim. You killed those who had, all our ancestors like that are gone now,” she said with a frown.

“I meant more figuratively. For instance your lifespan. You said early thirties? Yet you look like a young woman. And you will look like this for decades more. Humans will notice that. So you need to know how to properly keep people from noticing, and knowing how to see the signs to keep yourself safe for when it happens,” I said.

Silti nodded, her frown deepening in thought. That little groove of her lip became even deeper, forming a small indent near her cheekbone... a little similar to dimples, but more pronounced and not in the right spot. “Right... I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Most don’t. Not until it’s too late. My suggestion is simple. We’re to head to Telmik. Me, Oplar and Renn. I say you join us. If you’d like to, of course. Along the way you can learn from Renn and Oplar, and if at any point you encounter a location or village... Society owned or not, that you find yourself enjoying then...” I shrugged, not wanting to finish the sentence.

“And if Ash and the rest don’t allow it?” she asked me.

“And how would they do that, exactly?” I asked her.

Silti shifted, and opened her mouth to speak... but once again said nothing.

Studying her... I wondered if maybe Ash’s report had not been as... accurate as it should have been. It had mentioned, as had Renn, that she had been abused by Rollo. But maybe it was worse than they had suggested.

She seemed slow to speak her mind. And not because she didn’t want to. It was as if she thought not just twice, but thrice, before speaking. I had originally blamed her hesitation and quietness on well... me.

I was Vim. And in this village that was a problem. But it seemed she didn't mind it that deeply, likely thanks to Renn. So...

"My point was I'd not allow them to stop you, Silti. If you truly wish to leave, I'll ensure you can do so," I said, to make sure she hadn't misunderstood me.

Silti's eyes focused a little, and then she nodded. "Okay."

Okay...?

"Made your decision that quickly?" I asked.

She nodded again. "Yes. I'll come with you."

Good. Renn won't be upset, then.

Which at this point was more important than this woman's happiness... or her life even. At least to me.

Though I'd never say that to anyone. Not even Renn.

“Before I let Renn and Ollie back in... anything you want to ask, or say?” I asked her.

Siltilti perked up... pondered a moment... and then smiled. “Is it really true you killed Vita?” she asked.

I nodded. “I did.”

“Was she actually a god?” she asked.

“She created you and your people. You would not be here now otherwise,” I said.

Siltilti hesitated, and paused. She stared at me with a look of utter awe, and then slowly lowered her head... as if to bow. “Then... thank you, Vim. For saving us from her cruelty,” she whispered.

“Mhm... I suppose this is where I should apologize, isn't it?” I said softly.

She looked up at me. “For...?”

“Killing your husband. I'll not tell you I regret doing it... because it'd be a lie. I don't tolerate murderers within our society. But... all the same... I am sorry for ending your husband's life,” I said gently.

The demure woman stared at me for a long while... and then slowly smiled. She gave me the largest smile she'd shown me yet. Dimples and all.

"Don't be."

Chapter 289 To Say Goodbye

"You've never offered to carry me through the mud, Vim," Oplar said from behind us.

I smirked as I turned around, to look at Oplar... who was carrying Sillti on her shoulders much as Vim was me.

"You've never asked to be. Plus you're tall enough to not have this gunk ruin your clothes Oplar, they aren't," Vim said from beneath me.

Patting his head, I smiled at Oplar and the unsettled Sillti. She looked like she wasn't enjoying being carried by Oplar at all. "Sillti's taller than me," I reminded him.

He tilted his head in a way that told me he had either forgotten, or hadn't realized at all.

"I'd get stuck, I think," Sillti said.

"Aye this stuff is thick..." Oplar complained.

It was. Vim had called it a bog. I knew such places by the term swamp, but Vim had not used that term even though he's done so before. It meant the two were different... though...

The slush and gunk that we were walking through, or rather Vim and Oplar, was indeed thick. It had a strange dark green color, and sounded more like mud than water. The oddest part though was that although a giant lake, at least in size... there didn't seem to be many bugs or creatures. An oddity, in my opinion. Usually such large amounts of stagnant waters were full of stuff like insects.

Though that might change once it got darker. Right now the sun was high overhead, beating down upon us.

"Though, Vim, you could carry all of us couldn't you?" I asked.

"I could," Vim answered.

I grinned at the idea, and wondered how it'd work. Maybe one of us in his arms, or one per arm and another on his shoulders as I was? Or maybe...

"I'm sorry Renn, but I'd rather not," Oplar said loudly with a laugh.

"We could do it, I think. You on his shoulders, I yours and her mine," I said, amused at the idea.

“Yeah. No,” Oplar said.

Sillti’s expression told me she didn’t like the idea either. Which was too bad. It’d have worked, I think. Oplar was strong, even if she didn’t admit it.

I shifted a little as Vim stepped upward. I turned to watch as he stepped out of the sludge and onto more solid ground. It was still mushy, and he still sunk into it more than not, but he only sunk to his ankles instead of almost his knees.

“Vim... you called this place a bog?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Isn’t it just a swamp?” I asked as I glanced around.

“It is, I suppose. Swamps usually are more wooded though,” he said.

Oh. Right. There were trees, but not many. I could see for some distance. There were a few patches of trees here and there, but not so many that I’d classify this place as a forest or anything like it.

“I was told these places were called quagmires,” Sillti said.

“Fancy word,” Oplar said in a way that told me she too hadn’t heard it before.

“That’s basically what this place is. That word can also be used to describe a difficult situation. Which is what one is in when trying to cross a place like this,” Vim said.

“Difficult... but not very dangerous, I suppose,” I said. Really other than getting nasty, was there any real threat? It seemed even if the gunk was deep enough to sink into, it wasn’t thick enough to pose any threat.

“You could step on something dangerous. Or get bit by something. Or slip and drown, if clumsy,” Vim said.

“Bit by what?” Oplar asked loudly.

Turning to look at her, I smiled at her furrowed brows. She was suddenly upset.

“Have you ever ventured this way, Sillti?” I asked. Both to include her in the conversation, and to somewhat steer it away from something that Oplar seemed to dislike. Did she not like bugs...?

“No. I’ve only left the village to go north to the nearby human settlement. And I’ve only done that a couple times,” she said.

Huh...

"Most in the Society never leave their hometowns, Renn. We're the odd ones," Oplar said.

"Right..." I nodded gently. She was right, of course, I just hadn't thought about it that way.

After all most I've met and spent time with seemed... older. The type of old that basically guaranteed they had traveled the world, at least once in their life.

But there were a few who were like Silti, if I thought about it. Even Riz and Lellip, the younger members of my friends, were similar. They traveled to the nearby human towns, but no farther.

I wonder if it was because of desire or need, though.

Silti for example was only leaving because of what had happened... not necessarily because she simply wanted to.

I did not fault Silti for wanting to leave her home. I don't think I could have stayed there myself. It was one thing to lose your husband... but to lose him that way? The whole village would likely never treat her the same again. She was right to leave, in my perspective.

Though, from what I had heard she had planned to leave the Society as a whole. Not just the village. It took Ollie, Oplar, myself, and even Vim surprisingly, to convince her otherwise. Vim seemed to be under the impression she would eventually leave it anyway, likely to just... disappear one day.

I hoped that wouldn't be the case. I planned to spend as much time with her as we traveled, in hopes of making her feel comfortable. Maybe if she realized that the rest of the Society wouldn't care, or likely even know, of what happened to her at her village... maybe she'd not run away.

"How many days is it to Telmik?" Silkti asked.

Oplar scoffed. "Girl it's not even been one and you're already asking?"

Leaning a little as to study Oplar and Silkti, since they were walking behind us, I smiled as I watched the way Silkti's face contorted into worry and shame. She wanted to argue back, but was obviously afraid to and keeping silent.

"If we're where I think we are, it's a few weeks away. Though I don't know how long to add for whatever stops we make," I said.

Silkti looked at me as Oplar nodded beneath her and crossed her arms. By doing so she covered and wrapped Silkti's legs, which dangled in front of Oplar's chest. The guinea pig sat up straighter, as if startled by Oplar's actions.

"It could take us a month or two. Depends on Vim's route. There are three he can take from here to Telmik," she informed us.

Vim neither nodded nor grunted an answer, like he usually did. So I responded for him. "It sounds like a long time but it'll pass quickly. It's fun," I told Sillti.

"I'm not really doing this for fun..." Sillti mumbled as she continued to stare down at Oplar. Maybe by Oplar crossing her arms like that it was hurting her...? She didn't look in pain though, just in discomfort. Maybe she was just not used to someone holding her legs. Though it wasn't like Oplar was actually holding her legs on purpose, it was just that they were in the way.

Oplar liked to cross her arms, being so animated, and did it often. Even while walking through a bog it seemed.

Turning back around, I grinned as I leaned down a little as to whisper.

"Vim," I got his attention and patted his head.

"Hm...?"

"Cross your arms."

He tilted his head... and seemed to ponder my request for a moment. Then he went and did so.

Unlike Oplar though he had snuck his arms under my legs, forcing them outward.

I grabbed a handful of his hair, not to pull or hurt him but to make sure I didn't accidentally fall backwards. My legs sticking out thanks to his arms being under them now made me feel weird. "I didn't mean that way..." I grumbled.

Vim tilted his head some more, and then turned... to only glance at Oplar and Silti for a few moments before looking back ahead.

"I see," he said, and then adjusted his arms as to mimic Oplar.

Smiling as he crossed his arms around my shins, I felt my smile slowly die a little as he walked... and I felt...

Well...

Nothing much, really.

He wasn't squeezing very hard, and thanks to my thick clothing and leather greaves, I barely felt his touch. Other than a little pressure, it wasn't anything too special.

“What?” Vim asked after a moment.

“It’s not as fun as I thought it’d be,” I mumbled in defeat.

He sighed at me. “What’d you want me to do?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted.

“What are you two doing? Are you flirting without me?” Oplar asked loudly. She splashed a little as she picked up her pace.

Vim noticed and slowed his own to allow her to easily reach us. I smirked at them, particularly Sillti who had gone to grabbing Oplar’s shoulders desperately. She looked as if in a tiny panic, as if she was about to fall over. Maybe she had almost fallen off when Oplar originally rushed towards us. I hadn’t been looking or paying attention.

As Sillti calmed down, I patted Vim’s head. “Want to swap Sillti?” I asked.

“W-what...!?” Sillti startled, for a new reason.

I sat up a little straighter, and wondered if she had misunderstood me. “Want to ride Vim’s shoulders? We can swap if you want,” I offered again, speaking a little gentler just in case.

“She can’t be serious...” Sillti whispered.

Frowning, I glanced down to Oplar who had a huge grin. “Hear that Vim? She’d rather ride my shoulders than yours!” she teased me and Vim as she raised her voice.

Sillti’s face grew even more worried as Oplar chuckled and stepped even closer, maybe even to in fact trade us.

“She does like to experience new things. And I am boring. She just sighed at me because I hadn’t done something correct,” Vim said.

Oplar laughed, and Sillti had to once again grab Oplar’s shoulder in a desperate attempt to stay upright as Oplar leaned forward a little.

Watching Oplar laugh, and Sillti hang on for what to her was for dear life, I couldn’t help but smile at the pitiful woman.

Oplar was just too strong. She likely didn’t even notice Sillti’s weight upon her. Just as Vim likely didn’t notice mine. So her moving so naturally was a no-brainer for her... but for Sillti... well...

Poor girl. Maybe I should swap with her. Vim was actually a very stoic man, and rarely if ever made abrupt movements of any kind. He could walk calmly for days and days, always looking lazy as he did so. Plus he was rather adept at being gentle... maybe Oplar wasn’t.

"Please don't!" Sillti shouted with her tiny voice.

Oh...? I waited apprehensively to see what Oplar would do. She had just been yelled at. To be told not to move around so much.

She hated confrontation, but Oplar still had a strange attitude. So maybe she'd...

"I'd like to tease them, but you're right. Just because he's all nice to her doesn't mean he'd be nice to us," Oplar said up to her burden.

Huh...?

Sillti nodded quickly down at her. "If not him, then her. I don't need anymore jealousy in my life, please," Sillti whispered rather forcefully.

Wait... "Hold on...!" I groaned as I realized I had misunderstood what was happening.

The two glanced at me, but only Oplar grinned at me. Sillti instead abruptly became red in the face and looked away.

Embarrassment or shame, I wonder?

“I’d not get jealous...! I just suggested it myself!” I defended myself.

“Now, now, Renn. It’s okay. No need to force yourself,” Oplar continued to tease me.

“Gah...!”

Oplar chuckled as she looked up at Sillti. “I like how you think though Sillti. You’re right, Vim being jealous sounds bad but it likely wouldn’t be. He’s too old to take his jealousy out on other people. But Renn? Poor girl can barely handle the thought of being away from him for a single meal, so...” Oplar continued, and I felt my face grow a little warmer.

“That’s not what I said!” I interrupted her before she could continue.

She ignored me. “See her tail? She even wraps it around him all the time to leave her scent on him and stuff it’s quite—”

“Oplar.”

The world suddenly got very quiet.

And still.

Vim had stopped walking.

Oplar came to an abrupt stop too, and Silti's red face went pale as she stared at me. Or rather... right below me.

Glancing down, I wondered what was wrong. Had he actually taken offense to Oplar's teasing? He really shouldn't have. I had been enjoying it splendidly. It felt so good to have someone acknowledge our relationship, and take it seriously enough that she could make such jokes and...

"W-what is it Vim...?" Oplar asked with a tiny stutter.

Seeing Oplar worried made me worry even more. Just what kind of expression was on his face? I wasn't able to see it at this angle and...

Leaning forward, I relaxed a little as he pointed behind us... to a few feet behind Oplar, where some of the muddy muck was still re-settling from her footsteps.

Not far behind her was a small pouch. Slowly sinking.

“Oh shoot!” Oplar shouted as she spun around to grab at it.

As she did though Sillti almost slid off. She barely held on thanks to Oplar having the wherewithal to pay attention. She had held Sillti’s leg as she bent down to pick up the fallen pouch, and by doing so had kept Sillti on her shoulders.

“Dang. The snap broke,” Oplar said as she studied it.

“I’ll hold it,” I offered.

Vim stepped forward, sloshing through the gunk and over to Oplar. She handed it off to him and sighed. “That’s what I get for bouncing around I guess,” she said.

“It is...!” Sillti agreed.

I grinned at the two as I watched Vim shake the bag a little, as to clean it of the gunk clinging to it. Tiny little blotches of clumps of thick mud, with tiny leaves, sticks and other stuff were all over the bottom of the hand-sized pouch.

“I didn’t drop anything else did I Vim?” Oplar asked.

“Not yet, at least,” Vim said as he finished cleaning off the pouch... and then instead of handing it to me he shifted a little and went to putting it into one of our larger bags.

I grumbled, but said nothing. I had wanted to take care of it myself. It had little straps on it, which had snapped as Oplar had said, but I could have simply tied them around my waist or onto one of the many hooks on my leather outfit.

Now not only was I not going to be able to occupy my time with it, that bag was going to likely stink of this bog for some time.

Why didn't he think of stuff like that?

Oh...

I frowned as I wondered if maybe our bags didn't smell anymore either. I honestly hadn't even noticed, or tried to. I had noticed that my clothes had started to... not stink as often, or as strongly. What used to be me cleaning and washing them all the time had turned into something I only did when they actually got nasty, from extended use or moments like these when traveling through a place so filthy.

"Also, Vim, don't scare me like that. I thought you were going to yell at me for teasing our adorable cat," Oplar said with a laugh.

Sillti nodded quickly at Oplar's words.

"Your teasing wasn't working. She was enjoying every moment of it," Vim said as he returned to walking.

Oplar didn't follow right away. She simply gawked at us, and I had to look away from her in shame.

It was true.

"But she got all red in the face and everything!" Oplar said as she hurried to join us.

I kept my neck turned, away from Oplar and Sillti. I was glad that the ears on top of my head were covered in fur, otherwise they'd be burning bright red right now too.

"I'm sure she did," Vim answered blandly.

Grabbing his hair a little, I thumped him on the side with my tail. I couldn't smack his back since it was mostly covered by all the bags he was carrying underneath my bum.

He ignored me, of course, as Oplar sighed.

"My mother told me she had seen him blush once. I'm starting to wonder if I'll ever get to see it or not," Oplar said with a groan.

Turning to look at her, I stared wide-eyed at the bear who had just declared something so importantly precious. “She had?” I asked, excited to learn more.

Sillti too leaned forward, transfixed and waiting to hear more as Oplar nodded.

“Aye. She told me the whole story too,” she revealed.

Excited, I nodded and waited for her to continue.

What had it been? Where? For who? Would it bring a tear to my eye to hear about it, or will I grow upset? I couldn’t wait!

“She’s just ta—” I quickly covered Vim’s mouth, firmly stopping him from spoiling the story.

“Go ahead Oplar!” I said happily, and quickly.

Oplar paused a moment, staring at us... and then broke out into a laugh as she pointed at me. “Look at that!” she shouted.

Gah! She was going to laugh and distract herself and...!

“Stop laughing and tell the story already!” Sillti shouted down at Oplar, likewise getting upset.

Vim sighed, and I realized I could free his lips. Letting go, I patted his head apologetically.

“I feel bad now! I was just joking. Mother used the same joke on me, back then,” Oplar said as her laugh died down. Sillti and I both frowned in disappointment, and before I could say anything Oplar coughed and pointed at us... or rather Vim. “I guess not long before I was born Vim lost a bet. He allowed some of the kids to dress him all up. For some kind of festival. Basically that gave him a blush with makeup,” Oplar explained fully.

Ah...

“Really?” I asked Vim.

He nodded gently. “Yeah. But I can blush you know? It’s not like I’m some heartless machine,” he said.

“Machine?” Sillti asked.

“It’s the word he uses for complex systems. Like your waterwheels back at home,” I explained.

“Oh,” Sillti nodded, finding that to make perfect sense.

Oplar grinned at me as Sillti hummed in thought.

“What...?” I asked. Why was she staring at me like that all of a sudden? Was she going to tease me again?

“I’m just impressed. I look forward to this, Vim. Maybe I should stick with you for a few years,” she said.

I frowned at her, and wondered what she meant. Impressed by what...? What I had said? Surely she had known what the word meant too, right? It had seemed like Oplar knew of many of Vim’s odd words, from what I’d noticed... so...

“She’s teasing me now,” Vim told me.

Oplar chuckled and nodded.

“It does seem more effective,” Sillti agreed.

Did it...?

I grinned as I leaned forward to look at Vim. He glanced up at me with a tired expression, but I felt that tiredness was not from his actual exhaustion... but rather us.

Poor man. Now it wasn't just me, it was Oplar and now also another. Sillti seemed quiet, but it seemed she was quickly growing comfortable with us. She had not only participated in our recent conversations, she had even made a few quips herself.

Gently patting his head once more, I smiled as I went to ask Oplar about this dressing up she spoke of. I wanted to find out both how far they had taken it... and if I could somehow replicate it.

The bog, for all its nastiness and stink, didn't deter or stop us from enjoying our day. As we exchanged stories, and simply enjoyed the moment... I realized rather quickly that Oplar had the same intentions I did.

To do all she could to make Sillti feel as comfortable and safe as possible.

I was very glad to have realized it, and glad to know I hadn't been the only one to worry over it. I was honestly tired of sad news, of any kind, and if I found out later that Sillti truly left the Society... I'd take it very badly. Because I'd see it as a personal failure on my part.

After all I was here right now. With her. Together.

If she ended up leaving the Society, after spending weeks on the road with us, with me, then... well...

It was the same as saying that we weren't good enough. That in her eyes, we had been just as dangerous and annoying as her village had been.

And that was a very sad thought. Because that was the entire point of the Society. To be what the rest of the world couldn't be. To be what our blood related family, our nations, our people even, couldn't be.

Better.

As the day lingered, and then eventually grew old... the sky gradually became very dark. And not because it was night.

"A forest fire, maybe," I said as I smelled a scent I'd not smelled in a very long time. Maybe even decades. Although the smell of burning trees was very thick in the air, it had only just become so. The wind had shifted a few moments ago, bringing both the smell... and a thick haze our way.

I could tell that soon my eyes would start to water in annoyance. It was that kind of haze.

"Yes. And it's close," Vim said.

"Not a surprise. Didn't they have one at the Keep recently?" Oplar said from behind us.

We weren't in the bog anymore. But I was still riding Vim's shoulders, as was Sillti riding Oplar's.

Vim had simply not asked if I wanted off yet or not, so I kept indulging in him. It was growing increasingly difficult though, since I really needed to find some trees and bushes to use.

“It is the season,” Sillti added.

I hummed as I wondered what that meant. Wasn't it about to be winter? I knew we were still a month or so from it, but...

“The smells getting stronger,” Oplar complained.

And stronger it got, alongside the thicker haze in the air.

We eventually began to climb a steep hill. One that was so steep that Oplar had to put Sillti down, since she hadn't been able to properly climb it without issues while with her on her back.

Vim however simply ascended it, even though he did so at an angle where I felt ridiculous. Vim had to grab my knees, covering them with his hands, to keep them from scraping against the thick grass. That was how steep it got at the top and...

Reaching the top of the hill, and finally returning to a normal stance... Vim stepped forward a few feet as I tightly gripped his head.

Vim went still as Oplar and Sillti stepped up next to us. I stared out at the wide world... and felt tiny somehow as I took in the sight of a giant cloud of black and orange.

Half the world looked like it was aflame. Thanks to how thick the smoke was, and how late in the day it was, it was a strange sight. It was as if half the world had been become murky and thick. The setting sun showed the world around me, the hills, the mountains, the forests... but the world in front of me, for miles and miles, was just a big black cloud of ash.

“That’s... a big one,” I groaned.

“The whole mountain range is on fire,” Sillti whispered.

Studying the fire, I noticed a section that wasn’t as covered in smoke. It was a small pocket of white amongst black, with dancing oranges and red within it. The fire.

It was worrying, somehow. We were far away but... I knew forests. I knew trees. I had grown up in them. I knew how big they were, and how many there could be in a small space. From this distance that fire looked huge, and yet I knew it was far bigger than it seemed.

Those blazes and flames were likely as big as the very trees they were burning.

Such natural threats were things no one could survive if not careful.

“Oplar.”

I shifted, and glanced down.

I had not liked his tone. At all.

“Aye Vim. We’ll head south to the port city. If Hornslo is on fire too we’ll head southwest, or round it until we can,” Oplar answered without missing a beat.

“Vim...!” I grabbed at his hair and leaned forward a tad, to glare at him.

Vim didn’t look at me. Instead his eyes stayed focus on the sight before him. Far off in the distance... dead center in the fire.

“Our next location is beyond the fire. And that inferno is large enough it may well be within it, too. I can’t afford to round it slowly,” he told me.

My stomach knotted in worry as I realized I hadn’t misheard, or misunderstood.

He reached up, and two gentle but firm hands grabbed me by the waist. I was lifted, and soon my feet touched the ground for the first time in many hours.

“Vim...” I groaned as he went to unbuckling and unfastening the many bags he carried.

“You’ll all be burdened. I’m sorry,” Vim apologized as he laid the many bags he had been carrying down next to us.

Uncaring for that, I stepped forward and grabbed his arm. “Vim,” I said his name again, and he finally looked at me.

“Hm?” he smiled in a way that told me he wasn’t sure why I was suddenly fretting.

Gulping, I felt a little silly all of a sudden.

Why was I worried...?

I felt distraught. As if something horrible had just happened.

But... why? What was this worry for?

For the village in the fire? Members I didn’t know?

Us?

For him? What for?

Vim... likely didn't fear such a fire. At all.

Yet...

Letting his arm go, I stepped back a step... back to where he had placed me.

"Mhm..." Oplar hummed next to me, and I did my best to ignore her scrutinizing glare. She had leaned rather close, to study my face.

Oddly, Sillti had done the same on my other side.

"I'll verify they're safe. Once I do I'll either meet you at that port city along that huge river to the west, or I'll see you three again in Telmik when I can," Vim said.

My toes curled and tail coiled as I realized why I had felt the panic earlier. I was feeling it again.

We were about to be separated. For an unknown amount of time.

As Oplar had said earlier today, Telmik was at least a month away. Even at our pace.

And...

When Vim spoke of making sure our members were safe... He didn't just mean alive. He meant genuinely safe. For good.

Such things took time.

"Make sure you stay out of sight and mind. Sillti, please pay heed. It's easier for us to hide during moments of turmoil like this, but such chaos also brings out the worst in humans. Stay alert. All of you," Vim gently cautioned us, each of us, as he looked at all three of us. He spoke gently, but evenly. He didn't sound as if he was in a hurry, but it was clear he was.

"We're stout and hardy women, Vim! We'll be fine! Get going," Oplar said loudly, unafraid and unbothered.

She sounded so... very used to this.

“Mhm. I’ll stick with them, I promise,” Sillti too calmly answered. Even she, who had never traveled with Vim, didn’t find this odd or worrying at all.

After all... why would she?

This was the man who had killed not just her husband, but her god.

Frowning softly, I did my best to say something. To say something upbeat, and happy. A good farewell, just like they had just done.

If anyone should say it... it should be me.

Vim needed to hear it. From me. Because it was me.

Instead nothing came as I stared into Vim’s gentle eyes.

“Stand tall, Renn,” Vim then said.

I gulped as my eyes began to water, and I nodded. Before I could find it in me to say it back... Vim turned and darted down the hill. This side wasn’t as steep as the one we had just ascended, but he rushed down in such speed you’d have thought he was falling down it and not running.

“Sheesh he’s fast,” Sillti mumbled in awe.

“Aye, he’ll be in and through that fire before the nights even over. I’ve always longed for his speed,” Oplar commented.

Watching Vim run down the hill... I dedicated everything I had to not chase after him.

Why hadn’t I said goodbye? What if it's months before we see one another again?

Why had he left so quickly and readily? Without... without...

“Renn...? Dear?”

I blinked, and realized I had allowed a few tears to leak. “I’m okay. The stuff in the air is burning my eyes,” I said as I turned to smile at Oplar.

The bear obviously didn’t believe me, but she nodded anyway. “Mighty strong aint’ it? Did your home forests not have fires?” she asked, kindly allowing me my tiny lie.

“Only a few times,” I answered honestly as I glanced again at Vim.

He was off this hill and already ascending the next. He was far enough away already that I doubted he'd hear me even if I screamed.

Or well... maybe he would.

"If it's this bad here just imagine how bad it is there," Sillti said.

"Aye it's bad enough to kill, it is. Come on then. It's so massive and far away that it don't look it, but trust me that fire could be upon us before we know it if we aren't careful," Oplar said as she stepped over to grab some of the bags.

I nodded as I forced my eyes away from Vim's small figure in the distance. I went to grab the two heavier bags first, before Oplar could. I knew she was strong, but just in case we needed to really hurry and Sillti needed to be carried I wanted her to be able to do so. I could carry the woman, but I wasn't sure for how long when forced to it, nor how fast I could do so.

Sillti too accepted a few bags as we all readied to hurry away. We were mostly silent as we prepared... but my mind and heart were anything but silent.

I was upset. I was bothered by how quickly Vim had decided to act. I shouldn't be, of course... Vim seemed slow and even-paced, but when it came to moments of seriousness... he was like this. Acting without a moment's thought. He made momentous decisions just as easily as I smiled around him. As if it was the most obvious thing to do.

And it was. It was Vim's job to ensure the safety of our members. And if there was a village of our people in that fire... then...

Glancing at the black blob in the distance, I groaned as I realized I could no longer see Vim. The world had gotten dark enough, the smoke thick enough, that not even I could make him out.

"We head west. To a large river. Hornslo," Oplar told us.

"I've heard of it. Some of us go there occasionally, for one reason or another," Sillti said, excited.

"The river's big enough for small ships. So sometimes we use it for transportation," Oplar explained as the two stepped forward, to head down the hill. Towards the same way Vim had ran.

I knew we weren't going to follow him, but that it was simply the easiest and fastest way to the nearby road. I could see it even still, through the haze and darkness. But...

Usually I either followed after Vim, even if from a distance... or I simply waited for him to return.

Yet here I was... about to go a complete opposite direction. Away from him. Intentionally.

And it terrified me.

Following them, I forced myself to discard my worries.

Vim wasn't mine alone.

Don't be the jealous wife that Oplar had joked about, Renn.

Gripping one of the straps of the heavy bags, the one that was upon my back, I clenched my jaw and glared at the world around me.

Jealousy...? No. I had simply been startled.

I've become too comfortable with Vim's presence. Too used to it. Taking it as a matter of fact.

Yet the truth was... this was something that had been bound to happen, and would happen a lot throughout my life.

After all I wasn't fast enough to run alongside him. Even if I was strong enough to survive such a massive fire... I wouldn't be able to keep up with him. I not only lacked the speed, I lacked the endurance. He could run like that for days and days.

I hadn't even been strong enough to give him a smile and say goodbye.

Sighing at myself, I ignored the strange depression that tried to rise up in my heart.

Tried and failed.

Chapter 290 Bisons

Running through the embering forest, I did my best to ignore the look on Renn's face that was stuck in my mind.

She had looked terrified. Shocked. Hurt.

Why...?

Because once again our people were in danger...?

Because I had not invited her to join me?

Was she upset I had not kissed her goodbye...?

"Vim...!" I chastised myself as I leapt over a charred log. It didn't have any flames upon it, but the heat it was radiating stung my lungs as I breathed the air around it in.

As I landed back onto the hard ground covered in ash, I kicked up burning cinders as I picked up my pace.

I wasn't far now. A few hours and I'd reach their mountain. The little groove with a small waterfall, and trees with huge roots. The type that made traversing even a trodden path difficult.

Glancing at the burning, and burnt, trees around me as I ran... I realized those trees and their roots were likely gone now.

This fire had been thorough. The few trees still standing were only charred remains. Most had already fallen over, too brittle even after being scoured.

As I ran through smoke and flames, I found my mind drifting back to Renn and her expression.

That look confounded me. It bothered me. Far more than I should be allowing it.

But why...? What had happened? What had been wrong? Had this fire reminded her of something? Had someone said something that I hadn't heard? I had been noticing that lately I've been a little... distracted.

I've always been a little inattentive. Even from my youth. But it's gotten worse. I've noticed that I've even ignored Renn on a few occasions, getting lost in thought and...

A huge tree collapsed in a billow of smoke and ash in front of me. I didn't hesitate nor slow as I ran right through. I jumped over the larger trunk, and through the thicker branches still burning. They cracked and shattered as if made of glass as I ran through them, scattering the fires and embers all over in the process.

Maybe I was just getting old. Too old. I mean... I was. Even I didn't know how old I was anymore.

Maybe that was what was wrong with me. My exhaustion. Wounds reopening without reason. My mind going dull occasionally.

Maybe I was just growing old.

I scoffed and regretted it as hot ash filled my lungs. I groaned as I slowed a tad in my running, as my lungs immediately began to heal and expunge the burnt flesh and smoke. I spent a good few dozen steps spitting out clumps of blood and flesh.

See? I knew better than to inhale while inside a fire. This always happened when I did. It was annoying, not to mention it hurt and made everything taste like burnt toast for weeks and...

I picked up my pace as my lungs stopped protesting, or rather I got used to it, and I made sure not to take anymore deep breaths for awhile. I could force my lungs to adapt, by taking many long deep breaths, but it was a painful process and all it would do is cause me to have to have them adapt again once I entered a breathable location... which... well...

Should be soon...?

I frowned as I ran through a patch of not yet burned thickets and briars. They were smoldering, but not aflame or ash. The large pocket of green amidst the red and black of the world was an odd sight. I did my best to round the edges of the pocket of undamaged nature, but wasn't able to completely. It was large enough that rounding it completely would have added miles to the distance I needed to run.

Running through the still alive, but dry, bushes and shrubs, I wondered how big this fire was.

I'd been running for what felt like an hour or two already. And at this pace that was quite a distance. Especially since thanks to the fire the land was relatively easy to traverse. What few things, like this current patch of nature I was in, that still existed weren't enough to really slow me down or hinder me.

I was at least two mountains away from where I'd left Renn and the others. Likely the equivalent of many days worth of travel for Renn and I when walking leisurely. I was likely fifty or more miles into this inferno, yet I was still surrounded by flames and smoke.

Leaving the patch of un-burnt nature, I returned to running through charred trees and smoldering grass and shrubs.

I knew forest fires, under the right conditions, could move quickly. Some could spread as fast as I could run. So I wasn't surprised to have ran so far, and still be engulfed in flames or surrounded by still burning trees.

But I was surprised over the fact that it felt as if the fire was still in its prime.

Usually during fires such as this, once you delved deep enough into them, you started encountering pockets without such flames. Large sections, either already burnt, or like that patch of nature behind me. Places that the flames just seemingly ignore, or simply haven't gotten to yet.

Yet that had been the first and only patch I'd seen so far.

As if this fire had some kind of accelerant or something. Which... really shouldn't be possible. At all.

I slowed a little as I noticed movement ahead of me.

A pair of large deer were running. Bounding over burning bushes and through the flames. I watched them for a moment before picking up my pace. They left my sight rather quickly, thanks to my speed and the fact we were heading different directions.

Hadn't mother told me a story about deers in a fire? Or was it a fox?

The next hour of my running was filled with me trying to remember the story that those fleeing animals had reminded me of. I failed to do so, but it at least kept my mind off Renn and that blasted expression.

Really. What was I going to do with her?

I suppose I could ask her. Thanks to her precise memory she'd likely remember full well her emotions, thoughts, and everything else about that moment. I could ask her why once I saw her again. She'd probably smile at me as she remembered and retold it to me.

I liked that idea. She'd likely find it very heartwarming that I'd want to know such a thing. Hopefully whatever had given birth to that expression hadn't been anything too bad...

Though who knows how long it'd be until I saw her again as to ask such a thing.

I slowed as I neared a large river. One that split a blaze of strong fires in two, but not entirely. Some trees had collapsed and fallen thanks to the fires, and landed in the river. Some of them were so hot that they still burnt even while in the river. All up and down the river, when I could see it through the smoke, I could make out patches of sizzling steam and boiling water. From what were basically now coals being dumped into it, by the embering logs.

Stepping up to the side of the river, I tried to remember where I was. Their home had been near a river, but it had also been near a small waterfall. An inlet type of grove, sandwiched between too large mountain steps. The kind that were too heavily wooded and rocky for humans to even go near, let alone cross or ascend.

Right now though I could not see those mountains. Thanks to the fires and smoke.

But...

Staring down at the fast moving water, I studied the debris within it. Most of the river looked oddly clear and clean, as if completely unbothered by the chaos around it. But there were the occasional chunk of debris, or splotches of black ash, that passed by as to remind oneself that even such a pure river could be tainted by the fires around it.

The water was flowing to my right. Downward a little.

I was off. Likely thanks to my mind wandering as I ran. I should have approached their home from the east, not the south.

No matter.

I was going to leap over the river, but paused a moment as I glanced down at my body.

Patches of my clothes were now frayed and singed. A few were burning lightly even now.

Right.

Stepping into the river, I quickly submerged myself as I simply walked across it. It was indeed a fast moving river, and surprisingly cold. But that was likely because of how hot the air was, not because the river itself was genuinely cold right now.

It didn't take long for me to cross the river by walking along its bottom, and upon exiting the river and stepping back onto burnt ground I re-entered the flames.

My now soaked clothes and body sizzled as I ran through them, running somewhat along the river, upwards towards its source. I knew if I followed it until I reached small ponds, basically little lakes, I'd be able to turn and then quickly find their village.

Hopefully I'd not find them, though. I was close enough now that I knew there was very likely no chance that their home hadn't already been ravished by the flames.

Hopefully they had escaped. But where to? It can't have been too far. This fire was likely only a few days old at best. But they likely wouldn't have gone to any of the nearby human settlements...

If they had not gone to any of the nearby towns, I'd likely be very hard pressed to find them. Their family was a small one. Five people, or was it six? Plus they could blend in with humans if they needed to, as well, even though they didn't like humans at all.

They did believe in the same religion as those in Telmik, though, so they might eventually head that way... maybe...

Running through some larger trees, that weren't burning too strongly, I finally found the first of the many ponds I remembered from my prior visits.

They looked strangely tiny surrounded by fire and smoke, but I chalked that up to the lack of density around them. This area used to be full of foliage, and most if not all of those thick roots that extruded above ground were mostly gone too.

Running along the pools, I eventually reached what could only be the remains of a massive tree. It was smoldering something fierce, with great heaps of black smoke billowing from it. Odds are there were pockets of sap burning within it, and doing a mighty fine job of it too.

I rounded the tree and tried to recreate my steps. From the pools, to the large tree, to...

Here.

I squinted through the smoke, with burning eyes, and saw the first sign of something man-made.

Or well. Bison made.

A half burnt fence, only still visible thanks to the metal spikes that had held it up, surrounded a... strangely not as burning farm as I had expected.

A few of the buildings still stood, though had already been swept by the fire. The wooden walls and that still stood were charred and smoking. Their roofs had collapsed inward, and...

Stepping past the fence, through what had been a large pasture... I came to a dead stop in the center of fresh grass.

I stared down at the large circle of untouched grass. It was at least fifty or so feet wide, and it was strangely eerie how the grass went from fresh and green to burnt and black, or no grass at all, just beyond the circle.

“Baren!” I shouted loudly as I studied the circle.

How was this possible? Patches of undamaged grass, even trees, were to be expected. I had ran through a few on the way here. I had indeed thought it odd how few there were, but...

Stepping out of the circle, I did my best not to think too deeply about how perfect the circle was. Not a blade of grass was out of place. It was as if someone had erected some kind of dome over this section, and not only had not the fires been able to penetrate it... neither had the ash or smoke. There wasn't even a hint of burnt ash upon the grass either.

I forced my attention away from the uncanny circle and stepped towards the buildings. The ones still standing, and the ones completely collapsed into rubble.

“Baren! Klamma!” I shouted louder, even though to do so I had to take a deep breath. My irritated lungs and throat were paid no heed as I continued to shout their names.

A part of me wanted to hear them respond... but most of me hoped they wouldn't.

They weren't the brightest of people, but they had been good and stout. Hardy. Klamma especially. She had endured hardship before. She and her family should have noticed the danger before it had

approached, and acted appropriately... I honestly had little doubt that Klamma had kept her family safe. She has kept them safe for hundreds of years thanks and...

As I continued to shout loudly, I entered the second largest building. The home. It had been a single story house, but the roof had been thick and heavy. It had collapsed inward, in typical burning down fashion, and so I could only enter to a certain point. It wasn't actively on fire, but there were still sections smoking and it was of course very hot.

Looking around the home, I studied the debris. The charred remnants of a house and searched not just for the remains of people but...

I shifted as I kicked over a large beam. It cracked and pushed aside as to give me more space. It billowed up a plume of smoke and ash, but I ignored it as I stepped through it and deeper into the smoldering house.

"Damn," I coughed.

There didn't seem to be any obvious bodies, not even bones, but there was definitely the remnants of personal affects. Clothes. Bedding. Dressers and other such furniture were half burnt through, and their remaining forms told me that they had likely been full at the time of their burning.

So if the bison family had escaped, they hadn't had the time to take much of their stuff it seemed.

Which was worrying. Forest fires could indeed spread quickly, especially an inferno like this, but these weren't humans. They would have smelled it on the wind no matter how fast it had approached...

I quickly left the building and went to the largest building nearby. The barn had utterly collapsed around itself, with only one section of a single wall still standing. It was the only building still burning, and I tried to smell through the smoke and hot air for any signs of the smell of burnt meat.

All I smelled was charred ash. My nose was useless at the moment. Though as I breathed it'd not be long until I adjusted and...

Pausing a moment to scan the collapsed barn, I was glad to not see any obvious remains of farm animals.

Maybe they had escaped to safety then, if they had freed their livestock before doing so. If the fire had approached so rapidly that it had overtaken them, you'd think there would have been animal corpses in the barn too and...

A heavy huff drew my attention away from the barn. It hadn't come from me, and it had been rather distinguishable. I stepped out of the rubble and frowned at the sight of a massive bison.

The huge animal slowly walked over to the circle patch of fresh grass, and I shivered a little at the odd absurdity of the sight.

A bison. Standing in a circle of fresh, healthy, grass... surrounded by smoldering ruins and a forest fire.

Walking over to the large creature as it lowered to the ground and sat down, I wondered where it had been. Its massive frame looked relatively unharmed, all things considered, but some of its thick and shaggy hair looked singed and burnt.

“You should have ran, plains dweller,” I said to it as I patted its mighty shoulder. It was larger than most, even as it settled down onto the fresh grass it was still almost as tall as me.

It paid me practically no heed as it lowered its mighty head, but not to graze. It instead let out a really heavy sigh of relief, and I realized the sad fact that it was likely suffocating, and its lungs had likely been damaged. It was wheezing heavily, and it sounded very strained even for a creature of its size.

I glanced around at the surrounding fires and burnt forest, and wondered how far away it had been. Maybe it had been lying nearby and heard me shouting? It most likely had.

Klamma and her family did indeed tend bison, but they were not farm animals. They were wild grazers, who they only tended from a distance. They didn't keep them in pens or barns.

Honestly if it didn't die of suffocation, it might just live through this. Most of the denser stuff around here had already long been burnt. The fires that were left were small patches, and not as intense. The air quality was the more pressing concern here. If it remained in this little patch of grass overnight or for a day or two, and got lucky, it might just survive...

Where had been the well? Between the barn and house, right? I couldn't see it. I couldn't remember if I had helped them build it with stone or wood, but it didn't matter. Odds are I'd not find a bucket around here, but maybe I'd be lucky and the bucket inside the well was still intact. If it was I'd be able to leave this creature with at least a few gulps before I left.

I'll do so after checking the rest of the buildings and the surrounding areas first. To just be sure. I didn't think they were here. I had not seen any bodies, not even the burnt remains of their livestock. If I was lucky my hopes would be proven right, and Klamma and her family had escaped.

Though...

Glancing down, and around me and the creature, I once again felt uncomfortable at the sight of the perfect circle of fresh grass.

Just how had this come to be? Even if I created some kind of fountain sprinkler, would it have protected grass like this from such a raging fire? I understood small patches surviving out of pure happenstance, but such a perfect circle...? While surrounded by burnt ash?

The bison let out a deep groan of a noise. One of discomfort.

I wanted to make a similar sound, and not just because of the situation.

Patting the beast, I sighed.

"I had wanted to find bison, but not in this form."