

Non Human 291

Chapter 291 A Hazy Road

The boat lurched as the man pushed against the riverbank with his long pole.

I waved lightly to the family as they waved back. They floated away for a moment, and then got caught by the river's current. The boatman helped the boat along by also pushing off the bottom of the river with his long pole.

"That was nice of them," Silti said softly as we watched them float away.

"Most people become very charitable during such tribulations," I said.

"Humans especially," Oplar agreed.

Silti shifted a little as I turned to look up the hill nearby. On top of it was a road, one that would lead us to the village that was a little north of here.

We had actually reached it earlier in the day, but had approached from the other side of this river. The bridge to the village had been destroyed, somehow, and we had no way to cross without swimming. Although I would not have minded it, Oplar was adamant that we didn't do such a thing. We were carrying stuff that we couldn't risk for no good reason in the waters.

Yet a few hours later, as we traveled south along the riverbank away from the fires in the distance, which boat and the family upon it had offered to help us across. It had been a kind gesture from a family that had been recently uprooted and lost everything.

Their boat had been rather small, and packed full. It had been so overburdened that it had taken two trips for us to be taken across the large river, thanks to how heavy the stuff we were carrying was. And how there had been three of us.

It had taken the good portion of half an hour to get it done, from introductions to waving goodbye. Although the fires in the distance weren't traveling fast enough to have put the family in danger...

Yes. It had been a kind gesture. They hadn't even accepted any of the coins I had offered as thanks. They had refused firmly, likely thinking that we like them had lost everything... and needed the money to survive.

"Are we going back north? Isn't the fire approaching there?" Sillti asked as we ascended the hill to the road.

"Yes. We promised Vim we would wait there for him," I said.

"Aye. Plus the river will help deter the fire. It can cross it, but not easily, especially since most of that side is plains lands," Oplar said as we reached the road.

Glancing up and down the road, I frowned at the lack of people upon it. We had noticed quite a few people traveling on this road when we had been walking on the other side of the river originally. Pretty much all of them had been heading southward, like us, likely in escape of the incoming fires... but...

The road was now empty. I wonder why. It was midday, so it wasn't like it was that late.

Maybe most of the people around here had already evacuated south or west? I wasn't sure how far the fires went, but based off the smog in the air it had to be quite a distance. Not only was there a deep haze all around, the very air was hot. It made me sweat, even though I knew it should be a little chilly right now.

A tiny splash drew my attention back to the river. It hadn't come from the boat or the family upon it, they were now farther away, but I couldn't make out the source. Maybe a fish or something had made it.

"I didn't realize there were other Society locations so close. Are there more around here?" Sillti asked as we three began to head for the nearby village. It wasn't visible from here, and not just because of the smoke in the air. Although the other side of the river were mostly flat plains, this side had rolling hills that were rather large. We'd not have been able to see it from here even if the air had been clean and clear.

"There are a few, but none near enough to worry over the fire. Like your home, it's far enough away and through those rocky mountains. I bet it'll be fine," Oplar said.

I glanced at Sillti who perked up a little at the mention of her home, and I realized something interesting.

She hadn't even considered her home might be in danger of the fires.

Was that simple innocence, or...?

“Though fires that large can sometimes last a long time. My mother wrote about a firestorm. One that had lasted for months, supposedly. I’m not sure where it had been, but it’s hard to imagine how big and strong such a fire could have been,” Oplar said.

A firestorm...

“I’ve been told about how the churches of the humans had burnt many of us. It’s hard to imagine such a death,” Sillti wondered.

“Oh they did far worse than just burn us. But they do the same to themselves too. I hear in the south they’re slaughtering and burning anyone who even looks remotely sick, is that true Renn?” Oplar asked.

“Huh? Oh...” I nodded. “There were places doing that, yes.”

“Sick...?” Sillti asked.

“Oh. There’s a plague going around. Keep an eye on who you go near, don’t eat anything given to you without care and definitely don’t go sleeping with anyone for awhile. Human men can be nasty,” Oplar warned her.

Sillti stopped walking, which made me stop too as to stare at her shocked expression.

Uh-oh. Had no one told her that there was a disease going around...? I mean... it had somewhat slipped my mind too, since the last few places we'd visited hadn't been affected by it, but...

"Do... do you two actually do that?" Sillti then asked.

Oplar stopped walking too. She turned to glance at Sillti, and then glanced at me. I could tell that like me, she hadn't understood Sillti's question.

"Do what...?" I asked.

"Just... sleep with random men? Is that a thing? Really? And with humans too?" Sillti asked.

Oplar responded first, by laughing her butt off, and I couldn't help but grin at her too. So that was what had shocked her so badly, not the plague or danger but what Oplar had said earlier... likely as a joke, if not even without such intention at all.

"She's shocked!" Oplar said between laughs.

I smiled at Sillti who went red in the face. "Some of our people do, I think... but no. Most of us don't. I think a majority of the Society are too scared to get as close to humans as that in the first place, let alone have such desires," I said.

She seemed to calm down a little as she nodded at me. Oplar on the other hand continued to laugh. "And you! Answering her so seriously!" she pointed at me as she spoke.

I frowned at my friend who really did have an odd sense of humor. "What...? There are, Oplar. Look at Kaley," I said.

Oplar slowly stopped laughing as she realized what I meant, and then crossed her arms and nodded. "Oh. Yeah. I guess there are, huh."

"Kaley?" Sillti asked as we three returned to walking.

"A member that lives on the western coast. She's... what some would call frisky," I said.

"Frisky," Oplar snickered at me.

"Most members are either religious, or some form of it. They belong to one-on-one relationships, kind of like how your village handles it," I said.

"It's called being monogamous. It's not just a religious thing, either... but I suppose it is one of the core tenants being pushed by most of them nowadays," Oplar added.

Oh? A new word. Interesting.

“Are there any of our kind with multiple partners, Oplar?” I asked. I’d not known or noticed any.

“Hm...? A couple. Not far south from Tor is a village of bunnies. There’s only one man there, and I know for a fact at least five women share him maybe more. There used to be a weird village a long time ago to the east, that didn’t even have the idea of marriage or relationships. I’m told only Vim was willing to go there, that even those like Landi found it weird. They didn’t even wear clothes,” Oplar said.

Silti made an odd noise as I giggled. “To have bothered even Landi is quite telling,” I said.

“Aye, right!” Oplar agreed, laughing.

Smiling at the information, I tucked it away as to tease Vim and ask about it later. How interesting.

Though... it was sad to hear her speak of it in a past-tense kind of way. The meaning was obvious, but... well...

I really wish it wasn’t so common.

“There’s a few other places and people that are odd... but most nowadays are normal folks. Or well, normal to us. Some of the far eastern pagans have the concept of polygamy, a few of the older members don’t see anything bad with sleeping around with whoever they want and such, but yeah... most are normal,” Oplar continued to explain for both me and Sillti.

I kind of wanted to ask who those members were, but decided against it. In all honesty it was kind of a personal matter, and didn’t bother me, so I shouldn’t pry.

“Is it... difficult to find a partner?” Sillti asked carefully after a moment of silence.

I did my best to not glance at her, since I knew her question had been one she’d been waiting to ask for a long time.

“For some. I’ve been looking for almost forty years,” Oplar said honestly.

Forty...? Such a long time... yet for some reason I had thought it had been longer.

“And you have Vim,” Sillti said softly.

“I just found him, in that sense... I had been searching for at least a century I suppose, before that,” I said. It wasn’t the total truth, honestly... I hadn’t actually been on the hunt for a partner in that sense, but now that I thought about it... it was true.

I just hadn't realized it, I think. I had been searching for someone like Vim. Though if I hadn't found Vim, I would have been more than happy to just have friends too.

"Vim did say it would be difficult," Sillti mumbled.

"Hm...? For you? Not likely, Sillti. You're not a predator. Plus you're beautiful, and dainty. You're as pretty as Renn, but without all the sharp nails and teeth," Oplar said.

"Huh?" I perked up at her comment and wondered what that meant.

"Is it easier for us then...?" Sillti asked, completely ignoring what she had said.

"It is. But that's more so because there aren't many predators in the first place. As far as I'm aware there are less than a dozen male predators of age in the Society that aren't married or anything. So for us it's more a problem of a lack of inventory than anything else," Oplar said.

Lack of inventory... what a way to say it. That felt like something Brandy would have said.

"Hum... is that why you chose Vim, Renn? Not much else to pick from?" Sillti asked me.

Although kind of happy to have this conversation, I still felt weird as I glanced at the gentle-smiling woman. She really did seem to have no ill-intent behind her questions, but it still felt... a little strange. She was supposedly mid thirties, yet sometimes I felt as if I was talking to someone much younger.

Though maybe I shouldn't think that way. It might also be due to the fact that so many I've been hanging out with recently have been not just older, but even older than me... so I just needed to once again get used to those who were young and full of questions.

"I'll be honest I'd have chosen Vim no matter who or what he was. Even if he had been human, I'd likely have picked him," I said.

"Geh... Renn, I love to listen to you flirt but hearing stuff like that just makes me sick," Oplar complained.

"What...? Why?" I asked, offended.

"He's not handsome enough for that. If you take all his special quirks away, make him human or something, then he's just... well..." she shrugged at me, not wanting to say more.

I huffed. "Next time we see someone you consider sexy please point them out, so I can see what you find appealing. Maybe I'd be able to understand you better, then," I said.

Oplar laughed and nodded. "Will do!"

"Oh...! I want to do that too," Sillti joined in.

"Aye! While we wait for Vim let's prow!" Oplar declared.

Prowl...! "You just warned us against doing such a thing!" I shouted.

Oplar laughed. "This and that are different! I kind of want to see what she'd find attractive too, now that she's out of her pen!" Oplar said.

Pen...? "What do you mean by that?" I asked carefully.

Sillti stayed silent as Oplar glanced at me, and then turned her head to look over her other shoulder at Sillti. "Well... I mean... not to be rude, Sillti, but your husband had been very unattractive. He had a nice facial structure, but ruined it with his mess of a beard he couldn't grow, and the rest of him...?" Oplar shrugged as she spoke.

I panicked a tad, to hear her speak so of a man just recently passed, her husband no less. But upon looking over at Sillti, I found her smiling warmly. "He had been ugly, yes."

"Most men in your village are, to be honest. They're all either tall and skinny, or rotund like Thrain," Oplar said.

Right... she was right. They had even all kind of looked the same too, with similar hair colors and stuff.

"How about you Renn? Did you find Rollo attractive?" Sillti asked me.

“You’re asking her...? Have you seen what she sleeps with every night?” Oplar teased me with a snicker.

“To be honest I had been interested too, Sillti. You’re... actually very pretty. So I had been surprised to see him. I had expected someone... well...” I hesitated, and felt horrible for saying it... even if I hadn’t outright said it aloud.

“Hm... it makes me hopeful. It means there must be plenty of good men in the Society to pick from. I look forward to it,” Sillti said happily.

Oplar snickered and chuckled, and I worriedly looked away.

Was there...? I mean... yes. There were a few men who were good looking, like Gerald, but...

Well...

Most I’d found ugly, myself.

But... well...

Maybe that was just my own personal preferences. After all it was mighty clear that most saw Vim as average at best. Which was surprising, since so many more people seemed interested in him than I had first thought.

Ollie had been a taller woman, with a stern gaze... but she hadn't been ugly at all. I had enjoyed spending time with her, even if she spent most of that time badmouthing Vim. She hadn't been too rude about it, but she had been a little bitter to have been so readily ignored it seemed. I had allowed, and understood it, so hadn't allowed myself to get bothered by it. Hopefully next time I visit the Summit she and I could talk more about other things.

Although... a little odd to think... I found myself rather interested in those who also found Vim attractive. It was like finding someone with the same interests and hobbies. We both really liked the same thing, so... we should be friends.

At least that was how I was trying to handle it. I still wasn't entirely sure how to face Merit once I saw her again. I felt horrible now that I knew about her affection towards Vim... and just how long it had lasted.

Hundreds of years was a daunting thought. To go that long without any kind of recompense... and in Merit's case, it had even been that long before Vim even actually realized her feelings existed.

Granted one could argue it was Merit's fault, for not just telling the man, but... well...

I knew Vim well enough to know that Merit had likely tried many times, in her own ways, to make him realize her feelings. Vim however wasn't just oblivious... he was indifferent. He was so indifferent to Merit that he had simply not noticed at all.

It was actually a little concerning. It meant Vim had not seen Merit as important enough to really pay attention to. Or maybe it was the opposite...? Maybe he had seen her like a child, or something, thanks to her size?

I really should talk to him about it.

Sillti coughed as a light wind blew some hot air passed us. The haze grew more intense, growing thicker, thanks to the wind. You'd think a heavier wind would clean the air out, but not in this case. It likely meant the fires were so massive that there was no clean air anywhere to swoosh around us.

Shifting a bag, I hoped wherever we ended up tonight had a bath. I really, really, needed one. Between the heat and the gunk in the air I felt nasty.

Oplar had called this village Hornslo. On the other side of the river it hadn't looked that big... but it was still a village. It was likely home to a few thousand people, at best. But the river it rested upon was a large one. Big and deep enough to allow good fishing and trade. It hopefully meant there would be a nice inn or something to stay at while we were there.

"By the way did you two know Ollie had liked Vim?" I asked.

Oplar and Sillti both laughed.

Chapter 292 Another Legend Born

The air was cooler up here. Fresher. The slight chill it enveloped my lungs in as I inhaled felt good, especially now that my lungs were done trying to adapt to the fires.

Some of the rocks shifted as I reached over to grab another craggily extrusion. I used it to lift me up farther, and then another grab was all it took to reach the top. I clambered up over the edge of the cliff and sighed as I stood up on top of the vantage point.

Turning around, I scanned the wide world around me. The mountain I had just climbed was a rather thin one, but tall. I was far above the treetops, even the trees that were still lively and not smoldering cinders.

The world was an odd sight at the moment. One half of it was charred and blackened. The other side was a myriad of colors, ranging from a deep green to a similar burnt orange and brown as the other side.

Fall was here.

I took a deep breath of the fresh air once again as I scanned the world... searching for any signs at all.

There had been a some tracks not far from the burning bison village. Just a single set of feet, but they had stood out. Some of the burnt grass and ground had been... squished in an odd way. The type of way that told me that the fire had not burnt those sections after someone had walked there, but instead someone had walked there after the fires had finished.

Someone, a person with human styled feet, had walked through the field behind the bison's home. After the initial waves of flames had done their worst.

The bison were rather human looking. The only non-human traits they had anymore were tiny little horns on the sides of their heads. They were small enough that just a little bit of grown-out hair could hide them. So I wasn't too outright worried just yet over those footprints.

I was hoping they were just the bison's footprints. So I was on the hunt for them.

They had led westward. I'd only been able to follow them for a few hours before losing them completely... but I was still heading in the direction they had been going. It was later in the day, and I was hoping that I'd...

I blinked as I found it. A strain of white smoke coming from a section of the nearby forest. About three or four miles away. Not too far from the next mountain range. It was a white plume of smoke not too unlike some of the strands still coming from the section of already burnt forest... but it was alone in a dense section of fresh and healthy trees. Far from any potential fires. In fact most of the burnt forest nearby was no longer on fire at all. Even the smoke and ash had settled, for the most part.

A campfire.

It of course could be anyone. Hunters. Humans on the road, escaping the flames. It could even be a small cabin. A small brush fire, even. But...

Glancing around for any other signs of people, of any form, I spent a good few minutes to make sure there were no other immediate signs. I saw no other obvious inclinations of any nearby people other than the campfire.

That smoke was indeed in the direction the footprints had been going...

Leaping off the sharp stones, I felt the cold air rush around me as I fell to the ground. The cliff wall I had just climbed blurred past me, and as I fell I felt the air grow warmer and warmer... and then I landed on hard rock and soil.

The impact was loud, and kicked up a huge puff of ashy dust, but I ignored it and ran forward. Running towards the direction I had seen the campfire smoke, I hurried with all my might.

It could be the bison family. We weren't that far from their home, nor the fires... but their family wasn't a big one. They might be traveling with small children... or livestock even. So they might be traveling slowly, carefully. Wisely.

Klamma was a cautious woman, so she would have them constantly on the move but also stopping to rest when needed...

Picking up my pace, I ran through a new form of forest. What before was one without shrubbery, and had been a rather flat area, was now a rolling hill forest with thick bushes and foliage. The perfect kind of underbrush for a forest fire.

It was strange that the fire hadn't consumed this forest too. Though, maybe it would eventually once the winds changed.

Or well... it likely also wouldn't. Up above, even above the dark smog, were clouds. Dark clouds were gathering from the north, heading downward with a heavy pressure.

It would soon storm. Harshly. It was a good thing. It'd not only put out the remaining fires, it'd clean the world of ash and soot. It'd allow the nutrient heavy ash to be soaked and absorbed, and would then give birth to even lush forests and lands...

But those storms would just make it more difficult for me to track down the bison family. I had two or three days left at most. If this wasn't them...

Nearing the campsite earlier than I expected, I slowed as I turned directions a little. I could smell whatever they were cooking upon a fire. It stunk; the stink pierced even the heavy and thick air of burnt forest. They were cooking some kind of fish. Likely a bottom feeder.

I had misjudged a little. I would have run right past them if I hadn't smelled them. Not something I commonly did, maybe I was tired. I was usually very good at judging distances and locations...

I pondered my own body as I slowly approached them. I didn't want to rush too quickly. They were cooking, so it wasn't like they'd run off anytime soon. Even if they were the bison family they'd likely not notice my approach, but I wanted to be sure just in case.

Walking through the dense forest as I neared the campsite, my assumptions and hopes quickly dwindled as I both listened to the voices... and smelled the people.

They weren't the bison family.

Not only did they stink of humans, terribly unwashed ones, they didn't have the bison family's accents. They spoke like the humans did around this region. This land of hills and steppes.

"Calm down now, else no dinner!" a woman yelled, and I smiled.

A mother scolding their child. No matter how long it's been... A mother was always the same.

I sighed as I paused behind some thicker trees. I was close enough that I could now somewhat see them. I peered around one of the trees and confirmed what my ears and nose already knew.

It looked like a smaller family. Maybe half a dozen people. A couple kids. There were some donkeys, and near the edge of their camp was a small stack of crates and boxes. The goods and items the donkeys had been carrying.

Likely not traveling merchants. They looked far too poor, and the kids were telling.

These were survivors. Fleeing the fires.

Leaning away, I rested against the huge tree I was hiding behind.

What now...? I couldn't track the family by using smells or sight. The air was a mess thanks to the fires. Even if in a few hours my lungs and nose would return to normal, it would not help much. And then once the storms hit tracking them would become even more difficult.

I could run to the next larger mountain range and climb up one again, to try and search for any hints or signs of them... but...

Such things were difficult. We were now talking many hundreds of square miles, most of it now thick forest. And the bison family weren't humans. They did have a unique smell, that I'd catch once I drew close enough, but it wasn't strong enough to linger and allow me to track them thanks to it.

"Wipe your hands off, look at you," the mother continued to chastise the child, but I could hear the love and affection in her voice. She sounded exhausted as she cleaned off her child.

About to step away, as to leave the family alone, I hesitated as I thought of something.

It'd disturb them... but...

Taking a small breath, I stepped around the tree and slowly approached the campsite.

I made sure to walk as slowly, and as noisily as I could. I made sure to step on a few dried branches, and through some noisy bushes. One of the donkeys noticed my approach first, making a small huff at me. With my noisy approach and the donkey's glare, the family noticed me too.

They were all sitting around a large campfire. One with a cauldron looking pot boiling above the fire. I counted a quick eight people, four adults and four children of varying ages.

There were two full grown men, who both quickly stood wearily at the sight of me.

Neither looked like warriors, but they were still stocky fellows. They were all dressed in leather, and looked dirty. A few even still had stains of ash upon their faces, which confirmed my suspicions. They had been fleeing the fires.

“Who goes there?” one of the men asked loudly as they all looked past me.

They expected more to step out from the forest. More than just me.

The two men were on guard. The two women, both of them sitting on a fallen log, had a haunted look on their faces. One was clinging to a young boy, shielding him from me, and she had a cloth in her hands. That was likely the one who had spoken earlier.

I smiled gently as I raised my hands. “I apologize for intruding during your dinner. I’m from a smaller village a ways south, Me and my family got separated this morning thanks to all the smoke.”

The very noticeable relief that washed over the group, even the children, was palpable. One of the men who had tightly gripped the knife he had been using to cut a carrot relaxed so much it had nearly slipped from his grip.

I coughed, and hadn’t needed to fake it. Although nearly completely healed and re-adapted to normal air, the tinge of burnt flesh still lingered inside of me. I gestured at myself, and didn’t need to look down

to know that my appearance had very likely helped out in calming them down. I knew I did look like I hadn't just got caught in the fires, but had been burnt up myself. I could feel all over my body patches of exposed skin, being touched by the cooler air. The fires had burnt and scorched a lot of me.

"I only wish to know if any of you had seen anyone else? Or possibly know of any large rivers or lakes they might be traveling alongside?" I asked.

One of the women shifted a little as she relaxed. "We did see another family this morning," she said.

The taller of the two men glanced at her, and then nodded as he remembered. "We did. Around Peak Mountain, heading northward," he said.

Peak Mountain... Likely the mountain range to the north of here. "Is that the mountains just that way?" I asked with a point towards the donkeys, which was to the north.

"The top of the peak is flat as can be, that way," the other man said with a point in the direction I had just come from.

Oh. The one I had just climbed. Made sense, it was almost like a plateau up there. The peak, huh? Interesting. I had thought the other mountain range had been taller, but maybe to humans it wasn't.

"They're the only ones we saw, stranger... But I must say you look very worse for wear. Would you like to sit and rest? We got plenty to eat, was easy hunting this afternoon the beasts were exhausted and unguarded," the taller man offered.

I couldn't help but smile warmly at them, a real smile. "Thank you, but no. If they were headed around that mountain then I best hurry to try and catch them," I said, and was about to step away.

"Wait...!"

I paused as I glanced back at the woman who had stopped me. She glanced around her group, and I frowned at their strange expressions.

"There are no villages that way, sir. If you head too far that way, you may get lost with no help," she then said.

Ah. A kind soul. Or maybe they all were. All but the children were nodding in agreement.

Humans really did bang together during crises. It was too bad my people rarely did the same.

"I appreciate the concern... but I have to try," I said confidently as I stepped away, to return in the direction I'd come from.

"They wore robes! Dark ones!" one of the men shouted.

I hesitated a moment and frowned, but realized that was actually a good sign. Although the bison family didn't outright need to hide their features, maybe it was just in case.

Picking up my pace, I ran off from the humans and their campsite.

Leaving them behind I hurried to return to the same mountain I had just climbed.

I knew it was a long shot and not the greatest of methods... but I had to try. Plus I didn't doubt those humans at the moment. They had been visibly concerned for me. Odds are they genuinely had seen these robed people from a distance.

Either way I'd track them down. If they had seen them near that mountain range in the morning, even if it were the bison family they'd not have gotten far. They could travel farther, and faster, than humans with less rest but not by much. They were sturdy people, but not like Renn. Not like me.

Reaching the mountain, and climbing it once more, I quickly ascended back to the same spot I had just been standing in about an hour ago.

The world was growing darker. Thanks to not only it becoming nightfall, but also thanks to the mixture of smoke and dark clouds setting in.

I needed to hurry...

Stepping up to the edge of the cliff, up on the mountain, I glanced all around me. I once again made out the smoke from the campsite I had just left. It was darker now, which told me they had added more wood to the fire and were done cooking. It was now a fire for heat and safety.

The section of burnt forest was still smoldering, but it didn't look like any new fires had started. Even the sections where the burnt forests met the still fresh one all looked fine. At the moment at least there was no urgent danger from the fires... at least here in this area. Off in the distance, far south where I'd come from, I could still see the deep dark fires and their smoke. It gave the world a strange setting sun look, even though the sun was setting in a different direction.

I scanned the horizon, searching desperately for any signs or hints. The forests were too thick to see any actual movement, from people or animals, but...

There.

I found a new campfire. A smaller one, with gray smoke. It just barely got over the treetops before being dispersed by the wind rushing down the other side of the mountain.

It was indeed situated on the northern end of this supposed Peak Mountain. At just the right spot and distance to make me believe it was the same individuals that human family had spoken of. If they had seen each other, even from a distance, on the southern side where they had gone their separate ways...

Studying the distance from me to this new campfire, I turned around to look at the other one. The one I had just gone to, and come from.

Yes. It was likely a little farther than they. Maybe half as far from here.

If it were the bison family it would make sense. They would travel farther in the same time span, even if also traveling with children and animals.

But to make sure I didn't miss any other camps or things of interest... I waited a few minutes to study the world around me further.

Growing more and more impatient as I waited, I lasted what was likely half an hour.

Deciding to go and take a look, I focused on the small lisp of smoke and leapt once more off the mountain. This time to its north-eastern side.

This side wasn't as clean of a drop as the other. Its cliff face was not as flat, not as steep. I ended up sliding down the mountain, kicking up rocks along the way.

By the time I reached the bottom, I had to quickly dart off away from the mountain as more and more rocks fell behind me. Some even as big as me. I had caused a small avalanche of large stones in my descent. It'd not kill me, but I was in no mood to run with a cracked skull or broken leg.

Hurrying away, leaving the loud ruckus behind, I ran through the forest and towards my destination.

They had set up camp what had seemed like half a mile from the mountain. A spot with very thick trees.

Hopefully it was them. If not then I'd be running around, going from campsite to campsite for the unforeseeable future. Odds are thanks to the displacement of the fires, there would be hundreds of people traveling around these areas. And the only real method for me to sort through them in my search would be to just simply approach them myself, usually when they had a campfire going since that was how I would find them.

Such a thing was a massive pain, but part of the job.

It'd likely cause strange rumors amongst the humans though, if I had to do it for a week or two. A strange man, in burnt and tattered clothes, who was appearing randomly... sometimes in the middle of the night; asking for any sightings of his long lost family.

To top it off once the humans started telling others about it, the moment they encountered someone else who had experienced it too? The chaos that would ensue. Especially once they compared notes and realized the ground traveled between them was inhumanly vast.

Yes. The perfect seedling for a regional ghost story. What with the fires and chaos.

Not the first time I'd spark such rumors and stories.

Another legend. At least this time it was amusing.

I smirked at the idea as I hurried, and wondered who'd enjoy such a funny idea more. Renn or Oplar.

I'll need to remember the thought as to share it with them.

Hopefully it'd not be long before I could.

Chapter 293 Hornslo's Worries

This inn was rather empty for how large it was.

Not that I was complaining. The world was already very smelly, thanks to the nearby fires, so a lack of humans was a good thing. I honestly preferred the strange burnt smell in the air over unwashed humans. Even if the thick stuffy air made everything I ate and drank seem... burnt themselves.

Gulping down the last of my berry smoothie, I frowned in annoyance at the lack of detail in the taste. The darn stuff really did taste burnt, as if they had made it in a charred barrel like they did some wines and ales.

I didn't like it at all. It almost ruined the drink completely. It was not a complemented taste at all.

Sighing, I sat back and glanced at the large window I was sitting near. It revealed the larger main street of Hornslo, and it was relatively empty. The only thing out on the street right now was the strange hazy fog that had engulfed the whole world.

It wasn't that this village was empty, like this inn, but rather that people were busy. Some were out of the village, near the river. Doing whatever they did to try and keep the fires from crossing over the river and coming here. Others were preparing to leave. Earlier this morning a bunch of horses and donkeys

had passed by, heading to one of the nearby shops. They were fleeing the fires, and taking as much of their goods with them as they could.

In fact this inn we were staying at, or rather the ones who owned it, were likewise readying to flee. Right now I could hear them rummaging around in the backrooms, packing boxes and whatnot. It was a small family, with the mother being somehow the oldest. She was old enough, in appearance at least, that I had originally thought her the grandmother of the family... but it turned out she wasn't. She was the mother of two teenage children, and wife to a young man.

It wasn't often one found a human couple like that. It was usually the man who was older. It was an interesting thing, but I hadn't been able to get much information from them. They were far too focused on simple survival. They had no time for idle chatter.

In fact they hadn't even asked for payment from the three of us for staying here. The only thing that they had wanted in return for letting us use some of their rooms, and their kitchens, was to agree to help them on what they called night watch and to help them load their cart when the time came. Both tasks Oplar happily agreed with without hesitation.

Night watch was simple enough. It was simply the duty of watching the fires while everyone else slept. They were very worried the fires would show up while they slumbered, and overtake them, so they wanted someone on duty at all times. I was more than willing to volunteer for last night's duty, especially since I had found myself unable to sleep the night before.

I had genuinely been bothered by it, and still was. It's been three days since we'd arrived here, and I'd only gotten a few hours sleep the first night here. Likely because I of the exhaustion from traveling for the first time in a short while.

Yet now was day two without sleep. It was midday, and tonight wasn't my turn to watch the fires... but something told me I'd not be able to sleep much tonight either.

Hopefully I wasn't turning into Vim.

There had to be something wrong. Maybe it was the bed? There were two other rooms, maybe I should try sleeping in a different one. It hadn't felt uncomfortable though, and thanks to the smelly world I hadn't been bothered by the stink of the bed or bedding either...

Maybe the nearby fires were more dangerous than my mind believed. Maybe I was instinctively just... on guard, or something...?

Maybe...

"Now Renn just because they said we could drink our fill, that doesn't mean you should be getting drunk in the middle of the day!"

I smiled as I turned to greet Oplar who stepped around the corner of the stairwell's hallway. She grinned as she walked over to sit down at my table across from me.

"Want some?" I asked as I reached over to grab the large pitcher. It was still mostly full... I was so upset over the weird taste thanks to the smoke that I'd just only finished my first glass, even though I'd been sitting here for a couple hours now. There were a few other empty cups on the table, one of which Oplar grabbed and held out.

“What... it’s just juice?” Oplar mumbled as she watched the contents pour into her cup.

“Don’t like it...?” I asked.

“Hm... I much prefer tea or spirits, but this will do for now I suppose,” Oplar said as she went to take a drink.

I watched her do so, but if she was bothered by the taste at all it didn’t show. She didn’t even seem to register the drink at all, and instead glanced around the inn. “Still empty, I see,” she noted.

“The streets have become quieter too. I think a lot of people have left in the last couple days,” I said.

“Aye... odds are this village will be burnt, based off how strong the winds are and how close the fire is now,” Oplar said as she glanced into her cup.

Oh...? Maybe it did taste bad to her too. Maybe it wasn’t just me.

Instead though she took another drink and shrugged. “Seen Sillti?” she asked.

“Still sleeping,” I said. Couldn’t she hear her snoring? She had been exhausted yesterday, after helping me and Oplar carry stuff for the innkeepers. We had spent about half the day carrying boxes and goods

from the upper two floors down here to the first, so they could sort and pack them. Unlike Oplar and I, Silti was not very strong... and it seemed she was also still a little exhausted from the few days of travel to get here from her home.

“May as well let the poor girl rest. We might be soon traveling hard after all,” Oplar said with a sigh.

“How far are we from Telmik?” I asked.

“About two weeks at Silti’s pace. I thought about maybe procuring some horses, but such a thing might be hard right now what with everyone needing them to evacuate,” Oplar said.

Ah... right. The humans were using them to carry cargo. “What about the river? Didn’t you mention Lumen sometimes trades with this place?” I asked.

“We could, but the river’s slow and I bet it’s mighty congested. Plus it would just lead us to Lumen instead, there are mountains that separate the waterways here on this side. You need to round those mountains to get to rivers that connect to Telmik,” Oplar explained.

I nodded, remembering those very mountains she spoke of. Vim and I had crossed over them on our way to Lumen from Temlik... they had indeed been mighty and massive.

“It’s... a little odd to think we’re so far north already. How far are we from Twin Hills?” I asked.

“About as long from here to there as Telmik. We’re kind of in the middle,” she said.

I see. That’s too bad. I had planned to ask if we could make a tiny stop there if we had been closer, but I wasn’t going to let my selfish desires double our travel time. Especially not without Vim.

“You doing okay Renn?” Oplar then asked.

I perked up a little and glanced around. Was something wrong? But no. Everything seemed fine. Even the street outside was still clear and empty.

Oplar giggled at me. “You look tired, Renn. Was last night rough?” she clarified.

Oh. “I’m fine. I think it’s the smoke, it really bugs me,” I said. At least, that was what I hoped all it was.

She nodded knowingly. “Right? I keep thinking I just licked charcoal or something,” she said.

Licked... charcoal? I smiled at the odd way of explaining the smoke and haze’s affect on us. That was actually rather accurate. It wasn’t painful, just nasty and annoying.

A loud bang drew my attention to the other end of the room, and both Oplar and I listened for a moment as the innkeeper and her family rummaged around in the room beyond this one. It was behind the kitchen, some kind of storeroom.

“They’re rather worried,” I said gently.

“They’re about to lose their whole world, Renn. They may have money and stuff to take, but this inn is priceless to them. It’s not just their home it’s their livelihood, and their pride. They’ll survive, but they may never again have such a thing for as long as they live,” Oplar said softly.

Nodding softly, I wondered how hard it was to buy and or build such a place. “Vim once told me that some inns barely scrape by,” I said.

“He’s right. Most make only enough to survive and take care of the owner’s family. In fact most of the higher end ones are just branch businesses of larger guilds and merchant families. They’re not built or managed to make profit, at least not a lot, but instead for status or reach. A few years ago Brandy requested the right to start building inns throughout the Nation of the Blind under the Societies banner. It didn’t get accepted, though,” Oplar said.

“Why not?” I asked. What a wonderful idea! If we ran inns throughout the villages, then not only could we easily hide our members but also create places that allowed those that traveled easier times as they did so. Welcoming places and...

Oplar snickered. “They’re a pain, plus it’s one thing to own a business that deals with humans it’s another entirely to run one that deals with many humans all the time. Normal inns are always full, and half the time of merchants and stuff. Educated humans with keen eyes. Not the best places for those like us to blend in at,” Oplar explained.

Oh... right... “Yet we run one of the largest banks and warehouses in Lumen,” I noted.

“The members there are suited for it. Plus they have hundreds of humans to cover for them when needed. A tiny inn though?” She shook her head as she took a quick drink of her juice. “Just isn’t worth it. We’ve had members try to make inns before, never works out the way you want it to. It’s always problematic.”

I see... that’s too bad. “I see,” I whispered.

“Hm... I mean, look at you Renn. You hide it mighty well, what with your leather armor and stuff, but if you constantly worked in a place like this a mistake would happen eventually,” she said as she pointed at my head, where my ears would be if not for the hat on my head.

Nodding, I sighed. “Right. It’s why those in Lumen didn’t want me doing anything too direct, like working in the warehouse. They wanted me to work behind counters and stuff, where such things couldn’t happen as easily,” I said.

“Right? Did you ever wear their bank uniform?” Oplar asked.

Frowning, I tilted my head at the weird smile on her face. “Yes? Why?”

“What’d Vim think of it?” she asked.

My frown turned into a strange feeling grin. “I’m not sure. We... weren’t as close back then, I think. Not openly, at least. I did notice him study me each time I wore a different uniform though,” I said. I

remembered the way his eyes would linger on me each time he had done so. Usually from a distance, like when he had been standing up on a balcony or down a hallway. He had done it when he had thought I hadn't been paying attention.

"Hm... so does that mean he's ogled you even from the beginning? How about when you first met?" Oplar asked further.

Although I knew she was just trying to tease me, and Vim, I happily smiled and nodded. "He had. Even in the beginning I had noticed him staring at my legs or rear. He even stared at my tail and ears... I think he finds them attractive, somehow," I said. He had even been doing it lately too; it wasn't something he had only just done in the beginning.

Oplar giggled for a moment, and then her smile turned a little sad as she got serious. "I see. So it's true then, when it happens it happens," she mumbled.

"Happens...?" I asked.

"Love. My parents had made it rather clear that even if you don't notice it for a long time, it happens upon first sight. You're not the first to basically confirm their teachings, but out of everyone I place stock in your answer the most," she said as she tapped her cup with a finger, as if lost in thought.

A little surprised to hear such a serious tone from her, especially when it wasn't right away followed by a laugh or giggle, I found myself oddly humbled.

"I appreciate that... but can I ask why my opinion can be valued so highly?" I asked.

“Your memory. It’s flawless. If you remember him doing such things, it means he really did it. Plus you’re rather pure. You don’t lie, especially not about stuff like that. I’d take your word over anyone’s, maybe even over Vim’s to be honest,” she said.

My humbled heart grew warm as I smiled at her. “I... I think I too fell for Vim upon first sight of him. I met him when he brought Lomi to the Sleepy Artist... so when I first saw him, I saw a man watching a beautiful scene. One that was tear-inducing. A little girl was happily, yet wearily, greeting and hugging people she’d never met before. Fellow non-human members. Yet the moment I stepped forward Vim’s eyes latched onto mine, as he studied me. Ever the dutiful protector. I sometimes spend a long time just thinking of that moment,” I told her.

Oplar’s eyes fixated upon mine, and I did my best to not blush and look away as she studied them... as if searching deep within them for something.

“I’ll be honest though, I don’t know if Vim thought the same about me at first. Remember... he almost killed me, when I had brought news of what had happened. If he had loved me I don’t think he would have been willing to do such a thing so readily,” I added, feeling sheepish.

She frowned. “I wouldn’t say so. Vim’s an odd man. And I can tell you for a fact he’s killed many people he loved, or cherished. No matter how painful, he does it without hesitation,” she said.

Oh... Right... “The ending thing,” I remembered.

Oplar nodded. “He’s told you about it? Good. I haven’t told him anything, but he actually has one of those requests waiting for him at Telmik,” Oplar said.

Wait... "What?"

Oplar sighed as she leaned forward, to rest her head on her hand as if exhausted. "The duck. Trek. He's requested it. Poor man's ready to end his life," Oplar said.

My heart thumped as my vision blurred.

That quiet man...? The one who had lived near that pond, that Vim and I had visited on our way to the smithy? Vim had just recently helped him rebuild his little dock...

"Why...?" I asked softly.

"I don't know. Trek's an odd man. He won't talk to anyone unless absolutely needed. I'd hope that Vim could talk him out of it... but... well..." Oplar shrugged.

"He so willingly supports anyone's wishes," I grumbled.

Oplar nodded. "Yeah. It's a good thing, really... if he wasn't the way he is, he'd be a tyrant and likely not the good kind at all. But sometimes... sometimes I wish he wasn't so damned insufferably understanding," Oplar said.

Hm... "That's heavy news, Oplar. Thank you for telling me, but I also kind of wish you hadn't," I said.

She chuckled softly. "Sorry. Didn't mean to sour your happy love-talk with such bad news, but it's been bothering me and you brought it up so..."

Right... I had. I sighed. "To make up for it, can I ask something?" I asked.

Oplar sat up a little straight as she lifted her head off her hand and nodded.

"Do you know if Vim... well... takes baths with people?" I asked.

She frowned at first, and then smirked. "Ah. Right. I had heard you like to bathe with him, though haven't seen it myself. No. Or well, I don't know. I've not really ever heard of Vim happily bathing with anyone, but at the same time I don't know if anyone's ever really asked or tried to do such a thing with him, you know?" Oplar said with her smirk growing in joy.

She really did like talking about such gossip.

"I've only gotten him to bathe with me a couple times. It doesn't help that he really never needs to, not ever smelling and stuff, but still," I complained.

“Just get him filthy? Go throw mud at him or something,” she teased me.

Smiling at the idea, I sighed as I went to refill my cup. The juice was low.

“It took a long time to get him to really sleep with me too, you know,” I told her.

“Oh...? Here I thought you two hadn’t gone that far yet,” she teased me.

“We haven’t... I meant... well... you know. In the same bed. Speaking of that, I really need to know... and you might be one of the better ones to ask,” I said as I glanced around, to make sure no one was around. Particularly Silkti.

Oplar leaned forward too, nodding excitedly at me.

“Vim. You’ve mentioned before that you thought Landi had gotten him once... are there any others you know of? Or assume?” I whispered.

Oplar strangely didn’t grin or laugh as she lowered her head a little. “My mother’s sister, Jennifer. I know for a fact the two did the deed. There’s a few others, like Landi, that I’ve always assumed too. Like Kaley. Kaley likes older men, and she also has a particular thing about stamina so...” Oplar spoke quietly, and I felt my stomach tighten a little.

“Jennifer...?” I asked with a groan. I didn’t worry over Kaley. I had already asked her, kind of, about such a thing and she had laughed at the idea.

My friend finally grinned at me as she leaned back, to sit normally. “Vim owed her one. That was her request. You don’t need to worry I’m told he hadn’t enjoyed it at all. She was upset about that until she died. Over the years though it’s bound to happen, Renn. Really. I mean he’s at least a thousand years old, as much as I like to see you jealous I’d honestly suggest not getting so worried over such a thing. Statistically, by age alone, Vim may be one of the most experienced men in the world,” Oplar said, and somehow didn’t sound like she was teasing me. She seemed to be trying to give me honest advice.

I absorbed her words rather well, and did my best to not let my tail and ears fidget too much. They were wildly itchy now. “I... I know that. Vim’s told me about a few of them... I just... well...” I grumbled as I realized I probably shouldn’t actually tell her why I had wanted to know.

“Plus Renn, you don’t have anything to worry about. Now that I think about it, most of the ones I know about that for sure something happened with... were all like Jennifer. Basically he just obliged them or something. You though? He genuinely wants you. That puts you a step above them all by far, I’d say,” Oplar pointed out.

Although I enjoyed hearing it, I also didn’t.

He wants me.

It was so obvious to others. Oplar and everyone in the Society noticed it now, and not only saw it but acknowledged it.

Even I've noticed it. More than not. Recently Vim's been rather... indulgent with me. The last couple nights before we had left the Summit I had actually thought something might happen. Twice I had caught him staring at me, or my tail, in a rather odd way... the kind of look that had made my heart thump and face hot.

Yet...

Why hadn't he taken me yet?

Admittedly I'd never really been too interested in relationships. Not until now. But I've seen them. Heard them. Smelled them.

It was hard to not notice them. They were everywhere, all the time. Especially amongst humans.

I had watched Lujic fall in love. I had watched his family grow. I couldn't count how many human couples I'd watched and listened to from a distance over the years. From the ones who just met, and flirted on the spot without hesitation, to the ones old and enjoying their last moments together. I had hundreds if not thousands of instances for reference in my memories to use... and... well...

There was one constant between them all. No matter their age, their type of romance... whether it was a love to last the ages, or some kind of tryst meant to last only a single night... there was something very common amongst all of them.

It always ended in the bedroom. And rarely did it take long for it to get there.

Such a reason was why I had left Lujic and his family so often after he had found his wife. It had been so odd to see and listen to them, especially at night. It made me feel so awkward and out of place... that I had to leave. But I had never thought much of it, other than it was simply a part of life. Something that eventually happened, to everyone. It was that common. Staying anywhere near humans, like this inn, only further proved such a thing. Mostly thanks to my superb hearing, though. I could hear what was happening even a house or two over sometimes, when the night was quiet enough.

Half the time it wasn't just the man who initiated such a thing either... so maybe it was my fault... maybe I wasn't pushy enough.

I knew I shouldn't compare our relationship with the ones that human's have, but I didn't have much else to relate it to. The few non-humans I'd met that were married or in a relationship... I'd only known them for a very short time. Lilly and Windle. Henrietta and her husband John. Pram and Drandle at the Smithy. The few couples at the armadillos, and of course Riz's parents at Secca... I'd not gotten to spend much time with them. A few weeks at most for most.

Even the places I'd spent more time at than not, like Secca and the Keep, I'd been distracted. I had spent more time with their children, Riz and Narli, than I had with the married couples. And at the Summit I had only seen Thrain and Ash a few times, and only once when they were together.

And it wasn't like I could use my own parents as an example. Even I've done my best to not remember the sounds I'd heard back then. Or the bruises and tears on my sisters and...

I fumbled with my full cup, wanting to take a drink... yet also not ready to do so.

Stop thinking of them.

It was strange. I hadn't thought of my family in a long time. Or at least, it had felt like a long time.

A byproduct of Vim and the Society, of course. They were so wonderful it was hard to think of anything else when around them.

And now that Vim wasn't here, I was allowing my mind to wander. To get distracted. To think about things that I shouldn't.

Though...

Taking a drink, I wondered if maybe I was over-valuing the stuff I knew. Maybe all the human interactions I've witnessed and listened into over the years were... well... maybe not wrong, but simply the wrong type.

Yes... it was the truth, wasn't it? My knowledge about such things was oddly limited. To humans. In nearly the entirety.

I've always thought that we non-humans weren't that different from humans. That the only real difference, other than physical stuff like strength or traits, was if we acted on instinct or not. But maybe I should rethink such an assumption. What if, by being as old as we were... particularly Vim, love was something a little different for us? For him? What if taking it this slow, this steady, was just... normal? I mean, the only real reason it was bothering so much was because it made me worry. It made me worry that Vim had reservations about our relationship. About me.

But what if that wasn't a thing at all...? What if Vim wasn't worried, and instead was in fact completely happy with how we were?

Then it taking this long for our relationship to slowly progress wasn't a problem at all, was it?

Honestly I should have sat down and talked with some of the more recent members I've met. Narli's mother. Nasba. I should have sought their insight, since they were or had been not only married for a long time... but far closer to Vim in age than I was.

Basically I really needed some kind of reference. I felt as if I was making a mistake, or doing some kind of disservice to Vim... but I wasn't sure if I really was or not.

Maybe we non-humans taking so long, was just... normal, and I was freaking out over nothing.

After all did I really need such a thing just to know he truly loved me? Surely not, right? Didn't he prove it in other ways? In those little, almost impossible to notice things he did for me? The way he held my hand as he slept? The way he always made sure I was fine first, before anyone else? What about the way he seemed to trust me so deeply, without any hesitation? He's shown me, and told me, things he's not shared with anyone else. His parent's grave. Miss Beak...

Did I not see it in his eyes when he looked at me...?

“Also you really are adorable. I don’t know how you see yourself, but let me tell you Renn... you may be one of the most beautiful members I’ve ever seen. It’s all in your expressions, they’re lovely,” Oplar praised me and snapped me out of my thoughts.

Jeez. Vim being gone really was making me weird. Why was I allowing this to bother me so much, especially here and now of all times?

I felt one of those expressions Oplar spoke of warm my face as I sighed. “Let’s go back to talking about sad things,” I said, defeated.

Oplar laughed.

Chapter 294 A Mistaken Hood

Now this was different, at least.

This was my fifth group of humans I’d found since beginning my search for the bison family. Like all the others, they were sitting around a campfire as they rested... unlike all the other groups though, these ones wore strange cloaks and carried little.

They had no horses or pack animals. Their bags were small and light, one of them still wore hers on her back.

I highly doubted these people were hunters. They could have the tools to hunt and gather food, but they didn’t have any packs as to carry anything they caught. And without all the luggage all the other escaping survivors of the fires all had, I highly doubted they were fleeing the flames either.

There were weapons amongst them, but that wasn't too strange. Most humans, those traveling outside of the regional areas where humans frequented, carried weapons. Bows and axes were very common amongst hunters and travelers who dared the deep forests... these people however also had spears.

I'd think them a group of mercenaries if not for the lack of noisy drinking and talking. They were all sitting rather quietly, as if there was a heavy air amongst them.

What to think of them...?

I kept a sigh from escaping as I looked away from the group for a moment. The world was dark, and the forest thick. I didn't need to worry over the humans noticing me, not from this distance and especially not when I was intentionally staying hidden.

There was no need to approach them, or speak with them. Just like the other ones I'd found, in my search for the bison family, none of them would know anything about them. Talking to them gave me no new information or any leads, so there was no point.

Now that I was sure they weren't Klamma and her family it was time I moved on... to search for any other hint of them throughout this wilderness.

How many groups of people would I go through before I admitted it was a taxing endeavor? I could likely eventually find the bison family at this rate, since I've already covered who knows how many miles in my searching... but at what costs?

I had left Renn and the rest near that fire. In danger. Although at that moment the bison family had been priority for me, they were now quickly becoming less so. If they had truly survived as I assumed, then they were likely fine. Simply traveling to wherever they figured they'd go. Either to another Society location, maybe even Telmik since they were religious, or simply spending time in some random human settlement until they figured things out.

I'd already been at this for four days. The soon to come sunrise would make it the fifth day. I didn't worry too much over Renn and the others, they were smart and strong. Or well... Renn was. Oplar was strong but she was not a warrior. She'd quite literally allow herself to be killed out of pure fear and worry under duress. Her only saving grace was that she was strong and durable enough to run away when the time came, and survive because of it.

If she could run though, leaving Renn and Sillti behind... Might be difficult for her. Oplar was a coward, but she was not one to abandon those she considered friends.

Plus it wasn't like they were too far from Telmik. If not for the fire I'd not worry at all. This area was Oplar's stomping ground. She's traveled these roads her whole life... but...

But all the same, even if I didn't need to worry for them... I still did.

I didn't want to admit it, but the fact was I did worry. I worried for Renn. I worried about that expression she had given me upon my leaving. I worried for her safety, and her happiness. Was she getting enough to eat? She never asked for seconds outright, and never really told anyone when she was hungry. Renn would pretend to not be hungry if everyone else ate small or simple meals, out of some strange humble kindness as to not bother anyone.

It meant she went hungry more than not when she spent too long with others without me. It was why I always tried to sneak her off to go eat or grab snacks, when we were visiting other places. So that she could get properly fed.

I blinked as I realized I had just prioritized Renn's hunger over the safety of a whole family, and flinched.

Damn me.

"We obviously failed. What do we do now?" one of the humans spoke up and asked.

I pulled myself out of my thoughts as I focused on the people not far from me. This was the first time I'd heard them speak since sneaking up on them.

"We can't go back until we know if we truly did fail yet or not," another said.

"Stop the fires. That's what she said. Now half the world is on fire, I'd say that's a pretty big failure if you ask me!" a third woman shouted.

"Don't shout! My head hurts!" one of the men complained.

Someone threw something at another, and I listened as the five people all bickered and hurled insults at one another. It sounded like there were two women and three men, and none of them seemed to like each other much.

They were now arguing and shouting over idiotic things, like how hungry they were. Not whatever failure they had supposedly done.

Still...

Fires. They had been involved in the fires...?

Maybe I should talk to them...

Rounding the tree I was hiding behind, I studied the group as I approached them. None of them noticed me, even as I entered the small area of their campsite.

"And you wonder why you're unmarried!" the tallest of the men shouted at the woman who still carried her bag on her back.

All but one of them had their hoods down, but they still wore their cloaks. They were thick, durable, looking poncho styled things. More suited for the far north than here. It was the type of hooded cloak that I bet Renn wore most of her life while living in the north. She had likely looked good in it.

"Tough words from a tough man!" the other woman defended her fellow, and suddenly the men were facing off against the women.

What the heck was this...? How'd sniveling about failure, and hunger, turn into some kind of sexual confrontation?

I crossed my arms as I decided to see what happened. I was annoyed, and felt like a failure myself, so this was very therapeutic for some reason.

"I told you we shouldn't have brought them. We should have brought Keith instead," one of the men said.

"Ha! That's all your problem is, isn't it? You miss your lover-boy!" the woman with the bag shouted.

"That's it!" the man who had been ridiculed and stepped forward, but before he could do anything two of the other men grabbed him.

"Just stop it for now!" one of the men shouted as they all struggled and kicked up grass and dirt. The man who had stepped forward to attack the woman was genuinely trying to free himself. He looked hell-bent on getting to her.

The two women stepped back a step, but neither of them cowed.

Interesting indeed. But as humorous such a sight was, I did have things to do.

“Did you all start the fires then?” I asked loudly.

All five of them went instantly still.

Now the focus of their attention, I kept myself from smirking at them. I could almost taste the complex confusion and worry in the air.

“Who the...?”

“Well? Did you?” I asked, before anyone could say more.

“Brave!” the woman screamed, and I frowned at the word.

Brave...? Be brave maybe...? Or...

One of the men who had been holding their fellow back from assaulting the woman rushed forward towards me... and I realized it hadn't been a statement, but a command.

He was brave as his name declared.

A sword flashed out from beneath his thick cloak and in a blur of movement the man went from being many steps away from me to right before me. He swung the sword down towards my head at an angle, as if to cleave my head in two.

Maybe they were mercenaries... this man had just attacked me with such speed and surety that there was no way he wasn't some kind of experienced warrior.

I ducked the attack that would have likely worked on mostly any other human.

The blade swooshed past my head, and he landed so harshly on the ground from his momentum that he fell forward and ran into me.

Either thanks to his sudden shock at my dodge, or his quick attack not being properly planned, he genuinely ran full bore into me. I held firm as the man impacted me, and the man bumped into me and then flew backward.

He tried to remain on his feet but the impact must have hurt him. His heavy cloak flapped all around as he stumbled backward and fell to the ground, his sword flew off in the tumble and landed in the small campfire nearby. The fire was almost as noisy as his fall as it was scattered, sending ash and smoke all over.

"Brave!" another man stepped forward, the first and only to not be so shocked by what had just happened. Although he stepped forward to help his friend, he fumbled with his own sword. He was trying to draw it but the handle was getting stuck under his thick cloak.

Either he was not as proficient a warrior as this Brave, or the shock of seeing a man bounce off another had really unsettled him.

“I’ll be honest I’m not in the best of moods. It’d be best to simply answer me. Were you all involved with the fires or not?” I asked firmly.

“Cat,” the nearest woman turned and hissed at the other woman, the one with the bag. Cat startled, glanced at the other woman and then nodded.

Then the two spun around and ran off.

I was stunned for a moment as I watched the two women run off into the dark forest... leaving us men behind.

“Get him!” Brave shouted from the ground with a point at me.

I blinked, and turned to look at the three men. The two standing had gotten their weapons out; one had even procured a spear. Brave, the man on the ground, was quickly getting to his feet.

Great... maybe I shouldn’t have walked out from the shadows so readily. I should have just stood there and listened longer... this was becoming a pain.

The man with a spear quickly handed his sword to Brave, who drew it and readied himself with a nod.

I sighed as the three men got into position, and I realized I had made a mistake.

They were indeed trained. They were now standing in a very obvious pincer formation... with Brave in the center. It was obvious their goal was to kill me, without hesitation.

My fault really... I had startled them, I suppose. But...

"We do not need to do this. I simply wish to hear more of what you..." I started to speak, but they weren't hearing any of it. The three rushed forward, all aiming for my life.

Narrowing my eyes at them, I wondered if I should just hurt them or not. Although they were indeed trying to kill me, it wasn't like I was in genuine danger. If anything I felt kind of bad for forcing them into this position...

I stepped forward as Brave attacked again. This time he spun around to swipe his sword at my right arm and shoulder. He attacked with the same swiftness as earlier, but not the same haphazard momentum. He was now more on guard, more steady. He was unsettled by what had happened but wasn't letting him stop him or impede his skill.

The man was experienced, at least.

Reaching out I grabbed Brave's sword right above the hilt and his hand. I held it in place in the air, mid swing, and he let out a cry of shock and pain as his hands flung off the sword and into the air. He had tried to pull the sword free and by doing so had hurt himself, maybe even broke fingers and wrists.

I tossed the sword away behind me and reached out to grab him by the shirt. I felt bad for him, but a few broken bones was far better than death. Plus it would help me stave off having to hurt and kill the others... hopefully.

Grabbing his shirt I hefted him and flung him to the left. I made sure not to throw him too harshly or too high, and he landed a few dozen feet away between some trees. He rolled lifelessly a bit before coming to a stop near some bushes. He didn't move or get up from the toss, but I didn't study him too long. Instead I focused on the two men still before me.

Both of them were staring at Brave who was lying lifelessly with wide eyes of shock.

"It's him!" the man with the spear screamed in fear.

"It's me?" I asked as I hesitated. I had been about to slap the spear out of his hands, to put him down as I had done his friend. Not to kill him, just... hurt him enough to scare the third and last man. To scare him enough to answer my questions.

"Demon!" the third man screamed as he stepped forward and swung his sword.

Demon...?

I frowned and wondered how long it had been since I'd been called such a thing. Years at least.

Were these churchmen... then...?

A flash of pure rage blinded me for a tiny moment... and the next moment, once I got it under control, I groaned as I found only one man in front of me.

The man with the spear was staring at me with pure shock... his spear upward as he clutched it to his chest with both hands. They were clasped together around the same part of the spear's shaft... as if in prayer.

I heard a loud crash behind me. I heard tree branches and leaves shatter and break. I heard flesh and bone do the breaking and then break themselves... and then finally a heavy thump of flesh landed on the forest ground not too far away.

Woops.

The spearman fell to his knees before me and began to whimper a prayer. He was sobbing now, and I wasn't able to even make out what kind of prayer he was making. Was that of the northern or eastern faiths? Had he mentioned holy father or holy mother? Or...

My head began to hurt as I realized I had really screwed this up. Not only had I now possibly killed two people who may or may not have been completely innocent... I had also just allowed my own personal emotions to kill a man.

There was no way a normal human could have survived such a throw. Brave may still live, but...

I glanced to the nearby body. The brave man I had thrown first. He was still not moving.

Great. Just great.

The second was far behind me. Likely a heap of broken bones.

And the only man still conscious...

"Please...! Please...!" he was begging to his god, head lowered. His spear still in his hands and pointed oddly, thanks to the way he held it. If he clung it any closer to himself it'd break his neck.

I sighed as I shook my head.

Come on Vim. Get it together. What would Renn say if she saw this?

"Feel like answering me now?" I asked the man.

I had planned to do this. To scare one of them enough to answer me... but... well...

“O’ Soul and...” the man though instead kept on praying, completely ignoring me.

Just great. When men like him got like this...

Even if I did get him to answer me there was no telling if it would be the truth. Or even enough of one.

Deciding to play the cards I’d dealt myself I stepped forward and grabbed the man by the middle of the face. I made sure to leave his eyes over my grip, so he could see me, and I made sure not to break bones so he could talk.

I didn’t squeeze too hard, but I got his full attention. He forgot all about his god as his blue eyes began to tremble up at me.

“Did you start the fires?” I asked coldly.

“No...!” he shouted.

“Who did?” I asked.

He began to shake and tremble all over. It felt very weird to feel his head almost vibrate within my grip, as if being shaken. "My god...!" he shouted.

I knew he didn't just say his god had started the fire, but instead was calling out to them for help instead.

"What do you know about the fires?" I asked.

He closed his eyes and I felt the tears on my hand... and then...

His trembling turned into a couple of very heavy twitches and spasms... and then his eyes opened up with pure terror...

And then he took one final deep breath, and then went limp.

"You're kidding..." I groaned as I stared at the dead man I held up by only his head.

Letting the man's face go, he crumpled forward. I had to step back and to the side since he would have fallen onto me. His spear thunked against the grass as his whole body landed upon it... and he went completely still.

“Vim...” I chastised myself as I knelt down and grabbed the man’s wrist, to check his pulse.

What should have been easy to feel, since it should have been beating wildly in stress... was instead not recognizable at all. There was no pulse.

Letting his wrist go, I reached up to rub the bridge of my nose and eyes.

“What are you doing, Vim...?” I asked. Why did I just kill two, possibly three, people? For what reason? And what had I gotten out of it...?

Standing up, I flinched at the sight around me.

Two visible bodies. A third that I knew was not far... an empty campsite with a few spears lying around, and a few bags. A smoldering fire that was now about to go out completely thanks to the sword that had fallen into it.

I kicked the body of the man, who had died from a heart-attack or something like it, over and bent down to move his cloak and shirt a little... and sure enough found a chain of silver. I tugged on it, breaking it and stood up as I stared down at a very unfamiliar cross.

Frowning at the weirdly shaped thing, I wondered what kind of religion they were servants of. It was nothing like the crosses of any of the major churches around here, nor anything like any I knew. It wasn’t inverted like the Epoch cross, but it had two small circles around a second set of crossbeams. It gave the thing a strange, misshapen and almost messy look. As if it wasn’t a religious motif at all.

Some of the papal crosses had multiple crossbeams, and not a few over the years had rings or circles... but...

I pocketed the cross, since I might need to look into the sect later... and then stepped forward towards the fire.

Kicking the fire around a bit, to further put it out, I then hurried off in the direction the two women had gone.

With those three men dead, or at least out of commission, they were now of no use to me. And after going this far, and doing this much, I may as well see it all the way to the end.

Though... I'll try not to kill the two women too.

Granted that would depend on what truths they revealed or not, of course.

Chapter 295 Angie

Someone was at the door.

I frowned as I got up from the table and checked out the window. From this angle I could only make out one of the women outside the inn.

It was the middle of the night. The kind of late that warranted locking the front door of the building. It was the first night we had locked the door, since earlier today someone had told the innkeeper that there were people going around and looting the abandoned buildings. She had been worried about us being bothered.

Stepping over to another table, I grabbed the sword I had rested against it. It was the one I'd been carrying around all this time. The one Vim had made at the smithy. The dull blade for training.

It was dull, but I knew with my strength it wouldn't matter. Plus it was better than nothing.

More heavy knocks shook the door and I gripped the sword tighter... and then stepped forward.

After a few steps I hesitated a small moment and wondered if I should open the door or not.

Would burglars knock on the door...?

"Lasly! It's me!" a woman's voice shouted from outside as she banged on the door some more.

Lasly was the name of the innkeeper... but...

"Coming, coming...!" I heard Lasly's voice from down the hallway. She sure enough showed up, half dressed in a nightgown. I frowned at the older woman, since the thing was actually kind of... well...

It was scantily.

“What the heck do you want this late?” Lasly shouted angrily as she unlocked the front door and opened it.

I stepped closer, to help the older woman just in case she needed any. But it didn't seem to be something I needed to worry about.

It was two women and a young girl.

“Sorry Lasly... but you're the only one with extra beds,” the oldest, and skinniest, of the two women said.

“What...?” Lasly looked down at the young girl, and I realized why. She had recognized the two women, but not the young girl.

“She showed up this afternoon. Washed ashore. Poor girl's from one of the farms up the river,” the other woman said gently.

The young girl frowned as she glanced around, and then her eyes fell upon me.

I hesitated a moment as I realized what was going on.

A young girl. Alone. Who had washed up from the river...

"What...? Gris, you can't be..." Lasly started to complain, and new footsteps drew my attention away from the door.

Oplar walked down with a frown, lightly dressed. I smiled at the bear who yawned after she studied the scene for a moment. She had yawned after verifying everything was fine, and there was no danger. Funny.

"What's going on...?" Oplar asked quietly as she stepped over to me. I noted that she glanced down at the sword in my hand as she did.

"I think we're getting a new resident," I said gently.

"Come on Lasly. You got kids, what's one more for now?" one of the women asked. I didn't know if she was Gris, or the other one was.

"It's not about that! Whose is she? Where's she from?" Lasly asked, a little loudly.

“Like I said! She washed ashore! Unconscious! She just woke up, so,” one of the women argued.

“Woke up? So she’d been asleep until now? Likely in a bed no doubt,” Lasly said with a huff as she crossed her arms.

I frowned at them. Was... was Lasly actually going to try and deny shelter to the little girl...? Or was there something at play here I didn’t recognize.

Glancing at the young girl, I found her frowning in a way that made my heart hurt. She looked like she was about to cry.

She looked fine, other than her emotional state at least. She looked to be ten or so years old, and like most girls her age was scrawny... though she did seem to have some rather thick hair. It was as dense as it was long. She needed to braid it.

Other than her hair, she really did look fine. Her clothes were simple, but it was likely because she was poor. Or from a poor family, at least.

“Just take care of her for now, Lasly! Jeez! The priest can handle her tomorrow!” one of the women shouted, and then the two of them pushed the young girl forward... up into Lasly. Then before anyone could say or do anything more, the two women turned around and left.

“What...! You damned bags!” Lasly shouted at them as she grabbed the young girl by the shoulder, to keep her from falling over by bumping into her.

“Did they just abandon her?” I asked.

“So it seems,” Oplar said.

“Blasted...!” Lasly cursed under her breath as she stepped back and stared down at the young girl.

The girl looked up at Lasly, but wasn't crying. She looked about to, but hadn't yet. She was either unable to comprehend what was happening... or...

I realized she was likely traumatized. If she had washed ashore, then... well...

“Family?” Lasly asked the girl.

“Fires,” the girl responded.

“Aye. Figured... just great. Come in then. Soulless wenches, I swear their hearts are cold enough to put out the fires if we could wring them,” Lasly said as she guided the girl into the inn.

Wanting to comment that Lasly had just been kind of trying to argue and deny the girl just a few moments ago, I smiled gently instead as the girl looked at me and Oplar.

“Just great. Pa won’t be happy about this at all,” Lasly mumbled as she shut the inn’s door and latched it, locking it once more. Likely for good.

I waved at the young girl as Lasly stepped around her. “Pick a room. There’s food and drink behind the bar, you’re old enough to take care of yourself aren’t you?” Lasly asked the girl.

The girl nodded up at the innkeeper. Lasly sighed and nodded back and then glanced at us.

“Keep an eye on her, yeah? Toss her out if she tries to open the door for anyone,” Lasly said as she walked away, heading back down the hallway and to the back of the inn... where her families rooms were located.

A little dumbfounded, I shifted and glanced at Oplar. She glanced at me and gave me a sad, knowing frown as she shrugged.

Lasly mumbled and complained the whole way down the hallway, and then slammed her door rather loudly. Likely hard enough to wake other people up. As if she wanted the rest of those asleep to wake and suffer just because she had been bothered.

“I had not thought her unsympathetic,” I said softly.

“People get cranky when woken up in the middle of the night,” Oplar said lightly, and then yawned.

“You can go back to sleep, Oplar,” I said. It was my turn to watch the fires tonight anyway.

“Awake now. You there, tiny little thing you are, hungry?” Oplar asked the young girl with a smile.

The small girl shifted and then frowned and shook her head.

“Really...? She just gave permission for us to loot her stores, we should at least benefit from it,” Oplar said with a grin as she stepped away, heading for the kitchens and storerooms.

“Really doubt she meant that, Oplar,” I said.

Oplar giggled, not caring, as she stepped behind the bar and headed into the kitchen.

Oh well. It was true though.

“My name’s Renn,” I greeted the young girl with a smile.

For a small moment the girl stared up at me with a strange look, and then sniffed. “Angie.”

My smile grew. "Nice name. Come on, let Oplar cook us something then you can go get some sleep," I said with a gesture to the table I had been sitting at all this time.

Although there were plenty of tables here, since it was something of a tavern... I had been using the same one since arriving here. I felt like I had claimed it for my own, somehow.

"I just woke up," Angie said softly.

"So I heard. Did you really wash ashore?" I asked as I sat back down in the same chair.

"I guess," she mumbled.

As I got comfortable I watched the young girl walk over and pull one of my table's chairs back. She sat down in it, and sniffed again as she leaned against the table, crossing her arms upon it.

She did indeed not look tired... but she also looked about to weep. Hopefully she wouldn't, it'd make me cry too.

Really... what to do about this? Those ladies had said something about a priest, but...

"You live here?" Angie asked.

“No. Just visiting. You’re not from here either?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I’ve been here before though. With my parents,” Angie said.

Hm. If she’s been here before maybe I didn’t need to worry too much...

Maybe she really was just a kid from one of the nearby settlements. A farm or something. Maybe they’ll be able to find her parents, or...

I gulped as I realized I’d just internally decided to make sure the girl would be safe.

Vim was not going to be happy with me.

The girl sniffed again, and I flinched... but she didn’t start crying.

Instead...

Wait...

I half stood and leaned forward, and reached out to the girl. She frowned at me as I pushed my hand up against her forehead.

“Oh my,” I groaned at the feeling of clammy sickness.

She was hot. And sweaty.

“What...?” she leaned back a little, wearily staring at me.

“You’re sick. You really did float down the river, didn’t you?” I asked.

She nodded softly but said nothing.

Wonderful. A kid being sick was normal, but...

Glancing at the window, and the strangely burnt red sky... in the middle of the night...

The fire was close. Closer than ever. Likely right over the river.

Standing away from the table, I patted the young girl on the head. Her thick, fluffy hair, felt odd. "Stay here for a moment Angie," I said.

"Mhm."

The girl was strangely obedient. It probably helped she was sick.

Heading for the kitchen, I found Oplar in the middle of cooking something. She was humming as she cut up vegetables. "Oplar, she's sick," I said.

Oplar startled, knocking off a good chunk of the stuff she had just been cutting onto the floor. I groaned at the sight of wasted food. "You're kidding? The plague?" Oplar asked.

Oh.

Oh!

I too panicked at first. "I... I don't know. She's just hot, and sweaty. But they had said she had floated ashore from the river," I said.

"Oh... right they had. Let me go check. One second," Oplar said as she put the knife down and hurried out of the kitchen.

I sighed at myself. Really, Renn, how could you forget? Sure we hadn't seen or dealt with that plague in a while, but it had been all over...

Glancing at the nearby stove, which was burning hot with something inside it, I figured it'd be fine for a small moment. I stepped away and returned to the inn's front tavern, and found Oplar smiling down at the young girl.

"She's just sick, Renn. No spots or anything. Yet, at least," Oplar said.

"That's good," I said.

"Sorry," the girl whispered.

Oplar ruffled the girl's hair, which made the girl groan. "It's all good! I'm making food. You'll eat then off to bed with you!" she said loudly.

"I'm not tired though..." Angie mumbled as Oplar stopped messing with her and stepped away.

Oplar paused next to me for a moment. "I... don't need to warn you, do I?" Oplar asked softly.

“You’d abandon her too?” I asked.

“What...? Wait... no,” Oplar frowned at me, and then smirked. “I meant just keep your distance, Renn. Don’t get sick too. I’d not abandon a little girl, jeez, who do you think I am? The Chronicler?” she asked with a laugh.

I couldn’t help it, I smiled warmly at her. “No. I thought not.”

Oplar nodded and patted me on the shoulder as she stepped past, heading back to the kitchen.

Watching my friend go, I felt my smile soften a little.

How wonderful.

Though...

Frowning softly, I wondered if Oplar’s comment just now had been said out of spite for someone she hated... or genuine.

Would the Chronicler actually have abandoned a little girl...? Even if she was a human... wasn’t the Chronicler a member of the church? A rather important figure of it, too?

A tiny sniff drew my attention away from the kitchen and my thoughts, and I found the young girl staring at me.

“Oplar’s big, but she’s nice. Her heart is bigger than she is,” I said as I went to sit back down across from her.

“Mom was big too,” Angie said.

Was...?

Sitting down slowly, I hesitated at the expression on the young girl’s face.

That was...

“The fires...?” I asked softly.

The young girl nodded gently, and my heart wept.

“I see. I’m sorry,” I said gently.

“Mhm,” the girl sniffed again.

A runny nose. Hadn't there been a towel nearby...?

I found it a few tables over. But it looked filthy. Likely had been used to wipe the tables down.

I'll need to find her something clean. She was a little girl, after all.

For a short while the young girl and I sat in silence, except for the occasional snuffle.

Oplar was clanking around in the kitchen. I could hear her loud humming as she cooked. The fire in the kitchen crackled, and there was a slight wind whistling outside. I knew it was a hot wind, not a cold one that you usually felt in the middle of the night.

It was strange. It had been hot in the south, where even the wind had made me hot... but the hotness of this wind was something different. A dryer kind of heat, maybe.

“Where are you from?” Angie then asked.

Sitting up a little straighter, I smiled at her. She was staring rather intently at me. Maybe it was because she was sick, but it almost felt like she was enraptured by me. She had a slight flush on her face and everything.

Yes... I'll not be able to ignore this girl. I'm sorry Vim, but I'll end up going out of my way to make sure she'll be safe. Hopefully he'll understand.

"I'm from the far north. Where it snows more than rains. A place full of huge mountains and deep forests," I said.

"Hm... Is it far?" she asked.

"Yes. It'd take months to get there from here," I said. I wasn't entirely sure the exact location, but I bet I wasn't too far off.

"Huh... I've never been very far from here. My parents never cared for traveling," she said.

Hm... "Well... like it or not you may end up traveling a little soon. Something tells me that fire will reach here, any day now," I said.

She nodded. "It's getting hotter."

"Well..." I didn't point out she was likely just feeling hot because of her condition.

“How far is your home from here, Angie?” I asked.

“A little over a day from here. It’s burnt down now though,” Angie said with a sniff.

That hadn’t been a sniffle from her runny nose.

“I see,” I said softly, and decided not to press it. If she was going to just outright say such things, maybe I should just take the hint.

But...

“They’re gone. So is my home. It’s okay,” Angie said softly as she reached up to wipe her nose.

Watching the girl wipe her nose, only to have to sniff again anyway, I wondered if her tough demeanor was just shock. Surely, right? How many little girls could just... lose everything, their family and home, and then say it so readily like that?

“It’s not okay, Angie,” I said softly.

“No. But there’s nothing that can be done about it. Unless you’re a god and can bring them back,” she said as she glanced behind her, to the kitchen.

I gulped as the young girl stared at the kitchen, and Oplar who could be seen occasionally walking back and forth inside it through the doorway.

“Think she’ll make drinks too?” Angie asked softly.

“I’ll make sure of it,” I said as I stood.

“I don’t like tea,” Angie told me as I stepped around the table.

Oh...? “What would you like then?” I asked.

“Warm milk, please.”

I nodded. I knew they had a few pitchers of milk. I had helped carry them in the other day, given to Lasly by one of the nearby shop owners who had fled and hadn’t been able to take the milk with them.

“Did I hear she doesn’t like tea?” Oplar asked as I entered the kitchen.

“You did.”

“Ridiculous! I’ll fix that, you’ll see,” Oplar said with a shake of the head.

I chuckled at her as I found one of the larger pitchers of milk. It was too big to actually use to pour its contents into a cup. It was the type that held many gallons of the stuff. So I instead poured a portion of its contents into a smaller, different pitcher. Then I carried it and a couple cups out to the girl, making sure to bring a couple fresh towels with me.

“I’m not a messy eater,” Angie said as I placed the stuff onto the table, while she eyed the towels.

“For your nose,” I said.

“Oh. Right,” Angie mumbled and nodded as she watched me pour her a glass of milk.

It was a good thing she wanted it warm. Because it was. The inn did have an ice room, but it wasn’t that cold anymore. Not only had they not replaced the ice, it had been left open a lot as they packed for their inevitable departure.

It was why Lasly hadn’t cared if Angie ate and drank her fill. Because there was no way to take all the food with them anyway, even if they wanted to. It’d all just go to waste, or be burnt in the fire eventually no matter what.

“Thanks,” Angie thanked me as she grabbed the cup of warm milk and quickly chugged all of it down.

I had been about to put the pitcher down, to sit back down, but instead ended up just refilling her cup.

The young girl smirked happily as she watched me refill her cup... and then she took another deep drink.

This time at least she didn't empty the whole thing, but she did let out a tiny burp of relief all the same. “I was so thirsty,” she said with relief.

“Looks like it...” I said.

Odds are that meant she was hungry too. Had... had those people not fed her at all? The ones who had dropped her off, had they literally just dragged her out of the river and then once she woke brought her here?

I had thought humans better than that. Especially towards children.

Maybe the nearby fire, and what it meant, was making people lose their typical kind attitudes. Or maybe people being cruel like this was just... normal. And I'd never really noticed.

I knew people could be mean. And cruel. But I'd always thought humans were nicer to children, no matter the situation. Cruel to another adult? Sure. But a child...?

Though... Lujic and Ginny had been abandoned too. And this girl was even older than they had been at the time.

And Nory. Poor Nory, abused.

Really... what was I to do?

This wasn't a full grown woman. This wasn't Elisabeth. And although she wasn't a baby like Hark, he had a family to be given to. People who would love and protect him.

She may have no one now.

Yet she was sitting here. Drinking calmly. Sniffing, sure, but not depressed and crying. You could see her sadness readily, but she wasn't allowing it to ruin her. Not yet, anyway.

She reminded me of Nory. Of the kids.

Of myself.

“Renn...?” Oplar’s voice drew me from my thoughts, and I realized I had been standing next to Angie and staring down at her rather oddly. With the pitcher still in my hand.

Oplar had emerged from the kitchen, carrying several plates of food. I went to help her, since it looked like she was about to drop half of them. But I hadn’t needed to. She made it to the table without issue and immediately livened up the table... forcing the girl to eat even though she kept claiming she wasn’t hungry.

It seemed my friend of a bear was more motherly than I had thought.

And... she was better than me at controlling her concern and worry. I knew she had heard everything said between us while she had been cooking. Oplar’s hearing wasn’t the best, but it was still better than a human’s. Yet she didn’t seem to show the girl any pity or worry, and instead continued to act as normal. Loud, boisterous, and cheerful.

A far cry from the now depressed cat that I had become upon figuring out the poor girl’s situation.

As I sat with Oplar and Angie, eating and drinking with them through the rest of the night... I did my best to be cheerful too.

I’ll worry and fret over the girl and her situation later. For now I’ll just enjoy the moment.

So that she could too.

Chapter 296 Fate’s Tricks, and a Cat

You had to be kidding me.

Leaping off the cliff, I skidded down the rocky decline and hurried over to the woman.

I knew before even kneeling down next to her that it was too late.

She had cracked her skull. A splatter of blood staining the sharp rocks nearby made it clear that she had fallen off the cliff while running, not able to see properly in her panic in the still dark morning. The sun had started to rise, but not fast enough.

“What the hell,” I groaned as I placed my hand on her neck to feel any hint of a pulse.

There was none. But even if there had been, I wouldn't have been able to save her. She had genuinely split her head open.

What poor luck. This poor woman.

I hadn't even been chasing her. Not entirely. Not for real. She had fallen off this cliff before I had even found her. The blood was already cooling.

Though, had it been an accident or something else?

“The other one...?” I glanced around for her companion. The one that had a bag. I didn’t see her anywhere around here, but... well...

The cliff had been a rather high one. If that other bag carrying woman hadn’t pushed this one, and this one genuinely fell on accident, then the other may have ran off another direction. The cliff ran quite a ways either direction, so she may also be searching for a way down.

A rustle of leaves drew my attention behind me, and sure enough I heard the panicked breathing of an exhausted woman.

So she had. She had searched for a place to descend safely. To come down and try to help, or save, her comrade.

“Nory!” the woman worriedly shouted.

Nory...?

Glancing down at the dead woman, I hesitated.

Was this all a dream...? Just what the hell was going on?

“Nory, can you hear me?” the woman continued to search for her friend, and I sighed as I stood up.

“Over here Cat,” I said.

I didn’t know if that was her actual name or not, but it was what this dead woman had called her. It was likely short for Caitlyn or something. Or a nickname.

I heard the woman go still a few dozen feet from me. She was hidden behind a small group of trees, but I now knew where she was.

“Your friend fell. She’s dead,” I said.

A whimper came from the bushes and trees.

“I’ll not harm you. I was not an enemy in the first place. My name is Vim,” I said gently.

Still the woman said nothing, and stayed still.

Taking a small breath, I wondered if I should just go grab her or not.

I really didn't want to. That other man had died to a heart attack because of what I'd done. I really wasn't in the mood to have another innocent soul on my hands so quickly.

"Was her name really Nory?" I asked as I glanced at the dead woman.

She looked human. And young. Maybe early twenties. She had likely not been very pretty, even through the blood and pain on her face I could see the weathered exhaustion upon her. She looked too thin, even for a young woman. And her hair, the parts not covered in blood and gunk, looked frayed and rough. Had she been sick?

"Yes."

I turned and watched Cat walk out from the trees. She looked absolutely terrified, and sobbed at the sight of her friend's body lying near me.

"Did she fall?" I asked.

Cat nodded as she stepped over towards me. I stepped back a step, to give her some space, and she knelt down next to her friend.

"Oh Nory," she said with a groan as she reached out, but didn't touch her friend. Her hands hesitated, as if afraid to wake her. As if she was just sleeping.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Who are you?" she asked without looking at me.

"My name is Vim. I've been on the hunt for people I know who had gotten displaced by the fires. I saw your campfire's smoke from a distance... hoping it was them. I hadn't planned to bother you after figuring out it wasn't, but then you all started talking about the fires," I said.

The woman sniffed as she finally grew the courage to touch her friend's body. She moved her ever so slightly, so that she was lying on her back and not on her side. She then went to shuffling the woman's robes a little, but it didn't seem to be like she was searching for anything... she was just trying to make her friend comfortable, it seemed.

"I really am sorry. This did not go how I had thought it would," I apologized.

"Are you a demon?" she asked.

"No. I'm a unique man, but just a man all the same," I said.

She sniffed as she leaned back a little and turned to look at me.

The morning sun was starting to really pierce the forest's canopy, so she was likely now able to see me better.

“Vim was it?” she asked.

I nodded. Was she actually this calm, or was this just her survival instincts taking over? Some people did get this weird, calm and placid flight or fight response when faced with something unbelievable.

“My name is Cat. I uh... we,” she corrected herself as she gestured to her friend’s body. “We were sent here by our saint to stop the fires. We failed, I think,” she said.

I shifted, and was glad the forest ground I stood on had enough firmness of hard stone to withstand me but also the flexibility of good dirt to not cause a crack to open.

“Your saint,” I said.

She nodded. “We’re from a village in the north. A few months ago she had a prophecy. That a terrible cataclysm would be born here, and start fires all over the world. We were sent here to try and stop it,” she explained.

I closed my eyes and reached up to rub my head.

This was just getting worse and worse.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but!" The woman mistook my actions, but I calmed her by raising my other hand to hush her.

"I believe you. How were you supposed to stop the fires?" I asked. Even if her saint was real, and had prophesied it... what had they planned to do? How could they have stopped it?

"Oh. Uh... She said the monster would be very weak upon birth. That if we found it within the first few days of its birth, we'd be able to slay it," she said.

"Damn."

She flinched, and I realized I had just said that a little too harshly.

"Sorry. Yes. I see what you mean," I said.

A monarch.

But...

Birth...?

My mind whirled and I had to sit down. I walked over to a nearby rock, one that was far too pointy to comfortably sit on. I sat on it anyway.

“Uh...” she watched me with an awkward look of worry, but I didn’t care for her at the moment.

A monarch had been born? That was impossible.

It had to be.

Yes. They were frail during their first few days of existence. It took time for their hearts to fully connect to their sources. During those moments, yes... even these humans may have been able to slay it. Whether I liked to admit it or not, that Brave man had actually been rather formidable. Not to me, but in the general sense he had likely been a great warrior.

The saint had to have been wrong.

She had to have misunderstood the prophecy, or whatever she had sensed or seen.

There was no way a new monarch had been born.

It was quite literally impossible.

“Sir...?” Cat worriedly drew my attention, and I sighed as I realized I now needed to handle this far differently.

I’m sorry Klamma. Hopefully you will be able to keep your family safe for now.

I now had something far more important to focus upon.

“What was the prophecy? The actual words?” I asked the woman.

She flinched. “I’m... I’m sorry I don’t know. I’m a doctor, I wasn’t told much,” she said.

A doctor...?

I blinked at the title. “You said you were from the north?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Where exactly?” I asked.

The woman went wide-eyed, and then closed her mouth.

“You’ve already told me about your saint, do you really think clamming up now will change anything?” I asked her.

She slowly shook her head, but kept her mouth shut.

I sighed at her.

I didn’t want to torture her. I didn’t want to beat the information out of her, or anything like it.

Especially if... well...

“You were sent to kill the monster. That started the fires,” I said.

She nodded.

An honorable task.

Looking at the body that laid next to her, I felt horrible.

I had just killed comrades. Fellows. Brothers in arms.

It's been a long time since I've done that.

Renn is going to be furious.

"Do you have any relation to the Church of Songs?" I asked.

The woman sat up a little straighter, and I glared at her for a moment since she kept her tongue in check... then she flinched and nodded at me. "The one in Telmik? No," she answered, finally breaking her silence.

So she'd answer anything other than the location of her saint, likely.

That was enough. For now.

"Is... is that who you belong to? Then... then we really didn't need to fear anything, did we?" she then asked softly as she looked to her dead friend.

“So it seems.”

She gulped and then sniffed. “Poor Nory...” she whispered as she reached over to touch her friend’s arm.

Was it just a name, or something more...?

Didn’t Renn just ask about fate...?

“Is your name really cat, or is it short for something?” I asked.

“Huh...! Oh. No. It really is. When I was born all the cats in the village came to my family’s house and laid near me, so...” Cat said with a sheepish smile.

Wonderful.

A cat with a friend named Nory.

What the hell.

Studying the woman with tear-stains on her face, reflecting in the morning sunlight... I waited for me to wake up.

This had to be some terrible dream. A nightmare. Surely.

Hadn't I been having strange nightmares lately? How did one go about proving if one was awake or not? I've never had this problem before.

She sniffed and went to wiping her face. I noted beneath her cloak there were small pouches and bags.

She had called herself a doctor. Maybe that was why she had kept those pouches and that bag on her back upon her even while the rest unburdened themselves to eat and relax. They may likely be full of supplies. Medical supplies. To be kept on hand under any emergency.

Cat looked a little younger than her dead fellow, but she looked a little healthier. And not just because she was still alive. She didn't look as weathered. She had a bit more meat on her bones, and her hair didn't look frayed.

"The... the others?" Cat then asked.

My shoulders felt heavy all of a sudden. "Likely dead."

"I see..."

“Were you five the only ones sent?” I asked.

She nodded. “Brave would have known the most. He is... was... the saint’s knight,” she said.

Wonderful. “Thus his name,” I said, understanding.

She nodded. “It’s tradition the saint’s knight is called that. They abandon their name, and other attachments like family and stuff,” she said.

Right. There were a few other religious sects that were like that. Basically cults.

Shifting, I stood up. The woman flinched and stared at me, but didn’t seem to be trembling or about to run off.

“Your saint. She send you off on missions a lot?” I asked.

“Huh...? No. Not at all! Usually her prophecies are not as important. Stuff like foretelling that the crops will wither, or a terrible flood will come, stuff like that,” she said quickly.

Hm... “Yet she’s done this before. Sent you out to handle monsters?” I asked.

“Well... not that I know of. I know her ancestors did. Her mother and such, though I’ve only heard the stories,” Cat said.

Wonderful. A whole damned village of cultist following the orders of a saint bloodline.

Though...

If they were keeping to themselves, and in fact only interfered in the world when it was because of a dangerous event or calamity...

I suppose I could live with that, and let them be, if that was the case.

“Um...” Cat hesitated as I stepped over to her and held my hand out.

She at first didn’t take it... but then she did. I felt her small thin hand, and her nonexistent weight as I helped her up.

She was as dainty as Renn it seemed.

“Cat. As I mentioned my name is Vim,” I said.

Cat shifted, and her hand went stiff in my own. I hadn't released it. "Right..." she mumbled wearily.

"You're going to take me to your village," I told her.

"Am I...?" she worriedly groaned.

I nodded. "But don't worry. I only wish to hear more about her prophecy. I promise you, as long as you really were sent to stop the fires... and only that, then I'll not harm you or your village," I said.

"And what of our saint?" she asked stiffly.

Ah. Smart woman. Even under the stress of terror.

I nodded. "I vow it. If you really were sent only to stop terror, and nothing more, than I will not threaten or harm any of you," I said.

"If I don't believe you...?" she whispered.

"I'm believing you," I told her.

She blinked and stood up straighter, and then smirked. "I suppose you are."

I nodded. I was. She didn't know, nor ever could, how much I knew about saints and monarchs... so there was no way for her to know that I'd already completely believed her. There was no doubt of what she was telling me.

Only a saint, a real one, could have known of a monarch's weakness during birth.

Or well...

A saint and a god, I guess.

"Now let's go. I'll carry your friend. We'll go back to your camp and bury them, unless you'd prefer to leave them as they are," I said.

"Oh... no. Please. Let me at least send them off properly," she said with a quick nod.

I nodded back and released her hand finally. I stepped around her and knelt down to pick up her friend's body.

The limp body was cold, and I was glad nothing leaked or fell from her cracked skull as I picked her up.

Cat sniffed again. "Poor Nory. She was doomed anyway, but what a terrible fate," she said.

"Doomed?" I asked as I glanced at Cat.

"She was sick. Dying. I... we don't know what was wrong with her. Saint Elaine said her insides were failing, and nothing could be done. It was why she was chosen for this task," she said.

I see... that explained her sickly and weathered appearance.

I stepped away, and led the woman away from the area. To where I knew of a place where we could ascend the cliff and then head back to the campsite where the rest of her fellows laid.

"A sickly woman seems a bad companion for such a dangerous journey," I said.

"The Saint didn't think we'd succeed. But we had to try. She sent those who had nothing to lose. No family. No future. It was a mercy," Cat said.

I frowned at that. To some it was likely a mercy, as she said, but to me it was just another symptom of a cult.

“Yet you’ll not just tell me where your village is, will you?” I asked her.

“No.”

“A lot of loyalty for someone sent to die,” I said.

“I’m not dead yet,” she said.

That was true.

Reaching the spot where we could ascend the cliff, I made sure to let the woman do so ahead of me. So in case she fell or tripped I’d be able to catch and save her. Didn’t need another deadly mistake. Not so soon.

Once on top of the cliff we returned to walking upon flat ground, and through dense forest. It was starting to get a tad noisy. There were birds chirping, and the leaves were rustling since the wind had picked up.

Upon that wind I could smell the fires. They were heading this way.

I should send a letter to Lumen, to tell Brandy to stock up on lumber.

“You really aren’t the demon, right?” Cat asked as she glanced behind her to me.

“No. I did not start the fires. In fact I too am upset over them. A family, my friends, have been displaced and may be in danger because of them. So if this creature you speak of started those fires, then I’d be more than happy to hunt it down,” I said.

“I don’t think it’s possible. Saint Elaine said if we failed then the world will have to suffer under a new calamity,” she said.

I’m sure she did. “Why’d you fail then?” I asked.

Cat flinched, and then sniffed. “We couldn’t find it. We searched all over where she said it would be, but it never showed up. Then the fires popped up the other day, and here we are,” she said.

“Where’d she say it would be?” I asked.

“On top of a mountain. Overlooking a lush forest, with three rivers that connect in the middle of them. We were told to look for a large green stone on the top of the mountain in question. We found it, but the creature must have been born before we got there and left already,” Cat said.

I frowned at the very detailed orders. This saint of hers must be rather strong.

“That’s near here. Over by Hornslo,” I said. I knew the three rivers she spoke of. They intersected oddly, not forming a lake but rather it was two medium rivers that merged to become a single large one. It gave the appearance of three rivers when looked at from above. Like from certain mountain peaks nearby. Likely the very one they had been sent to.

She nodded. “That’s what we figured. We... we really tried, you know? We did,” she said, and I heard her tears and sorrow.

“I believe you,” I said.

“Dying to the creature would have made sense... but this...?” Cat whimpered as she slowed a little.

I wanted to sigh as her pace became almost unbearable. Did she not realize I was carrying a dead body...?

“Cry later. After we bury them,” I said gently, trying not to be rude.

She sniffed. “Right.”

Just great.

This was not going good at all.

The worst part was it wasn't at its worst yet.

This woman was the perfect storm.

A woman named cat. With a friend named Nory. Who belonged to a cult. Who was sent to face a monarch, to her death, because she had nothing. No family. No future.

And I had, accidentally, killed all her friends and fellows...

By my parents, Renn was going to be insufferable about this.

Sometimes I wish I could be as cruel as I used to be. Killing this woman and just searching the north for the saint would have been so much easier...

Though...

"Um..."

I stopped walking, since the woman had stopped too.

What now?

Cat studied me, and then frowned. Her face was a mess. She had been crying harder than I thought.

“What’s wrong?” I asked after a few moments of silence. Really. I was tired of carrying this body. I didn’t need to worry over diseases, but it was still not something I really wanted to do.

“You really won’t hurt me?” she asked.

“Would a man intent on hurting you be offering to help you bury your comrades?” I asked.

“Well... maybe?”

“No. I’ll not hurt you,” I promised.

“You won’t assault me?”

“What...? No. I’m married.”

She frowned at me.

“Ask questions as we walk,” I said as I returned to walking.

She too went to walking again, but did so closer to me. “You said you were unique,” she said.

“I am.”

“How so?” she asked.

“Figure it out,” I said.

Cat frowned at me, and I realized she was likely not named after such a creature just because of what had happened on her birth.

Maybe I didn't want her to meet Renn. At all.

“You're married?” she asked.

“Yes. Her name is Renn. You’ll like her,” I said.

“I will...?” she asked, a little startled.

Flinching, I sighed. “Ask questions later. Let’s deal with this first. Aren’t you religious? Don’t be rude,” I said.

“Ah... right,” Cat nodded softly. “Sorry. I think I’m just scared.”

Right... I calmed down a little as I realized she was likely being very honest, and was still understating the truth.

The poor girl was likely in shock right now.

Nearing the camp, I noticed the... lack of sounds coming from it.

I heard no groans of pain. No huffing. No voices, or moving.

No life.

Feeling bad, I decided to be a little nicer to this woman. As an apology. For what I'd done.

Four people dead. Because of me. Four people who had not been my enemies. They had not been a threat to the Society. In fact... they had been trying to eliminate one, instead.

"We're allies. You and I. So don't worry, Cat. I promise you on my wife's name that you'll be okay," I told the woman as we stepped into the camp.

She took a deep breath and sighed as she took in the sight of her other friends. Their bodies hadn't moved from where I'd left them.

"I'll hold you to that," she said weakly, about to cry again.

Chapter 297 To Stand Tall

The wagon was overweight. I could hear the axles and wheels scream in stress, and the two donkeys pulling it were also breathing heavily in strain.

Glancing at Lasly and her kids, who were all on the wagon alongside the several layers of stacks of goods, I wondered if I should say anything or not.

Had they not noticed the several broken carts and wagons, abandoned on the side of the road we were on? They'd be joining them soon if they weren't careful.

At least her husband was not on the cart too, but walking in front of the donkeys guiding them. But something told me it'd not matter.

"Renn."

I glanced down, and smiled at the one holding my hand. "Angie," I said back.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Well..." I hesitated and glanced to my left, at Oplar.

"That is a good question..." Oplar mumbled.

"I thought we were going to Telmik," Sillti said from the other side of Oplar. I could only make out her hands when they swayed forward, since Oplar blocked her from my sight.

"We are... well... we're supposed to, I suppose," Oplar said with a sigh.

"I'm sure Vim would understand. Hornslo burnt down, after all," Sillti said.

Angie's hand squeezed my own, and I glanced down at her. "Hm?" was something wrong...? But no. The girl wasn't even looking at me, and instead forward. She might have just done it absentmindedly.

Looking back to Oplar, I gestured lightly at the wagon in front of us and the long row of other carts and wagons ahead of it. "Is there not a town this direction?" I asked. Where else were all these people going? Half of the shop owners in Hornslo were here with us, in something akin to a caravan. They had all chosen to travel together it seemed.

"There's several. But who knows how long Vim will be. It really would be better just to return to Telmik, honestly," Oplar said with a sigh.

"Then why stress over it? Let's just do that," Sillti said.

"Because I really, really, wanted to watch them flirt more..." Oplar said with deep regret.

I paused a moment, and couldn't help but gawk at Oplar. She had been serious!

"I don't. It just makes me depressed seeing them together," Sillti said.

Groaning as I kept walking, Angie squeezed my hand again. "Vim's your husband...?" she asked softly.

I nodded. "Yeah... regretfully," I said with a sigh.

“Regretfully she says!” Oplar snickered happily.

While Oplar laughed I did my best to ignore the looks we were getting from the people around us. Not far behind us was another wagon. One that was covered, but there were a married couple sitting at the helm. I could feel their stares burning the back of my head. They’d been whispering about the four of us ever since we had left Hornslo this morning.

They hadn’t been whispering anything bad, of course, but it felt really weird to be hear some of the things they were whispering to each other. Throughout the day they had gone from wondering if we were traveling prostitutes, to wayward nuns. It was amusing, but I knew Oplar’s maniac laughter hadn’t been helping prove them wrong.

“Husband must have run off,” the wife whispered to her husband, who grunted in response. The type of grunt that usually joined a nod.

Oplar snickered some more, and I knew it was because she too had heard what they had said.

“Humans sure do like to stick their noses into stuff,” Sillti whispered quietly.

“It’s fine. They’re bored, and we’re great entertainment,” Oplar said.

“Vim doesn’t like it when we stand out,” I noted.

“Aye he don’t. So make sure not to tell him!” Oplar said as she reached over to wrap her arm around my shoulder.

I allowed her to give me a weird side-hug, and couldn’t help but smile and sigh at her. She really was fun to be around, at least.

“Where is he?” Angie asked innocently.

“Her husband went to search for our friends. In the mountains nearby,” Oplar said as she tugged on me a little, as to lean me backward just enough that she could look Angie in the eye.

It was a little uncomfortable, but I allowed it. “In the fire?” Angie asked worriedly.

“Aye. Likely. He’ll be fine though, don’t you worry. See her? She’s not worried either, and she’s his wife,” Oplar said with a point at me.

“Only an idiot would worry about him,” Silkti mumbled.

“I do worry... kind of...” I said softly.

“Really?” Sillti stepped forward, to round Oplar and look at me.

I nodded at the woman who was rather fixated on me rather seriously. “Yeah... what if he gets distracted?” I said.

Oplar’s arm around me got stiff, and Sillti’s shocked expression turned into a disappointed frown... then she sighed and returned to walking on the other side of Oplar.

Oplar immediately began to giggle. “Distracted by what, Renn?” she then asked.

“Well...” I hesitated since Angie was listening intently too.

Oplar’s giggle turned into a full on laugh again, but this time she at least let me loose so I didn’t need to feel the whole laugh resonate through my body.

Rolling a shoulder, somewhat similar to what Vim did occasionally, I smiled at my friend who happily shook her head at me.

“Men who get easily distracted are not worth anything, per my mother,” Angie then said.

We all paused a moment, and then even Sillti and I laughed alongside Oplar this time.

The young girl frowned at us, likely thinking our laughter an insult to her or her mother, so I quickly pulled her a little closer to me. "Your mother was very right," I told her.

"Aye. Take it from me, a man who notices what he shouldn't and gets focused on it instead of you isn't worth being with," Sillti said as well.

"Now, now. If a man's too focused that can be a bad thing too," Oplar said.

"Not if he's the one you're focused on," Sillti argued.

I frowned at that. "What about me then? I can think of a little over a thousand things Vim would place above me, so..." I said, thinking of the members of the Society.

Oplar and Sillti both went quiet a moment, and Angie's hand squeezed mine again. I glanced down at her and found her staring up at me with a sad look.

Oh...? I hadn't meant to make the air so heavy. I had kind of meant to make a small joke... even if it was serious, and true.

Vim had already told me, rather clearly, that he'd always place the Society above me.

It was why he had ran off into those fires without any hesitation after all. Leaving me behind.

“I’d not thought of that,” Oplar then said softly.

“Me either. I guess I shouldn’t be so jealous so quickly,” Siltti agreed.

“What... you’d rather it be the opposite?” I asked them.

“Well... no. But in your perspective, that’s kind of sad,” Oplar told me.

Siltti leaned forward, to look at me. “Yes. I’d feel slighted. I don’t know if I could allow that, myself,” she said.

“What...? Really?” I asked. She’d not have allowed Vim’s dedications had she been in my position...? Really?

She nodded seriously. “I want to be the most special thing to him. Even if it means it’s selfish, it’s the truth,” she told me.

Wait... “Wasn’t that the issue though...?” I asked wearily.

“Yeah? In a way Rollo’s fascination with you, his focus, was the cause of what he did... no?” Oplar agreed with me.

“I mean... yeah...? But that was him taking it too far. That was greed, not love,” Silti didn’t even hesitate to give an answer.

I hummed a little as I saw it from her perspective. So Rollo’s selfish desire to keep her for himself, although what she wanted, had been wrong because it had been the wrong type of desire?

“I get what you’re saying, but still...” Oplar said softly, seemingly not willing to point out the flaws in such a view.

Maybe I shouldn’t either. Not right away, and not here and now.

“His love has to be broad enough, but focused. If it’s too dedicated to you he’ll be a bad father. He has to open his heart enough to include the children, and extended family as well. And your community if there is one.”

I turned to look at who had spoken, and frowned at the young girl.

What the heck...?

Oplar began to laugh. “She’s not wrong!” she shouted.

Angie huffed at Oplar's laugh, but didn't say more.

"So uh... they mature fast, don't they...?" Siltti mumbled. I knew she didn't mean young girls, but humans in general.

"Not in my experience," I said.

"Men never mature," Angie then said with another huff.

Oplar's laugh became even louder, and she stepped around me and grabbed the girl by the waist. Angie's hand slipped out of mine as Oplar lifted her up and placed her on her shoulders. "Alright! I'll not feed you to the horses after all!" Oplar said happily.

"I was perfectly fine walking!" Angie said loudly, trying to speak over Oplar's mighty laugh and voice.

Smiling at them, I stepped back a little as Oplar swayed a little, to annoy Angie who was now riding her shoulders.

"Let them wear each other out," Siltti said next to me.

I frowned and nodded. Right. Oplar did seem to always have excess energy.

While Oplar harassed Angie, I spent a moment to check our surroundings. I verified the long line of wagons and carts were all still there, and nothing too untoward was happening.

It all looked fine. Up and down the road, which I could see for a long distance thanks to the small curve of it, seemed to be relatively calm. There was a little distance growing between certain carts and groups it seemed, but it was most likely because some horses were slower and older... and well... others...

Glancing at the wagon we were walking behind, and the speed it was rolling along at, I wondered how long it'd take until Oplar decided to abandon them and increase our pace on foot. We could be walking much faster than this.

I did feel a little thankful to Lasly and her family. Although they were... odd, and a little rude, they weren't evil people in general. They had allowed us to stay at their inn, and eat and drink our fill, only asking for a little help in exchange. Plus although she had been rude originally about Angie's arrival, come morning of the next day she had become nice to her and offered her medicine since she had been sick. And during the two days that had followed, while Angie recovered in bed, it had been Lasly that took care of her most.

In fact... Lasly had also offered to take Angie. The supposed priest that was supposed to show up never did, and no one had been able to find him. So the innkeeper, upon deciding the priest wasn't going to show up, simply made the decision to take care of the girl for the indefinite future until something happened.

It had been a little humbling... though for some reason Angie had kept lingering near me and Oplar instead of Lasly and her family. Maybe it was because Oplar and I had eaten with her that first night.

Still... regardless of what happened with Angie, what were we going to do about our travel plans?

Lasly and her family were currently heading the same direction we needed to go... but would we travel with them the whole way? At the pace they were traveling with their wagon it'd take months to get to Telmik. Plus it wasn't like they were actually going to go all the way to Telmik anyway.

"What are you thinking, Renn?" Sillti asked quietly.

"Let's check that hill!" Oplar said as she stepped away with Angie, heading for the edge of the road. There was indeed a hill right near us.

"Just... keeping an eye out, I guess," I said to Sillti as I watched Oplar climb the hill. It wasn't that big, but it took her a few moments to reach the top.

"Hm... So far it hasn't seemed that dangerous. Other than the fire," Sillti said.

"It can change rather quickly. Humans can be... fickle," I said quietly.

"Are they all like that? She talks as if she's an elder," Sillti asked with a glance at Oplar and the girl on her shoulders.

“No. I think she’s just... well... because of what happened. She just lost her home and family. She’s an orphan now,” I said.

“That makes you mature?” she asked.

“Maybe. Some people are like that too... just calmer than other people. I bet Vim was like that when he was younger,” I said.

“Vim... younger...?” Sillti mumbled as she thought about that.

I smirked at her. “Think he had been cute when younger?” I asked.

Sillti’s face scrunched up in disgust. “Renn... please...”

“What...?” I asked, what had I said?

“You’re making me question everything I believe in... it’s weird,” she complained.

“I uh...” I wasn’t sure what to say. What had I done?

"I can't imagine it. Vim? Young?" Sillti said, telling me what had bothered her.

The very concept of it had disturbed her. Interesting.

"Vim's claimed he had been a rambunctious child, but something tells me he doesn't remember it properly. I bet he was all quiet and moody," I said with a smile.

Sillti groaned and covered her face, exasperated.

Grinning at her, I wondered if this was what Vim felt when he teased me sometimes.

For a few steps Sillti frustratingly rubbed her eyes as if exhausted, and then sighed. "Speaking of children... what will you do with her? Do we take in abandoned humans?" Sillti asked quietly, changing topics.

We...? I smiled gently at her. So she still saw herself as a full blown member of the Society. Good.

"I'm told there are orphanages at Telmik. My plan is, unless she ends up staying with Lasly, is to take her to those," I told her. I had made the decision earlier.

"Hm... did you and Oplar talk about this?" she asked.

“No. But I bet she’d agree with me, why?” I asked.

“Nothing... I just wanted to know if it was common to help humans or not. I had thought it was the opposite,” she said.

“Oh. Well... there are some in the Society who wouldn’t help, yes. In fact there are many. But I’m not like that, and I don’t think Oplar is either,” I said.

Sillti nodded. “I’m glad. I had been worrying about it... what with you being Vim’s wife and all,” she said.

I felt my tail twitch beneath my leather and clothes. “What uh... what’s that mean, Sillti?” I asked carefully.

She shrugged. “He’s Vim? He slaughtered hundreds of us. Children too. So... well...”

My stomach twisted and turned, painfully, as I realized she was right. He had told me he had done so himself.

“Well...” I spoke with a dry mouth, suddenly feeling sick.

"I know now he's not really like that! I know it's likely just some weird legend, or misunderstood story, I just... it's hard I guess. Like you talking about how he had been young at one time. It's going to take me time to... well... process this. For most my life I saw him as some kind of god, yet here he is... just a normal person. Or well, normal in a certain sense, I guess," Sillti said with a strained smile at me.

Misunderstood story? Not at all. Vim had admitted it to me to my face.

I better not tell Sillti that though.

"Right... I'm sorry," I apologized.

"For what? This is why I left home. To broaden my world. I just... didn't think it'd be like this, I guess," she said with a sigh.

I smirked at her. "It'll get weirder. Wait till you talk to giant animals, or meet a saint," I said.

The young guinea pig shivered. "Oh Vita, please no monarchs. Least of all without Vim here," she said with a hush.

Oh. Right. Most of the Society was terrified of them. For good reason, I guess.

As I pondered that, I realized something interesting.

Vita...?

Vim Vitae.

Wait...

I slowed to a stop, my mind going numb.

There was... no way, right?

Was it just coincidence? They weren't said the exact same, but...

"Renn...?" Sillti paused too, noticing my worry, and I did my best to quickly bottle it up and tuck it away.

"I'm fine, I just... realized something I uh..." I stuttered as I kept trying to calm my mind down.

Why'd it take me this long to realize it? And was there actually a connection, or did I just make a mistake...? Had I misremembered Vim's name? Surely not, right?

I've never said it. Not aloud. Not since he had told me. Out of respect. Vim so obviously didn't want anyone to know anything too detailed about himself, so I made sure not to say such things around anyone. Not even when I thought we were alone, just in case.

He had trusted me. To tell me his name. So I wanted to not just cherish it, but earn it. So...

"Renn!"

A new shout alerted me, and at first I hurriedly glanced behind me. Because I had assumed that I had been paused for so long that the horses behind me, pulling the carts and wagons, had caught up to us. But they hadn't. There was still plenty of distance between me and them.

So...

Looking to Sillti, I found her staring wide eyed up and at an angle. To my right. So I then turned to look up the hill.

And found Oplar hurrying down it, Holding Angie to her chest as she did. To make sure the girl didn't drop or fall.

Oplar was running quickly. Too quickly. She ran with such speed that any of the humans around us would notice and find it odd. It was uncharacteristic for her. And to top it off... she had a look I did not like upon her face at all. It was a stark contrast to the happy grin she always had.

It was a look of utter worry.

Something was wrong.

Steeling myself, I stepped forward towards her. I reached down, to grab my sword's handle. My hand slid against the hilt, and firmly gripped it as if grabbing Vim's hand. It was so instinctual now that it was scary. I had gone so long without even thinking about the thing. The weapon had become another piece of clothing, nothing more. Something I'd grown so used to, that I never even thought about it anymore.

"Brigands!" Oplar shouted as she reached the road... and right as she did, horses appeared over the hill.

My eyes went wide at the sight of gleaming metal. Spears. Arrows. Swords. They reflected the sunlight as they were brandished. Many horses rounded up and over the hill, one after another, causing the whole caravan to shout out in alarm. But it was too late. They were already upon us.

Although many had rounded the hill only four horses approached our area. They weren't necessarily chasing after Oplar, but they were heading our way. There were dozens of other horses all up and down the hill, but they weren't my main concern at the moment. They were going after the wagons and carts. Likely the goods that were weighing them down.

I didn't care for the items. In fact... I didn't even care for the humans at the moment.

All I cared about were the people right next to me. Members of my Society.

Oplar reached me, skidding to a stop on the dirt road as she hurried to round me. I heard Sillti let out a weird groan of worry. Angie was clinging to Oplar for dear life.

“Renn!” Oplar shouted at me with a voice full of fear. It seemed her claims of being a coward had not been a lie. She seemed to joke and laugh a lot, but this hadn’t been something she had done so about.

“Get behind me,” I said without even thinking about it.

She did, and I heard her grab Sillti as well. The three went behind me as the horses reached the road. Two of them turned left. One turned right... and the last, a gray horse with a broad shouldered man wielding some kind of flail or mace upon it, headed straight for us.

I only needed to look into the man’s eyes for a single heartbeat to know his intentions. To know what I would have to do. I’d seen such eyes before in my life. Far too many times. Lately Vim had been here for me, to keep those eyes away, so I hadn’t needed to worry about them the last few years except in those sewers at Lumen.

The man saw victims. I didn’t need to look behind me to know what he saw. I could hear it. Feel it in the air. I heard Oplar whining, like a tiny dog whimpering from a beating. I heard Sillti hyperventilating, as if in shock. And I knew that although I wasn’t doing the same, I did by appearance at least, look like just a young skinny woman. Too small and frail to be anything but a victim. And... honestly, deep inside, I too was scared.

I knew what a weapon like that could do. I knew that being ran over by the horse could do far worse than that mace. I knew the man, although human, could be brutal and ruthless. Death was the least of his kindness.

And although as terrified as Oplar was... I took a deep breath and stepped forward.

“Stand tall,” Vim’s voice echoed in my head, and everything changed.

Drawing my sword, the blunt weapon I used to train with Vim, I hardened myself and steadied my now quick-beating heart.

I had people to protect. My friends. My family.

And Vim wasn’t here.

So it was time.

Time to stand tall.

Chapter 298 Vim – A Cat’s Hip

“So... Just so you know, I’m pretty weak. And I cry easily if I get hurt, and I’m also scared of the dark,” Cat said worriedly as we stared at the wall of fire in the distance.

Glancing at the human, I wondered what she thought I was about to make her do. Run through the fires? And did she bring up the dark because it was about to be nightfall, and we’d not made camp yet?

The hooded woman shifted at my look, and gave me a worried smile. "Just letting you know," she added softly.

"Luckily for you, I need to meet your saint. So until I do so, I can't let you get hurt or lost since you're my way of meeting her," I said.

She made an odd noise as she nodded reluctantly.

Cat was not happy with the fact that I wanted to meet her saint. In all likelihood, she was probably planning to run away from me or lead me astray. But I was both expecting it, and didn't worry about it.

It'd not be long until she let slip her village's location. Or the name of a nearby city, or its country or province, to give me a general idea of where it was. Plus if I needed to, I could always just place her in front of the Chronicler. I'd like to avoid such extreme measures, but in this matter I had no choice.

If a monarch really was the cause of these fires, then I needed to deal with it as soon as possible.

Looking out over the plains to the distant wall of fire and smoke, past scattered hills and large swaths of flatland, I sighed at myself.

The monarch was likely the source of that strange circle of undamaged grass back at the bison family's farm. A monarch's powers were weird sometimes, maybe the fires it created expelled outward in a circle around it or something. I had seen monarchs summon elements from a distance before. They did

not just spew water from their mouths or flames from their eyes but also from thin air a few feet nearby their bodies. Their damned abilities broke the laws of nature.

I didn't sense the monarch anywhere nearby. Odds are it was a weak one. Too weak for me to sense from a distance. It would explain the fires too. If it was a weaker monarch, it causing such great fires was a byproduct of its weakness.

A truly powerful monarch, capable of greater heat or flames... like Miss Beak, wouldn't have left a fire at all. All of the forests around here, and all the life, would have simply melted away. Upon using its abilities it would have taken only a few hours to turn this whole area into a wasteland of slag.

It told me that if these fires were truly a monarch's doing, and then the monarch was indeed weak. At least in the grand scale of things.

I tried to ignore the fact that Cat's comments about the prophecy that told how they could kill it if they found it as it was being born. That they'd only be able to stop the fires if they found it fast enough.

Such a thing only further enforced the idea of the monarch being weak.

It was still coming into its own. Still growing. Still learning what it was capable of.

Taking a deep breath of hot, smoky air I sighed again.

I had no choice but to admit and accept the fact that something odd was happening. Even if I didn't want to allow the reality before me to exist, like always it kept just slapping me in the face until I gave up and bent the knee.

"So... what are we doing then?" Cat asked, seemingly tired of standing here on this hill.

"I have comrades in Hornslo. We're going to round the fires if we can. If we find Hornslo has been burnt down we'll be heading to Telmik," I said with a point to our east. The fires were raging this way, but we'd be able to round them well enough. The fact this whole area were meadows and plains and not forests, with scattered rivers, made the fires have difficulty spreading this way. They likely would, eventually, but might also not.

"This a bad time to let you know I'm starving?" Cat asked.

"No," I said as I reached around to grab my bag. The one that I usually had dried foods and stuff in for Renn... and then realized I didn't have it on me.

Right. I left all the bags with them.

Cat gave me an odd look, but I ignored it since I knew I had likely just made a fool of myself. I had genuinely reached for a bag that hadn't existed.

"I'll get you something to eat. You're a cat, so you like fish I assume," I said as stepped forward, to descend the hill.

“I don’t mind fish, but I’ll be honest I’d much rather head away from those fires than towards them. There’s a monster in them,” Cat said as she hurried to join me.

Even if she genuinely sounded worried, she still followed me dutifully. Maybe I didn’t need to worry over her running off.

“There’s no monster in those fires. They’re natural now,” I said.

“Natural...? There’s a wall of flame over there. As tall as the trees themselves,” Cat argued.

I frowned at her. Why was she so snarky? Maybe she was still scared a little, and it was her way of staying strong. “I can sense monsters. There’s none there. And that wall of fire is far taller than the trees, by the way,” I said, correcting her. That wall of flames was likely several dozens of feet high from the looks of it.

Cat groaned as we reached the bottom of the hill and crossed over a dirt road.

Beyond the next few hills would be a smaller river. Not big enough for a ship, but definitely large enough for fish. I’ll catch some food and let her rest a bit, since I could hear her exhaustion.

She’d been up all night and day, after all.

I had helped her bury her fellows in the forest we had just left. She had wept, but had also calmly given them their last rites with a prayer. And after the deed was done she was willing to walk with me through the forest, answering my questions.

I had no doubt she firmly believed she served a saint. To her it was as real a fact as the sun in the sky and the darkness in the night.

If I believed this supposed saint was real, however, I was less sure. Some of the prophecies and stories she had shared with me had led me to doubt it. But I knew better than to think this young woman had seen and known the whole story. Odds are most of it was second-hand gossip. She had been chosen to hunt this supposed monarch because she was replaceable. Expendable. She had no family. She was just one of the several doctors in her village. Someone like her who had been basically sacrificed had likely not been very close with the saint in the first place.

Yet...

My gut told me to believe it all. That these fires were indeed unnatural, or at least their source wasn't. That she did indeed serve a saint, if even a weak one.

Klamma and her family would have to survive on their own. For now. I'd spent almost a week searching for them and hadn't been able to track them down. If they were still alive... They were either holed up somewhere, or quick footing it to somewhere they considered safe. Society destination or no.

For now my goal shall be to reunite with Renn and the rest. Then, after escorting them safely to Telmik, have this woman lead me to her saint. To hear more of this prophecy. Of this calamity.

Hopefully this saint was only dreaming the prophecies, and had dubbed it a calamity from those dreams and her own understanding of them... if her prophecies came elsewhere...

“How are we going to catch fish?” Cat asked as we neared the river.

“Aren’t you a cat?” I asked.

“If you think I haven’t heard such jokes my whole life and aren’t tired of them by now, I have bad news for you,” she said.

Hmph. Renn would have smirked at me, at least.

Stepping up to the bank of the river, I studied the oddly murky waters.

It was too murky. This wasn’t just from the ash in the air from the fires. This river likely went through the forests.

Yet as polluted as it was, I still saw the fish. They were swimming low, as close to the bottom of the river as possible.

Kneeling down next to the edge of the river, I raised my hand upward.

“What are...?” Cat started to ask, but didn’t get to finish. I slapped the surface of the river, causing a loud sound to deafen the world for a moment.

The whole river resonated alongside my slap. Water splashed outward either direction, but not towards me or the woman. The slap caused a wicked wave to slosh all along the river’s surface, which I knew would eventually make lots of little whirlpools and splash water around for a few minutes thanks to the force of my slap being diverted everywhere through the water. A tiny yelp drew my attention away from the now turbulent river, and I turned my head to find that Cat had fallen backward in shock.

She was now sitting on the ground, staring at me with wide eyes.

Woops. Should have warned her.

“Sorry,” I apologized to the startled woman, and then heard the results of my slap.

Alongside the splashing of water, there were little plops like giant raindrops. I looked back at the river and found several large fish now floating on the surface.

Some were dazed and some were dead.

They weren’t the biggest, and they were the type that really didn’t taste the best but they’d do.

Thanks to the turbulent waters from my slap, the fish that were now floating on the surface were being flung around all over the surface. It didn't take long for me to gather up several that were pushed up against the river's embankment.

"You have to be kidding me...!" Cat shouted at me as I nodded at her while showing her the fish.

"Don't want them?" I asked as I stepped away, to go start a fire.

The woman made wordless groans and grunts as I quickly started a small campfire. The small sticks I gathered for kindling would not allow the fire to burn for long, but it'd be enough to cook the fish and feed the human enough to keep her from starving to death.

Cat watched as I laid the fish down and realized I'd screwed up again.

I had no knife.

"No knife...? You can slap the river with that much force but you can't cut with a finger?" Cat asked as she stepped forward and pulled out a small hand-sized blade. It was curved a little. A typical hunter's tool.

Accepting the blade, I smiled at the woman who was leering at me. "Thanks," I said.

She huffed at me as she turned around to stare at the nearby river. I had stepped a distance away, but we were still close enough for her to be amazed at the sight of it. I could still hear the waters splashing from all the chaos. Its current must not be very strong.

As I prepared the fish for the woman, she looked around for something to sit on. She didn't find anything usable before I finished, so she ended up just kneeling on the ground.

She did have a large bowl on her though, so hadn't needed to eat the fish off the rocks I'd cooked them on.

The river had calmed down about midway through the woman's meal... but it had also grown dark. I had gathered up more fuel for the fire, since she ate slowly and I didn't want the woman to have to try and eat in darkness.

But as the darkness grew deeper, and the woman began to show sluggish signs of utter exhaustion... I knew I had to make a choice.

Either let her sleep or carry her.

"Cat," I stepped over to the woman, who startled and dropped the very last piece of cooked fish. It landed on her lap, but she ignored it as she stared up at me.

"Y-yes?" she asked worriedly. She had almost just fallen asleep.

"I'm going to carry you. On my back. You can sleep as I do," I said.

"You're kidding me," she whispered.

I shook my head. "You're exhausted and scared. A few hours of sleep won't be enough for you. And I don't even have those few hours to waste. If it's any consolation, I'm rather good at carrying damsels in times of crisis," I said.

"I knew it... this is all a dream..." Cat mumbled up at me.

Great. She was already half asleep.

Putting the fire out, I brushed aside the last piece of fish that had landed on her lap which she had completely forgotten about and simply lifted her up.

She let out a strange groan as I helped her onto my back, and I felt her wrap her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist. A few of her bags were poking me in certain spots, which told me she was carrying more than just simple cloths and travel supplies... but also that they were likely poking her too. So I did my best to move a few of her bags to her sides as to keep her from getting hurt. I wasn't concerned over anything prodding me as I hurried, but a young woman like her could actually get hurt by something like that.

Once all was set I wrapped my arms behind my back, under her as to hold her. If she really did fall asleep, as I expected her to, then if I didn't hold her she'd simply fall off. Humans rarely could sleep while exerting any force, she might be fine clinging to me right now but once she fell asleep she'd just slip off.

"This is very weird," Cat mumbled in my ear as I stepped away from the tiny temporary camp.

Yes. It was. But this wasn't the weirdest thing I'd done. Far from it.

I carried Cat to the nearby road. The dirt one that led along the river. I didn't need the flat road in the dark to keep from tripping or anything, but I knew it'd be more comfortable for the woman as I ran for me to do so on flat ground and not the rolling hills and grassy plains.

The woman stayed awake for longer than I figured she would have. The world had gone truly dark by the time I felt her arms and legs soften their grip, and her head become heavier upon my shoulder.

I was running, but only lightly. Although I was indeed in a hurry, I knew better than to risk the woman's health over it. If she ended up biting her tongue off, and either drowned in her own blood or actually bled to death before I noticed was a genuine worry. Humans were that frail of creatures. Particularly the young female kind.

It was hard to tell how heavy she was, thanks to my strength, but she genuinely felt too light. Was she lighter than Renn...? Surely not. She seemed taller.

Crossing over a wooden bridge, I compared the woman's width to Renn's. It was a little hard to tell, thanks to all the little bags and her thick robe, but it seemed her shoulders were wider than Renn's were.

Wider and taller yet lighter... Surely not.

Were her legs and thighs not as thick?

I realized what I was doing and scoffed at myself.

“Stupid,” I said as I glanced to the horizon.

The fires were a little closer than they were when I first started running, but I didn't think it was because they were actually drawing closer. It was instead because I was drawing nearer to them.

We were nearing the larger river of this area. I couldn't see the mountain's outline, thanks to the thick haze in the air from the fires, but I knew in front of us was the mountain range near Hornslo. And just in front of it should be the river, and about half a day's distance from here should be the city itself.

That is... if those fires weren't there instead.

As I ran, and got closer and closer to Hornslo, the placement of the fires began to make me more and more worried.

Had the fires survived the rivers and plains...? It was starting to look like it. They had left the forests and were now spreading throughout the meadows and plains, devouring the hills and rivers.

I wasn't too worried about Renn and the others, of course. They weren't stupid. Renn particularly. They'd not foolishly sit and wait for the fires to reach them.

But...

If these fires were indeed from a monarch...

Picking up my pace, I ignored the tiny groan of discomfort from the woman. She had half-awoken up based on the way she suddenly started clinging to me tighter.

I'd not apologize for the rough handling.

If I found Renn and the rest hurt, or worse, after running off and not even saving or finding the bison family I swear I'll destroy this whole world.

"Vim...!" Cat shouted at me, and I felt her fingers dig into my shoulders.

I slowed, and immediately relaxed my arms a little. I had likely squeezed Cat a little tightly in my rush.

“Sorry...” I apologized as I felt her legs wiggle around me. As she pushed on my shoulders with her hands. She was trying to wiggle out of my grip, likely to get off my back.

“Were you trying to break my legs?” she complained with a whine. The kind of whine that was unmistakable.

I had hurt her.

“I’m sorry. Are you okay?” I asked as I came to a stop and slowly let her down.

She clambered off me with a huff and actually limped bad enough as she stepped away that I had to reach out and grab her arm to keep her upright.

“Uh oh,” she whined as her left leg curled inward a little.

Rather... she wasn’t curling it intentionally. It looked rotated too, as if...

Wonderful. I’d broken something.

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I tried to remember where I’d been holding her. Her upper thighs, right? Had I actually broken one of her femurs?

In this era such an injury could result in a limp for the rest of her life. I may have just maimed the poor girl.

What the hell was wrong with me lately?

“Uh... it’s not broken I think. I think my hip is...” Cat spoke quickly as she grabbed my arm, and then flinched with a yelp. “Yep! Hip!” she shouted in pain as she dug her nails into my forearm.

Taking a deep breath, I flinched myself.

Broken hip. Or dislocated.

Wonderful.

“Okay. Alright. Um...!” Cat began to panic as she started to cry. Either from the pain or the shock.

“Deep breath. I’m going to lay you down on the grass,” I said.

“Wait!” she wanted to complain, but there was no point. She couldn’t just stand there on one leg for the rest of her life, clinging to my arm.

Picking her up carefully, she let out a tiny wail of pain and actually hit me in the face. I ignored the blow, and the nails that dug into my cheek and neck as she clung to me as I stepped off the dirt road and laid her on the ground in the grass.

It was as flat as the road, so it would do.

Cat cried out in pain as she tried to sit up, but I pushed her down onto her back.

“Lay down,” I ordered as I grabbed her left leg under her knee.

“Don’t touch it!” she shouted angrily, but I ignored her since I could feel it just by lifting her leg.

Yes. Dislocated hip. Strangely it had dislocated inward, not outward behind her. Must have been the way I had been holding her on my back, what with her legs spread the way they had been around my waist.

I’ll need to set it. And I’ll need to do so gently. I may have already damaged ligaments and who knows what else as it was, didn’t need to make it worse.

“You...!” she groaned in pain as I felt moved her leg into position. I curled my arm around her left leg, to angle it properly and make it so I could adjust her leg with my other hand if necessary. Although I’ve set countless hips over the years, they were trickier than the other joints. It sometimes took a little trial and error for a hip.

“Take a very deep breath,” I said as I reached out to push down on her pelvis. Just enough to keep her from raising it when I did what I had to do. Didn’t need her popping it back out from jolting in pain.

“You’re not really going to! Wait! Not yet!” she shouted at me, and then I remembered what she had told me before. About her occupation.

Right. A doctor.

“I’m going to set it,” I said.

“Wait! Wait! It’s going to hurt!” she shouted at me as she leaned up on an elbow and raised her other hand to grab her own hair.

“It’ll hurt more if I don’t,” I said.

“Wait...! I... I have something I can... I...” she began to panic, and I smiled at her. What was she going to say? That she had a magical herb to fix a dislocated joint or something?

After a few moments of heavy breathing, Cat finally leaned back down and nodded. “Okay,” she said.

Ah. So she had just been gathering her nerve.

“You know how it works?” I asked her.

“You’re going to move it until it goes back in. Yes. It’ll make me scream,” she said.

Good. So she did.

“You’ll likely pee yourself. Want anything to bite on?” I asked.

“Right. Teeth,” Cat groaned and then lifted her robe. She rolled it up a little and while taking deep breaths put it in her mouth.

Good. Okay. “Ready?” I asked

Cat took the robe out of her mouth for a moment.

“I’m telling your wife all about this,” she threatened me, and then put the robe back into her mouth.

My eye twitched and I immediately turned her leg and popped her hip back into place.

Chapter 299 Pyre, Pepper, Laughter

A new fire had been given life.

Standing with Oplar, Sillti and Angie, I stared alongside them at the large burning pyre. One that had been made out of broken down wagons and carts. Some of them hadn't even been destroyed in the attack, and had been perfectly fine.

But there had been that many dead. Enough to warrant breaking down still usable wagons. As to have enough firewood for their funeral, and because the wagons would have been abandoned anyway. Enough people had died in the attack that even if each person took a wagon or cart there'd still be some left over.

I shifted as I glanced to our right. A few dozen paces away were a line of people. Kneeling in prayer. Some were weeping. Some didn't have a single stain upon their faces, as if unable to cry at all.

Lasly the innkeeper was amongst them. Her husband had been hit by an arrow.

All around us were other wagons, carts, horses and people. After the attack the whole caravan had banded together as closely as possible. What had been a rather disjointed caravan had become a very tight knit group of people. The reason why was obvious. To treat their wounds, handle the dead, and better keep each other safe.

I wasn't sure if they really were safe or not, to be honest. The attackers had been fended off... but...

Glancing again at the funeral pyre, and the many dozens of bodies still burning within it... I wondered who had really lost.

Far more attackers had fallen than I'd thought originally. But there had still been dozens more to escape back over the hill and away, too. The caravan had outnumbered them originally, but something told me the numbers were now even.

A quick glance at the grieving people, and the crowds gathered all around them watching somberly... and the other crowds at a distance, at their wagons for one reason or another, I did my best to count those still alive and still here.

There were at least fifty, but a good portion of those were elderly or women. And of the men, several had injuries. More than a few now had their arms wrapped in slings, or similar wounds.

Our tiny group was actually one of the few, if not only ones, to have not only had no casualties... but no injuries either.

Or well... technically I suppose our group did.

I felt bad as I glanced at Lasly again. She was still there, weeping. Her children were holding her close.

Yes. We had suffered too.

"I'm uh... not sure what to say," Silti said softly, breaking the silence that had been growing amongst us for the good part of an hour or so. None of us had seemingly been willing to say anything as the pyre had been readied, and then lit aflame. The whole caravan had gone quiet, even the wounded which had been groaning in pain had ceased doing so. In reverence, almost. But now that people were openly weeping, and that most were done doing so, conversations had begun to sprout. Smaller campfires had even begun to be lit around the area, as people settled down.

"What is there to say? This happens rarely anymore, but it still does and always will. The chaos of the fires gave the bastards the chance to do this. Typical of mercenaries, opportunistic bastards," Oplar said angrily.

I shifted at that. Was it really typical?

Was that why so many had been wary around Vim and I while we had traveled together? While we had pretending to be such a thing...?

I had thought mercenaries were just people who could be hired. To fight wars. To be temporary guards or knights.

Were they brigands and murderers too...?

Hadn't I heard that Vim had been friends with many of them? I couldn't imagine Vim being friends of such people. Vim did not look kindly on those who forced their will on others... and theft and murder were definitely not something that aided free will.

Still... although surrounded by grief, and chaos, I felt strangely tired and calm. My heart was no longer thumping wildly. My breathing no longer harsh and short. My sweat that had covered my body had even cooled and dried already, making me feel a little chilled somehow even in the hot air.

However, although calm... and very happy that no one precious to me had died or gotten hurt... I still felt as if I had failed, in a way.

And not just because the humans around me had gotten hurt, like Lasly's husband and the couple who had been riding on the wagon behind us.

Glancing down, I glared at the handle of my sword.

It was back in its sheath. It had done its duty. It had stood tall for me.

But...

"Come on. I need a drink," Oplar then said as she turned around.

"Hm!" Sillti quickly went to join her, sounding as if she agreed with the idea completely. They both stepped away, heading for the wagon that had been given to us.

It had been the wagon of that couple. The human couple who had been riding behind us.

They wouldn't need it anymore.

"Renn."

I blinked as I glanced down and found Angie. The young girl had been holding Oplar's hand, not mine, but not because she had not wanted to hold my hand or had found me scary. Instead it had been because I had been holding my sword's handle, and my other hand had been clenched tightly into a fist this whole time. I had actually noticed the young girl try to reach out and grab my hand a few times since I had returned to standing next to her and Oplar, but I'd ignored her.

I shouldn't be mean to her. She was likely terrified still. She was just a little girl. My weak nerves and distressed self wasn't an excuse. I needed to be better.

I needed to stand tall.

"Sorry. Are you okay?" I asked. The battle had ended a few hours ago, but this was actually the first time I'd actually spoken to her.

She nodded gently at me. "Are you?" she asked.

"Yes. Not even a bruise," I told her.

And hadn't lied.

I had not only defended my family, I had done so flawlessly. I had stood tall. I had faced four men. Full grown men, who even had armor and fancy weapons. One of them even had a spear.

And not only had none of them hurt me, they hadn't hurt those I had stood tall to protect. They had hurt and killed those around us, but not us. Not those of the Society. Not this little girl.

I've killed before. More than I'd like to admit. Throughout the years I've had to defend myself, or the kids and Nory, from others. During my time with Witch I had also been forced to do things I had not wanted to do. But this was honestly the first time I'd faced four battle-hardened men as I had, and hadn't gotten hurt in the process. Usually when I was forced to fight for my life, or others, it ended up with me covered in wounds and sometimes even bedridden for days.

This time though... thankfully, I was standing firm. Not even a pulled muscle to speak of.

Vim's training had paid off. My efforts hadn't been in vain.

In fact...

I gulped as I smiled at the young girl who was looking up at me as if I had just lied to her. She hadn't believed me.

“To be honest I’m just... kind of surprised. I hadn’t realized how strong I was until now,” I told her the truth.

Angie frowned. “Isn’t that a good thing?” she asked.

“It is... but...” I shifted as I reached down to grab my sword’s hilt. With a small tug I drew the blade out of the sheath a little... until it had no more sword to draw.

It had broken. Right in the middle. Shattered.

“Better it than us,” the young girl said as she stared at it. I was glad to see she hadn’t stepped back in worry at the sight of it. She didn’t fear me, even after watching me kill those men. Even after the blood and death.

She was rare for a child. The kids, and even Nory, had always been a little skittish around me after witnessing such traumatic events. Maybe it was because I hadn’t gotten hurt this time.

Fly hadn’t shied away from me either, during those moments in the sewer. But that might have been because she had been more scared of the attackers and her master than me. There had not been any room in her tiny heart for fear of me. It had been full already.

Not only was she brave... this little girl was also rather wise. I nodded at her statement.

“Yes. But... it had been special to me all the same,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“It’s full of my memories,” I said.

The girl’s eyebrows furrowed in a way that told me she hadn’t understood. It seemed although wise beyond her years, she was still young.

“Get over here you two!” Oplar shouted at us from the wagon. I turned to make sure they were okay, since her shout had originally made my heart miss a beat... but Oplar and Sillti were fine. They had made a small campfire next to the wagon we now owned, and it looked like Oplar already had tea being made.

“I hate tea...” Angie grumbled as she stepped away.

Watching the young girl walk away, I smiled gently at her. Yes, she had said that before.

Taking a deep breath I glanced once more at my broken sword.

It had shattered inside the chest of one of the men. The one with the spear. The last to attack us. He had been on his horse still, and I had leapt upward to stab him. I had actually almost jumped onto him, and

although my attack had worked and I had impaled him in the chest... it had also forced me into a weird position. I had angled away from him as he fell off his horse, and I fell back to the ground. The result was my sword snapping in two, since it had gotten stuck inside of him. I should have let it go, to leave it in his body and grab it afterward. It had snapped from my own strength, my own actions.

In reality I knew it was likely something a long time coming. Vim and I had sparred often with this sword, and I knew better than to think all the exchanges between me and him hadn't left their marks. Odds are this blade had broken thanks to tiny little cracks from the thousands of times Vim's sword had blocked my own, or I his. Maybe Brom's sword had left cracks too. Although a strange metal stronger than normal, it was still in the end but metal. A normal object. One that could wear down and break.

Angie was right of course. Better the sword than us. Any day, any time.

But...

"Sorry," I whispered to it.

How long had I had this thing? Two years at least. Granted lately it had become such an obvious, matter of fact, thing to have that I had actually forgotten about it half the time... but...

I'd trained for countless hours with this thing. With Vim. My sweat and blood had stained the handle. Seeped into it. It even smelled like me. I had been taught by Vim how to care for it. How to oil the handle, and make sure the edges didn't chip too deeply or roll.

Tapping the blade, right next to where it had broken, I sighed at the sound my nail made upon it.

It had sounded dull. Nothing like the pure note it usually made.

“Don’t rush her.”

I heard Oplar’s voice, even when hushed she was still loud. Sillti or Angie must have been about to call out to me.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed as I slid the broken sword back into the sheath. It was just barely enough of a sword to keep it in, but it made it lopsided. The sheath was strangely heavier than it seemed, but not heavy enough without the rest of the blade inside of it to leverage it out. The sword’s handle kept wanting to slide downward, unbalanced thanks to it being broken and missing its lower half.

I’ll not be able to keep it. But...

I groaned at the thought of the other half of the sword still in that man’s body.

They hadn’t burned the attackers. They had instead gathered up all their bodies and placed them on the side of the road. They had even laid blankets over them all, as if in respect. I wasn’t sure why they’d gather them up with such care yet not burn them too, but I hadn’t been about to stop them.

The man who had half of my sword stuck in him was on the other end of the road and hill. I even knew which blanket he was under.

It felt... wrong, somehow, to know the sword's pieces were still in him. But I wasn't going to go digging into him to pry them out.

A part of me wondered what I should do about it. I'd not be able to carry it on my hip like I've been doing. Not with the way it dangles now. But I couldn't just abandon it either... could I?

Not only was it precious to me, even while broken, it was also important.

Vim's precious steel...

"Where are you?" I whispered softly as I stared at the blade's handle. The funeral fire could be seen upon it. Dancing in a reflected glimmer.

I had cleaned it of blood already. Wiped it with a cloth. I knew I was supposed to also apply some of the oil too, but I hadn't done so... and likely wouldn't.

The thing was broken. It was done.

Gripping the handle, so it wouldn't fling and fall out as I walked, I turned away from the fire and headed for our wagon.

Reaching up to make sure my hat was still firmly on the top of my head, I promised myself to give Vim a kiss. His pins had held firm and hadn't broken or gone loose during all my fighting and movements. It was almost startling to think those little wooden pieces had been strong enough to endure what they'd just gone through a few hours ago. Especially when they just... randomly broke sometimes, for no reason at all.

As I approached our wagon, I made sure to glance around to check our surroundings. I was still on guard, and felt antsy. Hard not to be, considering.

Oplar was the only one standing. Sillti and Angie were both sitting on small stools, likely found from within the wagon. They were tiny enough that they fit Angie, but not Sillti.

Other than them... there was no one else nearby. The nearest wagon, a large one with huge wheels taller than me, was a few dozen steps away and currently didn't have anyone around it. I had seen someone messing with it earlier, but they weren't there now. They were likely either still over with the mourners, or were at another group's campfire.

While Oplar messed with her tea pot, Sillti noticed my approach. She seemed about to stand up, but hesitated. She instead just smiled at me. "We found food, Renn," she said in greeting.

"And booze," Angie added.

I frowned. "Please tell me you didn't give her alcohol," I said. Angie had a cup in her hands.

Angie giggled as Oplar laughed at me.

“No, no. She’s got tea,” Sillti said quickly, not realizing that I knew full well Oplar wouldn’t have given the young girl such a thing.

“Good,” I said with a smile as I went to sit down too. There was only one other unoccupied stool, but there was a larger box sitting next to it. I took the stool, not because I was too good for the box but instead because I knew such a tiny stool would have been uncomfortable for Oplar. It had even felt a little uncomfortable for me. Had this been for children? The couple hadn’t had any...

“Hope you worked up a good and mighty hunger, Renn. They had some mighty fine meat and I’m going to cook it well,” Oplar said happily.

“Had a bunch of other stuff too,” Angie said.

“Aye they did. Good thing Brandy isn’t here, else we’d be going home with a dozen wagons in tow!” Oplar said with a laugh.

I couldn’t help it, I laughed too. “I bet she would make us gather them, yes,” I agreed.

There were not that many wagons left, I didn’t think, but there were indeed several nearby that had no owners anymore. Odds are no one would actually complain if we went and took whatever we wished. In fact I’d already noticed a few people doing just that. There were a pair of women rummaging in a cart not far from us, on the other side of the wagon with big wheels. They were talking between themselves, and I made out a few of the words through the noise and crackling fires. They were looking for something. Some kind of box.

I watched the women for a moment... unsure what to think of them. Should someone stop them? Were they stealing? Were they friends or family of the ones who had been the original owners of the wagon?

Did it matter...?

Then shadows moved, and I startled as I looked up.

A tiny moment of panic ran through me, but I calmed down and smiled up at Oplar who held out a cup to me.

“You sure you’re okay, Renn?” Oplar asked as she handed me a full cup of her tea.

I smiled at her and nodded, but didn’t say anything... as I released the handle of my sword. I had grabbed it instinctively upon being startled.

I was still on guard.

She smiled back and nodded, and stepped away. To head for the wagon. I watched as she lifted a box and brought it over. I could smell the meat within it even before she went to opening it.

The cup was warm. And smelled good.

"I've never had alcohol," Sillti said.

"You can try it later, Sillti. The odds of them attacking again are pretty slim, but until we know for sure no messing around," Oplar said with a happy tone.

"I wasn't saying I wanted to get drunk! I was... just saying," Sillti argued.

"We drank mead in the winter," Angie said.

"Aye. Watered down mead is a staple indeed," Oplar said with a nod.

I hummed as I nodded too. She was right. In the north especially children were allowed to drink watered down spirits. It was sometimes all they had to drink, and it also kept them a tad warmer during the harsh winters.

"Wait... you let kids just drink that stuff? Why'd you say something about it then, Renn?" Sillti asked me, having noticed my nod.

"Forgot about it. But it's true; up north where I'm from they did let the kids drink the watered stuff. But I don't know if it's all the same or not. The stuff here smells a lot stronger," I said.

“Different kinds. The stuff you’re thinking of Renn is more diluted, not as strong. The stuff in the wagon is the good stuff. I bet even you could get drunk on it,” she said with a grin.

“Really...?” I perked up at that. Interesting. It was too bad Vim wasn’t here, so that I could have some.

“Let’s not get her drunk, please,” Silti mumbled.

I smirked at that. Was that because she worried about me being a drunk predator, or because then she’d lose her current protector, I wonder?

“Good tea is far better than a hangover, I say,” Oplar said as she went to start cooking. She had already laid out some kind of iron cookware over the fire. It looked like a small barbecue. It was neat; it looked like it could be folded up for easy storage.

Maybe I should keep that.

I blinked as I realized technically it was ours now. After all, the whole wagon and all its contents were now ours.

I wonder if Vim would let us keep it. Would he let us use it while we traveled around...? We had used a cart in the south not too long ago. When we had taken the dyes from Secca to Landi. So maybe...

“I’ll help. Let her rest,” Sillti then said, drawing me from my thoughts.

“Huh...?” I sat up a little and realized I had missed something. Sillti had stood to help Oplar with the food.

“You can lie down after some food, Renn. Trust me, a full stomach helps relieve the tension,” Oplar said to me.

Great. They were worried about me. I probably looked troubled.

“Should we be doing this...? Should we leave, Oplar...?” I asked instead.

“Nay. Although defeated and wounded, there looked to still be dozens of them. They’ll be licking their wounds, and likely won’t attack this group again in fear of them being ready this time, or reinforcements showing up, but they’ll not hesitate to attack a small wagon on its lonesome, let alone three women and a kid,” Oplar said as she started laying slabs of meat onto the iron grill thing.

It sizzled, and I couldn’t help but stare at the meat as it did.

I was starving. Oplar was right.

Somehow that made me smile.

“Wait! Please don’t put that stuff on them!” Sillti shouted as Oplar opened a pouch. One that immediately made the air smell funny.

Spices.

“What? Liven up Sillti, this stuff exists to be put on good meat like this,” Oplar defended her choice with a frown as she stuck her fingers into the pouch.

“Don’t! It smells weird!” Sillti groaned defiantly.

“Smells like typical spices,” I said.

“I love you Renn, but please be quiet. Can’t you smell it? It’s rancid,” Sillti said with a glare at Oplar.

“It’s just pepper from the islands. It tastes good,” Oplar said with a frown. She wasn’t joking anymore, but being serious.

“Pepper? That’s expensive stuff we should keep it and sell it instead,” Angie however had a different opinion.

“Alright you little old soul, I swear if you don’t start acting your age I’ll be sending you to the Bell Church. Nothing but old people there! You’ll fit right in!” Oplar said loudly while pointing her spice stained finger at Angie, as if making a threat.

The young girl frowned at Oplar, not understanding what she meant, but I couldn’t help but smile.

“Careful Angie, she says it in jest but that might actually be rather threatening,” I said.

“Now now, don’t be biased Renn!” Oplar turned the pepper stained finger to point at me.

It was my turn to frown.

“I’ve heard of that place. Supposedly it’s all women, so I don’t want to go there either,” Sillti said with a huff as she crossed her arms, forgetting all about the pepper all of a sudden.

Oplar immediately began to laugh hysterically, which in turn made me laugh too.

Sillti gave us looks that told me she couldn’t comprehend why we were laughing, but it was fine. After all... this was the best outcome in my opinion.

Laughter.

It was far better than weeping. Far better than sobs and heartbreak.

And...

Most importantly...

They had all asked if I was okay. Right after the fight. The battle. Oplar and Sillti, and even little Angie, had asked several times if I was all right. Even though they had all been there to see it all. They had with their own eyes watched what had happened. They hadn't needed to ask, they had seen that I had been fine.

Yet...

Other than asking if I was okay...

They didn't bring the battle up at all, afterward.

They'd mentioned lightly things like if I was tired, or that I should eat my fill or rest... but nothing more. Nothing more direct than that.

No comment about what I'd done.

No comments about how many I had killed.

All they did was act natural. Normal. We made dinner. We ate. We sat and drank while talking and telling stories, as we always had. They had allowed the night to be as normal as could be; so normal I had almost doubted it all had happened in the first place.

There was no stiff fear directed towards me. They hadn't stared at me in terror or worry, as Lughes and Crane had done. They hadn't become distant, and started walking on eggshells like those in Lumen had done either.

Instead... they just kept on being themselves. Being normal. With me.

And for that...

I'll always be thankful.

This was what I had wanted originally. This was why I had joined the Society.

This was what made it all worth it.

This was why I stood tall.

Chapter 300 To Stress and Worry

“I do believe that’s Hornslo, or used to be at least,” Cat said from above my head.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed at the sight of an already burnt down village. One that was smoldering heavily.

Judging by the way the land all around the village was darkened, it was clear that the fires had swept through not long ago. There were still white wisps of smoke all over, rising up into the air in tiny arm-thick size columns... which meant the fire had come and go only a day or two ago at longest.

“Looks like the fires genuinely ended here,” I said as I turned a little, and stared out at the rolling hills that headed westward. These same hills eventually turned into Twin Hills in the far north, and smaller mountain ranges in the south. Beyond them were more forests, other human settlements, a few Society locations... and of course, the Nation of the Blind and Telmik. It wasn't far in the distance that the burnt ground and grass returned to its normal greenery.

“Well... not much to burn really,” Cat noted.

I nodded. That was true.

She shifted on my back a little, and I felt her turn to look a different direction. She hummed at whatever she saw, but said nothing about it.

Honestly I was tired of carrying her. It made me think of Renn.

I didn't mind thinking of Renn. In fact I enjoyed it. But that was the problem. I enjoyed it too much.

I wanted her body on me, not this cultist woman. I wanted to be feeling her ass and thighs not this cat.

I wanted my cat. Not this one. Not this fake.

"Vim?" Cat patted my shoulder, and I felt my eye twitch.

Don't pat me as if you were Renn... "What?" I asked while doing my best to not sound too annoyed.

It wasn't her fault. I had hurt her. She could walk, but very slowly and it hurt her. She was being carried by me out of necessity.

I had slaughtered her friends for no reason. I had hurt her carelessly. This was all my fault, not hers.

Yet I couldn't help the fact that I really did dislike her.

“What now? Your friends were here, right?” Cat asked softly, sounding worried.

Yes. I shouldn't hate this girl. She was actually a rather nice person. A little too nice, really. Typical of a cultist. The moment they felt someone was a friend they dropped all their barriers around them. She would even likely tell me where her saint was now, if I outright asked.

A part of me wanted to, but I knew if I did... I'd not need her anymore. And if I didn't need her anymore, well...

Would I abandon her? A young woman... who was unable to even walk properly now? Here in a fire scorched wasteland without any people, or civilization in sight?

Renn wouldn't.

“They likely are heading for Telmik. If they are as wise as I believe them to be, they had likely left a few days before the fires drew too close. So they're likely up to a week ahead of us, though...” I hesitated as I thought of Sillti. That woman, although a non-human, had been frail. Like all her fellow guinea pigs.

“Though?” Cat asked gently as she leaned forward a little, resting her arms on my shoulders to do so.

“Though they might not be. One of their members is like you. So they might be traveling slowly,” I said.

“Hurt? Tender and scared, worried their captor will at any moment do terrible things to them?” Cat asked me.

“You’d sound more convincing if I couldn’t feel your giggling,” I said as I stepped away, to head for the road in the distance. The one that led to Telmik.

Cat giggled louder, happy. “Sorry. I can’t help it, you remind me of Brave,” she said.

“Do I...?” I asked. The man I had killed? The first one?

“He was very stoic... and hated it when women teased him,” she told me.

Great.

“I actually enjoy it. But only by certain women,” I said as I picked up my pace a little.

“One woman, I bet,” she teased me further.

I smiled at her. She was right.

Renn didn't tease me often, but when she did it was lovely.

As I stepped onto the dirt road, I noticed the obvious tracks. Several dozen deep gouges were dug into the dirt road.

The type left by wheels. Wheels overburdened.

"Hm... did someone bring a plow through here or something?" Cat wondered as I followed the tracks.

There were footprints, hoof prints, and even other animal prints amongst the wagon tracks. Dogs and cows, too.

"Likely Hornslo's residents. Evacuating," I said.

"Ah. That makes a lot of sense," Cat said.

Typical doctor. So smart in some ways, and not in others.

Though... that might have just been her youth. I had learned this morning that Cat was younger than I had thought. I had thought her a woman in her early or mid twenties, and instead found she was only seventeen. And had only turned so a few weeks ago, in the middle of their journey here.

In today's era it was the age of an adult. One able to start a family. To wage war. To die for a cause, or dedicate themselves to a religious order or place themselves in perpetual servitude to a lordship.

Yet to me, it still wasn't old enough.

Not the age to be sent on a suicide mission at all.

I had much to say to her saint. This Saint Elaine of hers was in for an ass chewing once I found her. Maybe I'd let Renn do it.

This world didn't need any more holier-than-thou idiots sending children and the good-hearted off to their doom. I thought I had done a good enough of a job to destroy that world. Yet here I was... carrying proof that I'd not done a good enough job.

"Is your wife a saint, Vim?" Cat asked gently.

"No." Thank goodness.

"Hm... then how are you so strong?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“Isn’t your strength from a saint? If she’s not your wife... was your mother one or something? How’d you get so strong?” she asked.

Oh. Right. Sometimes they thought like this. It made sense to them.

In a way I guess it probably did. It was a weird mistake, and completely misguided, but in truth they did have a pinch of truth to their assumptions.

“My strength was given to me by parents,” I said.

“Ah. Your mother. How neat. Explains why you’re so nice too,” she said happily, as if it all now made perfect sense.

I was nice?

I mean... I tried to be, sometimes, but...

“I had killed your friends, Cat. I’d not call that nice,” I said gently.

Her legs tightened ever so softly around my waist. I noticed her left leg didn't do so as hard. "I suppose you're right. But you hadn't meant to, and wouldn't have had you known who we were right? You even helped me bury them, before I even thought of it," she reasoned.

Possibly. Or I had done it to make you trust me as fast as possible. Because I hadn't been able, or willing, to brutally force you to tell me what I wanted to know.

Keeping such a thought to myself, I shrugged gently.

"What's your wife's name again? Reny?" she asked.

Reny. Cute. "Renn. She's about your height, skinnier than she should be, with auburn hair and golden eyes," I said.

"Aubur?" she asked with effort, not recognizing the word.

Ah. "Brown hair that has a slight red tint to it. You can only really see it in certain light, though," I said. There was no point in saying that the tint of red was her rosettes. And maybe I should have just said brown, or copper, anyway. Humans may not be able to see the tint and off-coloration of her spots.

"Huh... must be from the north, then," she put one and two together.

"She is. Farther north than you are from, likely," I said.

Cat hummed as we rounded a hill, and encountered a broken down wagon.

It had been abandoned. Its wheel had snapped, and although there were a few boxes and crates around it, they had already been pried open and scavenged.

“It broke,” Cat pointed out.

I smiled gently at the kid. “So it had. Likely thanks to all the divots in the road. These type of wheels don’t do well with such terrain, they have no give and sway,” I said.

“Hm... because they can’t turn? So they snap?” Cat asked, understanding quickly.

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s fine when the road itself is straight, so the wagon only has to go in a straight line, but these roads are windy. Going up and down hills, and around them. I bet there will be many more along this road,” I said.

She hummed as I picked up my pace, leaving the broken wagon behind.

“You ever been a teacher, Vim?” Cat asked out of the blue.

“A few times, yes,” I told her.

“Thought so. You must be older than you look,” she said.

You have no idea.

We passed other carts and wagons as we hurried. Some had been outright left as is, while others looked as if they had been scavenged as much as possible. It felt like I was following after an army, a little, what with the way they were broken down and abandoned on the side of the road.

Armies usually left such a mess behind as they traveled. Especially through enemy lands.

Distant smoke from fires was a common sight during such things too, so the distant fires and the smoke only further aided such a misconception.

Now the only thing I needed to pass were dead bodies or...

Slowing, I narrowed my eyes and wondered if I had just somehow given birth to reality with my thoughts.

“Vim...?” Cat asked worriedly, noticing my slowing down as I studied the things on the side of the road far ahead of us.

They were likely too far for her to make out yet, but I'd not mistake rows of bodies. The sight was very recognizable.

"Have you encountered the plague, Cat?" I asked her.

"Huh? The thing happening in the south? No. But even if I did I'd not know it, Saint Elaine blesses us and our food so..." I felt Cat shrug as she spoke.

Right. A saint. One with a modicum of power it seemed.

"Are you sick...? Please tell me you're not, I wouldn't know how to help you," Cat then said, worried.

Oh. Woops. "No. But there are bodies on the side of the road ahead of us. They might be dead from the disease, so I was just wondering if you've caught it already or not," I said. If she had and survived, it meant she'd be immune to it. Or at least, have a very good chance of not catching it again. Or if she did, not being as badly hurt by it.

But if she's been blessed by her saint recently I didn't need to worry. Not yet anyway. Such blessings usually lasted years. Stronger ones could last a human their whole life.

"Huh... I don't see any bodies," Cat said as she leaned upward a little, likely to try and see as far as she could.

Her ass and thighs pressed against my forearms as she did so, and I once again wished it was Renn I was carrying and not her.

“Just to be safe, keep your distance from anyone who looks sick. And don’t eat or drink anything that they’ve touched or came close to,” I warned her.

“Right,” She agreed as she lowered herself back down, not trying to find them anymore.

As we neared the bodies I slowed a little, and frowned at the sight of them.

They were all men.

And had not died from plague, disease, or fires.

“Uh...” Cat noticed too, as I stopped on the road and stared down at the bodies.

Some were covered in thin cloth, while others weren’t. But not because whoever had lined them up here had ran out of cloth to spare. The winds and wild animals had caused some of them to be revealed.

They all had injuries. Wounds from battle. Cuts from blades. Piercings from spears. Bludgeons from heavy objects, or from being trampled by horses. A few had arrows still sticking out of them.

“None are your friends, right?” Cat asked gently, worried.

Yes. She was a kind soul. “No. They’re all women,” I said.

“Oh...?” she perked up at that, for some reason.

“These here are mercenaries. I don’t recognize their colors, but...” I studied the few who had armbands. The bands were hand-sized thick wraps of blue with a gold emblem. None were correctly positioned enough for me to really make out the emblem, but I didn’t really feel like walking over and grabbing one to examine. If it was just me, I’d do it, but I was carrying a young lady. Even if she had been blessed by a saint, I’d not be so rude as to risk her life like that for no reason.

“I don’t like mercenaries,” Cat said coldly.

“Most don’t,” I said.

“Though... I heard they don’t abandon their fellows when possible. I thought they didn’t do this?” Cat asked.

“They usually don’t. This means they lost the battle. Either completely, or enough for the rest to retreat. In fact...” I turned and studied a distant meadow.

Yes. The fight had happened here... and then whomever they had attacked had set up camp off in the distance there. Not far from a river.

Walking away from the line of bodies, I stepped off the road as I entered the meadow. It was a grass field with flowers all over, and there were a few abandoned wagons scattered around.

There was also a large section of burnt grass. One with very clear signs of a mighty fire... one that had burned bodies. The remains of burnt bodies were rather clearly visible amongst the ash and half-burnt wood logs. Pieces of skulls and other bones were poking out of them.

“A funeral,” Cat said as she studied it too.

I nodded. “I think the mercenaries attacked those fleeing Hornslo. Odds are they had been a large caravan of wagons and people. Wagons carrying all their possession... or rather, all the things valuable enough to bring,” I said as I made sense of what happened.

“Why not burn their bodies too then?” Cat asked.

“Just like you, many despise mercenaries. See them as scum. In this region the prominent religion would also see the lack of giving them any final rites as a way to doom their souls. Basically they did it out of spite,” I said.

“Ah...”

Walking over to one of the larger wagons, that still looked in good shape, I studied the things left upon it.

There were still boxes and sacks. Full of stuff.

It was obvious someone had rummaged through it all, but...

I stepped up closer to the wagon and bent a little to allow Cat to reach out for the small pouch of apples. She picked only a single apple up out of it as to study it.

“Looks good,” she said, and then I heard her bite into it.

“Not enough room and space for it all. So they left what they had to,” I said as I reached out to grab the sack. There were what looked to be a few dozen apples in it. I’ll let Cat have them.

She hummed as she ate the apple, likely glad I had grabbed the rest of them.

Stepping away from the wagon, I sighed as I headed back for the road.

“Think your friends were among them?” she asked.

My eyes narrowed, but only because I had been trying not to think it.

I'd not smelled them after all. Neither Renn, nor Oplar or Sillti. But the air was very thick of smoke and decay. Even with the light wind there was a strong stink of dead corpses, and burnt flesh, mixed in with the smoke and distant fires. A part of me thought I could smell Renn, but honestly I'd been smelling her for days now. I wasn't actually smelling her, I was simply remembering the scent in the back of my mind.

“I don't know. But... I hope so,” I said.

“You do...? Shouldn't you hope they weren't here when attacked?” she asked.

I shook my head. “If they hadn't been, then they might have been attacked elsewhere. I'd rather they have been attacked while amongst a large group and not while alone,” I said.

“Oh.”

Stepping back onto the road, I glanced around again. To make sure I wasn't missing anything.

There were broken wagons. Remnants of a huge fire. Bodies far behind us. Obvious tracks in the road of lots of people and animals...

Yet no one else was around. And I didn't smell Renn, or Oplar or Sillti.

"If they are with this caravan, we'll catch up with them soon at least," I noted.

"Ah. True. You are fast," Cat said as she tossed aside her finished apple. It bounced off the road and rolled into the meadow we had just left.

"Want another?" I asked.

"Please."

I shifted a little to hold up the bag. Thankfully she took the whole thing, so I'd not have to keep handing it to her.

She rested the bag on my shoulder and back, between us, and I smiled at her.

Yes. This was why she kept reminding me of Renn. That was something she would have done too.

They made me feel like I was but a pack mule, sometimes.

Picking up my pace as I left the battle-site, I kept an eye out for any distant people or signs of them. Depending on how bad the attack had been, and what and who had been involved... there might be scouts for both parties involved. Those in the caravan might keep lookouts, while the mercenaries might keep tabs on the ones who had fended them off. To try and get revenge if able down the road.

It was worrying. I knew Oplar had taken this road. This was the one to take. There were a few paths from here to Telmik, but it'd be several days' worth of travel before one could turn down any different ones. That meant even if they hadn't been involved in that scuffle... they had been near it. Possibly.

Oplar was strong but a coward. She could be pushed to fight, but it usually didn't happen until those near her died or got really hurt.

Silti was as frail as the woman on my back.

And Renn, for all her strength and willpower...

She could fight. Would. To her last breath.

But that was what worried me.

Renn was strong enough to survive a battle with mercenaries. Even multiple ones. She herself was strong, fast, and could be deadly... and I had just spent the last two years teaching her how to really control that deadliness.

But, what I'd not been able to train her of... was her innate desire to protect those she deemed weaker than her and precious.

And during those moments she could get heated. Emotional. Desperate.

If Renn had been alone I'd worry for her safety, but not as much as I was now.

Because she had Oplar and Sillti.

Because she had been with an untold number of humans. Ones she had likely befriended in their time together.

I groaned as I clenched my jaw and picked up my pace even more. I began to run thanks to all the worry filling me up.

Cat made a noise, and she dropped the apple she had been eating. It landed on my head, before rolling off and falling to the ground.

Although I knew her mistake was because I had broke out into a run... I didn't slow or stop.

“Jeez...!” Cat mumbled a complaint as she grabbed the bag of apples. Not to claw out another, but instead to make sure it didn’t fall to the ground too.

I ignored her complaints, and kept on running.

She could ask for my apology later. If I would even be willing to give it.

For now I needed to run at least this fast. Even if it earned her discomfort. Even if it made me feel rude.

She, and this world, were lucky this was all I was doing to combat my stress and worry.

Far more lucky than they could ever imagine.