

The Non-Human Society

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Chapter 31: Chapter Thirty – Vim – Lomi's Den

"Have a good day!" the young guardsman waved at us as we passed.

I nodded at him while Lomi walked even closer to me. He was wearing new armor. Armor that shined a little more than it should, implying it wasn't just new but something he regularly cleaned and polished.

The boy was proud of his new position, even if he looked ridiculous in the armor he wore. He stepped to the side, and bent a little to wave more in-line with Lomi's sight.

Lomi noticed his attempt and glanced at the spear wielding boy, who smiled at her.

She looked away quickly, and the only other guard of the gate laughed. More so at the younger guard than the little girl who was now too embarrassed to look at anything but the floor.

Lomi did her best to hide herself next to me as we left the eastern gate of Bordu.

"Humans are weird," Lomi said once we were far enough away that the guard's laughter was only a faint sound. Her cheeks were still red.

"And yet the humans that know us think we're weird," I said to her. There weren't many people walking this path, but there were some down the road. A pair of men were quickly approaching, and what looked to be a large cart was a ways behind them.

Not too rare, considering this path led to the wheat growing village, Twin Hills. As its name implied there was nothing but rolling hills of wheat. If one wasn't a merchant they had little reason to ever go there.

"More like they think you're weird," Lomi said quickly, and then glanced behind us. To the gate we had just passed through.

"Want to go back and talk to him?" I asked her.

"Shush!" she shouted loudly enough that the pair of men heading towards us both paused for a moment, to stare at us.

I smiled at the young fox that began to mumble insults at me, as she glanced again at the gate.

If that young guard had known how much his simple goodbye had affected her, he'd probably get as red as she was now.

"Seemed like a good town," Lomi then said.

"Bordu? Yes. Smaller than Ruvindale, but lively. They have many festivals, especially during harvest season," I said.

"Festivals?"

"Big ones," I nodded.

She glanced behind us again, but I didn't bother looking back with her. Instead I focused on the two men who were now nearby.

They looked like farmers, but I didn't recognize them. Either they worked at Twin Hills, and lived in Bordu, or were on a task.

"Vim?"

Glancing at Lomi, I found that she had collected herself and calmed down. She was no longer blushing, and even had a gentle smile on her face. "Yeah?"

"Will... will you stay for awhile? Or are you going to leave right away?" she asked.

"I'll stay for as long as you need me," I said to her.

She began to say something, but stopped once she realized the two farmers had gotten close enough to hear us.

Lomi remained quiet until after the farmers passed. It was a good thing the cart down the road wasn't any closer, or else she might have stayed quiet until it too went by.

"Did they know my parents?" she then asked.

"Yes. They knew your village well," I said.

She blinked water eyes, and took a small breath... she looked as if she was doing everything she could to not break down and cry.

I reached out and patted her on the head. Her thick hat barely moved. Lomi grumbled, but didn't swat my hand away nor stepped aside. In fact, she drew a little closer to me.

"Stand tall, Lomi. Enter your new den with confidence," I said to her.

"Confidence..." she whispered.

"Or at least, pretend to do so. It's a fox's nature to be sly," I said.

"Mother always said I was sly..."

I squeezed her head gently, which caused her to finally try and step away from me. Based off the look she gave me as she rubbed her hat, I had bothered her ears.

Smiling at her glare, I patiently waited for her complaint... but it didn't come. The cart was too close now, and she didn't seem to want to talk in front of anyone.

"Ho! Good evening!" A surprisingly young voice came from the old woman guiding the horse which pulled the cart.

"Good evening," I said to her as we passed one another. As she smiled and waved at Lomi, I noticed the empty boxes in the cart.

She had delivered something to the Twin Hills. Probably food or resources.

"Is it a good one?" Lomi grumbled as the cart creaked away.

"To her it is," I said. She had probably made a nice little profit selling whatever she had transported. Or at least, got paid to deliver it.

"Do they make good food?" Lomi then asked.

I chuckled as I noticed how serious her face was. "I'm sure it's fine enough."

She didn't like my answer, but didn't get to complain about it as we came to a small hill.

It led upward, enough so to block out the sight that I knew lay just beyond it.

"Hills... You called it Twin Hills?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But there's lots of hills," she said.

"Not yet there isn't," I said. Granted we've been climbing them up and down since yesterday, but so far those were all little ones. The real ones lay just ahead of us.

Climbing the hill quickly, Lomi ran ahead. I followed her slowly, since I knew she'd not make it much farther past the top of the hill without me.

Not because she was incapable of running such a distance, but rather...

Lomi came to a stop at the top, and I watched her as she studied her new home. She went still, freezing in her tracks.

It didn't take me long to reach her side at the top of the hill, but her sudden stillness hadn't left her. She looked frozen in time.

"There's a bunch of wheat already?" she asked, staring at the ocean of gold.

"Winter wheat is planted a little earlier than winter. It'll be harvested soon based off the size of it," I said.

"Even in this cold?"

"Hm. Hardy stuff," I said.

She awed and hummed for a moment, as I watched the wheat sway in the light breeze.

There was wheat as far as one could see. It started not far from where we stood, and its rows of golden stalks ran down the hills like a wave... only for it to crash up against the next large hill, off in the distance. The wheat went up that hill, and over it. I knew beyond that hill was another large section of fields, and another beyond that too.

A small breeze went by, and it felt cold.

Yet Lomi didn't shiver.

Yes. Hardy stuff.

"See that large building? The one on the right?" I asked, pointing at the home that sat in the middle of the two large hills.

She nodded.

"That's your new home. The building across from it, the one with the red roof, is where the snakes and squirrel live," I said.

Lomi gulped, and looked around us. The top of the hill allowed her to see everything, except for what was on the other hill opposing it. This hills twin.

"The other buildings?" she asked.

"Storage and work buildings. The humans don't live there, they ride carts from the city to work the fields," I explained.

"But humans are here often?" she asked.

"Oh yes. Every day," I said.

"So... I'll have to hide my ears?" she asked gently.

I nodded. "Occasionally. See the large fences? During the day, or during harvest or planting, you can stay behind them and not be seen. Plus..." I pointed to the nearby field of wheat. Some of it was as tall as me.

"That hides us too," she whispered.

"Yeah. Plus the humans who do come and work here are busy. They toil long and hard. A few humans even know of us, they'll be able to tell you who they are and introduce you to them. They're the ones who you'll see the most, and they give orders to the humans. It keeps you separated another layer from them," I said.

"Like... like Amber?" she asked.

"Yes. Kind of like what Amber did for Lughes and the rest," I said.

"Hm..."

We stood in silence as I watched the buildings in the distance. I could make out shadows in one of the houses windows. Features hidden by heavy drapes yet had visible silhouettes all the same. The foxes were awake, but it seemed the snakes' house was dark.

But that wasn't a tell of them being asleep.

After all, one was blind.

"Uhm..."

Glancing at Lomi, I watched her fidget as she looked around. To the ground and the wheat around us.

"Don't be nervous," I said.

"I... I'm not!" she said loudly, taking a deep breath to puff out her cheeks in annoyance.

I nodded, proud to be of help.

"I just..." she looked away, to the house we were about to walk to. "I just... hope they'll like me," she whispered.

"Hm... what's not to like? Even if you drool and slobber, and bite and snarl," I said with a smirk.

Lomi smiled, but didn't argue back. She remained focused on the house before us.

"Is it safe?" she asked.

"As much as it can be. As long as you're careful of what you wear, and who you talk to. They'll keep an eye on you, and help teach you. You'll be fine here. They've lived here longer than you've been alive and have had no problems," I said.

"The snakes won't eat me?" she asked.

Blinking at that question, I realized it was the first time she had brought it up.

"No. In fact they don't care for the taste of meat at all. It's kind of weird actually," I said.

Lomi glanced at me and I nodded, to confirm it. "Really."

"And... the squirrel?"

"He's a coward. He couldn't harm you even if his life depended on it," I said.

The young fox frowned and then smiled, as if she hadn't liked what she heard but at the same time did.

"Will I have to work in the fields?" she asked.

"Hm... I'm sure there's something you can do to help out," I said.

Lomi grumbled, and I wondered if we'd make it there before the sun set. It was just about to reach the top of the other hill, which meant we'd have to begin our descent shortly to make it in time.

"Can... can I stay with you? If they're... If I don't like it?" she then asked.

I nodded gently at her watery eyes. "Yes."

She gulped and then looked back at the houses.

Extending my hand to her, I smiled softly. "They have cats, you know. Little playful creatures that will happily let you pet them," I said.

"Cats?" she reached out to take my hand.

"Well they did last time," I said honestly. Knowing my luck this would be the one time they didn't have any. Even though they always had dozens all over whenever I visited.

"Like Renn?" she asked.

"Well... no... normal ones. Little ones," I said.

"Hm..."

Hand in hand I guided Lomi to her new home. Slowly descending the hill with quiet... but hopeful steps.

Chapter 32: Chapter Thirty One – Renn – An Empty Forest

The forest was dark. And not just because the sun was just starting to rise and the morning light wasn't strong enough to pierce the thick treetops.

Walking slowly, I tried to comprehend why I felt so...

"Alone," I whispered.

It's been a few hours since I entered this so called "Owl's Nest." Yet not only have I not seen any owls, I hadn't seen much of anything else.

Upon originally entering this forest, I had seen multiple deer and rabbits. I had heard the birds, and smelled a bear.

Yet now there was nothing. No animals. Not even the scent of them on the wind.

As if I was the only living creature in the entire forest.

Glancing around as I headed ever deeper into the dark forest, I wondered how it was even possible.

Forests weren't empty. No matter how devoid of life they could look like sometimes, it was nothing more than a facade. Forests were always teeming with life. One could not have a forest without such life. They went hand and hand together.

Yet here now was one without any.

The oddest part was I didn't even smell anything off. The lack of animals would be understandable, if I smelled a certain stink in the air. Something unnatural or powerful... yet there was nothing. I smelled the forest. The moss. I even smelt some kind of flower, too.

Although disturbing, it at least told me I was on the right track.

The path I had been following originally was gone. Not even a hint of a path buried by weeds and grass was visible, which meant that there probably never had been one. Yet I continued on in the same direction as I'd been walking.

Lughe's letter had mentioned walking straight into the center of the Owl's Nest.

So to the center I'd go.

I had planned to wait until sunrise to enter the forest, but had grown impatient. I had arrived at the edge of the forest around the middle of the night, and couldn't help myself.

After all I could see well enough in the dark, and had spent most of my life in the forest. I had grown up inside one even denser than this. I had nothing to fear... yet now...

What if I spent days walking through this forest, only to emerge at the other end and never find these supposed owls?

I could continue on to Bordu, and then of course Twin Hills where Vim would be taking Lomi... but...

"What if I spent too long here?" I asked myself, worried I'd miss Vim by wandering too long in this forest.

Although there was no real... true urgency, to find Vim... there also was.

I needed to find him, to tell him what happened.

I needed to be the one to admit it. To inform him.

Wasn't sure why I felt so... serious about it, but...

I wanted him to hear of Amber's death, and the resulting conflict between me and the residents of the Sleepy Artist, from me. And not from a letter. And not years from now.

Yet at the same time, what if it resulted in me being kicked out of the Society?

For a good few hours I allowed such conflicting thoughts to come and go. After all, with a lack of life around me... and only constant trees and shrubs, there was little else to do.

At least the forest didn't seem to be getting any darker.

Not that it was getting brighter either.

Somehow it unsettled me. The trees were numerous, and their leaves thick and large... but surely the sun wasn't that weak? It wasn't that cold, so I didn't think there was a storm above us either... so why then weren't the sun's rays reaching into the forest?

By now the sun should be high overhead. Yet it looked almost as if it was night and...

Going still, I focused my attention off in the distance. To the left, there looked like...

Yes. Something was moving. In the shadows. Causing shadows to move themselves.

Usually such a sight wouldn't bother me. After all, forests were full of life. Animals of all shapes. Sometimes even humans, who were out hunting could be found this deep into forests too.

Finally seeing something after so much time, should be a good thing. It should give me relief and comfort that I wasn't truly alone...

Yet...

Going so long without seeing something made it all the more worrisome to finally see another creature.

I watched it for a moment as I slowed my pace. I wasn't too worried over it, since it was so far away... but... there was something about it and...

"A bear maybe," I whispered. It did look... shaped like one. Walking on all fours, as well. Yet I hadn't smelled it yet. Usually I smelled bears from a great distance.

A heavy sound echoed throughout the quiet forest, and I went still.

Off in the distance I saw the creature move. It was dark... blending in well with the dark forest that we were in, but it was moving. And as I watched it further, I realized something odd.

Whatever it was... there was no doubt that it was much larger than I.

It loomed high enough that, if it was really walking on all fours as I suspected... that if it stood onto its hind legs its head would breach the thick treetops.

Which meant that even I, even though much stronger than any human, would be just as helpless and weak as a normal human woman in front of it.

I gulped, and slowly stepped backward.

It wasn't acting as if it noticed me. Yet at the same time, how could it not? Something that big... its senses were probably far beyond my own. It had probably smelled me from far away; maybe even from the moment I had entered its territory.

After all it wasn't as if I didn't smell. My tail and ears always smelled a little different, a little stronger and...

Stepping back another step, I hesitated. The grass beneath my feet wasn't dry, but it was also full of sticks and weeds. Things that crunched loudly.

If I kept walking it'd definitely hear me, and might focus on me.

Should I just kneel down and do my best to hide? Hold my breath?

Should I run?

Deciding to kneel down slowly, to do my best to blend in with the trees and foliage around me... I went as low to the ground as I could.

The thing stepped to the right, and I heard the heavy footfall. It had only taken a step, yet it had sounded as if it had slapped the earth with great force.

It was heading my way.

Another step followed, and for a brief moment I remembered my youth.

Stories from my grandmother. Stories she and my mother had told to me and my siblings.

Stories of our ancestors who had once ruled the world.

They had ruled because they were at the top of the food chain. Because nothing existed beyond them. Nothing that was bigger. Nothing stronger.

This was probably exactly what they meant.

Was it a bear then? Or something like it? It looked as if it had three sets of legs, but it was hard to tell in the dark and...

A low growl emanated from the dark creature. A rumble echoed throughout the air, vibrating the air to the point that it took everything I had to not reach up and scratch my ears. The sound was so thick, it made the hair in my ears tremble and itchy.

Then it seemed to shift directions. Suddenly I could clearly see the three different sets of legs, as it began to walk towards the direction I had come from. At least it was away from me.

Focusing on the creature as it continued to saunter away; I did my best to not feel relief yet.

After all I couldn't really tell where it was looking. The shadows kept its head and eyes out of sight... which was strange all on its own. Why weren't its eyes reflecting the little amount of light?

Then the creature paused. Shifting its great weight, I watched as it hefted what was probably its head. For a brief moment it looked as if it was...

Yes. It was smelling the air.

Smelling for me.

My stomach knotted, and I hoped it'd not gurgle mistakenly. Luckily it didn't, but my eyes did narrow as I felt a ting of pain.

Eating my full for so many months seemed to have made me spoiled. To think my stomach would complain over only a couple days without food...

Though I knew that the knotting feeling wasn't just hunger. It was also fear.

Softly rubbing my fingers together, I felt the layer of cold sweat upon them.

Yes. Fear.

A heavy growl drew my entire focus back onto the creature. My ears and tail went stiff as I realized something dreadful.

It really was looking at me.

Three reflective eyes stared directly into my own.

For a few seconds nothing happened. My mind didn't think. My heart didn't beat. The beast didn't move or make a sound.

Then it growled again. A new type of noise. One that was clear, without any words being spoken.

A very distinct, very deep, and very real threat.

Quickly standing, I allowed my heart to beat wildly for a few seconds as I wondered how I'd survive this.

If it wanted me out of its territory, it'd simply chase me... but...

Odds were I was nowhere near the forest's exit. I'd been walking for most the day. Even at full sprint... it'd take me at least two hours to escape.

That creature wouldn't give me hours.

And that was with me assuming that it was just a base creature, and not something different. What if it had no comprehension of territories? What if it simply...

Cold understanding dawned on me as I realized that was why the forest was so quiet.

This was why there was no life here.

It ate and killed anything that lived.

Two heavy feet stepped towards me, and I groaned as the realization became clear.

It was no normal animal. And not just because it was bigger than anything I've seen.

The beast stepped closer, and as it did it stepped on a large log. Maybe an old fallen tree.

It snapped and crumbled beneath its weight. Squished more than broke.

Turning on a heel, I ignored the creature as it roared.

Breaking into a run, I felt my mind go blank.

I thought of nothing as I ran with everything I had. I ignored the heavy thumps I could not just hear, but almost feel, behind me. I ignored the trees and bushes I ran past, they were nothing but blurs in the corner of my eyes. I ignored the terrible fear bubbling in the pit of my stomach, and the horrible thought that this might have all been a trap.

What if Lughes and Crane had done this on purpose...?

"No!" I screamed, and tossed that thought away. Refused to let it go any further than a thought.

Focusing entirely on my running, I leapt over a large root. A few seconds later, I heard the sound of something huge and heavy ramming into a tree.

Then I heard the tree crack. Then I heard it fall.

It had run into the tree I had just passed, and ran through it.

"Impossible..."

Another tree was plowed through, and I turned a little. To change the direction I ran. Trying to run into the thickest parts of the forest.

Even if it ran through trees, that didn't mean they didn't slow it down. Right?

Entering a thick patch, it took everything I had to not trip or slip on the many roots that now littered the floor. I cursed at myself as I noticed my speed noticeably drop. The trees blocking it weren't going to help me if I slowed down this much!

A loud snap told me it had broke another tree. Then another great crack echoed throughout the forest... then it roared.

Its roar caused me to pick up my pace. It had sounded as if it was right behind me!

"Don't look!" I shouted at myself, since I wanted to. I needed to! But!

The thing roared as another tree was broken. I heard the rustle of leaves this time, which meant it was that much closer.

Would it destroy the whole forests just to get me? Was it that far gone? More monster than beast?

For several long minutes I ran through the thick trees, and listened as the branches and trees themselves were broken. Shattered and toppled as the beast pursued me.

How much energy was it using to catch me? Each tree it ran into. Each minute that went by...

There was no way I was worth this much effort! I was small! Skin and bones! And!

Then suddenly there were no more trees.

My heart went still as I tried to comprehend what had just happened.

Flat, knee high grass was all around me suddenly... not a tree in sight... and...

Quickly looking around, I felt the hairs on my tail become so stiff it was painful.

I was dead.

I was suddenly in a great clearing. The forest was still here. Behind me. Off in the distance... All around, but not close enough. I had run to my doom.

Looking everywhere for a place to go, a place to escape, I realized there was nowhere to go. A great massive tree was off in the distance, but it was too far away. There was no way I'd escape that creature on this open field, without the trees to slow it down and...

Yet...

As I ran, I realized I was still alive.

Then another minute went by, and...

Daring a glance back, I found nothing but empty field behind me.

Slowing, I hurriedly looked around. Where was it?

Nothing was around me. Not only were there no trees, there was no beast either.

"Where...?" I gasped for air, and regretted slowing down. Now I felt winded. Now I felt the severe layer of not just terror sweat, but exhaustion covering me. Now it'd be noticeable and...

But no. The creature was gone.

Looking all around, I was surprised to find that it really was gone.

It had just been behind me! Where could it have...?

Then I saw it. Three red eyes. Glaring at me from just behind the forest line.

Just behind a few of the trees, the dark silhouette was undoubtedly the creature. It looked even bigger than it had before... and not just because its eyes were closer to the treetops than not.

It was standing. Glaring at me.

With emotion.

I could see visible hatred in those eyes.

"Why...?" I whispered, unsure of what had caused it to stop.

Did it fear the open field? Animals did that sometimes, but never something so big. Never a predator...

Unless there was an even more dangerous...

"You're very lucky."

Spinning around, I nearly stumbled as I stepped back. Away from the sudden figure.

A tall woman smiled at me, and I instantly knew she was like me. And not because of the woman's bright, large eyes... but the feathers on her arms.

Glancing behind me, at the creature, I found it was gone. Or at least, I couldn't see it anymore. No more red eyes. No more dark shadows, roars or heavy thumps of footfalls.

This woman was undoubtedly the reason then. There was no way something like that would fear just an open clearing. Nor dedicate that much effort to catch me and stop so easily...

"Thank you," I said to her, and meant it.

"Hm. Come, before she realizes he's not here," she said, gesturing towards the massive tree in the distance.

"Huh?" I glanced at the forest, and wondered if it was still there.

"She smells Vim. Yet he's no longer here. So hurry, please," the woman said.

Gulping I nodded, and hurried to follow her.

Vim wasn't here. Yet he had been.

That meant she really was one of us. That meant this was the Owl's Nest.

Which meant...

Glancing at her back, I noticed the odd shape of it. Beneath a light shirt, was undoubtedly something akin to wings on her back, near her shoulder blades.

I almost died doing it... but I found the Owls.

Lughes and Crane hadn't tricked me.

Smiling, I did my best to not let the woman in front of me notice my tears.

If she did, hopefully she'd simply assume they were from the relief of surviving... and not being betrayed.

That'd be hard to explain, after all.

Chapter 33: Chapter Thirty Two – Vim – A Snake's Requests

"You've done well, Vim."

Sitting in front of the two snakes, I nodded in thanks to their words and their gentle smiles.

"Really. By saving her, you saved their bloodline. A hope. A beacon of hope," Trixalla said.

Her husband nodded, his half-closed eyes giving him a tired look.

"We'll see. I'm glad Porka's fine. Windle had told me she was pregnant, he hadn't mentioned that she was pregnant with her fourth," I said.

Last I had known they had two daughters. Although the oldest had left on a journey many years ago, and hadn't returned yet.

Might not ever.

"And for a boy to be born, maybe it is fate?" Trixalla said happily.

"Fate's not that kind, usually," I said.

Trixalla's smile died a little, but she didn't hiss at me. Instead her husband smirked and nodded. "Indeed," he agreed.

"Shush," she chastised her husband, and I noticed the way her voice elongated the sound of the word.

Snakes indeed.

We were alone, sitting in their living room. At a comfortable table, with large chairs. Their attendant, the squirrel, wasn't here... but I was thankful for it. He was...

"Will you stay awhile, Vim?" Mork asked.

"I will. At least a few weeks, to be sure... though something tells me it's a useless worry," I said.

Lomi was right now outside playing with the other fox children. I could hear their laughter and noises, even from across the road.

The two old snakes smiled, and I knew they too could hear that fact. Especially Mork.

"She had been so meek last night," Trixalla said.

"Skittish," Mork corrected.

I nodded. She had been. Not just of these two, but the fox family as well.

It had only taken a few hours for her weariness to be forgotten. Casted aside, as if it had never existed.

The two older daughters, Yelma and Pelka, were about twice the age of Lomi. But thanks to the way our kind took forever to age, they not only looked barely any older but acted it as well.

Horn, the young boy, was in fact only a year or two younger than Lomi.

He was already as tall as her. Ears included.

All four were noisy, giggling and playing with what sounded some kind of ball. Something made of leather. They'd kick it up against what sounded like the fence on occasion, telling me that it was far heavier a ball than what a human child would play with.

I knew Porka and her husband, Bjorn, were watching over them. Like most of our kind, the moment they got a new child they became exceedingly protective.

It'd only take a few years, but Lomi would blend right in. It'd not take her long to start acting like an actual member of the family. Odds were the next time I visited; she'd be calling Porka and Bjorn mother and father.

"Before you leave Vim, sometime this month the Lord of the Merchant Guild is to come and negotiate the new contract. Would you please stick around until then, at least?" Mork asked.

I frowned, but nodded. "Getting so old you don't find negotiating fun anymore?" I asked him.

Mork's wide mouth got even wider as he smiled. "Just figured it was a good opportunity. Although we only re-negotiate every five years, we've been doing it enough now that it's time someone else stood in for us," Mork said.

I nodded. That made perfect sense. Especially if it's the same merchant as last time.

"I'm expecting them to try and buy our land again," Trixalla said with a sigh.

"It's a merchant's duty to always try and haggle. Don't hate them too much for simply doing their job. Human nature is just as ingrained as ours," I said.

Mork sighed, nodding his head in agreement. "And they forget things so quickly. It's a good thing they're so willing to abide by the written contracts," he said.

"Some do," I agreed.

"We hear the church is also vying for land ownership in Bordu. Just as in Ruvindale recently," Trixalla said.

"Ruvindale's church has long since been built. Has been for many years," I said.

The two snakes startled a little at this information, and I watched as the old woman glanced at her husband. He too looked at her, even though I knew he couldn't actually see her.

He saw nothing anymore.

"Which means any day so too will Bordu be owned by the church," she whispered.

"It will be. But you're talking many decades hence. No point worrying over it now," I said.

The two sighed lightly, and I noted the small hissing sound within the sighs.

"Merchants I can deal with, but the church..." Trixalla said, shaking her head.

"In a certain perspectives, they're merchants too. They just sell belief and promises," I said.

"And lies," Mork added quickly.

I shrugged, uncaring if what they sold were lies or not. Sword and fire didn't care if you spoke the truth or lied as they took your life.

"Tell us of our new member, as well," Trixalla said, and I knew it was to change the topic of conversation. She didn't want her husband growing heated in his old age.

"What more needs to be said of Lomi?" I asked her.

She sighed, shaking her head. "The cat," Mork said for her.

"Ah. Yes. A large cat. Not sure exactly which, but definitely a forest cat. A true predator," I said with a nod.

"So rare. Why did you not bring her?" Trixalla asked.

"She wished to stay there," I said plainly.

Were they going to grow angry with me as Lilly had? Upset I'd risk our weaker members, or angry that I didn't enlist her elsewhere where she was more needed?

"Poor Shelldon. He must be trembling something fierce," Mork said with a chuckle.

"Ah, I heard his shell rattling all night long," I said, remembering the sound.

Mork's chuckling turned into a small laugh as his wife shook her head, upset he'd find it so humorous.

"Was she old?" Trixalla asked.

"Older than most, but still young. Probably around her second century," I said. At least, that was what I had assumed based off my conversations with her.

"Ah, how quaint. For one like her to survive so long... had she been with a pack or something like it?" Mork asked.

"As far as I'm aware, no. She had a family, but they perished or separated early. She's... lived amongst humans mostly, believe it or not," I said.

"That would explain it. I've always thought that our survival could be further enshrined if we were to somehow manage the task of growing our young amongst humans," Trixalla said.

"Impossible," Mork said plainly.

"For one blind as you, maybe," his wife snidely said.

"Blind yet still I can see what you can't, as always!" he retorted.

Was it impossible though?

I kept my mouth shut as the two went to arguing with one another. Typical married banter, that even though I enjoyed listening to... still found myself drowning out.

Trixalla has been mentioning such ideas for many years now. I've never discounted or ignored them, but honestly until recently I hadn't thought it possible either.

But why wasn't it?

Humans, just like us, all had their own beliefs and morals... It was already proven, by the many humans our kind live with and even mate with, that it was possible.

The question was not if it was possible, but if it was possible on a grand scale.

A handful of humans could work... but could a whole city?

What if all of Bordu knew of them?

All it would take is a few to rile up and incite a crowd. Even if a majority of the city found themselves unafraid, nor bothered, it'd only take a few dozen to burn down these fields... and the houses... and everyone who lived within them.

"You're just old!" Trixalla said to him loudly, as I returned to paying attention to their squabble.

"And you're still beautiful! But I don't say stuff like that out loud!" he shouted back.

I smiled as I watched the old snake hesitate in her next rebuttal, and even grew a little red in the face.

"She'll either adapt and become a true member or I'll find her gone when I return there," I said, returning to the real topic at hand.

"Or dead," Mork added, always unwilling to let the unsaid words be left alone.

"Or dead," I nodded in agreement.

"Still, it's so rare to find predators anymore. Who was the last?" Trixalla asked.

"The last that is still alive as far as I know..." I thought for a moment, as I went through my memories.

The shark was dead. So was that young bear cub. Before them was...

"Vim..."

I blinked as I found the two old snakes staring at me. Even Mork, with his white eyes was looking at me as if I was pitiful.

"What?" I asked them.

"You should have brought her along. To protect her," Mork whispered.

About to argue with him, the door opened. Not the door to the living room, but the house.

The two snakes glanced at the intruder, but I ignored the squirrel as he entered.

"Master Mork! I apologize for being late!" Montclair happily entered with a huge proud smile on his face.

"Nonsense, Montclair. Come, sit, join us," Mork said calmly.

The squirrel quickly shook his head, as if the very idea was abhorrent to him.

"Nonsense! I must go prepare dinner! Yes! Quickly!" Montclair quickly went to gathering up the few scraps and plates before us. Things that had been sitting there for hours.

Things that had been there since before I had even sat down with the snakes.

As he gathered up the cups and plates, I sighed and watched the short man glare at me with a smile. As if daring me to say that he wasn't properly tending his masters.

"How've you been Montclair?" I asked him.

He perked up, his cheeks becoming rounder as his smile grew. "Wonderful! As you can see my masters are smiling, so what more could I ask for?" he said quickly.

I shook my head at his strange joy, ignoring his happy smirk as he hurried out of the room. He began to mumble a happy tune as he went to preparing food.

"By now you'd think Vim would be used to him," Trixalla said.

"By now you'd think Vim would have killed him," Mork said.

"You kept him around as emergency food, but I swear he's getting skinnier each year. At least keep him well-fed," I said.

The two chuckled as I sat back, listening to the sounds of drawers being opened, and plates clattering.

He was going to prepare a feast, as always.

It was hard to hate him, honestly.

After all, there was no ill intent in his dedication to these two. It was pure, simple, and unequivocal love and devotion that he had for them.

Yet, maybe because of who I was, I couldn't comprehend his strange studious desire to be something of a servant.

Why not just be a friend? Or a comrade?

Though, it wasn't as if the snakes actually treated him like a slave or servant.

"You cannot force a predator to do anything. You two of all people should understand that," I said to them, returning to the main topic... again.

After all, wasn't that the entire reason this place existed?

Wasn't that why they grew wheat for a city that no longer housed their old friend? Even though I've asked them to return south?

"I suppose we have to accept that," Mork said.

"We do don't we dear? It'd be right slimy of us to say otherwise," Trixalla said.

"Yes it would. So as fellow predators, grant her your blessing and stop complaining about it," I said.

"We weren't complaining were we?" she asked.

"Impossible," he said.

"True, such proud snakes would never complain, after all," I said with a nod.

"Hm, indeed," Trixalla said with a sigh.

"Indeed so," Mork agreed.

"Rightly so," I agreed as well.

"Right!" Montclair shouted from the kitchen.

Chapter 34: Chapter Thirty Three – Renn – The Owl's Nest

The house was pristine. Strangely so.

I stood alone in a large room, which was full of tables and chairs... as if there was about to be a great feast and a whole town had been invited. And every table. Every chair. Every piece of furniture... all the rugs, and the framed paintings... They were all immaculate.

Not a single speck of dust could be seen. Not a single hair out of place. It made me want to clean the chair I had just been sitting in, since I might have gotten dirt on it.

It made me feel uncomfortable, somehow.

Especially since this house was huge. I'd only seen a few rooms so far, but they've all been as massive as this. And we were on the third floor, and I knew there was a couple more above me.

It was as if this place had been made for hundreds of people... Yet I knew, by smell and sound, that there were only two others nearby.

Lilly and her husband were upstairs, in what she had said was her husband's study.

They were talking, and not too quietly. They weren't shouting, and in fact spoke evenly... but to me it sounded odd.

After all, I had expected them to whisper. To hide what they were saying, from me.

Instead they spoke openly.

"Come down and greet her, Windle. Or I'll drag you myself," Lilly said firmly.

I smiled as I heard hurried footsteps. Lilly had actually stepped towards her husband, as if to put validation into her threat.

"Okay! Okay! Fine!" Windle spoke loudly, upset. Upset at me. At his wife.

He hadn't wanted to meet me.

I stood up straight as I heard their footfalls grow louder. Leaving the room they had been in, and into the hallway above me.

"Come on," Lilly spat, and I heard a quick few footsteps in succession.

He had stopped, and she had pushed him.

Grabbing the back of a chair in support, the one I had been sitting in earlier as I had told Lilly who I was and why I was here... I felt silly.

Why did I feel so embarrassed? Why was I so anxious to meet her husband? I felt giddier now than I had when I first found Lughes and the rest!

How and why? I felt as if I was some little kid again. I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks, as if I was doing something outrageously embarrassing.

It made no sense. Yet...

I knew why. How could I not?

After all this was the first real married couple I'd ever met. Of our kind, at least.

Other than my parents. But they had been...

Holding my breath as they descended a wooden stairwell, I noticed the fine shoes on the man who walked down first.

He paused, going still with wide eyes upon seeing me.

I too went still, and tried my best to smile gently. To not seem too dangerous. To not scare the obviously very timid man.

The man opened his mouth to say something, but couldn't. He stammered, and began to twitch and shiver... as if frozen in fear.

Lilly finally stepped down as well, and her wide eyes were narrow in a glare since she had to stop because of her husband.

"By the tree, Windle!" Lilly shouted at him, and then kicked him.

"Gah," he made an odd noise as he fell forward, and I startled as he actually tumbled down the last few stairs... landing harshly on the wooden floor. Face first.

"Uh..." I heisted as I watched the man. He remained on the ground as Lilly huffed, descending the rest of the stairs and entering the room. She ignored her poor husband as she smiled at me.

"Renn, this frail man is my husband. Windle. Please don't be gentle with him, he doesn't deserve it," she said to me.

"I... I see. Hello Windle, my name is Renn," I said to him, and stepped forward. To shake his hand. I only made it two steps before I realized there was no point. The man was still on the ground, groaning.

Odds were he wasn't actually hurt. Even if timid, he was still not a human. Even if he looked more human than his wife... did he not have wings or feathers at all?

Seemed he only had the wide eyes of their kind...

"Come sit, or I'll make you sleep in the field for a moon," Lilly ordered harshly, not even looking at her husband as she went back to sitting at the table.

I gulped as I quickly went to sitting back in the chair as well. Sitting across from her, I watched out of the corner of my eye as her husband slowly found his feet... gingerly walking to a chair himself.

"Seriously, Windle?" Lilly asked with a sigh as he sat down, at the other end of the table. Nearly the farthest chair from me.

"Hm," he made an odd noise as he sat, staring at me with his narrowed eyes.

Was I really that terrifying?

Glancing at Lilly, I found her glare... which was directed at her husband, not me, to be far more intimidating than I was.

She was nearly twice my height! And fierce!

Yet it was I who scared him.

"Vim spoke of her," Windle spoke, but his voice cracked a little. He quickly began clearing his throat.

"She needs to get to Vim before he heads south," Lilly said.

Windle frowned then shook his head. "Then why stay here? He's probably at Twin Hills," Windle said.

"Sometimes I wonder why you're here," Lilly said.

"I'll depart shortly, I promise," I said. It was pitiful how worried he looked.

Lilly's glare left her husband and came to me. I sat up a little straighter.

"No need to hurry. He most likely will spend several weeks there, waiting for Lomi to acclimate," Lilly said.

"Ah. He will," Windle nodded.

"I'd still like to hurry, honestly," I said.

"I'm sure. The human that Vim took to Ruvindale is dead," Lilly said to her husband.

"The saint's daughter?" Windle sat up straight, his trembling stopped.

I nodded, even though it was hard to admit it.

Windle closed his wide eyes, and slowly covered his face. He released an odd whine, which sounded eerily inhuman.

Glancing at Lilly, she nodded. "That's bad," she said.

"That Amber died, or his whine?" I asked.

"Both," Lilly sighed.

"Vim will not be happy," Windle then said.

The man was still covering his face, and I wondered if he was crying. He sounded as if he were.

Unsure of what to say, I squirmed in my seat as Lilly studied me. Her large eyes made it difficult to not feel conscious of her stare. They were easily twice as big as any human's eyes.

"Vim will not blame you. But he may grow upset at you all the same," Lilly warned.

"I'll face it," I said quickly, nodding.

"Typical predator mindset," Windle said.

"Aren't owls predators too?" I asked him.

"Do I look like an owl?" he asked back.

For a moment I wondered if maybe he wasn't. There was a good chance; after all I had just determined he had no official traits like his wife did...

"He's an owl. Most of us have become very weak-willed. I'm glad to see you at least have a spine," Lilly said to me.

"Do I? I just ran for my life," I said.

"If my husband had been the one chased, he would still be curled up in a ball sobbing right now," she said, glancing at him.

"It was... scary," I admitted. Although I was no longer worried, I could still feel parts of my clothes that were a little damp from the sweat.

I had ran with all my might, but the sweat hadn't just been from the exertion and strain... I had genuinely been scared.

My tail, lightly swaying to the side of the chair, still felt a little odd. It had been many years since I had been so hyper-focused.

Even when I had walked in that one morning to find Nory collapsed on the floor I hadn't been as shocked.

"Most predators who had any backbone died a long time ago Renn," Lilly said.

"Hm..." I wasn't sure what to say to that. I didn't feel as if I had much of a backbone.

After all wouldn't a true predator had stood their ground and fight? Instead of run as I had?

Something told me Vim wouldn't have run away.

"Vim will not be pleased at all. What of the rest? Shelldon? Lughes?" Windle then asked.

"They were fine last I saw them," I said.

Should I show them their letters? None of them had referenced them, in fact most had been written for Vim himself...

"All the same. I'll go make you something to eat; I heard your stomach earlier. After you eat and rest you may leave," Lilly said as she stood.

Windle was the one who sat up straight, going stiff at her sudden exit. I smiled gently at the two as I watched Lilly happily smirk and glare at him as she left.

She had left him alone with me on purpose.

"It is nice to meet you Windle. I do hope you'll forgive me for intruding into your nest so brazenly," I said to him as Lilly headed out of the room.

The man turned to look at me with an odd stiffness. As if he couldn't move his head at all.

"Yes... It is alright, young cat. Our branches welcome all members of the Society. Always have and always will," he said.

His branches...

Glancing to the only window in the room, I saw the dark tree not too far off in the distance.

It was huge. Looking far bigger than it should, even though I knew it was a small ways away.

So that tree was precious to him. To them all.

"It is beautiful. I've not seen a tree as big as that before," I said. I'd seen similar sized ones, but this was definitely the largest. It was wide enough that one could run around it and grow tired after only a few laps.

"She is. She's also rare. There are only a few of its kind left in all the world. We try to help it propagate but it's insanely difficult," Windle quickly spoke, and seemed all the calmer because of it.

A man with a study. A man who was a coward... An owl. Yet his wife, although stern with him...

Smiling at the man who probably had no idea just how much his wife loved him, I wished I could stay here for a few days.

To spend time with them.

To learn from them.

Maybe Vim would let me come back here later.

If he let me live.

"Vim mentioned you grew up in a forest as well, Renn. Was it like this one?" Windle asked.

"Ah... yes. Somewhat. Though not as dark, it was just as thick of trees and foliage. There were a lot more thorny bushes though, the types that were painful to mess with," I said.

"Dark indeed. Thorny bushes are more common in the north... Perchance did you come from the snow?" Windle asked.

My gut tightened at the sudden... accurate question.

"Yes," was all I was able to say.

"I see. Would explain your hardiness. To have encountered the Shadow Bear," Windle said.

"Shadow bear? So it had been a bear," I said.

Windle nodded. "Indeed it is. Corrupted, but a bear all the same. For how long did it chase you?" he asked.

"I... I don't know. I felt exhausted an hour ago, but now I feel fine..." I said honestly. A part of me thought I hadn't been chased very long at all, but based off the way Lilly had spoken earlier; she had heard its roars for a rather long time.

The man went silent as he thought about my answer, studying me.

"Is it just the two of you here?" I asked him.

"No. A large dog lives with us. It had somehow survived the dark forest and found its way here a few years ago..." he went quiet, going into thought.

"A dog?" I asked. Where was it?

"She's hiding," Windle said plainly.

"Oh..."

His eyes shifted, and then he raised his head higher as if in shock. "No. Not of you. The bear. She will hide for a day or so, based off what she usually does whenever it draws near," he said.

"Ah..." I nodded, that made sense. After all, dogs usually didn't care much for me but that didn't mean they actually hid from me all the time.

Cats on the other hand hated me.

Which in a certain perspective, made sense.

"Can I ask you something, Windle?" I asked.

He nodded, although his gaze grew weary again.

"Your wife, Lilly... she's strong, isn't she?" I asked.

"Very much so. And in more ways than one," he said, a small smile finding its way onto his face.

"Your children... are they strong like her?" I asked.

Windle blinked, and then sat back a little in his chair. At first he looked as if he was simply getting comfortable, but instead he seemed to go deep into thought. "One of my sons is. He's also like her. With a backbone, as you two were mentioning earlier. He joined a warband recently, much to my protest. The rest however, my other sons and daughters... they're more like me," he said.

I nodded, and found that to be similar to my own situation.

My siblings hadn't been brave either. Even though they should have been.

Even though my mother had been.

My father, although not as brave as my mother... hadn't been as much of a coward as Windle though. He would have, and did, stand and fight when it came to it.

"Why do you ask?" he asked.

"I was comparing it to my own siblings. I had several that were... well, honestly, like you," I said gently.

"Ah. I see. Yes. Although the blood of predators flows through our veins, there are still many who lack the... fight, which one would assume all of us would possess. Vim calls it the diluting of the blood," he said.

"Diluting," I repeated the word, and found it rather proper. Yes... that was probably exactly what was happening.

Windle nodded, and seemed to be far more confident in himself. Either he was growing used to me, or talking about stuff like this made him calm down. "Our ancestors, for instance Lilly's parents, were more animal than human. So their traits, obviously, were more instinctual. And thus she too is like them. I don't know how much you know of owls, but as a creature there are few things that are above them on the food chain. Owls hunt nearly everything, yet not much hunts them," he explained.

"Yet an uncle of mine, who actually possessed claws and fangs, would run and hide from his own shadow," I said.

The owl nodded, his eyes focusing on me. "Indeed. It goes to show that just like humans, we're all very different. Guided, in a way, by our traits and blood... but still different. Our non-human traits influence us, but do not control us," he said.

I nodded, agreeing with him. It made perfect sense.

"Do you worry over being a predator?" he then asked.

"Worry...?" I asked him back.

"That's why you ask such questions, is it not? You worry that by being what you are, you'll be not just seen as a threat but doomed to actually become one, yes?" he asked, nodding as if he already knew the answer.

For a small moment I couldn't say anything. After all, that wasn't the real reason I had asked... but it was also something I had feared.

"Don't say such things aloud, Windle. It's rude," Lilly returned before I could say anything.

She carried a small platter, but it only had cups and a pitcher on it.

Lilly placed the platter down gingerly onto the table, and quickly went to handing out empty cups.

Holding the cup steady as she went to filling it up, I smelled the fruity liquid that was poured into it. "Wine?" I asked.

"Grapes are hard to grow here in the forest, so do please enjoy it," Lilly said. Once my cup was full she went to filling her's and her husband's.

"Thank you," I said, and meant it. That meant this was something precious to them.

"Our meeting, although rushed and not under the best of circumstances, is still to be treasured," Lilly said as she went to sit for a moment.

She lifted her cup up into the air, to signify a toast.

"To the Society," Windle said for her, lifting his cup as well.

I hurriedly toasted with them and nodded. "To the Society."

Chapter 35: Chapter Thirty Four – Vim - Porka

Porka smirked as she watched Lomi and Yelma toss the armfuls of wheat at me.

"Ha!" Lomi laughed as the two then darted away, feeling accomplished in their prank.

I sighed as I reached up to brush off the dozens of wheat stalks all over me.

"Funny that Yelma is the one to join her, usually Pelka is the prankster," Porka said, proud of her daughters.

She and I sat alone on the outside deck under the patio of the second floor. Lomi and Yelma, the two who were now running away while laughing, were the only ones around. Porka's husband Bjorn had taken the other children to the snake's house, to help prepare for dinner.

"She's gotten brave since we got here," I said, gathering up all the wheat stalks.

There was no saving them of course, and there wasn't enough to worry about grinding into wheat... but it kept me busy to gather them up into a nice little pile. A human might have yelled at the children for damaging good stock, but we weren't human. Honestly even if they had been human children, I doubted Porka would have chastised them for it.

"Emboldened by numbers," Porka said, happily watching her children.

I nodded, and glanced at the head of the family. She had a huge smile on her face, looking like the perfect representation of a proud mother.

She was beautiful. And not just because of her current demeanor. Porka had always been beautiful. Even as a child she could make people blush and stare.

Granted so had Trixalla at one time...

Thinking about it, that cat had been rather good looking too.

How was it that the women of our kind were always so fair looking, yet our men were always...

For a moment I thought of Montclair. The small pudgy man was a common sight amongst our kind. Windle, Lughes, Porka's husband Bjorn... Most were either as average as can be, or looked nearly deformed in some way. Though that was most likely thanks to the non-human traits combating with the human ones within us.

Not that I had any room to talk, of course.

"Lomi shall be fine here, Vim. She's a delight. Look, they may as well be actual sisters," Porka said as we watched Lomi and Yelma started to chase a fat cat around.

The rotund orange cat voiced its complaint as it darted as fast as it could away from the two little terrorists... but Lomi and Yelma weren't just any normal little girls. They were foxes.

Yelma caught the cat just before it had a chance to leap up onto the top of the fence that surrounded the yard. It meowed loudly, yet didn't fight back. It went limp and let loose a low meowing complaint as Yelma and Lomi happily pet the animal.

"I'm surprised your colors are so different," I said. Lomi's hair and ears were auburn, while Porka and her children had a more yellow tinge to their fur.

"Only you would care about that," she said.

"Wasn't complaining about it..." I said, putting the very last stalk of wheat into the pile. The large stack next to me was far bigger than I had expected it to have become.

"If we're lucky her and Horn will grow to become fond of one another," Porka said.

"A little early for that kind of talk, isn't it?" I asked. Picking up one of the wheat stalks, I started to twirl it between my fingers.

"Mother's know these things," she said with a smile.

"So I've heard," I said.

"And I've heard you killed a monarch," Porka said.

The wheat stalk I was twirling came to a stop. "I did."

Porka's eyes narrowed as she glared at me.

"Where'd you hear that?" I asked her. Not even Windle had known yet. Especially since I hadn't told him.

She smiled and looked out to the yard. At Lomi and her daughter, who had abandoned the cat and were now chasing each other around. It didn't take long for me to find the fat orange cat; it was sitting on the top of the fence near the corner, staring at the two girls with what could only be malice.

"Oplar visited last full moon, she told me all about it," Porka said.

For a small moment my vision blurred as I quickly processed that information. That meant Oplar had gone straight north after that incident. That meant she had gone to the

Cathedral first. Which also explained why Windle and Lilly hadn't known... Oplar would not have dared to enter the Owl's Nest alone.

That also meant it'd not be long until the whole Society knew of it.

Tossing the wheat stalk away, I sighed and wondered what I was going to do with that woman.

"I knew that'd annoy you," Porka said with a small giggle.

"You have no idea," I said.

"Oh but I do. We all know how much you hate it when we find out what you're up to, and have done," she said.

"It's not that," I said defensively.

"Then what? You know most men would love to be praised for their achievements," she said.

"There's nothing amazing about killing an old god," I said firmly.

Porka was about to say something, but a ball bounced towards us. I lifted a foot to stop it, and stared at the two young girls who happily ran up to us, chasing after it.

"Momma!" Yelma greeted her mother as I reached over to pick up the ball.

It was heavy, and made of leather. It felt like there was... something solid inside. Maybe wooden. Someone must have crafted a wooden orb, and fastened the leather around it. The thing worked, as a ball, but it was heavy and hard. Not something a human child would happily kick around.

"What were you talking about?" Lomi asked, smiling at me.

Tossing the ball at her, she made an "Oof," sound as she caught it... more so with her belly than not. "None of your business."

"We were talking about the wheat," Porka said.

"That's all anyone talks about," Yelma complained, and then turned and darted off. Lomi quickly followed, and the two went to tossing the ball back and forth.

"Wheat is boring," I agreed.

"But I bet you'd rather talk about that than the monarch," Porka said.

"What's there to talk about? A monarch woke up. It killed a bunch of people. I killed the monarch, now I'm being forced to watch wheat grow," I said. "Or get plucked," I added.

Porka happily chuckled, more than amused at my annoyed tone.

"Oplar said you looked very happy as you fought it," she said.

Glancing at the woman, I waited until her eyes found my own before saying, "She sees any man smiling and instantly thinks it's something perverse. Of course she'd say something like that."

"Oplar is a little... odd... but she means well," Porka said, smirking.

"One of these days she'll means well to a beating," I said.

"So scary," Porka teased.

I huffed and leaned back, resting against the wooden column that held up the patio above us.

"All the same, I'm glad to hear of if Vim," she said.

"Sure," I said.

"Really. I am. All you did was make the world that much safer for my children," she said with a gesture to the two girls playing.

"Monarchs are less a threat than anything else. It had been nearly a hundred years since the last one had awoken. It'll be longer than that before the next does. Soon there'll be no more at all. But there will be more humans. More diseases. More threats elsewhere," I said.

Porka's soft smile made me look away from her. I didn't like that look. A lot of the Society looked at me like that sometimes.

Such looks of pity made me angry.

They were the pitiful ones. Not me.

For several moments we sat in silence, watching Lomi and Yelma. The two seemed full of endless energy... and really did play together as if they were siblings or lifelong friends, and not two children who had met only two days ago.

"You're going to negotiate for us this contract, right?" Porka asked.

I nodded; glad to be on a different topic. "Yes."

"Good. Bjorn would have had to if you hadn't. The merchant lord is the same again. It should be the last year he'll be the one doing it, but you can never be too safe," she said.

"Indeed. Part of the risk of your situation," I said.

"You helped create it, so I don't feel like you have any right to chastise us for it," she argued.

She was right... but at the same time, the only reason I had helped was because they would have gotten themselves killed otherwise.

"Can I ask a favor, before you leave?" she asked.

"Hm?"

She smiled at me, and I once again was reminded of her beauty. "Would you take Pelka out to hunt?"

I frowned. "Hunt what?" I asked, worried.

Porka giggled, and her bashful smile told me she knew exactly how I was misunderstanding her request. "Not men, that's for sure!"

I smiled at her happy laugh as she went to giggling. It came from her belly, and sounded so happy it made her daughter and Lomi pause in their playing to glance at us. Luckily they returned to playing instead of coming over to us.

"She wants to hunt a deer. Or something like it," Porka said, finally collecting her breath enough to speak.

"Why do I need to help her do it? Have Bjorn help her," I said.

Porka's smile, that had grown large thanks to her laughter, died a little. "She doesn't want him to help her, she wants you to," she said.

I sighed and wondered why this happened so often. Maybe it was the parent's fault, for always telling their children so many stories about me. So many of them were as much fairy tales as the monsters within them.

"If I must, I guess. But then I'll have to do the same for the rest of the kids won't I?" I asked. Though maybe Lomi really didn't need it, since I had hunted a few times on our trip here. But even still she'd ask to join us.

"Pelka's the oldest. And she wants..." Porka went quiet, and I could tell by her expression what she didn't want to say aloud.

"You can't stop those who wish to try," I said to her.

"Can't I? Pilma is gone," Porka said stiffly.

I didn't need to be reminded of that. Her first born daughter had left without permission. Before I had arrived to help her on the beginning of her journey.

Considering I had spent some time looking for any traces of her, and finding none after all these years... I was led to believe that the worst had happened.

"She might return still, Porka. Journeys throughout the world can take a lifetime, depending on where one goes and what they are trying to do," I said gently.

She smiled, but I could see the pain in it. "Yet you traverse through dozens of nations, accomplishing all you do, in a few mere years. You may have helped deliver me, Vim, but that doesn't mean you can still baby me," she said.

"I helped deliver you?" I asked, smiling at her.

Porka sighed, but her smile became a little more real. "Seriously," she complained.

"You whined a lot back then too," I nodded.

"All the same. Please. Take her hunting... but also discourage her. I beg you," Porka said.

For a long moment I watched Lomi and Yelma. The two had stopped kicking the ball to each other, and were now kneeling near the fence. Looking at something. Probably some kind of bug, based off the way they were poking at it.

"You know I believe in free will," I said.

"I'm not asking you to tell her she can't... just..." Porka paused, and must have realized by my expression that I'd not do what she wanted.

She sighed, looking away from me. To the kids in the distance. "At least don't encourage it. Please," she whispered.

"That I can agree with. For the same reason I wouldn't discourage her, I also won't encourage it," I said.

"I just want them safe, Vim," Porka said.

"As do I."

A tiny whine drew my eyes to my right. A small cat, probably a year or so old, jumped up onto the porch. The little white and black coat was unique around here, most were brown or orange.

"That's Pain," Porka said.

"Pain?" I asked as it casually walked towards me, stepping around the stack of wheat stalks with careful steps.

Pain... looked fine. Didn't look deformed, or have any scars from old injuries. It was looking around carefully, side glancing everything like a cat usually did as it meandered towards me.

So...?

Glancing at Porka, for maybe a hint or reasoning behind the name, I watched a huge smirk plant itself on her face... and then felt it.

Looking down, I found the cat with a mouthful of my wrist. Biting hard.

"I see," I said.

"Hm. No fun when it's you. Should have expected that though," Porka said with a chuckle.

Pain continued to bite me, and although I understood completely now why they named it what they had... I couldn't understand why it was doing this.

It wasn't attacking out of rage, or malice... it looked calm and composed, even as it chomped down again. This time with a little more strength.

After a few moments its eyes then went upward, and its long pupils widened as it stared at me for a moment.

It then released me, and with a faint meow went still. Staring at me as if frozen in fear.

"Hm. Realized it bit the wrong thing finally, hasn't it?" Porka asked.

"So it seems," I said, and then with the hand that it had bitten I went to petting it.

Pain didn't move even as I continued petting it, at least not until a few moments later. It began to purr, rather loudly, and then started to nuzzle and walk into my pets as if to make them more efficient.

The small cat happily crawled onto my lap, purring as it got comfortable. "Pain is a very loving thing," I said.

Porka sighed, shaking her head at me. Yet her smile told me what she was really thinking.

"I'll at least tell her of the dangers she could potentially face," I said as Porka and I watched the fence's gate open, revealing Bjorn and the other children.

The kids ran in, running to Lomi and Yelma, to join them in playing. Bjorn smiled and nodded at us, more so his wife, as he went to closing the gate.

"Thank you Vim," Porka said gently.

"Hm..."

"For her too," she then added, as Lomi turned to hurry towards us. Most likely to tell us what she had just been told by the other children.

Dinner was ready.