

Non Human 381

Chapter 381 Vim – Sheilla and Pancakes

"We're fine Vim. I'm glad to see you well, but we have no need for you today."

Renn shifted next to me, and I did my best to ignore her tail that was very noisy beneath her clothes. It was wiggling something fierce, just as she ground her teeth.

Glancing past the Sheilla, I studied the small family of birds staring at us from a half open door.

"Please Vim... we are fine. As we have always been. Thank you for checking up on us, but from now on it won't be needed," Sheilla said, her eyes were rather firm as she stared at me. I found myself rather proud of her. She was usually very soft spoken. The kind of gentle and demure one would expect from a such a kindhearted bird as her. Right now all of the children, and the older ones, staring at us from the house were all birds... but there had been many times I'd come and visited, and found human children amongst them.

She always took in orphans when she encountered them. No matter if they were human or not. She was that special kind of person who didn't hesitate to save a child, no matter the danger involved.

I'd seen her stare down full grown men while protecting such children. A few times I'd almost been too late to help her. She had scars on her back to prove that.

So I knew that look on her face. The way her eyes were slightly narrowed. The way her chin was lifted up a little, in defiance.

This was Sheilla being more than she was, standing up for what she believed in. Facing a enemy or threat. I'd recognize it anywhere.

Yet this was the first time it had ever been sent my way.

"Okay... I understand, Sheilla. Know that we'll be staying at Nevi for a short time, at least a few days. If in case you need something, we'll be there and you know how to reach me," I said gently.

Sheilla nodded. A little firmly. "Thank you Vim. Safe travels."

I nodded back as Sheilla then turned away. She stepped away from us, heading back to her home, as if we had already turned around and left ourselves.

"But...!" Renn stepped forward, her voice cracking as she did, but I didn't let her go much farther. I grabbed her arm, a little stiffly, as I watched Sheilla. She didn't even flinch or pause upon hearing Renn.

"Farewell. May the winter be a gentle one," I said in parting, and turned as well. I kept hold of Renn's arm, as she made a weird whine. One that bespoke the mixture of heartbreak and anger inside of her. I turned her with me, and gently pushed on her back as to make sure she left alongside me without causing a fuss.

Renn thankfully obliged, though she did so with that same whine as earlier. She glanced back behind us as we headed along the dirt path away from the home and towards the edge of the village. This little

coastal town only had a few hundred homes, and we were on the outskirts of it already. So we didn't need to worry about having to pass through the town again as to leave.

"Vim..." Renn groaned sadly as I released her arm, but kept my other hand on the small of her back.

"It's okay, Renn," I said softly as we continued to leave.

"No. It's not," she said.

It wasn't. But at the same time... it was.

I didn't look back, but I did listen. I heard Sheilla whisper to her family, and then shut the door behind her after entering her house. I kept a keen ear out as I listened, but knew I'd not hear anything.

It wasn't like someone had been in there, hiding or something. I had not smelled anyone else. I had not heard anything odd.

Sheilla had simply wished me gone. To not have me stick around.

A first. From her, at least.

"She didn't even invite us in," Renn whispered as she sniffed loudly, while looking back at the house we were growing farther apart from.

"No. She didn't."

"You said she was nice...! That she always made you pancakes," Renn said worriedly as she grabbed my arm.

I nodded, as I noted the feel of her nails. They were a tad longer than they'd been in a long time. Why was that...?

"She usually does. Pancakes with berries in them," I said.

"Then why...!"

"Isn't it obvious Renn...?" I said as we reached a more normal road. It was still one of dirt, but the dirt was compacted and didn't even have weeds growing from it. We turned onto it, and headed not just away from Sheilla's home but the village itself. To head south, along the coast, towards Nevi.

"The vote..." Renn said through clenched teeth.

I nodded. "Very obviously. I had not thought Sheilla to be one to have such a stance... I've helped her many times over the years, helping her save children and stuff. But, well," I shrugged softly, unsure of what else to say.

"Vim...!" Renn squeezed my arm, but I didn't look at her. I could hear the tears, and I didn't want to see her pained expression right now. It'd just make me sad.

"It happens sometimes, though. Look at the Summit, Renn. I can't even enter that place without getting permission first... and..." I started to try and explain, to even try and find a way to address it in as nonchalant away as possible... but, per usual, my efforts were neither quick enough nor good enough.

Squeezing my arm, Renn clung to me as she wept. Full on bawling, to the point I had to slow down. She came to a stop, and rested her head against my arm as she let out a terrible sound. One that almost made me do something foolish.

"Jeez Renn... she hadn't even turned us away too harshly," I said softly as I studied the way she wept. I couldn't see her face, of course, thanks to the hat she wore and the way she was leaning against me... but I didn't need to. I could see the great emotion all over her. Her shoulders were high, as if stressed, she was trembling, and not just from the tight squeeze of my arm. I couldn't hear her ears or tail beneath her clothes, which told me they had gone limp.

Reaching up a little, I patted her gently on her arm. She made a noise as she cried, telling me she had noticed, and had wanted to say something but was crying too hard to do so.

Really. What was I going to do with her? I had expected her to become emotional during this journey, as the vote got closer, but...

If it was already this bad, what was she going to do when we had to face true opposition?

Sheilla had turned me away. But she had not been rude about it. She had not attacked me. She had not run from the mere sight of me.

Should... should I not let her meet those like Crane? Or should I just allow her to weep and become heartbroken each time it happens?

I wanted her to be happy. Joyous. It was why I had chosen, at least in part, to step down as the protector.

Yet here I was. Hurting her.

She was such a gentle person. Seemingly welcomed by anyone we went to see. And only turned away by those either too ignorant or too foolish to realize it. Renn was not one to normally be treated in such a way. Particularly lately, what with her scent of a predator now missing.

Yet once again, indirectly because of my mistakes, she has to endure such a thing.

Lumen had been my fault. I had not intervened quick enough. I had allowed the Society, others, to decide how fate would play out. And then once it was over I didn't properly step up and correct their stupid votes to deny her the right to live amongst them. They had hated me, and found me wanting, but had not been brave enough to actually blame me. So they had blamed her instead. The woman I was seemingly growing close to.

The Bell Church was also my own mistake, in a way. I should have gone there with them. If I had not only would Renn maybe not have been banished so readily, but maybe Fly would not have had to suffer either. And if my assumption was correct... this would only get worse. This pain was only something she would endure and encounter more and more often as time went by. Especially once I really stirred the pot and announced my intention to step down, regardless of the vote.

If not for our relationship she might right now be at home elsewhere. Making a new life. Like at Lumen, even. These tribulations and trials were my doing and mine alone. She has had no fault in them. Yet it was she who wept, not me.

In other words, since I loved her and wanted her near me... I was causing her grief. And instead of holding her and begging for forgiveness, I was just standing here awkwardly. Like a bumbling fool. My father would be ashamed of me. My mother would have locked me in an acorn for a hundred years as punishment.

For a few minutes we stood there, and thankfully Renn's sobbing slowly lessened. She kept her head hung low, but she still clung to me even as her cries turned into sniffles.

I dared a glance back down the road, to the path we'd come from, and was glad to find we were at least out of sight of Sheilla's home. Though there was another house not far that was in full view. Hopefully whoever lived there wasn't very observant, or out and about instead of at home preparing for dinner as they should be at this time of day.

"How can you just smile and accept it?"

I blinked and looked back at Renn, and found her glaring at me. Rather furiously.

"What would you have me do, Renn...? Force myself into her house? Force her to greet me, and give me tasks to help with? To demand she cook food for me, against her own desires?" I asked.

Her eyes squinted and I heard her tail squirm. "No...! But..." she hesitated, and I knew it was because she herself wasn't sure what she wanted to say in response.

It wasn't like she had actually wanted me to do such things... yet her emotions, her heart, had told her what had just happened was wrong. And that we should correct it.

But in honesty what had just happened wasn't wrong.

Everyone had a right to decide who they were friendly with. Everyone.

"Why is life so crazy? One moment I'm basking in the wondrous joy of great people, and then the next my heart is being broken by someone I've never even met!" Renn then said as she reached up to start cleaning her face

Smiling at her, I studied the way she wiped her face hidden by her dangling hair. It had gotten long again... and...

Wait no.

Reaching up, I grabbed some of her hair. Gently, of course, to the point she didn't even seem to realize what I was doing as she kept on sniffing and rubbing her face clean of snot and who knows what else.

Why was it so long...? Most of it was bundled up beneath her hat and hood that was pushed back onto her shoulders. A part of the clump of hair I held was even a part of her bangs, and there was quite a slump of hair between the section I held and her head.

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Hadn't she just gotten it cut? Didn't Nann or someone cut her hair? How long ago had that been? It had likely been months... but...

"Vim...?" Renn finally noticed I was holding her hair, so I released it. I watched the way it fell, joining the rest... stopping a little past her breast.

"When'd you last cut your hair, Renn?" I asked.

"Huh...? Nann cut it for me," she said as she sniffed. She was looking at me as if I was being weird.

Which was funny.

Me. Weird.

When she had hair that was growing as quickly, if not quicker, than a humans.

It had not grown that fast before, had it? It had gotten long once, but I think it was now longer than it had ever been.

Right...?

"How often do you normally need to cut your hair, Renn?" I asked. It honestly needed to be trimmed a little now. Some parts were growing faster than the others, likely thanks to the way Nann had cut it. She had done it up in layers, it had looked good on her.

"What...? What the heck? Vim why are you talking about my hair now? After what just happened!" Renn asked as she pointed past me, back to where we'd just come from. Sheilla's house.

"It's important. Please, I'm not trying to change topics I'm being serious," I said.

Renn hesitated, and she gave me an odd look as she glanced down and grabbed at her hair. The same section I had just held.

"I... don't know? Every so often... I guess? I usually cut it when it starts getting in the way of my sight, or when it starts getting stuck on stuff, or clumpy. It's probably not long from doing that, I guess?" she said as she studied the hair in her hand.

Great. She had no idea. But... how could she? Renn wasn't a filthy person, and seemed to really like being clean, but she also wasn't the type to really care about her appearance. Not in the way I was used to. She didn't care if her hair was a tad unruly or not fashioned perfectly. In fact I think I remember her even saying that the haircut Nann had given her had been the fanciest she'd ever gotten. It had been a simple one, with layers in the back. It really had looked good on her... but I kind of liked how it looked when unruly too.

"What is it Vim? Why are you being weird over it?" she asked as she looked back at me.

"You're a non-human. One thick in the blood. Hundreds of years old," I said.

She slowly nodded. "Yeah...?"

"Yet your hair and nails grow as quickly as a humans," I pointed out while gesturing at her nails, which I had just noticed had gotten sharp again when she had been squeezing my arm.

"Well... I guess? Do they? Why? Why's that a problem?" she asked.

Why was it a problem...?

I hesitated and wondered what to say to her. I mean...

Hasn't she noticed?

"Once one of our kind reach adult age, they typically stop aging. The thicker of blood one is, the longer their youth and stuff lasts. Only a few in all my years, like Mordo, have become as ancient looking as they actually are," I said.

Renn's brow furrowed at me. "Are... are you saying I'm going to start growing really old? Or are you saying I should be?" she asked, trying to understand my meaning.

I shook my head. "No. I'm saying those who are thick in the blood, usually either don't grow at all until their end, or do so only very... very slowly. Remember Root? It will take her decades to reach maturity. It took Sap almost fifty years to reach adulthood, and she had been thin blooded," I said.

Renn shifted, and I heard her ears shift under her hat. "So... what are you saying?"

Right... well...

I hesitated again, and wondered why I was even making a big deal out of it. After all... it wasn't like I could change it. Or alter it. No matter what was happening.

So she was different. In her own way. Unique.

That was no big deal. Everyone was unique in their own way, especially us who existed outside the realm of normalcy.

Yet hers was such an odd thing.

It'd make sense if it was something new. Like her loss of a scent to others. Something that had only just recently started, thanks to her connection with me.

But she's been dealing with this for her whole life...? That meant it wasn't me. Though one might be able to argue I was amplifying it...

"I'm just saying... you're of thick blood, maybe thicker than anyone else alive today. Yet your body still acts as if it's not, in such ways as that. Hair growth, nails... it explains why you always need to brush your tail and ears too," I said. I'd never commented on it, but when she did she always had a clump of fur she had to toss aside that she shed while she brushed herself.

Renn sniffed again as she gave me a look. "So... it's not a big deal at all then?" she asked.

"Not really. Just something I noticed, that was odd," I said.

She then hit me. Square in the stomach.

I of course didn't buckle, or even make a noise, but the impact was hard enough to jolt my whole body.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"I just cried my heart out and that's all you're worried about!?" she asked loudly.

"No... I was worried about that too, I had even wondered if maybe I shouldn't have you meet Crane or..." I started to raise a hand, to defend myself, but then I was hit again. Same spot.

This time I made a little noise, since I had been in the middle of talking. A tiny grunt escaped me as Renn genuinely hissed at me. "What gives you the right to think that!" she shouted.

"It was just a consideration..." I said carefully.

To think just moments ago she had been weeping! She now stood up fully, nearly on her toes, and had both hands clinched before her into fists. As if readying up to get into the ring with me.

The sight of her acting so made me smile. I really liked that look of strange anger on her face. It wasn't hatred, and maybe not even rage. I could even see a faint smirk hidden behind her glowering sneer and...

She hit me again. "Don't smirk at me!"

"Hard not to when you're being so adorable," I defended myself.

Hopefully she wasn't hurting her hand. She kept hitting me square in the same spot, and I knew my body wasn't the softest thing to hit. Especially not when it was now expecting an attack. Odds are my stomach was as hard as a tree at the moment.

If she threw another punch I'll need to step back a bit, to absorb the blow. Not for myself, but her own bones. I didn't want to break them.

Glancing away from her hands, wondering why she had gone quiet and hadn't hit me again... I found the reason.

She had gone completely red in the face.

The world went still for a moment, and I had to force myself to breathe again as a huge grin planted itself on my face. "You really are a pendulum!" I said happily.

Weird noises came from her as she groaned and shifted, but didn't throw another punch. She kept her hands clasped tightly but lowered them as she looked away, as if to hide her embarrassment with her long hair. "You've said that before. What's it mean?" she asked.

"Pendulum...? In that context it's used as a reference to the tendency of your swinging of emotions. You don't do it too often, but when you go from sorrow to joy, then anger and back again, I find myself rather fascinated. Transfixed, even," I said.

She tilted her head for a moment, and then finally looked back at me. Her face was still red, but not as badly as before. "You like it when I'm emotional?" she asked.

"A lot. I guess...?" I admitted.

Renn studied me for a moment, and then gave me an odd smile. "You're weird, Vim."

"Indeed I am... But that's fine as long as it makes you happy," I said.

Her smile became a little wonky; as if she was trying her best to stop smiling yet found she was unable to. "Didn't you get upset too, Vim? Didn't what just happened hurt at all?" she then asked.

Oh? We were done talking about her, I guess. "Usually I'm the one who causes such topic shifts," I said.

"We'll get back to me, but if I don't ask about it now you'll keep distracting me until it's too late," she grumbled.

Right. I sighed and nodded. "It had bothered me, Renn. But only because it's so telling. If even those like her are going to start distancing themselves from me... well... then..." I paused a moment, since her

smile had finally broken. Her lips quivered a little, as if she was about to cry again. "Well, maybe my decision was the right one, Renn. Even if it hurts to say so," I finished.

"Mhm..." she made a noise, and I noticed a small tear slide out from the corner of her eye. She ignored it as it slid down her cheek. "You don't deserve such treatment Vim. Even if their argument that you're not doing good enough was true, it doesn't discount how nice you are to everyone. How you always go out of your way to help in any way you can. You helped Elk prepare for his new bedroom. Glass's family you helped with several things, their boat and that musical instrument. You always help everyone, without asking for anything in return," Renn said.

"The reason I help in such ways Renn is because I can't help in the ways they actually need me to. I can't give them what they really need, so give what I can. That's not a good argument," I said softly

She shook her head. "It is, Vim. Yes... you are so great, so strong, that in theory you should be able to give them all exactly whatever they need. Safe homes. Safe environments, and more. But the reality is they won't let you. How are you supposed to protect people that won't even attempt to fulfill the smallest of requirements for such a thing to happen? They won't even live close enough to each other for you to properly protect them, and that's on them, not you," Renn said.

"How many times are we going to have this conversation before you're willing to admit that at the end of the day, I am the one at fault, Renn? Since all of those issues are because of my own personality flaws, in reality?" I asked.

The dirt beneath her feet made noises as she shifted her weight and crossed her arms. "Don't say that stuff Vim. It just makes me want to cry."

"Okay... what would you rather talk about instead then?" I offered.

Renn sniffed again, and then gave me an odd frown. "What's a pancake?"

I blinked at her, and for a tiny moment wondered if she was teasing me... but then noticed the seriousness in her eyes.

"A... soft snack. One I will promptly make for you once we reach Nevi," I said. Odds are she's had one before, but had heard a different name for them. It wasn't like they were that fancy or rare of a treat.

She smiled at me and nodded. "Good!"

Feeling defeated, I sighed once more and reached my hand out. It hovered before her for a moment before she uncrossed her arms and then took my own.

She took her place by my side, right up against me, as she held my arm and we began to walk once more.

"I had offered my hand, not my arm," I said.

"It's in my nature to take more than I was offered," she said.

"Is it now?"

"Well... no. Only when it concerns you, I think," she said honestly.

I nodded at that. That made a lot more sense. When it came to others Renn was actually very reserved. She seemed to try her best to not be imposing to anyone, not even those she felt truly close to like Lilly or Merit.

"Speaking of offerings... I have a gift idea in mind for you. But before I do it I'd like to hear your opinion on it," I said, bringing it up.

"Hm?"

"It's about to get cold. And we will be up here in the north long enough to have to endure it," I said.

"Right...?"

"I'd like to get you something to fit around your neck. A muffler, of sorts. Since your new clothes and cloak will protect you from most else," I said as I pointed at her neck.

"Muffler...?"

"A scarf."

"Oh? Really?" Renn perked up at that, which I knew she would.

I nodded. "Would it bother you if I caught a fox and used its fur? To make it for you?" I asked.

Renn tilted her head at me. "Hm...? Why would it?"

Ah. I see. My worry had been pointless. I should have kept it secret then.

Oh well. Next time. "Some women don't like the senseless killing of animals. Well, some men too," I said while thinking of the many who would complain at my sexism in the Society, namely those like Windle.

Renn giggled at me. "I see! Well... It would bother me if you killed animals for no reason Vim, but you want to use it to make me a present? How's that any different than the clothes we wear? Or my shoes? Or hat?" she asked as she pointed at her head, particularly the hat made of mink.

Right...

I nodded, and felt silly again.

Right. Of course.

This was that type of era after all.

Plus she was a predator. A real one. Even if her heart was so swollen and soft, beyond rhyme or reason.

"I mean you even make stuff out of monarch leather, right? Actually, I've been meaning to ask about that... our bags are made out of monarchs, right? Why don't you make clothes out of the stuff, Vim? Lilly's cloak was made of it too, right? It seems to be rather strong and durable, and light. I bet a set of monarch clothes would last you a lot longer than normal stuff," Renn asked as she grabbed at the sleeve on my arm she held.

She was asking why I wasn't decked out in the stuff, not why I didn't make more of it for her. Such a strange woman.

"Because only certain monarchs have suitable materials to make stuff out of. And of that stuff, they're hard to properly form right. Making a cloak, or a bag or pouch, is easier than making suitable clothing. It'd end up looking really weird, or feel uncomfortable," I said.

"Hm... that's too bad," Renn said.

It was. But not for the reason she was thinking.

"I've tried before. The few attempts I've had that ended up with moderately successful sets were... well... Let's just say they didn't last long, for one reason or another," I said.

She snickered at me. "That means they either got destroyed instantly, or you found them hideous or uncomfortable. Probably both," she teased.

"You're not wrong."

Renn enjoyed that as we left the village... leaving Sheilla behind.

I dedicated this place to memory, adding it to the rather long list that was now growing once more, of locations I no longer needed to visit during my travels. Not unless summoned, first.

We walked slower than usual, but I was okay with it. We were leaving in a form of defeat, but also with our heads high. And as we did, I was glad that we had somehow also left the tears and sorrow Renn had found while there behind too.

Even if I had to play the fool to accomplish it.

Chapter 382 Renn – Return to Nevi

Gosh I was nervous.

People were walking out of the church rather slowly. It was raining, not hard enough to make people hurry, but hard enough to bring out the umbrellas they seemed to like here. I myself did not have one, but the cloak and hood I had on was more than enough to shield me from the falling rain.

I stood not far from the church's entrance, and gulped as I quickly looked at every person that passed. Not just for Rapti, but for anyone I recognized. Crane, even.

My heart thumped a little harshly as the church emptied... and once people stopped walking out of the church, I realized it was now time for me to go in.

Doing my best to not make any weird noises, I took a deep breath and collected myself... and then stepped towards the church. I entered through the large wooden doors, and out of the rain, and spent a few moments to look around before going in any deeper.

The place had a strange smell. One of burnt incense. But also a strange... smell of dirt. As if a lot of the people who had just been in here had been working in dirt all day. Maybe they had been.

It was the same church I remembered from my last visit, nothing really looked different... there had not been much change in the furniture or the placement of them, and there were still people within it. Some people still sat quietly upon the rows of benches, while a few still stood on the podium up front. There were even a couple people still kneeling in front of the small stage, before the little stairs up to the stage where there were small statues of varying shapes and forms.

A few of the people here were dressed in the familiar church gowns, but...

Hesitating a moment, I wondered why I didn't see Rapti. Vim had been so confident she'd be here... since she hadn't been at home. Maybe she was deeper into the church?

"Please don't be hiding from us..." I whispered gently as I stepped deeper into the church. It was worrying me terribly. We had knocked on her door, waiting for a response, and once none came Vim had told me to come here. He had gone off to do something else, and hadn't seemed too worried... but... What if she was going to be like Sheilla? Though instead of just outright telling us to leave, what if she just... hid herself? And didn't want to face us?

The thought that Vim and I were so horrible that someone didn't even want to speak with us broke my heart. I just couldn't imagine Rapti being that type of person. Even if we disagreed, even if she wanted to vote against Vim... I just could not imagine her going so far as to...

"Oh my! Renn?"

I turned, my blurry eyes went wide at the sight of Rapti. She had entered the church from another door. A hallway. And was carrying a small box... which she promptly dropped to the floor and rushed forward.

Before I could even comprehend what was happening Rapti had wrapped me in a hug.

"Renn!"

The moment I heard her say my name, I broke. I returned her hug in full, taking care to not squeeze too harshly since she was a bird, and started to cry.

"Rapti...!" I barely got her name out in greeting, and suddenly felt very relieved.

She hadn't been ignoring us!

Then I heard it. A tiny whimper. And not because she was crying in relief like I was.

Hurriedly releasing her, I began to panic. "I'm so sorry!" I apologized as I stepped back and glanced her up and down. Where had I hurt her?

Rapti gave me a gentle smile. "It's all well, Renn. I'm fine. I should have known you were strong!"

Feeling horrible, it was my turn to whimper. "I'm so sorry... Are you sure you're okay?" I asked worriedly.

"I am, Renn. I am. Can we hug again?" Rapti asked with a smile.

I sniffed and nodded. This time I made absolutely sure to be as gentle as possible.

Hopefully I really hadn't harmed her. But... we were in her church. A place she believed could not be lied in. So maybe I was lucky and she was being completely honest with me.

After a moment of hugging, we both seemed to calm down a little and then separated. I was rather relieved to see that I wasn't the only one who had to go and wipe my face after such an emotional moment... though a part of me wondered if maybe her tear stains had been from pain instead.

"I'm surprised you recognized me so quickly," I said. I still had my hood on, and it was a thick and heavy one. One that really blocked out my features.

"I'd recognize you anywhere, Renn," she said happily.

Feeling happy about that for some reason, I noted that she was likely wearing the exact same clothes I had seen her in last time. In fact, there was even a very small stain that was barely noticeable on her shoulder. And not from my tears from our hug, or wet droplets either from my rain soaked cloak. One that had been there last time.

She really was a pious woman.

"How have you been Rapti...?" I asked softly, suddenly not really caring about much else.

I did have a lot to ask. Like where was Crane. Why they were doing what they were doing. And how they slept peacefully while doing it... but right now...

All I cared about was that she was alive, and happy. If able.

"I've been better, Renn... and I'm glad we're here, because I have a confession to make," Rapti said.

Slowly nodding, I tried my best to not let my tail twitch and squirm in apprehension as Rapti clasped her hands before me, as if in prayer, and then lowered her head.

"By my gods above, upon my heart and soul, I have wronged you Renn."

I gulped, and did my best to ignore the fact that a couple people were staring at us. Luckily no one seemed to be heading our way, and Rapti and I weren't really talking loudly... but...

"Rapti..." I whispered her name, feeling self-conscious all of a sudden. I did want to talk to her about this, but to do it here? In front of all these people? There had to be at least fifteen people in here!

"I've helped a friend do something terrible. I've wronged you. And in doing so have no doubt caused you much grief and sorrow, and it is likely not to rectify itself anytime soon... and..."

"Rapti...!" I reached out and grabbed her wrist. Gently.

She gave me a frown as she only half-opened her eyes. "I'm confessing, Renn. It's rude to interrupt..."

"Here though?" I whispered.

Rapti then blinked, and then looked to her right... and then left...

Then she went pale in the face.

Someone giggled at the sight as Rapti hurriedly covered her face with both hands and groaned.

A little stunned at such a sight, I wondered if maybe this was what Vim felt when he watched me sometimes. Is this what he meant by adorable...? Because it was. Absolutely.

Rapti continued making an odd noise as I sighed and reached out to gently grab an arm. "Let's go talk elsewhere Rapti. Maybe your home?" I asked.

"Mhm...!" she only made a noise, so I went ahead and stepped towards the door. She seemed to let me guide her, even though she kept her face covered the whole time.

I paused at the exit... realizing it was still raining. And in fact, had increased in strength. "Uh... you wouldn't happen to have... an umbrella or something, would you?" I asked awkwardly, now wanting to cover my face myself.

Rapti lowered her hands, realized what I meant and then flinched. "Right... I'll be right back!" she turned and hurried off, running back into the church.

As she did a few people said things to her, such as asking what was wrong, but she seemed to ignore them. I though kept my back turned to the crowd, and felt my face grow hot.

Gosh now I really wanted to cover my face for real!

Rapti didn't take long. She returned after a few moments, now with a thin cloak and an umbrella. The cloak was so thin it almost looked useless, like it'd flap and fly away even from the lightest of gusts.

Someone's those like her took their religious devotion a little too far, I think. Why didn't they believe that their gods they so cherished would be sad if they got sick, or hurt, thanks to them not properly protecting themselves? It was odd to me.

"Ready?" Rapti asked as she unfolded her little umbrella and made it all big.

I nodded and joined her out of the church, and was glad to find she had calmed down a little. I still felt hot though, so I was glad for the rain and light breeze that it was brought in on.

"That was embarrassing huh?" I asked.

"Don't say it!" Rapti nearly shouted.

Smiling I nodded. "It's too bad Vim wasn't here. He would have enjoyed that."

"Oh...? Is he not here? I had heard you two were now inseparable," Rapti said.

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"No, he is here. After we went to your home and found you gone he sent me to your church while he went somewhere else. I don't know why he just said he had something to do and that he'd be late," I said.

"He must have gone to see if Meriah is here," Rapti said knowingly as she nodded.

"Meriah?"

"Certain places she leaves letters for him. I don't know where in town, but there's one here. I've always offered to hold them for her, but she doesn't even trust me with them. Which is very sad, but that's just how Meriah is," Rapti said.

Oh! "Vim has been told she's looking for him," I said.

Rapti nodded. "Yes. She is. She's visited a few times recently, which is a rarity for her. She's been waiting for him for several months now," Rapti said.

Geez... it must be serious then. Vim has been worried about it, maybe he had a right to be so if she was this active in waiting for him. Especially since she was supposedly someone who absolutely hated to visit other members in the Society. She was like Lilly, supposedly, with how she liked to be alone.

We passed a small group of people who were waiting to enter a building. Some kind of restaurant maybe, based off the smells coming from it.

"It's become popular. People wait hours to get in when it's busy," Rapti told me.

"Really...? Is it good?" I asked. Maybe I could ask Vim to let us try it before we left.

"I've heard it is yes. They sell some kind of new dish, some kind of meat cooked in bread that people seem to like," Rapti said.

I knew better than to ask if she herself had tried it, or planned to. She wasn't the type to do so. But I had known she would have likely at least heard about it, being so active in the community as she was.

"It does smell good," I noted.

"Hm... it does... though, since we're speaking of scents, is the rain playing tricks on me Renn or are you now like Vim?" Rapti asked.

"Noticed already? Yes. I've lost my smell, so I'm told. I still smell myself though," I said. In fact I was actually a little glad to have finally arrived here at Nevi because I wanted a bath. Rapti was not one for materialistic items, but her home did at least have a bath.

"I see! How very interesting," Rapti seemed to find that strange based off her tone. She was now also side-glancing me in an odd way.

"And I'm sorry... by the way. For interrupting your confession. I know that had been rude, though I thought it uh... well..." I went quiet, since I wasn't sure how to phrase it.

"No, no. You were right to do so. I had been caught in emotion. I had been about to speak of things I shouldn't of in front of others... which for me would not be good at all. It's one thing to basically betray the Society as I have, it's another to do it in such a stupid way again so quickly after the first time," Rapti said.

Wait...? "Betray...?" I asked softly.

Rapti nodded, and did so so seriously her umbrella tilted forward and got me a little wet. I didn't mind it, since I still had my cloak and hood on, as Rapti slowed a little and looked me in the eye.

"I'm sorry Renn. I've betrayed not just your trust, but Vim's. And... even worse, my indiscretions have caused irreparable harm. To the Society as a whole. To the world, even. I do not even know how or where to begin to earn forgiveness, if it even can be... I've thought of flagellation, self-ending, and banishment but..."

Without hesitation I grabbed her arm. "No! Don't even think like that!" I shouted.

Rapti panicked, and actually dropped her umbrella. I thankfully was able to easily catch it, since it bumped and fell into my own arm that was holding hers. I lifted it back up over her, careful to not hit her with it as I drew closer and got her to look me in the eye.

"I don't care what you did, Rapti. Even if it is as bad as what you're alluding to... don't you dare do something as foolish as that. How would you hurting and leaving... or even killing yourself do anything to change what you did? All it would do is cost even more pain and stress, nothing more," I said.

Rapti blinked a few times, and then moved her mouth as to speak... but before she could find her voice new tears hit her eyes. Her face contorted and she began to cry again, though not as harshly as she had earlier. "I'm sorry...!" she said between her cries, sounding more like a child than the full grown nun she was.

Feeling bad all of a sudden, I released her arm and hoped that I hadn't hurt her again. I didn't think I had grabbed her too harshly, but I had done so in a burst of emotion... so...

"I... I didn't mean to yell, Rapti. I'm sorry." I apologized to the crying nun.

Thankfully it was raining enough that there weren't many people out and about. Otherwise this would likely be a scene... I was dressed somewhat like a mercenary again, and she but a nun. It was obvious what she was even with her cloak, since only someone like her would have such a thin and worn down thing covering them in such weather. Most of the time people kept a slight distance from me thanks to my appearance anyway, looking as a mercenary, so I could only imagine the uproar there would be if people thought I was being abusive to a nun.

"I'm sorry...! I helped Crane do something horrible...! All because I couldn't think beyond my feathers...!" Rapti cried, standing there and weeping in front of me.

Awkwardly shifting, I made sure to keep the umbrella over her. But thanks to the fact I was now holding it, some of the rain falling from its canopy was now falling onto my head. It made me feel weird.

Where was Vim when I needed him...?

"Come on Rapti... I'd rather have this conversation by a warm fire, and with something nice to drink," I said carefully, trying to mimic Vim in how he handles such situations. This is what he'd say to me, I think. Maybe it'd work for her too, since it would have for me.

"Mhm... Some tea sounds lovely..." Rapti nodded and sniffed, and I felt my ears twitch a little stiffly.

It had worked! Were we really all such simple creatures? Did men fall for such things too?

We returned to walking, though I still held the umbrella. Rapti went to wiping her face clean again, and as she did I noticed a lot of snot staining her sleeves. A little too much for just some crying. Hopefully she wasn't sick...

"Is Crane here, Rapti?" I asked.

"No. She's not welcome anymore... or well... she knows she's not. I've not actually banished her from my home. She's been my friend for so long, but..." Rapti's lips trembled, as if she was about to cry again.

"You... you and her aren't working together?" I asked.

"No...? Once I figured out what she's been claiming and calling for I confronted her over it. We got into a huge fight and she left, and I've only seen her once since, and that time she had only visited to spend the night and rest. We hadn't said more than a few words to each other, she simply slept for the night and left quietly the next morning," Rapti said.

Oh my...!

"I'm sorry I've ruined your friendship," I said softly.

"What...?" Rapti paused, making me stop again too. "Really Renn? Don't blame yourself! Crane is the one who has done it! She is angry, at the whole world it seems and is simply using her hate and anger as an excuse. You're just a convenient thing for her hate to latch onto. You did not make my friend go crazy, she did it herself," Rapti said.

My heart swelled upon hearing it, and the way Rapti sounded so serious about it. I resisted the urge to embrace her again, and simply nodded. "Mhm...!"

"Plus it's also Vim's fault. If anyone other than myself and Crane, and all the others who have latched onto her stupid schemes, have any blame it is him. He should just reveal what he is already and get it over with," Rapti said with a huff.

Wait...

Rapti started walking again, but I was so stunned I barely noticed. I hurried to keep pace with her, but she had gotten a little wet before I could do so.

"What do you mean? Reveal what?" I asked worriedly.

"That he's a god, Renn. Don't you know? You're married to one and you don't realize it?" Rapti asked.

Stunned, I couldn't help but try and mistake her very serious tone for one of jest. Yet I couldn't do it. Because Rapti was very obviously not joking around at all.

So... she really did believe Vim was a god.

Great.

"Oh don't look at me like that Renn. I'm not stupid. I'm not wrong, you're walking proof yourself," she said, likely noticing my own feelings on the matter.

"Wha...? How?"

"Your lack of scent? Your immense strength? You had just hugged me back there and nearly snapped me in half! How is that possible if you weren't the bride of a god?" Rapti asked with a small smile, though one of pure confidence not jest.

My stomach knotted and churned as I realized she was being absolutely serious. Impossibly so.

"Rapti..." I said her name carefully, and wondered where to even begin.

"Hm. That way Renn," Rapti pointed to our left. I nodded as we turned the street. I remembered how to get back to her home from the church, but in our conversation I had gotten lost in thought.

I mean... how could I not be lost! She was being crazy!

Or well... no. she wasn't.

I fully understood where she was coming from. I really did.

Vim being seen as a god was actually very understandable. Especially from the perspective of one like Rapti.

She was fully involved in her church. She knew her religion inside and out. And, being a non-human and more importantly a member of the Society... she knew people, maybe even personally, that had known gods. Actual ones. Like the ones who had ruled the Summit.

The ones Vim had killed.

Rapti was in a unique position to know for an undeniable fact that gods had once been real. If they weren't still real even as of now. And there were people alive, and the man himself who admitted to it aloud, that boldly claimed that he... that Vim had killed those very gods.

And by all counts and reason, only a god could kill a god.

Add his incredible strength, strange abilities, practical immortality and his unnatural knowledge about odd things... and well...

"It would really put an end to everything. Not just Crane's schemes, but all the schemes of the other fools acting out thanks to Crane's uproar. They're all basically calling for an audit of Vim's actions. His failures and successes. If he simply declared himself a god, and proved it, then none of this would matter. People would have no choice but to just accept that he's in the right, and return to normalcy. But knowing Vim he won't," Rapti said with a sigh. One of great sadness, too.

I gulped a dry mouth, and felt terrible.

An audit...? So Oplar and the rest had been right. They're going to try and place Vim's history, everything he's done and hasn't done, under scrutiny. And use those records to either denounce him... or even

banish him. Yet he instead was going to do something outrageous. Something not even Rapti, in her crazy theories, could have imagined.

He was going to nip it all in the bud. To snuff it out like he would a candle, without even licking his fingers.

He was just going to step down. Maybe even completely.

Since he believed, and I was slowly starting to realize he was right to do so, that this vote... this audit of theirs, could cause another rift in the Society. One just like the one after the wars, where half the Society split and left these lands for another across the ocean.

"I'm so glad you're here though, Renn. We have so much to talk about...! Not just about Crane, and the terrible things I've helped cause... but you too!" Rapti then said, reaching out to grab at my forearm. She wrapped her hands around my wrist in a gentle way, which made me feel rather conscious of her as she happily giggled and pulled herself close to me. Close enough that we both were now sharing the umbrella.

"About me...?" I asked worriedly. She wasn't going to claim something insane like I was a god too, right?

Rapti smiled happily at me and nodded.

"You did something that as far as I'm aware, no other woman... or man, has ever done! I need to know all about it!" she said.

"I did...?"

What was she talking about...?

She nodded. "You captured Vim's heart, Renn."

Oh.

Oh...!

Feeling utterly relieved, I shyly smiled and nodded. "Right...!" I admitted I had, and was super glad that was all she had wanted to talk about.

I too had lots I wanted to talk about. The vote. Crane. That earlier comment about her wanting to kill herself, or banish herself, as penance for what she's done. I wanted to ask about Sharp, and if she'd accept the letter from her I had hidden in my little monarch pouch. And yes, even why she so firmly believed Vim was a god. Hopefully she still had that book he had given her, which had birthed all this nonsense. I wanted to read it too.

But talking about how I had fallen in love with Vim? And him me?

Out of all those important topics, it seemed so... inconsequential. Yet it was one I was more than happy to talk about first... and maybe even, the most.

Reaching Rapti's home, we found it was locked and empty. Vim had not returned yet. A part of me was kind of glad for it though as Rapti unlocked her house and happily opened the door for me.

"Come, come! Let's get warmed up, some tea heated, and let me hear all about it!"

Chapter 383 Vim – Meriah's Note

Meriah's note, like always was short and to the point. Her handwriting was like Renn's, a little too nice, and she had notched three little marks on one of the corners of it. To imply she herself has checked this cache three times since putting this note in.

A rarity. At most I usually found notes with only a single notch, maybe two. But three...? Odds are she's been frequenting here and the nearby coastal areas often.

But how could I blame her?

I was alone in the graveyard. Likely thanks to the rain. It was a cold rain, fitting for the moment. I could hear the hustle and bustle of the city around me though, even with the rain. Like most port cities, a little rain wasn't enough to truly stop people from living their lives.

Reading the note one last time, I wondered how I was so calm. I'd expected something terrible, something that would have made me break something nearby. Maybe the gravestones. Especially since more than a single person has told me Meriah has been looking for me. Yet even this had been out of my expectations.

"I'll be traveling along the coast. Find me. The sisters cannot be trusted. Fox village burnt by Light."

Crumpling the note, I squeezed it so tightly it tore and shattered.

A heavy accusation.

One that would demand absolute proof.

But I knew Meriah. I knew her well.

Even though she hated the church, particularly the Chronicler and the rest of her ilk, more than even Lilly did... I knew Meriah would not have claimed such a thing without the necessary proof. If anything, it was her very distaste and hatred for the Chronicler and the Church of Songs that made me lack any doubt of her accusation.

She herself was as ardent a believer as Rapti or Abel. Randle even admitted when it came to faith, Meriah's was unflinching. She hated the people who had shattered her family, but would not have manufactured such false lies.

Still... a part of me hoped, maybe even prayed, she was wrong.

Maybe I would get lucky and Meriah had finally broken. Maybe her hate had finally corrupted her, or maybe she had simply misunderstood or...

"Like hell," I said as I turned and stepped away from the gravestone where we hid our little messages.

Lomi's village had been burnt by Light.

It made no sense. Light may have schemes, maybe even against me... but why would she intentionally harm our own people?

I myself had only met Light on a few occasions, when she had been younger, but she had not seemed like someone with such a cruel heart. But I knew better than to think it was outright impossible for her to have become so estranged. After all she was a saint. Half the saints I knew had gone down the path of such destruction... thinking they knew better, or that it was...

"A prophecy maybe...?" I wondered.

It was the only explanation. What if Light had believed the village had to have been destroyed, less something even more horrible happened...?

But then why not contact me? Why use the church?

I needed to find Meriah fast. To find out more.

"Renn's going to be furious," I said as I left the graveyard and stepped out onto the stone road. I was in the north of the city, not far from the docks. A lot of the buildings around me were warehouses or buildings where people did business. I could smell a butcher nearby, and probably some kind of soap manufacturer. I could smell fat being boiled.

Slowing a little, I shook my head and glanced down at my hand. The little letter was a flat mess. I had been squeezing it so hard, and for so long, that it had even torn and shattered. It was already in dozens of little pieces.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to fight through my mind that was whirling.

This was heavy.

Because if Meriah was right, and Light really had burnt down Lomi's home...

Then I would have to kill her. And anyone involved.

Had Randle known...? Surely not. He had gotten so frustrated and worked up over their changing of their bible... I couldn't imagine him not throwing an even greater fit over this. Something like this would have undoubtedly been brought to my attention.

Had... had the Chronicler known...?

What had she said when I had reported it? How had she acted...?

"Wish Renn would have... been..." Wait... had she been there?

I couldn't remember. I think I had allowed Renn to enter the Chronicler's office first, when we had first returned to Telmik after Lomi's village had been destroyed... but had we talked about the village in question then?

Surely, right?

Maybe Renn would remember, or know.

She would. Her memory was flawless.

Returning to walking, now with more purpose, I picked up the pace as the rain began to fall even harder.

As I walked I slowly allowed tiny pieces of the note I had crushed to fall from my hand. I dispersed tiny pieces all over town, allowing them to fall into puddles and on the road where they'd get stepped on and ruined.

Should I check the church first? Or Rapti's home? Which was closer?

Her house.

I turned down a road, heading deeper into the town and away from the docks. I ignored the few people I passed, my mind far busier and too distracting.

Meriah was claiming Light had killed our own people. Burnt a whole village down.

"Heavy," I whispered at the idea. I've had many people over the years come to me, to tell me about hidden schemes and terrible deeds of other members. Told to me in secret, since they feared telling anyone else. A few of those had resulted in my having to kill and or banish our own members. After verifying their claims were true.

This one though...?

This may be one of the worst I've ever had propositioned to me.

By my parents I hoped she was wrong.

But if she was...

"Such false accusations would require some form of penance..." I whispered. One did not accuse someone else in the Society such a thing falsely and not suffer the consequences.

As I walked through Nevi, heading for Rapti's home, I felt strangely cold. And not because of the cold winter rain.

Fate was heading in a direction I did not want to go.

Prophecies. Monarchs. Possibly even Gods...

And now such schemes and betrayal in the Society like this...?

It was as if I was being tormented every which way.

If not for Renn I would feel desolate, like lost out at sea without sail or compass.

Slowing a little as I stepped onto the road that Rapti's home was on, I frowned at myself as I wondered about that.

I didn't have just Renn.

That was an emotional thought. A mockery of reality.

Although I no longer had many of my old allies and friends, such as Miss Beak, it wasn't as if I was actually alone. I had even found strange allies in odd places, such as with Randle, recently.

Yet...

There was no denying Renn's importance to me. And the comfort I had found in her.

It was too bad the drama wasn't over. I still had Rapti to deal with.

"Makes me miss the wars," I whispered as I approached Rapti's house.

The windows were dark, but there was some smoke now coming from one of her chimneys. No... the second one as well. Maybe one of them was warming up the bath?

No matter.

Approaching the door, I paused a moment to listen in. To judge how my next few moments would go.

For a few seconds I held my breath, and noted the light chatter coming from beyond the door and walls.

Chatter that sounded relatively fine. I heard no screams. No cries. No strange pitches of voices.

Though that didn't mean those things hadn't already happened, or wouldn't happen the moment I walked in.

Taking a small breath, I sighed at my current life and knocked on the door.

As I did I noticed a single piece of the note left on my hand. Stuck between fingers. I pried it out and stared at the tiny piece, one that was rolled up and unnoticeable now thanks to it being half soaked and half torn.

The door opened, and I lowered my hand and stared at two looks of pure worry.

Rapti stood at the door, and Renn behind her down the hall. Renn was peering at us from around one of the doorways, and her ears were flickering wildly in stress... and Rapti...

"Vim..." Rapti said my name with a low voice, one that told me more than her look of utter heartbreak did.

"Rapti. Normally I'd not ask, but I've found in today's time it is needed. May I come in?" I asked.

Rapti's look of worry shifted into one of confusion. "Wait... ask what?"

"If I can come into your home...?" I asked again. Was she going to tell me no?

I ignored Renn's odd look as Rapti shifted and stepped back. "Of course you can Vim... are you saying recently there have been members who have denied you entry into their homes?" she asked with an odd tone.

"Mhm..." I nodded as I entered, and made sure to not get too close to her. I was soaked, having stood in the rain so long.

I went to undo my outer layer, to hang it up near Renn's heavy cloak nearby as Rapti shut the door behind me.

"So it's already gotten that bad...?" Rapti whispered as she locked her front door.

Renn stepped out into the hallway as I finished taking off my outer layer and went to take off my shoes.

"How have you been Rapti? I'm glad to see neither you or her are a sobbing mess," I said lightly.

"Oh my! But we had been, just earlier!" Rapti said happily, which made me glance at Renn.

Renn smiled and nodded at me. "We cried our hearts out already, Vim. You've been gone for a few hours."

Have I been...?

Possibly. I had stood in that graveyard for some time, stunned.

"Glad I missed it," I said as I finished taking my shoes off. As I went to walk into the house, I noted that my right sock was wet. I shifted a little, and realized it wasn't just wet... it was soaked.

Which meant my right shoe had ripped somewhere. Renn and I had gotten new travel gear in Telmik, before leaving. We had shopped together for them, yet...

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

"Did you step in a puddle, Vim?" Rapti asked as she watched me take off the socks.

"Not that I know of."

"Then you need new shoes," Rapti said plainly.

"What! Again? Already?" Renn complained.

Ignoring the two, I sighed as I turned to look at Rapti.

She stood up straighter, her eyes narrowing at me as I noticed the tells of her earlier weeping. Her eyes were slightly red, and her cheeks had been recently wiped with a wet cloth.

"Know that no matter what has happened... or will, Rapti, I do not blame you. I do not fault you. You, just like everyone else, have the right to ask questions. Even if the answers to those questions hurt, or can't be given," I said.

Her eyes widened and she took a small breath, but said nothing. She stood there for a moment, staring at me with eyes of wonder... as I nodded gently at her.

"I swear, on my parents, I'll make sure that no matter the outcome of all of this... You will be okay. I vow it," I said.

The sound of nails on wood drew my eyes, and I found Renn had reached out and grabbed the wall. She looked odd standing there, holding herself up, but seemed fine. I looked away and found Rapti had bowed.

Uh oh.

That was not a bow of forgiveness...

"O' Great One... thank you for your mercy... And please, may it extend to what I must say next."

I shifted, and heard Renn make an odd noise. I didn't glance at her though as I stared down at Rapti who slowly lifted her head, but only enough to look me in the eye. She still was bent forward, still bowing.

As if I was one of those bishops or statues she prayed to.

She seemed to wait for me to say something, but I didn't.

I couldn't.

Not yet.

Rapti must have taken my silence as acceptance, for she then took another small breath and nodded... and then looked back down, bowing further again.

"You need to stop hiding your existence. The Society crumbles as you play mortal. It is an insult to not just our loyalty and desire, but your purpose. If not take the crown, at least take the pedestal. So that the Society may flourish," Rapti said.

Oh boy... here we go again.

The worst part was she had spoken so fluidly. So smoothly. This had not been rehearsed, or well the words may have been considered, but the act had not been. That little request had come from her soul. It had been pure. Honest.

Real.

It made me sick.

I had not thought Rapti the one to do this next, but in a way it made sense. She was so very faithful to her religion... and well... Sometimes those like her misunderstood. But it was not their fault, not entirely.

I was so private about certain things. I kept so many secrets... so I understood how they made such mistakes. I really did.

"Rapti..." Renn whispered, lowly enough that odds are Rapti may not have even heard her. Especially since I could hear Rapti's heartbeat, even with the rain loudly falling onto the house and world around us.

"Raise your head, Rapti," I said gently.

She didn't.

Reaching out, I gently placed my hand on Rapti's shoulder. She didn't even twitch at my touch, which told me how steady her heart and soul was at the moment. Most others would have faltered just then. I'd seen it before.

"I... hear what you are saying, Rapti. I do."

She finally shifted. She lifted her head a little, to meet my eyes. Her pupils were wide, as if in awe.

I nodded at her. "You are not the first to say such things to me. And... I'm sure you will not be the last. Far from it," I said.

"Then...!" Rapti stood up a little more, and I squeezed her shoulder a little and shook my head at her.

"I will be honest with you Rapti, if you promise to take what I am about to say to your grave," I said.

She blinked, and Renn stepped forward.

Holding her eyes, I saw the devotion in Rapti's eyes. Not really to me, but her faith. Her beliefs.

She nodded, and I believed her.

"I'm not a god, Rapti," I said. Her eyebrows furrowed, in a way that told me that she had not believed me at all. Yet before she could argue, I raised a hand to stop her. "That being said... I am special. In my own way. Imagine me as something between a monarch and a normal man. Or well, normal non-human," I said.

Rapti clenched her jaw as she glared at me for a moment, and then sighed at me. "You made me vow to secrecy and that's all you reveal? That you're a little special...? Without even the how or why?" she asked.

"Right!" Renn agreed with her, making both me and Rapti to look at her.

"Don't take her side," I said exasperatedly.

"Oh I am! That was absolutely rude, Vim. Though... I think he's basically saying he's something similar to a monarch, Rapti," Renn said.

"I figured. Yet Vim... you once told me monarchs are akin to the angels in my gospel. Gods in their own way. You basically just admitted then, that you are indeed, a form of a god," Rapti said.

What...?

Had I said something like that?

Maybe. I sighed as I stepped away from Rapti and deeper into the house. I walked down the hall, passing Renn who was giving me a look.

"I'm going to sit down. My head hurts."

"Don't run! This is serious!" Renn shouted at me.

"I'm not running. I'm in fact sitting, the opposite of running," I said as I entered the small living area. The fireplace was going, and the table between the chairs and couches already had plates and cups of food and drink upon it.

I noted Renn's inner layers on one of the chairs in a slight mess. Some of her bags were there too. I went ahead and put a few of my own down next to them, and then went to sit down in one of the single chairs. So that neither Renn nor Rapti could sit next to me and bug me.

"I see what you mean, Renn," Rapti said softly as she and Renn entered the room.

"Vim...!" Renn yelled at me as she hurried to stand in front of me. I smiled up at her, relaxing in her glare. It allowed me to not think about anything for a moment as she fumed at me. "This isn't a time for you to be so...!" Renn made a noise as she gestured at me.

So what...? I wanted to ask, but knew she didn't have a word to really describe me. At least, likely not one that wasn't very rude.

"I'm not a god Renn. I really am not one. A god can do things you can't even imagine. If I was capable of such feats, trust me I'd be using them right now," I said. First thing I'd do is wipe out every monarch still left, for one.

Renn hesitated as Rapti stepped past her and went to sit on the couch across from where I sat. She did so gently, with grace. A far cry from my wife who looked as strung as a cat.

Her tail was twitching around like mad, and it almost made me want to reach out and grab it. It sometimes got close enough for me to do so, since it was so long.

"Even if you're not a god, Vim, you are still something greater than us. So my statement still stands, and it is still the truth. If you just took your rightful place in the Society, no... the world, then a lot of our problems could not just be dealt with but avoided altogether," Rapti said as she sat up straight and proper.

I sighed at her. "You are telling me to enforce my will onto others, Rapti. Even disregarding everything else, you should know full well what I think about such a thing."

She nodded. "I do. But I also know, as per the words in my gospel, that the will of the higher powers are divine. Your will, even if imposed with the rule of force, is the correct one. So it is justifiable," Rapti said.

Damn zealot.

"You'd be okay with Vim forcing the Society to do what he wants?" Renn asked Rapti.

She nodded, rather simply. "Yes? Especially since it will put an end to all the chaos and conflict. Just think of how many deaths, how many losses, could be avoided if Vim just... took his rightful place?" Rapti asked.

Renn shifted, her tail slowing in its twitching and swaying, and I was glad to see the utter discomfort so readily visible on her face.

She really didn't like Rapti's idea, at all.

And that made me rather proud.

"I'll not force my will in such a way, Rapti. And before you argue that a god has divine right over us lesser creatures, then I'd like to formally introduce you to those at the Summit or the many other locations who had suffered terribly under such rule," I said.

Rapti shifted, her eyes narrowing in a way that told me I had touched a nerve. "I... do not argue that gods can be cruel, Vim. But I know you are not that kind of evil. You may need to do a few... questionable things, I'm sure, to right the course of the Society but..." Rapti raised her hands, as if to somehow explain how I could do such a supposed thing.

See...? Always the same arguments, without any of the actual steps to fulfill such tasks. They always either neglected outright, or spoke in roundabout ways such as Rapti was doing.

Yet the moment I tried to do what they wanted, the minute I started killing or beating submission into the world around me, they'd be the first to cry foul.

Been there done that.

"As much as I hate to agree with her Vim... Rapti does have a point," Renn then said.

"Oh not you too," I said, unable to keep my real thoughts to myself.

Rapti tilted her head at me, but I ignored her as Renn's ears fluttered and she nodded at me. "Yes. Rapti might not be... saying these things for the right reasons, with her misplaced belief, but the fact is you are more than you appear to be Vim. If you just... slightly, somewhat a bit, forced people to listen to you I bet you could do a lot of good," Renn said.

"This is why some societies don't let their wives mingle without supervision," I said.

Renn gave me a look. "What...? That sounds horrible. Do you actually believe such a thing?" she asked.

"Well... no..." I admitted. "Okay, that had been a bad joke. But my point is Renn, don't let Rapti and the rest corrupt you. I have many faults, and am more than happy to sit and talk about them, but my lack of forcing my will on people is not one of them. And that is a hill I will die on, a thousand times over," I said.

"I'm not saying you should actually force your will Vim... just... be a guidepost. Something for our people to look up to, a higher power is a great unifier. Even you have to admit that," Rapti said.

"I do. Most of the greatest nations to ever exist did so by rallying behind a great figure. People get a strange sense of fulfillment when following someone they consider divine, or of great importance. To the point they'll endure things unthinkable, and accomplish feats impossible. But my agreement with Celine, to the Society, was not for me to lead. I protect. That is all I do. I am the protector, not the king. Not the ruler. Not the founder or symbol," I said.

"Is... is that what most of this is about for you? The fact your contract with Celine doesn't include such duties...? Does that mean if it had, you'd be willing to attempt fixing the Society?" Renn asked with an odd voice.

My first instinct was to scoff at her, but then I realized she was right.

Hesitating a moment... I frowned at myself and then begrudgingly nodded. "Yes... I suppose you're right. If I had agreed to it, then yes, I would have done so. But I would not have agreed to it, Renn. No matter what, in any form, or any circumstances. I did that once before. It almost caused the world to end. I'll not do it again," I said.

Renn tilted her head ever so slightly at me, and I noted the way her ears perked up... and then I realized what I had just said to her.

Kicking myself, I glanced at Rapti and found her staring at me with intense eyes. Fully focused on me.

Shit.

Taking a small breath, I feigned a sigh... as if I hadn't cared that I had just revealed something very important.

It was one thing to reveal it to Renn. But Rapti...? Even if she had vowed to keep it a secret...

Coughing, before Renn or Rapti could say anything, I gestured lightly at myself. "It doesn't matter. None of this does. The vote, won't matter, because I plan to..." I was about to say it, but Renn shouted wordlessly and rushed towards me.

I sat up straighter as Renn planted her hands over my mouth, rather roughly, and she hissed at me. "Don't you dare say it!" she shouted at me.

Stunned, I found myself lost in her huge eyes as she kept pushing onto my mouth, as to keep me from speaking. She was doing so hard enough that had I been a normal man she may have just broken my neck.

"You..." Rapti whispered, and Renn went stiff. She and I glanced at Rapti, and I watched with interest as I saw the obvious look of shock on her face. "You plan to step down!" she whispered in shock.

Renn let out a loud whine of a groan as she slowly released my mouth. "Damn you, Vim," she said worriedly, her face contorted as if she was about to cry.

"What...? I told you Renn, and..." she reached out to grab my mouth again. This time though she did so gently, too gently to actually stop me from talking... yet I went silent all the same.

She held her hand over my mouth as she looked to Rapti. "Yes. He plans to step down as protector. He foolishly believes the chaos will end if he does, or rather that the chaos and discord will grow worse if he doesn't," she said.

Rapti shook her head as she stood up. "That's foolish!"

"I know! But he's so damned obstinate!" Renn shouted in agreement.

I glared at the two. "You tell me to impose my will and are now upset I'm doing so?" I asked. My voice sounded odd since I spoke into Renn's hand.

She gave me an odd look, one I kind of liked for some reason. Was she bothered by the feel of my breath on her hand?

"That's not imposing your will Vim, that's you running away from the problem," Rapti said.

"Right!" Renn agreed.

I rolled my eyes and leaned back a little as I grabbed Renn's wrist. She didn't fight me as I pushed her hand away a bit, yet she kept it in front of my face and didn't pull it back.

"Listen... that might not even be what happens anyway... not after what I might learn soon," I said.

The two glanced at each other and back at me. "What do you mean?" Renn asked.

"When was the last time Meriah was here, Rapti?" I asked.

"Not long ago. She's been waiting for you for months Vim. She's stressed, though as you know she never tells me anything. I know it's serious though, since she's been coming around more often than not. You know what she's like, so for her to visit so often is telling," Rapti said.

I nodded. That sounded right. "Well... a lot can change depending on what she has to say to me. So I'll reserve words until I meet her, but just know, Renn, things might change. A lot," I said.

Renn frowned at me as her ears fluttered. "In... in a good way? Are you now considering staying the protector?" she asked, hopefully.

"Maybe. We'll see."

She instantly relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness."

"Yes. I take back what I said earlier. You need not declare yourself a divine authority, Vim... just don't leave. Please," Rapti said as she clasped her hands.

Renn made a noise as she squirmed a little, as if she wanted to walk away or something.

While the two acted oddly for a moment, I sat back a little and released Renn's hand. The moment I did she hurriedly snaked her hand into mine, clasping it tightly.

Renn gave me a strained smile as she nodded, as if telling me she agreed with Rapti.

"By the way where's Crane? I don't even smell her," I said, realizing I didn't smell the bird at all.

Rapti startled... and then slowly sat back down with a sad smile. "I no longer call her my friend, Vim. She's not been here in months."

Oh...? I glanced at Renn, and she squeezed my hand without looking at me. She was staring at Rapti with a sad look. One that told me she had already heard about Crane.

I see. They had already had long talks about all of this, hadn't they?

Made sense. It had felt like they had tag-teamed me just now.

Though the way neither of them were hurriedly bringing up Meriah's information told me that neither knew. But that wasn't surprising. Meriah wouldn't tell anyone but me such a fact. Even if it had been of far lesser of importance, she would not have revealed it to anyone. She didn't trust anyone.

Which was why I trusted her.

"And the book I gave you?" I asked, right before Renn was about to say something. She flicked her head towards me, and I wondered which had offended her more. My interrupting of her, again, or what I'd just asked for.

"Well..." Rapti hesitated, which made me frown, but Renn laughed at me.

"She gave it to me. I knew you'd ask for it! I'll let you destroy it Vim, but only after I've read it," Renn said with a grin, one of victory.

My eye twitched.

Chapter 384 Renn – Rapti's Rest and The HeartBeats That Follow

The day was almost over yet Rapti still hadn't gotten out of bed.

"Vim, I'm worried," I whispered as I retreated from the hallway door. I had peered around it, hoping to hear her in her bedroom. I couldn't even hear her snoring or whimpering anymore.

"It's stress, Renn. Didn't this happen last time we were here too...? She's of very firm stuff, but in the end she is still just a bird Renn. Feeble. She'll be okay, I've seen this many times. In a day or two she'll be back on her feet," Vim said as he turned the page of his book. The one he had given Rapti.

The source of all this mess.

"Last time she only cried when she went to bed, and woke up at a normal time the next day. If she doesn't wake up soon, it'll be the second day Vim," I said worriedly as I walked over to him.

"Hm..." He nodded, and I noted the way he had hummed at me. He had just slightly ignored me.

"Vim..." I groaned.

He blinked and sighed as he lowered the book he had written a long time ago. "She gets like this Renn. I'm actually surprised you're surprised. She is no Lilly. Even you cry in your sleep sometimes, a few times recently too, so why the shock someone else has moments similar?" he wondered.

My tail curled a little as I begrudgingly nodded. "Right..." Wait... "How do you know how often I've cried recently...?" I asked, unable to remember more than the night where he had held me while acting weird. And even then I hadn't actually cried much, it had been more of just a few quiet tears as I worried and stressed over him.

He shifted a little and glanced at me. "Lilly told me."

What! "Why would she?" I asked, a little upset. Really Lilly! I thought we had a silent agreement about such things!

Vim sighed at me. "She was just worried, Renn. She loves you, so when she noticed she let me know. She'd not have done it had she known you a tad better, knowing you're just... sometimes a little emotional," Vim explained.

"That doesn't make it any better...!" I whined a little as I went to sit down next to him. Vim had this time sat on one of the couches, not a singular chair, as he read. I huffed as I leaned back, and against him. "And I had a very good reason to cry... before you got back. So I'm not ashamed of it at all, by the way," I said, hoping he didn't hear my red face. It was burning harshly.

"Hm. I bet you did."

My ears fluttered and I reached out to grab at my tail. It squirmed in my hands as I gently wringed it, like a towel. "And I didn't do it every night, I don't think..." I mumbled as I tried to think of the nights I had spent with Lilly before Vim had shown up. I had cried a few times, but not the whole time I don't think...

Maybe I did...?

"My point was Renn, is Rapti does this. A lot of our... more gentle members do such things. They grow sorrowful, melancholic. I don't worry about those like Rapti, I worry about the ones who don't recover from it. Like Tosh," he said, changing topics a little. Maybe out of kindness.

"Hm... When was the last time she was this bad?" I asked.

"That I know of...?" Vim shifted a little in thought, and then tapped the book in his hand with a thumb. "Probably those children. Some kids snuck into the church here. She found them, fed them and cleaned them up. Only for them to be found later on the street the next day. Someone had assumed they had stolen the clothes she had given them, and beat them to death as punishment."

I groaned and squeezed my tail almost hard enough to hurt. "How horrible...!"

"Yes. She... well... She's very devout, as you know. And like you, she is a good person. Particularly towards children and those down on their luck. She takes such things very personally. It's one of the reasons she's here and not at Telmik," Vim explained.

"Why...? Why not just work with Randle...? If she cares for children so much and those like them?" I asked.

Vim shrugged. "It's not that part she's bothered by Renn. It's the other parts. Parts that Randle is now having to accept he can't look the other way for either. There had been a real reason, an issue that had

caused a lot of grief, but I'll be honest Renn I don't know what it had been. I don't intrude in such things, if I can avoid it. It's like with Fly... I know she had fought and not mixed in with those at the Bell Church, and also have a slight idea of the how and why, but I don't know the full details. Unless I need to know them, as to prove or disprove someone's innocence to a crime, I don't investigate much more than superficially," Vim said.

My tail squirmed in my hands as I slowly pieced together his meaning to that last word he had just used. I assumed it meant he did things shallowly unless needed. "Don't you think part of the reason the Society might be having difficulties with you is your indifference, Vim?" I asked.

He frowned at me as he patted the book again with his thumb. It was loud this time, telling me I had bothered him a little with my comment. "Possibly, Renn," he admitted gently.

Feeling a little bad for making him obviously feel so, I decided to do what he does and gestured at the book. "So...? Do you realize what caused all this yet?" I asked.

I had read it already. Several times. It wasn't that big actually, even though it looked like it had hundreds of pages. Most of them were blank. Vim had written in it years ago, supposedly at the request of Celine.

It was honestly not what I had thought it was going to be. I had expected a book full of strange secrets, revealing a lot of stuff he's not even revealed to me.

Instead it was genuinely just a recounting of his encounters with monarchs at the time.

A giant fish he had found in a lake, where he and Lilly had gone to help a village of ducks.

Two great birds on the coast, great birds of black that attacked ships.

Some kind of snake that dug into the ground. There were a few dozen of such events, and they each only had a few pages of descriptions.

He had written about the monarchs, where he had found them and a few small tidbits of their abilities and if they had been difficult to slay or not. He also mentioned if there had been losses, of members in the Society, during the events. Basically he had simply given a few details about each encounter, not much more.

There had honestly not really been anything in the book, on first glance, that really declared openly that Vim was some kind of higher power... other than the very obvious fact that Vim was basically admitting he could slay giant monarchs. Creatures that, even if one discounted the hints of them being gods or at least the servants of them, in religions and stories, were mythical almost in their size and abilities. There hadn't even been any drawings of the creatures, which surprised me. I myself have read books in similar fashion, such as the one I had taken from Elaine's house. The one about flowers. Usually each section, pertaining to a specific thing, had a small drawing to give one a visual representation of what they spoke of. Vim though hadn't even tried.

Maybe he couldn't draw? It would surprise me really, since he was so apt at fashioning fancy things... like my comb.

"I've gone through it twice. The only thing I can think of is Rapti read this and simply believes that since I am capable of hunting monarchs, I am thus one myself. Or above them, even, since I can do so without strain. Which is dumb. I do strain myself when fighting them. I in fact, in a way, die hundreds of times over while I fight them. If one took into account the severity of my wounds, at least," Vim said with a sigh.

"She told me she's not shown this book to anyone else. Only that she sent letters, and talked to others like herself, telling them and talking to them about the monarchs you've slain over the years," I said.

"Acts which I have not kept secret, Renn. Everyone in the Society knows I hunt monarchs, and have since my joining. It is no secret, and not enough to cause this vote. Not now after all this time," Vim said.

"Then... what, Vim...?" I asked. If this book really had not been very impactful on Rapti and Crane's actions, then why was the Society suddenly having issues?

Vim sighed as he handed me the book. I dropped my tail and took it, glad he hadn't just tossed it into the nearby fireplace. "I'm starting to believe this is all a scam," he said.

"Scam...?" What's that?

"I'm debating leaving, to go find Meriah. But there's a chance she might come back here... would you like to stay here for a few days? While I run around and see if I can find her nearby?" Vim then asked.

My eyes narrowed at him. "Separating already Vim? Really?" I asked.

"What...? Just for two or three days. If you're here while she shows up you can make sure she stays here until I get back... and..." Vim went quiet, likely because of my look that I was giving him.

He shifted a little, away from me, and leaned a little as to face me. As he did so, his left leg and thigh pushed up against me, since he had turned a bit on the couch. I wasn't bothered, or hurt, by his movement but I found myself shifting and adjusting too... as to face him. I curled my own legs under me onto the couch, as to sit towards him.

It was cute that Vim always wanted to face each other properly when we had serious conversations, but sometimes I wished he did so with a little more finesse.

"Before we continue, what's a scam, Vim?" I asked.

"Light and the rest. I hadn't wanted to believe they were actually interfering with this vote to a great degree with malicious intent... but I'm now a firm believer of it. It's more than just them taking over the church, or the Society even. There's..." Vim went quiet as my ears fluttered wildly.

What the heck! So he hadn't believed it until now...? Even though Randle and so many others had said clearly that they were involved?

Did that mean Vim didn't trust those like Randle and Oplar at all? Or was it because he knew Light well enough to have thought otherwise...?

Or was he just a man who truly didn't judge anyone until he had absolute proof? Was he really that benevolent?

"Wait... were you asking what the word meant? Scam?" he then asked.

I blinked and my ears twitched as I nodded. "I get the meaning, I guess, especially now after what you just said. But yes. I had."

He frowned at me. "You don't know what a scam is...?" he asked.

I shook my head. "You've mentioned the word a couple times before, but I've never actually asked about it. Since I kind of assume it means trick or something," I said.

His frown deepened as he crossed his arms and studied me. "It means scheme. To fraud someone, or swindle them. A trick or con. Basically I'm saying the vote, and the chaos spurred by it, are not genuine. Or well... the sentiments are, very likely, but the source of it is not. I think someone, whether it be Light or not, is stirring the pot and creating discord on purpose. For a reason beyond the obvious," he said.

"Does it matter the reason...? They're hurting us, that's all that matters," I said.

"It matters greatly. At least in this context. For instance what if I am not the target at all, Renn? What if we're missing the full picture? The real plot? We could be worrying about something that has no threat, and because of it not preparing for the real one that will slither in-between our ribs when we're not looking," he said.

I groaned at that. "I don't like the idea of there being a worse threat than you being removed from the Society, Vim," I said.

"Me either. It makes my plan to just step down and diffuse the situation seem... stupid. What if my doing so is exactly what they want?" he asked himself.

"Exactly...!" I nodded gravely, glad he realized it.

"Don't get too excited Renn. If it ends up not being that big a deal, I still plan to step down. Regretfully for you, I'm too old and set in my ways to change my mind too easily," he warned.

"I'm not too worried. I'm sure I'll find a way to convince you to change your mind, even if I have to threaten you," I said.

He blinked at me. "Threaten...?"

I smirked and nodded. "I've got a few ideas."

"You'd threaten your mate? Your husband...?" he asked with a smirk.

"I would."

He seemed to find that amusing, and then gestured to the book. "Do you have any idea if there's anything in there that could have been the source of all this, Renn?" he asked.

"Not really. Like you said it's just... proof that you can kill monarchs. Or that you see them as prey, maybe? But like you said, the whole of the Society should know that. It shouldn't be something world changing, at least," I said as I lifted the little book. It was made of the same white leather that Celine's had been. While studying it, an interesting question popped up in my head. "Vim... how many books have you written? I thought you told me once you've never done such a thing before."

"Hm? That's not a book Renn it's a report. I've probably written a few things like that over the years. I wrote one for Nebl once, about how to shape and forge certain things... I don't write stories, which is what you probably asked one time. I don't have the time for such things," Vim said with a soft smile.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

It was my turn to tap the book as I studied the man who looked far too amused. Why was he enjoying our conversation so much...?

Though I guess it wasn't bad. I kind of liked the atmosphere we had. It was growing later, the rain was loud and the fireplace was going strong. Plus I could still hear Rapti every so often, as she snored and slept the night away.

We were basically alone... and well...

"Why're you suddenly blushing?" Vim asked.

"Huh! Oh... I was just thinking it was a nice moment, I guess," I said, a little startled he'd actually ask such a thing.

"Mhm... talking about our whole world falling apart, and a bunch of schemes against us, is definitely a nice thing," Vim said with a smirk.

"Oh shush...! You know what I mean," I said, trying to whisper but not really doing well at it.

Vim reached out, and I went still, as he patted my right knee. It was closest to him. I watched the way he did so, and dedicated it to memory.

It wasn't often Vim reached out and touched me, especially when it wasn't to protect me or try and comfort me as I wept.

I was of course very happy that he had started to become more open and affectionate, even if in such simple ways, but it also told me how serious he was about stepping down as the protector.

In his eyes, cherishing me was dangerous. Because it meant others, like those in the Society who doubted him already as it was, would further have evidence that he was not giving them his full effort. In a sense, I understood where such a thing came from... but...

"And now you're frowning as if about to cry. What the heck? Should I not have touched you?" Vim asked.

"No... I mean, yes...? I want you to touch me. I was just contemplating the terrible reality that the closer you and I get, the farther you get from the Society," I said.

He seemed to hesitate a moment, and then gave me a very gentle smile. One that made my tail twitch. "A conundrum isn't it?" he agreed.

I slowly nodded, a little entranced by the look on his face. It was some kind of mix of sadness and bliss, and honestly it looked good on him.

Vim sighed a little, glanced away from me and to a nearby wall... and I knew he was listening for Rapti. Once he confirmed whatever he had sought, maybe to make sure she was still asleep, he looked back at me and nodded again. "I once told you that our relationship would be difficult. Because I'd place the Society over you, if it came to it," he said.

"Mhm..." I nodded. It was honestly something I didn't mind. If it meant my life over theirs, I'd hope he'd always choose them. Especially since I'd sacrifice myself for them anyway, if I had to. So to me there was no difference.

My one life was not worth all of theirs. At all. At least in my opinion.

"A long time ago... I did the opposite," he said.

Shifting forward a little, I focused on the look in his eyes. He was staring straight at me, but I could tell he was also seeing a memory. "Your mistake...?" I asked softly.

"Yes. I had sacrificed the world for a single soul."

I made an odd whine of a noise as I nodded. That made a lot of sense. It in fact made a lot of his little rules and beliefs very understandable.

It was obvious the reason he was so firm in so many odd ways, such as in his free-will belief, because he himself had likely done something terrible in his past. One did not become such a firm believer in such things without due cause. It was like faith, for many they didn't find it or believe in it until life forced them to. Brought them down low to somewhere where all they had left was such a thing to cling to.

"I'm okay with you putting the Society over me, Vim. I love them. Even the ones who hurt us, or disappoint us. I really do. So I'd prefer it, honestly, that you are the way you are," I said gently to him, since he looked troubled.

He shook his head. "I did not sacrifice the world as to protect that single individual, Renn. In fact it had been the opposite," he said with a small whisper.

I sat up a little straighter and frowned at that. The opposite...? Of saving a life...?

"You did it to kill someone...?" I asked with a whisper, barely able to believe it.

He nodded gravely.

A little unsure of what to think of that, it was my heart and stomach that finally decided for me. They both became heavy and unsettled.

"That's... a heavy mistake, Vim," I whispered.

"You have no idea, Renn," he whispered back.

Should... should I hug him? He looked like he was about to cry. But if I did he might sigh and end this conversation, directing it elsewhere.

And I didn't want this conversation to end. Not yet. It was important. Not just for me, but for him. Especially for him. Which was why it was important for me.

"Would... would you have done it again...? If you were to face that same moment now, here and now, would you make that mistake once more?" I dared to ask.

Vim then smiled at me, one that even showed teeth. "How very Miss Beak of you."

Taking the compliment in stride, I didn't grin too wildly as I nodded. "Thanks."

Vim then sighed a little and reached out with his right hand. I recognized the way he did so and hurriedly went to take it with my own. I held his hand, holding it on my lap, as he nodded at me. "I don't believe in changing the past. I can't change what I did. However... yes. I would have chosen differently Renn. Even though I have no idea if the outcome would be any worse or better, I would have chosen different."

I gulped and nodded. It must have been something terrible then... if even though he deeply regretted it, to the point where he had ran away and exiled himself for possibly hundreds of years, that he still wasn't sure if another choice would have been any better at the time.

What could it have been...? Who could have been so terrible that even such a sacrifice, such a mistake, had been worth the price to end their life?

A god maybe? Some kind of monarch?

It was hard to imagine Vim needing to sacrifice anyone to defeat such enemies. And knowing the way Vim was, it was likely he was not speaking of sacrifice in some mundane or general way. He likely meant rather directly, matter of fact, that he had genuinely had to sacrifice the world to kill whoever had been his enemy at the time.

"Thank you for telling me, Vim," I said softly as I squeezed his hand.

"Hm... I've decided to be more open with you. And you seem willing to let me do it slowly, but I've never been one to hesitate. Not usually," he said.

Somehow that hurt a little. "I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Hm...? Why are you sorry?" he asked.

"I feel... unbalanced," I said honestly.

"Unbalanced...?" he asked, giving me an odd look.

I nodded. "You have been telling me so many secrets. Opening up so much with me... and I don't have anything to give you in return. I've already told you all about my life, practically everything! The only real secret I can probably claim is Celine's letters to me. It just feels... well... it makes me feel lacking, Vim. As if we aren't even in our relationship, that I'm not properly giving back what you're giving me," I explained to him.

Vim huffed at me. "Please Renn. In a relationship like ours, secrets shouldn't be something special like that. Plus the only reason you have that one secret is because of your love for me. You keep it from me out of my request, hardly unjustified. I'm the asshole in this situation," he said.

I shook my head, a little harshly. "No...! That's not what I meant."

He nodded. "I know. I'm just saying you shouldn't feel so conflicted, Renn... and..." Vim went quiet, and then smirked at himself. "See? I'm hesitating again. This is where I should kiss your hand or something, to tell you how our scales aren't balanced at all and I have so much more to do as to right them," he said softly.

"You seem to hesitate all the time with me," I teased him. Gosh he was adorable sometimes.

He smiled and nodded. "It feels like that sometimes, yes."

Wanting to tease him about something a little more intimate, I hesitated myself, and decided not to.

Wrong time and place, maybe.

"Now you look like you just let a fish go because it wasn't the one you wanted," he said.

My ears fluttered as I glanced away from our clasped hands and at his face. "What...? Fish?"

"Eh... sounded better in my head. Basically you looked regretful just now. Why?"

Ah. I smirked and nodded. "I wanted to tease you some more. But figured it was ill-fitting for the moment. It was about how I wanted you to be a little more... well..." I shrugged gently as I raised my hand which held his, to display his affectionate hold upon it.

"Ah. You know I've been wondering why you've been so reserved lately about it. I had figured what with you meeting Root and those twin moles, you'd be a tad more pushy about it. It's because you're worried I'd be offended? I'm not so weak hearted as that, Renn, really," Vim said.

"What, so you really know how bad you are to the point that you're actually expecting me to complain about it?" I asked. Really?

"Well... yeah? We're about to enter our second winter now? Three if you want to include the year before we got together, I guess. Though it's been some time since you've complained about it, I know you still worry over it. I'm not stupid," Vim said.

"Then...?" I asked as I squeezed his hand, trying to not allow my heart to increase in its beating too much.

Was he going to admit it? Maybe even say or do something? Here and now? Really?

Was I ready? I wanted him to, so desperately, but...!

It'd feel weird to do anything here. In Rapti's home. A home of someone who wasn't just devout, but... was currently going through great stress and stuff... and...

"Now you look utterly conflicted. You're usually a pendulum Renn, but what is it now?" he asked gently.

"I don't want you to try anything here. It'd be... wrong, I think," I told him.

"Hm...? Ah. The moment. Yes. It's important. Very."

I nodded. It was. Or was it...? Should it be?

Honestly rather than the moment itself, it was the moments afterwards I worried over.

What if his strange slowness to display his love for me had a reason? He had once mentioned, back in Lumen when we had an emotional conversation, that he had worried that by taking me to bed... he'd lose interest in me. As if he worried his affection for me was simple attraction, nothing more.

Hesitating a moment, I frowned at the man who was giving me a happy smile. He looked like he was enjoying my own emotional turmoil, which made me want to bite his hand, but I refrained as I squeezed his hand instead.

Was that really it? All this time...?

Was he just worried that... if he slept with me; he'd lose interest in me?

Was it really that simple? Honestly...? Was Vim really so simple of a man to even consider such a thing?

Maybe he was. He was strange in certain ways... maybe this was one of them.

"Is uh..." I started to ask, but felt my face go hot. His grin grew bigger, which made my own embarrassment triple instantly, but I took a deep breath and powered through it as I coughed and nodded. "Is... is it the same reason, Vim?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"Why you won't lay with me?"

"What reason...?" he asked softly, his grin slowly dying.

Bah! Why couldn't he just know what I meant! "Well... like you said. Back in Lumen," I said, squirming a little. I wanted to reach around and grab my tail. If not to hold it for comfort, but to at least stop it from whacking the couch wildly.

"Back in...?" Vim frowned, and then blinked. "Oh. You mean my comment about if I had sex with you that I'd then lose interest in you?" he asked.

Gah! "Yes," I groaned with a weird noise.

His frown deepened a little, but I saw the smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. "No, Renn. I'm long past that point. I admit it had been a thought back then, since I had been oddly attracted to you... in ways that made no sense. But I know now that my desire for you is genuine, and not just sexual in nature. That's not even a thing on my mind anymore," he said.

Oh...? Although my face still burnt I felt a little calmer as I sat up straighter. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

Then... "What's the issue then, Vim?"

He hesitated, and then... somehow, impossibly, it almost looked as if he grew embarrassed too. His face didn't get redder, but the way he looked down and away from me was a very obvious tic of emotion. It made me excited for a moment as he reached up to scratch at the back of his head with his other hand, further telling me he was genuinely embarrassed, as he coughed and nodded. "Promise not to laugh?" he asked.

I nodded instantly, transfixed by him.

Vim smiled at me and nodded. "I'm scared."

Blinking at him, I wondered if I had misheard him. Maybe my fast beating heart had drowned out the rest of what he had said? "What?" I asked, unsure if I was mistaken or not.

"I'm scared, Renn. Of giving you everything I have," he whispered again.

Gulping, I shivered as if suddenly cold. Had the fireplace gone out? Why couldn't I hear or see it? Even though it was just beyond him? I couldn't smell it either. In fact, I couldn't smell anything right now... and...

"I know. It's stupid. And cruel and not very manly... but it's the truth. The closer we get, the more I give you. I tell you more of my past. My life. My desires, my hopes, my rules. I begin to focus on you more than the duties I've agreed to, such as the Society, and I've begun to even neglect certain things in favor of you. So... I'm scared. How much can I give to you before it breaks me? Or the Society? Or the world, even? Or... well... even you?" he asked softly.

"Vim..." I whispered his name as my eyes began to fill with tears.

He nodded at me, with a strangely happy smile. As if he was glad to have finally said it aloud. To admit it. Not just to me, but himself.

"I want to give you everything I am, Renn. I want to hold you. To kiss you. And so much more. To trust you, even with things I can't even trust myself with. But... the reality is you're still just... a normal woman. A person. A non-human, yes. One wise beyond measure, with a steel trap of a mind, sure. You're even far stronger than you realize, too. But you are still within the realm of normalcy. And that worries me. It scares me. Plus your heart is so fragile, so easily bruised too, so..." Vim began to open his heart even more, but I barely heard any of it.

All I heard and saw was his love for me. Plainly written on his face. In his eyes. In the things he was saying.

So all this time his hesitation has been for me...? Worry for my own well-being?

How sweet of him.

And...

Squeezing his hand I leaned forward. Ignoring his odd look as I went to give him a kiss... yet right before I could, someone knocked on the door.

The front door.

Vim turned, and my fast beating heart hurt as I realized we had just been interrupted at a very important moment. One I may not get again for months.

Whoever had just knocked on the front door better instinctively get the hint and leave. Now. A couple of very hot seconds passed, as with turned ears I listened to the front door... hoping to hear the sound of feet as they walked away.

Yet they didn't. They knocked on the door again, this time a little harder. And in doing so, I heard Rapti wake up with a startle.

About to complain, I noticed Vim's frown as he shifted and stood from the couch.

"That sounds like Meriah," Vim said as our hands separated, likely recognizing the way the person had knocked on the door. There had been a certain rhythm to the knocks.

Feeling suddenly very cold, I too stood from the couch... doing my best to not absolutely despise and hate the woman I was about to meet for the first time.

Especially since she might be another close ally and friend, based off how Vim spoke of her.

I didn't want to hate her. She had supposedly helped Lomi. Avenged her. I wanted to like such a person, who was not just capable of such a thing but willing to do it too.

Entering the hallway as Rapti opened her bedroom door and Vim approached the front door, I took a huge breath and sighed it out slowly... doing my best to calm down as well as I could.

Failing at it horribly as Vim opened the door, I groaned inwardly as a woman in a dark cloak revealed herself.

"Vim! Thank the gods!" she greeted Vim at the sight of him, telling me his earlier assumption had been correct. It was Meriah. She was alone, too, it seemed.

"Oh my!" Rapti noticed as well and hurried down the hallway, walking past me without realizing I was still utterly conflicted with myself.

Meriah stepped forward, wrapping Vim in a hug, which stunned me for a moment... but I was thankful for it. The shock at seeing her do such a thing so readily made me realize she was likely someone I was going to get along well with. Plus... well...

How could I blame her?

I wanted to hug him all the time too.

Stepping into the hallway, to join them and greet the traveling nun... I was rather proud of myself for calming down not just my heart, but my emotions too, as I did so.

Especially since I'll just make sure to continue that wonderful moment the first chance I get.

Chapter 385 Early Renn Gets the Vim

The world that had been comfortably quiet was starting to get noisy.

In my half awake state, through the thick covers, I heard the birds first. They chirped to each other, greeting the morning sunrise. Dogs barked. Doors and windows were opened or shuttered, and the smell of hundreds of fireplaces and stoves being lit filled the air. The smell of countless different types of foods and drinks being made for the morning made me hungry. Almost hungry enough to fully pull myself out of sleep.

But I remained under the covers. It was warm. Comfy. I was hugging a very large, and very soft, pillow. One that didn't stink at all, even though it had yesterday when I had laid down to sleep. Vim's ability to eliminate odors and smells around him was useful in times like this.

He wasn't here at the moment. My tail was continuously swaying back and forth nearby under the covers, where he'd been a little bit ago. His section of the bed was now cold, telling me he'd been gone for at least an hour or so now.

I knew the reason I'd not been able to fall back into proper, deeper, sleep was his absence. I wasn't fully awake... and not really thinking about much, but his lack of presence was a forefront of my focus. I kept hoping my tail would twitch, and then suddenly feel him again. His warmth. His presence. Yet it didn't.

"Vim..." I mumbled his name into the pillow that lacked a smell, since I had buried my face into it. I was trying to drown out the noisy surroundings by pushing my ears as deep into the fluffy pillow as possible. It of course didn't work, but I still tried anyway.

A loud shout from outside made my ear twitch as I slowly opened my left eye. I saw only bright white, thanks to the sunlight forcing itself under my thick blankets. It blinded me and made me bury my face even deeper into the pillow and covers.

I didn't want to wake up yet.

My body felt heavy. Sluggish. I had gone to sleep late last night, and could tell by the feeling of heaviness and exhaustion that I still needed a few more hours of sleep.

Usually I'd sleep just fine, even if the world around me got noisy. But that was when Vim was here.

"Jerk," I mumbled as my heavy eyes fought me. They felt too heavy to open, but the noisy world outside made me want to get up and see what was going on. I heard shouting. Was this inn near a market or something? It sounded like a bunch of people were barking orders, as if preparing to open a store or something.

Why was such a fancy inn near such a noisy place? Weren't we in the noble's district? Usually such places were quiet and...

My annoyed mind calmed down a little, and I felt myself start to drift back into sleep. I felt a tiny smirk tug at my face, since it was amusing that my annoyed anger was what had finally gotten me to slip back into sleep.

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Then I was awoken by a gentle shake of a shoulder.

Taking a deep breath, I turned a little and leered at Vim.

"We have a job to do, Renn. You can either stay here while I go do it, or come with me," he said with a smile. I could tell by the look on his face that he was enjoying whatever sights he saw.

I was naked, but I could feel the blanket was covering most of me. That meant what he found amusing was my face. My expression.

Squeezing the pillow, I groaned into it as I woke up. Yawning into the fluffy thing, I wondered how long I had slept for. The world outside was still noisy, noisier than ever, but the noise was of midday. It sounded... quieter somehow, since it was meant to be noisy at this time.

"What job?" I asked as I slowly sat up, rubbing my eyes.

"A family nearby has requested my presence. We're to escort someone. It'll only take a couple days, they're not going far, and in fact not far from here. So you can stay here and rest if you'd like... but I'd recommend against it," Vim said as he watched me wake up.

"Why?" I mumbled as I fought a yawn, and lost.

While I yawned he grinned at me. "We're going to take a daughter to another location, so she can see if she can marry into their family. We're to escort a bride-to-be," he said.

I was awake all of a sudden. "Really? Who!"

"You've not met them. They're the types to not really request my presence often. Her name is Sivra. Here," Vim said as he handed me a large cup.

Happily taking the drink, I was a little disappointed to find milk inside and not my berry stuff. But it was fine, I drank it anyway after rolling to the edge of the bed.

"If they're that close... are they noticeably non-human then? That they can't even travel a few days safely?" I asked as I licked my lips. The milk had been cold, and had hit just the spot. Maybe even better than my smoothie would have.

"No. The family she's going to has obvious traits, being hairier than usual, but Sivra and her family look mostly human. They're just timid people. And... well..." Vim paused a moment as he frowned, and I noticed that something was wrong.

"What is it?" I asked.

"They're not the... nicest of people. They're not just the types to only want me to come when needed, they're also the types that I'm okay with them being so, honestly," he said gently.

Ah...

"Rude are they?" I asked.

"In a way. It's up to you Renn. You do look a little tired still," he said as he studied me.

I liked the way his eyes lingered on certain parts of my body. Parts that should not have told him how tired I was. "Like I'd turn down the opportunity to be involved in something like this," I said.

He nodded. "I figured."

"How'd you know they needed you?" I asked.

"I visited where they fish. They fish a nearby river as a family; it's nearer than their home. One of the lads told me. They plan to bring her to where I met them this sundown," he said.

"Oh...? Is it far? Should I hurry?" I asked.

"Just a few hours at your pace."

Okay!

Hurriedly getting up, I went to prepare to leave. I was hungry, and still a little tired, but I hadn't lied.

I'd never miss the opportunity to meet new members, especially when said members wanted help with romance!

Happily getting ready, I hummed a happy tune as I wondered what this lucky couple would be like. Hopefully they were cute.

It was time we had such simple, happy, moments. It's been awhile, after all.

Chapter 386 A Side-Quest

They were here!

Smiling happily as I watched the boat slowly approach, I shifted a little and glanced behind me up the river bank. Vim was still not back yet.

He had been about to piss into the river, and I had yelled at him. Usually it'd not bother me too much, but what if... like right now... they arrived while he was doing so? It was rude! So I had told him to go to the nearby patch of trees instead.

No matter. Most of the Society, even the ones I've never met before, knew full well who I was by now. Once I confirmed they were our members I'll just take off my hat to prove who I was, and it'd be fine. If Vim didn't make it back before they docked before me, that is.

The boat they had was large enough to hold all three people upon it, and two large bags, with plenty of room to spare. It looked older, and parts of the top of the boat's walls were worn and wobbly, from likely long years of rope burn and use. It didn't have a sail, even though it was actually big enough for a small one, but it did have two long oar rudders. One at each end of the boat. The man operating one of them looked older, with a thin beard full of gray and silver.

Another man, one much younger, was standing at the other end of the boat and studying me as they drew closer. In-between them, unmistakably, was a young woman. Likely this Sivra we would soon be escorting to her new family.

She was dressed like most people in this region, with dark leathers and cloth. She had a hood, but it wasn't put up over her head at the moment, and as such her mid-length brown hair was fully revealed. She had a small braid tied in the back, and looked...

Oh boy.

I sighed softly at the sight of a woman who looked tired and unhappy. Not excited at all.

Raising an arm, I waved gently as they got closer. "Hey there!" I greeted them.

The three glanced at me, then at each other. Before I could reach up to take my hat off, and greet them properly, the three visibly relaxed a little. I turned to watch Vim walk down the embankment of the river to my side.

They didn't say a word as the boatman guided the boat up to the side of the bank. Vim stepped forward, stepping into ankle high water, as to grab the boat. He pulled it a little closer, and once situated he went to helping the woman off the boat. He made sure she didn't get wet, and once she stepped onto solid ground she gently stepped aside as to climb to the top of the riverbank.

I'd been about to greet her again, but she ignored me for a moment as she glanced around, looking... a little lost. I was used to it though, since I knew there was a chance this might be one of the first times she's ever ventured out so far from home before. Plus...

She was about to embark on a life changing event. Anyone would be a little emotional over it.

"That's all Vim," an older man's voice said, as I turned to look back to the boat. The two bags were now resting on the ground nearby. They weren't as big as I had thought originally, they must have been sitting on benches or chairs within the boat to have made them look bigger.

"Anything else you need from us, Vim?" the younger man asked as he glanced at me. I stood up a little more, wondering if he was doubting me or something. Was that a glare? It almost looked like one.

Vim glanced at me, and then looked over to the young woman. She was looking down at us from the top of the embankment.

"You've said your farewells already?" Vim asked.

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"Aye. Goodbye then, protector. May the rivers you cross always be plentiful," the older man said as he went to push the boat out farther into the river with one of the long oars.

A little bothered by the unceremonious departure, I watched as the two got the boat back out into the current, and then the younger man began working the opposite oar. As to get the boat to start floating back up the river. It surprisingly began to float rather quickly, even though going against the current.

Either it was simply a well made boat, or they were stronger than they looked.

While they floated away Vim went to gather up the bags. Instead of helping him I stepped up the small mound as to join the woman at the top. She studied me as I approached, and smiled at her once near enough to extend my hand in greeting.

"My name is Renn. I'm Vim's wife," I said to her.

The young woman shifted a little and then nodded as she took my hand. "I am Sivra. It's nice to meet you Renn," she said.

I noted the gentle tone of the woman. She didn't sound as depressed as she looked, at least. In fact she seemed... a little older than she first appeared. Her voice made her sound older than she looked. A common thing for us non-humans. Vim was right, I couldn't see any obvious non-human traits upon her, but there was a levity to her eyes. The kind of look that only those much older than they appeared to be could have. I was starting to recognize our own just by such looks in their eyes lately.

She was pretty at least. I liked the way her eyebrows and her bangs were. Plus she had a nice and pleasant smell, she smelled like a spring river during a rainstorm. It was refreshing. Maybe she was some kind of river creature?

While we shook hands Vim stepped over to us. He had one of the bags on his back already and the other firmly under his arm. "Sivra. I remember you being smaller than a shoe, yet here you are full grown and ready to be married," Vim said in greeting.

Our hands separated as Sivra shifted and gave Vim a strange smile. "Surely I hadn't been that small, protector," she said.

"It was a big shoe," he said simply.

Smiling at the two, I watched as Sivra glanced past us to the river below. I turned a little, and wondered why none of them had said proper farewells. "Your father?" I asked gently.

"No. An uncle and cousin," Sivra said softly.

Oh...? Maybe her parents were dead then.

"Also... I did not know you were married, Vim. Have you always been?" Sivra then asked as she looked at me.

I smiled happily. "We got married a few years ago," I said.

Sivra blinked a few times and then frowned at Vim, who nodded gently at her. "I was sold to the lowest bidder," Vim teased.

"He was pretty cheap," I happily returned.

Sivra's frown turned into a wry smile... and I saw her left eye suddenly well with tears.

A little worried as she giggled and reached up to wipe a few tears that had leaked, I felt suddenly very self-conscious.

So I hadn't misread her. That had indeed been depression and worry... stress and more.

"Sivra...?" I asked gently as she sniffed while finishing up with her tears.

"Hm... I'm sorry. I'm just... well..." she gave me a sad smile as she glanced at Vim... and then looked again to the river. The boat and her extended family members upon it were now far enough to not just be out of earshot, but would soon be rounding a bend and leaving our sight.

"Is all well, Sivra?" Vim asked gently.

She stared out at the boat for a moment... and then took a deep breath and stood up straighter. The young woman looked up at Vim, her watery eyes firming themselves as she steeled herself.

Uh oh.

"I have a request, protector," she said sternly.

"Hm...?" Vim nodded as I felt my tail squirm beneath my clothes.

I had an inkling where this was going, and I really didn't like it.

"I want you to take me elsewhere. Away. From everyone. Everything," Sivra said quickly as she clenched her fists, her voice cracking as she spoke.

My jaw clenched as I bit back a groan. I knew it!

"Please. I want to run away. From it all! Forever!" Sivra begged.

And without even knowing the reason, or the why or how... Vim simply nodded.

"Then run we shall," he accepted without hesitation.

Chapter 387 Sivra's Request

"Are humans always this noisy...?" Sivra asked quietly as we walked down the hallway to our room.

"This is actually not bad. We're in the higher end area, the other inns and bars are thrice as bad," I said as I smiled at the young woman who looked exhausted. We'd just left the bottom floor of this inn, where the kitchens and an open gathering place was located. There hadn't even been many people down there, less than a dozen, but they had been drinking and noisy. Too noisy it seemed for young Sivra.

She and I were both carrying large platters of food. Vim had already walked up with his own platter, the one carrying our drinks. We were back at the same inn that Vim and I had stayed at the other night. It was a good place to rest, since it was between locations of Sivra's original destination, and also a place Vim felt I had enjoyed. It was a clean, nice town, full of happy people and good food and entertainment.

It wasn't just a good place to rest though. Vim's plan was to let Sivra spend a few days here in a human settlement, a large and bustling one, to let her see if she could envision living in such a location. Such as Telmik or Lumen. Since she didn't want to go to where she was originally supposed to. And also didn't want to return home.

Sivra had no intention to be married off without say, it seemed. And I was more than okay with it, even if a little disappointed.

I had been looking forward to seeing two members, who were planning to wed and become partners, meeting for the first time. I bet it would have been adorable to see them, but now that plan and hope was dashed and gone.

Oh well.

We found the door to our bedrooms open, and Vim setting the table within. Sivra and I put our own platters of food upon it as Vim went to close the door, and I hurriedly took a seat at the table and prepared myself a nice plate of warm food.

I was hungry.

Sivra took a seat next to me, and slowly gathered up a smaller plate of food for herself. I wasn't sure yet if she was just a dainty thing that didn't eat much, or if she was still unsure and feeling self-conscious and awkward around us. Some members did act a little... skittish, especially when around me or Vim.

Yet as skittish as she was, she had still firmly requested Vim to save her. Or at least, help her.

I wasn't entirely sure yet if Sivra really knew what she wanted, honestly. She simply didn't want to just get married to some stranger, but also didn't want to return home either. But beyond those desires she really didn't seem to care or mind what she did or where she went.

As I went to start eating, I noted the calm expression on Vim's face. He was moving some plates around, putting certain foods closer to me and Sivra than his side of the table. He looked a little bored as he also went to pouring the two of us some drinks.

Like usual Vim didn't mind our people when they were odd, or problematic. Vim found nothing wrong at all with Sivra's request, and was fully willing to help her in any way feasible. He didn't seem bothered at all that Sivra was acting out, and going against an agreement supposedly between two families.

Though I'd have been bothered if he had found an issue with it, I was also a little bothered that like usual... Vim didn't seem to care for anything else.

He would help her accomplish whatever she wanted. The reason for her wanting to not become a bride, or go back to her family, seemed to be a non-issue to him.

But to me it was a big one.

Glancing at the woman in question, I watched as she slowly took a bite of some fruit. She looked as if she'd never tasted the thing before, judging by the way she frowned and studied the taste and texture for a moment. I allowed her to enjoy the moment of eating a new foodstuff before speaking.

"Sivra, how old are you?" I asked as Vim sat down.

"Hm...? I'm forty-one," she answered as she picked up another fruit, the same as the one before. She must have liked it.

Forty-one...? Our people really did age slowly. She looked far younger than that, and not just because she acted slightly unsure of herself like a child would.

She didn't have any obvious non-human traits at all. When we had first gotten here, she had taken off her jacket and cold weather clothes and I had gotten a glance at more of her skin, such as her arms and belly, and it was clear she didn't have any kind of tail or fur, or scales or anything either. If she did have any traits they were in locations I couldn't see, nor visible with thin clothing, or it was stuff I didn't recognize in the first place.

Which in theory would mean her non-human blood was thin. Yet it was obviously not thin enough if she was that old and still looked as young as I did.

"And this is your first time visiting a human town?" I asked as I went to take a bite myself.

"Yeah. I've met traders, and other fishermen and stuff on the river, but I was never allowed to go with any of the others to trade or visit the nearby towns," Sivra said as she licked a finger and went to take a drink.

"Why not?" I asked with half a mouthful.

Sivra took a drink and frowned at me. "I... don't know? I just never got invited and I didn't want to be anyway, usually uncle and father went and the idea of being stuck with them for days on the road would deter me anyway," she said plainly.

Oh my!

I smiled at that, nodding quickly. "I too hated my father," I said happily.

"Hate...?" Sivra though didn't seem to share my sentiments. She glanced at Vim, then back at me and softly smiled. "I should have clarified... I don't hate my family, Renn... I just don't like them much. They're boring. They don't ever talk, we all lived in these huge homes and there was nearly thirty of us yet you could go days without hearing a single word spoken amongst any of them. It was boring and dreary, but I wasn't abused or anything," Sivra said, explaining.

Oh...

"Sorry... I just assumed, I guess..." I felt a little embarrassed, since I had done just that. I had thought she was like me, someone who had despised her family and for good reason.

"It's okay...! Though... now I feel ungrateful. So it's true then, Vim? A lot of our women are abused by others? Their family?" Sivra then asked Vim.

"Huh...? No. It used to be like that way back in the day, before the Society. Back when non-humans were... more what they are and less human. But today it's not like that at all. It does still happen occasionally, but I'd say currently there are more female abusers than male ones," Vim said.

I smirked at that. "I bet he's including me in that statement."

Vim ignored me as Sivra glanced at me with a small look of shock. "I'd not permit such a thing. I don't force my will on anyone, but I'd not just stand back and allow abuse like that. When we encounter such things we usually split the family up, or threaten banishment to the ones doing it. In the last... decade or two, I've only had to deal with three instances of such a thing. One was recently, a man named Tim at the Crypt," Vim said.

I nodded. "Vim did indeed handle it," I said. Still... three? I wonder if he was including Sillti's incident, the execution of her husband at the Summit, as one of them. I wonder who the third was?

Sivra hummed a little as she quietly munched on her fruit. In fact... most of the food on her plate were of the non-meat variety. Maybe she didn't like meat. Even the more prey-like members still ate meat usually. Only a few I've met, such as the ducks or Crane, actually didn't like it. And even they ate it occasionally.

"But such a thing is simple nature. Abuse is everywhere, even in the basic animals. You can't escape it completely, only deal with it when it occurs," Vim said as he took a bite, his first one.

"I see... will people think that's what happened then, to me? If I flee?" Sivra asked Vim.

"People are free to believe whatever they want. What they make up in their minds has no power over the truth. Don't worry about such a thing," Vim said simply.

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I smiled and nodded. "What's important is your own happiness, yes," I agreed.

Sivra smiled at that as she nodded back at me, with teary eyes.

Half tempted to reach over and hug her, I held myself back a bit. I still wasn't sure if Sivra was the type to allow such skin-ship or not.

"You're not the first bride-to-be who runs away. Won't be the last either. I still expect this one to run off at any moment, it's just another part of life, a part of nature," Vim said with a point at me.

"I'd come back eventually," I said happily.

Sivra laughed, a soft one, as she shifted in her chair. "But... can I do so while staying in the Society?" she asked after her moment of levity.

"Why not? You're breaking marriage vows, but it's not like you're killing someone or abandoning children or something," Vim said.

Oh...? Is that how he saw it then?

"But they're expecting a bride..." Sivra said softly, staring at Vim as if he was some kind of priest or something. She was clinging to his words, and more so by the looks of it Vim's indifference.

"And I bet they're expecting a good harvest. And a gentle winter. Light rain, and for aches and pains to fade, and all the other things people hope for. I'll explain it to them, if you don't wish to do it yourself. If you worry that I, or anyone in the Society, will be upset then don't. If they get frustrated with it they can answer to me. You have no need to indulge them, just do what you want to," Vim said.

Sivra's soft smile warmed a little more, and then she looked over at me. "He really is our protector isn't he?" she asked with that same soft tone as before.

"Hm...? Yes. Even if he isn't willing to accept it," I said, doing my best to not mention of his intention to step down.

Vim sighed as Sivra nodded. "Okay... thank you then, Vim. For allowing me to trouble you," she said.

"It's fine. You're less trouble than her, that's all that matters," he said.

Hmph.

"Can I ask why you don't want to go join their family, though? You speak as if you don't have a lover, or anywhere else to go, so...?" I asked.

"Because I don't want to just be a wife! It's as boring as that house!" Sivra said, raising her voice a little for the first time.

House...? Oh. The quiet house. Her home. A place with lots of people but no words being spoken, supposedly.

I wonder what was up with that... I glanced at Vim, found him absentmindedly chewing his food, and sighed at him.

He was no help sometimes, in weird ways.

"What's wrong with being a wife?" I asked him.

Sivra startled, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her hesitate and panic a little. Vim though smirked at me and swallowed. "You complain about being my wife all the time," he said.

Do I...? "I do?" I asked, smiling as I tried to wonder what he meant. Sure I complained about him all the time, but did I ever really complain about being his? I didn't think I did.

He nodded though. "Don't blame you though. I think that's why most wives complain, because we husbands are all assholes. Kind of our thing."

Sivra sighed, relaxing a little as she realized we were just teasing each other. I looked back at her, felt my tail twitch a little at the sight of her obvious relief, and gave her a gentle smile to let her know all was well.

Odd girl. She reminded me of some of those I've met who were timid and unsure of themselves. Like the nuns or younger women at some of the more private locations, like at the Weaver's Hut or Armadillo's. Places without many humans, or at least ones without outsiders.

She didn't want to become a bride... because it seemed boring to her?

How was being married boring?

Did she not know what it was like to be alone for years? To wander forests, having nothing but your own thoughts to distract you? Or even worse, when you walked through human villages and saw everyone living lives full of bustle and wonder... while you could only stand back and watch from afar?

Marriage was far from boring. The exact opposite.

But...

Sivra then sighed softly. "I've talked more than I have in years, my throat hurts," she said softly as she took a drink.

Frowning at that, I bit back a few questions.

Talked more than she has in years...? We've only been talking for an hour or two at best! And we hadn't talked much on our way here from the river, though that was thanks to the loud wind and rain we had encountered on our way here.

Maybe her statements about her quiet home was nothing but the truth, and not the whole one at that.

Maybe her home really had been that quiet. The men on that boat had seemed a little... distant. As if not interested at all. They hadn't even said goodbye to her.

Fumbling with a fork, I wanted to groan. I had a bunch of questions and worries, some now that were very serious.

What if she was making a mistake...? What if she was turning down the opportunity for love and companionship because of misguided experiences and beliefs?

Yet at the same time it was her decision. Plus she knew what she wanted, and needed, best... right?

So many in our Society would give anything to have the opportunity she was being given. I had a long list of women, and men, looking for partners. And here she was... tossing the thing they all desired away just because she thought it to be boring...?

But how to address it? What if I was assuming and misunderstanding again, as I just had done about her and her family.

What if the family she was meant to go join was as bad if not worse?

Vim was being, and would be, his typical self. He'd simply help her do whatever she wanted and then step back. Playing indifferent protector perfectly.

But was that actually helping her? Would that actually protect her...?

But what to say? What to do? What if I was just forcing my own wants and desires onto her? What if she really did just want to live peacefully, and not be caught up in drama and...

"You okay Renn?" Sivra then asked, noticing my stressful worries.

"No. But I'm not sure what to do about it," I said honestly.

She frowned in worry and glanced at Vim, who was smirking. "She's fine. Or well, she's not. But she will be fine. Just pretend she has gas or something and leave her be," Vim said, teasing me.

I placed my fork down, rather harshly. "Like I'd be that bothered over something like that!"

His smirk grew as he leaned back a little, making his chair creak as he did so. "Yeah when we're alone, not with company," he teased me.

"Gah!" I bit back a shout, since he was right. Not that I was currently having such a problem, but that I'd be more conscious with others than I was with him. So it was hard to find a way to turn this around... since Vim not only never seemed to have any issues, he also wasn't the type to ever care or be bothered by such things even if he had been.

Sivra giggled, drawing my attention, and I smiled at her. "Don't laugh now, I haven't teased him back yet properly wait until I do!" I said.

Her giggles turned into soft laughs as she nodded. "Okay!" she said happily.

Sighing at her, and myself, I glanced back at Vim and enjoyed the look on his face. He looked happy.

She didn't laugh for long, and once she finished she returned to eating. I took the opportunity to eat a little more too, even though I was trying to not smile too much as I did so. I wasn't sure yet if Sivra would be bothered by my more pointier teeth, so I wanted to be careful.

Another thing I was more conscious about when not alone with Vim.

Glancing at Sivra, who was smiling warmly as she ate, I glanced back at Vim and found him lazily watching us. He must have already ate and drank his fill. It never took him long to do so.

This was fine.

I'll just... take this step by step.

We'll help her; no matter what it is she wanted or needed.

Hopefully though we can do so without ending up with me feeling empty or troubled, though.

"They're special, after all..." Sivra then mumbled under her breath right before she took a drink.

A little bothered by her comment... I chose to not let her know I had heard it. I continued to eat, as if I hadn't. It wasn't proper to intrude in a person's personal thoughts, and to me such little mumbles were just those. Since they usually believed, and were right to do so, that no one else could hear them. Even other non-humans would have failed to have heard her just now.

Her words, their meaning, had been obvious.

The source of them, her thoughts, had been about us. Vim and me. Or rather, our teasing and talking just now.

It was just further proof that she was misguided about what a normal relationship was. Likely thanks to her own family, the environment she had grown up in.

I'll need to... be a little pushy, I think. Maybe not right here and now, but later. To find out if my assumption was correct or not. If it was though... that meant there was a chance she could still go meet the man she was meant to marry.

If she thought marriage was boring because of the way her family acted and were about their own relationships, then she simply needed to realize that wasn't the normal. And that Vim and I were not that special either. We weren't the outliers. I'd met and seen many other couples and families as happy and boisterous as we, if not even more so.

Even the strict Lilly got all lovey-dovey with Windle, for crying out loud!

Smiling softly as I grabbed my cup... I noted Vim's look. He too must have heard her, for his smile had gone a little sad. He was looking at me as if he was tired, or worried.

I warmed my smile, perking up a little, and directed it to him. He noticed, and gave me a warm smile back.

Yes. We were special.

But we shouldn't be.

Not like this.

Our relationship. Our love. Our teasing and fun... should not be seen as something so unique as that.

Not so unique that it made people jealous or unsure of themselves, at least.

Chapter 388 A Shopping Moment

The market here was neat.

There weren't many stalls here, with the place opting to use actual buildings and storefronts instead, but there were these carts being pulled around by people that had products upon them. Most had simple items, like hats or clothes, but a few had more unique items like the one Sirva and I were currently browsing.

"Does it hurt?" Sivra whispered as we both studied the little needle that would be used to pierce the earlobe as to hang a piece of jewelry upon it.

"It only hurts the first time! Then it heals up and doesn't hurt at all, like so!" one of the women who was trying her best to get us to buy some of the jewelry pieces leaned closer, to display her right ear. A huge earring hung from it, one that was far too big for my taste but I knew it was because she was a walking advertisement basically. She had a different earring hanging from her other ear, and it was equally too big and gaudy to be comfortable.

Though as ugly as it was... I could indeed clearly see the tiny hole the earring hung in. It was rather obvious since the thing was heavy, and was pulling upon her lobe. It looked a little red, likely from constant wear and movement, but I didn't see any blood or scabs.

Sivra though didn't like what she saw. She grimaced and hurriedly put the jewelry piece back onto the little rack she had plucked it from. She shook her head quickly. "Not going to happen," she whispered stiffly.

Although I agreed the idea of puncturing a piece of my body just to display jewelry was odd... I found myself a little interested all the same.

After all, I didn't care much for my human ears. So what if they got a little hurt or even ruined...? I didn't use them. If anything my lack of care for them made the idea of using them to adorn jewelry made it all the more interesting and acceptable.

Plus it wasn't as if I wouldn't heal quickly, and likely wouldn't be too bothered by the prick of the needle. Even if it looked... long and thick.

"You're both really pretty, I bet any of them would look good on you!" the woman continued to try and sell us as I crossed my arms and wondered if I should ask Vim his opinion.

Would he find such a thing pretty? He enjoyed it when I wore clothes I usually didn't, so maybe he would? Or would he find the idea of me hurting my own self just to wear something ridiculous and scoff at me for even considering it?

"Please don't Renn, I think I'd pass out if you poked a hole even in your ears," Sivra whispered as she grabbed my arm, as if to pull me away.

She didn't actually tug me away, but I pretended that she did as I smiled apologetically to the saleswoman. She didn't seem too bothered though, since another woman stepped up to take the spot we'd just been in. A new customer, one who was already wearing a set of smaller earrings.

"I can't believe they actually poke holes in themselves. Humans are crazy," Sivra mumbled worriedly as we headed farther into the market, passing other carts as we did.

None of the other nearby carts looked to have anything as unique as those earrings, so I paid most of them no mind as I smiled at my new friend.

"Some of them tattoo themselves too. They put ink into their skin, making artwork pieces. Some of them can actually be very pretty," I said.

"Ink...? Into the skin?" Sivra shivered as she mumbled under her breath. She had believed me, but couldn't imagine the how.

I didn't make fun of her for her lack of knowing, since I knew I had just gone through the same thing. With those earrings.

Many of the women in this town were wearing them. And although I'd never really noticed or thought about it... I could now recall a few moments in memory of other people with similar things. Notably down south, at Landi's. Many of the people down there, women and men, had stuff hanging on their ears too. Why hadn't I noticed more of that? Why hadn't I found it odd or noteworthy...?

Maybe it was because most of theirs had been dull. Little black stones and stuff. Not the intricate and pretty pieces of jewelry that was common here.

I wonder if it was just regional thing that determined what people found fashionable or not.

"Is that tasty?" Sivra then asked, pointing at a nearby shop.

"Let's find out," I happily said, agreeing it did smell good. The shop was one of those smaller ones, where it didn't have a door to enter but instead an open window where one could speak to the worker within it. They had racks of what looked, and smelled, like cooked vegetables. They were steaming on hooks not far behind the open window counter, and as we stepped up to speak to a portly woman I noted the smell of meat.

"Welcome! Just finished up a batch of filled peppers, if you're interested!" the woman greeted us happily.

I see. I smiled and nodded, licking my lips as I dug into a pocket to pull out some coins.

"What's a pepper...?" Sivra mumbled as I paid for several. We were given a small basket, one that looked hastily made and cheap, but it did the job. It held half a dozen peppers that had been stuffed with cooked meat and other tasty smelling stuff.

"Thank ye' and come again!" the woman bid us farewell as we stepped out of the way. A group of younger men had stepped up to buy some too.

"What are they, Renn?" Sivra asked with her quiet voice as we went to stand near the building. In a spot that was somewhat out of the way of the street and crowd. There was nowhere to sit around us, which made me wonder why they didn't have a few tables and chairs out here.

Also they hadn't offered anything to drink. Which will be an issue in a moment... I looked around for a place to sit and eat, and get drinks, and found none nearby. Where had I seen the last pub or dining place, I wonder?

"They're peppers filled with stuff. They're good, Vim's made these before," I said as I went ahead and handed her one. They were the perfect size to eat with a single hand, which was likely why there was no tables or chairs nearby. One didn't need them with these.

"Hm..." Sivra took a bite, carefully, and after a few moments coughed and nodded. "Hot," she said.

"They're still steaming," I noted as I took a bite of one myself. It tasted good, but a little dry on the inside for some reason.

Enjoying the snack, Sivra and I continued to head deeper into the market. This city was mostly wood buildings, other than the noble's section, but they weren't shacks or rundown buildings found in smaller towns throughout the world. The buildings here were finely made, and some were even painted and had designs carved into them. It was actually fun to just... look around and stuff, even if one disregarded the actual products being sold.

Vim was nearby, though I'd not seen him for a long moment. He had been letting Sivra and I to just... enjoy our time, really. He had wanted to see how she would act when surrounded by humans. Judging by the way she was happily stuffing her face and enjoying all the shops with me, it was clear there was nothing to worry about.

She was a little unsure of herself, spoke softly to the point most humans didn't hear her clearly, and was obviously not very worldly... but she didn't seem scared of humans or bothered by them.

She'd be fine at Telmik or Lumen, or any other location with humans. Though I'd like to think, and would likely suggest to her and Vim, she go somewhere where she won't be too alone. Somewhere like Lumen, where those there could keep an eye on her for awhile to make sure she assimilated safely.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

Odds are once Vim had realized she was going to be fine he had stepped away, though I kind of hoped he'd show back up soon. I was in the mood to sit down now and have a proper meal, plus I was thirsty and...

"Renn, look at that," Sivra grabbed one of my sleeves as we both watched a small dog walk by. It was on a leash, and the woman walking it didn't even notice us as she walked past.

It was cute. But it ignored us completely as it happily trotted along. Sivra though looked completely enamored by it, she was even blushing.

"You like cute animals?" I asked, glad to know. I felt a lot of people could be judged in how they treated lesser creatures. People like her who found such things adorable were usually the types to be gentle and cute themselves.

"I... guess I do? What was that? It was adorable. Can I get one?" Sivra asked, speaking a little louder than she's done all day.

"A dog...? I don't see why not. A lot of our members have pets," I said. If not dogs then cats, not to mention horses or farm animals too.

"That was a dog!? But it was so tiny!" Sivra didn't seem to believe it, and I realized what was wrong.

To her a dog was likely something big. Like a wolf.

"Most are bigger, yes. But a few are small like that. I don't know why, though," I said.

"Huh... I can get one? Where?" Sivra asked, and I wondered if I was going to have to find where to buy a dog for her. She looked serious about it.

Would Vim be okay with it...? I mean, it wasn't that big a deal... but...

Though others have asked for pets too. Those at the Crypt had asked for dogs once too.

"We'll find you one. I uh... don't honestly know where to get them, actually. Let's find Vim and ask him," I said.

"Oh! Okay!" Sivra then turned and hurried away.

A little stunned, I felt my heart flutter in worry as she actually left me behind. Was she going to actually run around looking for him...!? Without me?

Yet before I could fully process and panic about her actions, she came to a stop in front of Vim. She was far enough now that I could just barely hear her voice as she quickly said something to Vim, but thanks to the noisy street and my ears being under a hat, I wasn't able to make out her exact words.

Vim's frown after she spoke though, and the way he glanced at me and then behind himself as to likely look for the dog in question, told me exactly what she had said.

Stepping forward, I rejoined Sivra and sighed at her. "Hey Vim," I greeted him gently.

"Hm... here Sivra. When we get back to the inn swap your bags with this one, it's sturdier," Vim said as he handed her a leather backpack.

She took it, blinking a little wildly as she did and nodded at him. "Okay...? Thank you..." she mumbled, seemingly a little stunned. Likely because he had just ignored her earlier request.

"She wants a puppy," I said to him.

"She does," he said simply.

"I'll take good care of it! I swear!" Sivra spoke up quickly, speaking almost as loud as I normally did.

Smiling at her childish outburst, I felt a little sorry for her.

For her to be so serious about this told me a lot. Her life until now must have been rather dull, like she hinted at, for her to be so excited over the mere prospect of a pet.

Though... maybe this was just her being indulgent for once. Since to her Vim was the protector. A man who was supposed to do all he could to make her safe and happy.

"I'm sure you would. First though you need to find a home. It's cruel to force an animal to live without proper shelter, you know?" Vim told her.

"Oh...! Right..." Sivra slowly nodded as she took his statement to heart. She squeezed her empty pack close as she began to ponder his words.

"Want the last one Vim?" I asked him as I lifted the small basket. Now that it was mostly empty, the thing was starting to crumble. It was made of some kind of thin strips of wood. Too thin to be properly used. It felt like it was about to crumble at any moment.

"I'm fine thank you."

Like usual Vim never indulged in the food I offered him when we weren't alone.

"You sure?" I asked. He nodded, saying nothing.

Hm... I nodded and offered it to Sivra, who blinked and then took it carefully. She smiled softly as she took a bite from it, seemingly happy again.

As she ate I wondered what to do with the basket. It really did look wobbly and cheap now that it was fully empty.

"There's a place for refuse up around the bend Renn. Places like this build them at the intersections,"
Vim said.

Oh...! Right.

I turned to go find it. Sivra kept pace with me, and Vim stayed back a bit as we neared the end of the road.

"How long do dogs live anyway?" Sivra asked.

"Not very long," I said as I remembered the few I've known over the years.

"About a decade give or take," Vim answered.

"Oh... that's sad," Sivra whispered as we found the trash bin. It was already almost full.

While I tossed the worn down basket away, I smelled something odd. At first I thought it was the bin full of trash, but a small wind made it clear it was coming from a different direction. I turned a little, peering past Sivra, and saw a large building. A stone one amongst wood.

One with two huge windows on the bottom floor. Windows that revealed what looked like a bunch of couches and tables. Ones that people were... wait...

"What's that?" I asked as I pointed at the shop. It almost looked like the women in it were all dressed far too fancily for this place. A few even looked like they were wearing nightgowns.

Sivra turned, and I heard her make an odd noise at the sight of it. "What...? Even I know what that is, Renn."

"You do?" I asked. Sivra did? The woman who's never been to a human town before?

Vim chuckled, at me, and reached over to pat me on the back. "That's a brothel, Renn."

Oh.

Of course it was.

"Um... out in the open? Near the market?" I asked. In fact we were basically still in the market. There weren't any carts near here, but there were plenty of shops and people walking around.

"Yeah?" Sivra seemed off-put by my question.

"This region doesn't outlaw prostitution, Renn. Not like the northern ones, or the southern ones that keep it all secretive. Here it's not seen as something negative. Many of those women are likely working there because they want to. I bet if you waited until they ended their shifts and went home, and followed them, you'd find them going home to happy families. Many with husbands and children," Vim explained.

Huh...! "Really!" I was amazed at that. I of course knew what a brothel was, but I also knew what usually happened to those who not only worked them but partook in them. Lujic himself had arrested and executed men who had owned and frequented one a long time ago. He had to explain to me what they were. He, and everyone at the time, had seen them and the people who partook in their services as scum. Evil. As if criminals.

For the people here, a seemingly well situated culture with great commerce and numbers, to have such a different perspective on it...

"Your wife is a little odd, Vim," Sivra mumbled.

"You have no idea. But I find it adorable, so it's okay," he teased me as he responded.

Huffing at them, I pointed at the building. "Can I go into it?" I asked.

Sivra shifted, squeezing her backpack again as Vim frowned at me.

"You... want to go into the brothel?" he asked me carefully.

I nodded. "Can't I? Look, they're all just sitting and talking. There's men and women, there. I want to talk to them," I said as I gestured to the windows.

Vim sighed at me. "If you're planning on saving them or something Renn, cease now. This nation, these people, genuinely don't see a problem with it. It's not against their religion or their morals. You'd just be causing problems," he said.

I smiled at him. I liked how his first assumption was that I wanted to save them. "I figured, you can see they all look fine and healthy, Vim. I just want to talk to them. I'm interested in meeting a woman who lives such a lifestyle," I explained.

"Why...? It's gross," Sivra said.

Shifting a little, I wondered what to say to that.

Vim though simply dug out some coins from his pocket. He handed them to me, and I smiled happily at the glimmering silver and gold. "Thanks Vim! Though... I don't actually want to hire one, you know? I just want to talk to them," I said as I counted the coins in my hand. I had a similar amount in my pocket, but he likely thought Sivra and I had already spent it all.

He chuckled at me. "I'd hope so. But you'll have to pay for that privilege anyway, Renn. That's kind of their thing, their wares are their time. Their companionship. Even if you just want to exchange words, you still need to pay for it. Go on then, have fun. Down the road there looks like a restaurant. We'll be over there. Just shout if you need me," Vim said as he gestured lightly past me, down the road.

I followed his gesture, and noted the place he spoke of. It had tables and chairs outside, half of which were empty. I nodded happily and then grinned at him. "Not going to join me?" I asked.

His eye twitched at me. "No."

Chapter 389 One Silver Coin

The place smelled a little.

It wasn't really a smell of old sex or other nasty stuff, but instead incense. All over the walls, and on half the tables, were little candles and sticks. All lit and burning. They all had their own unique smell, and they were all mixing into a rather uncomfortable conglomeration of stink that just didn't sit well with me.

But I ignored it as I glanced around, a little excitedly.

I was sitting alone on a larger couch, near the window. I was alone here in my corner, but nearby there were small conversations. Some of the tables and chairs nearby had pairs, who were all whispering and talking quietly amongst themselves. It seemed there weren't just female prostitutes here, but male ones too. One of them was nearby, whispering into an older woman's ear. She had a flushed face and was giggling happily at the little jokes he was telling her.

It was interesting how they did it. When I had walked in I had been looked at funny, but not treated unfairly or strangely. I had been asked who, or what, I was looking for. Then once I told them I wanted to talk to a woman, they had me sit over here. It seemed here the workers could pick and choose their clients. I hadn't paid yet, I was supposed to pay the person who would come over and sit with me. There was a balcony above me, where women and men were walking around and staring down from. I felt a little silly being looked at by the half dozen or so up there, but knew not to take offense.

They were judging if I was a good customer or not, it seemed. If I was worth spending time with, and if I'd pay well or not.

A very interesting system. It made me wonder who came up with the idea of prostitution. And who then came up with the idea to handle it like this.

Some movement drew my attention, and I watched as a pretty woman in a red dress walked up the nearby stairs with a man in tow. He looked far too well dressed, and normal, to me. As if he didn't belong in here, buying the services they offered here.

Usually when I thought of men who used places like this... I thought of those I'd not find myself comfortable with. Yet everywhere I looked, the men at least, all seemed rather well off. Well dressed. Gentle smiles. Most looked more wealthy than most of the men who were walking around in town, at least. In fact several of them were wearing the same style of clothes that the nobles did.

This was why I was so interested. It felt like I was seeing a part of the world I'd never known before.

Not that I really knew prostitutes or anything. In all my life I've only ever met a couple, and only distantly. But that was why I was fascinated. Those women had been... sad. They had looked weak. Sickly. Tired. Depressed.

These women looked everything but. They were wearing wonderful clothes, all dressed up and prim and proper, and were laughing and smiling without a worry.

Vim had to be correct. I couldn't imagine the people here as slaves or under duress. If they were, then their slavery was not the kind I knew at all.

"Are you the weird woman who wants to buy a conversation?"

I perked up and stood, smiling happily at the woman who had just walked up. "I am!" I said.

The woman was taller than me. She wore a blue dress, one that glistened a little as if sparkly, and her hair was done in these fancy curls. She was honestly very attractive, though she looked a little bit older than some of the other women here.

"I see. You must be some kind'a noble or something. Hm..." the woman studied me as she put her hand on the back of a chair's headrest.

Staying still, I happily waited for her to ask a question, or say something. Or was I supposed to? Was I supposed to make an offer of payment now? How much did I give?

Before I could decide what to say first, the woman then extended her hand out over the chair to me. "Five silvers for an hour," she stated.

"Sure!" I happily reached out and took her hand, shaking it in agreement.

How neat! What should I ask first? Should we share names, or was that considered weird? Did we talk here, or go up to one of those rooms on the other floor?

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

The woman though groaned as her hand went limp. "Huh...?" I worriedly panicked. Wait... "Is five not enough?" I asked, deciding that to be the most likely reason for her sudden annoyed expression.

"What...? Not enough...?" She then sighed as she pulled her hand from my own. "You're definitely some weird noble. Do you not know how much one normally charges for such service?" she asked as she rounded the chair and sat in it.

Taking her sitting down as proof she was willing to indulge me, I too sat back down on the couch. There was a very small table between us, but it was so low to the ground it was almost comical. It'd have been a footrest had it not been made of glass.

"I don't know, no," I told her.

"It's a dozen bronzes for our pricier options," she stated.

Hm... it took twenty bronze coins to make a silver, if I remembered correctly. "I see...?" I nodded gently, not sure what she was trying to say.

"So now I feel like I'll just get in trouble if I actually charge you five silvers. Just give me one, and we'll call it even," she said as she glanced around over her shoulder, as if worried someone else was nearby and had listened into our conversation.

Trouble, huh? I wonder why she thought so. I dug out some of the coins Vim had given me, and made sure to count out five silver ones. I placed them on the table in front of me and nodded. "An hour, please," I said.

The woman stared at the coins with a slight look of worry, and then she sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. I heard her longer nails as she scratched. "Great... this is what I get for being the nice one," she mumbled as she leaned forward and took the coins.

"Everything will be fine. I really do just want to talk," I said gently as she studied the coins in her hand for a moment and then put them away into the slip of her breast.

Smiling at the sight, I noted the outline of the coins under her dress near her breast. "That's what they always say, then the next thing you know you're wrapped up in someone else's marriage and entire families start to fight and split up, and then you have to move towns and end up eating rats just so you don't starve. So forgive me if I don't believe you," the woman said.

A little shocked, I found myself studying her in a new light. That had not just been some random thought or theory, but something she spoke of sincerely.

She had lived it before.

"My name is Renn, am I allowed to know yours?" I asked, greeting the interesting woman.

"Hm...? Why couldn't you? My name is Promilla," Promilla said.

"Most of the others haven't said any names in their conversations, as if avoiding directly addressing the other. So I just figured," I said as I glanced at the people around us. There was a new pair nearby, two women, though they might just be friends or co-workers.

"Ah... but if we kept our names secret how could we get repeat customers? No, most customers just don't like using names. They're here not for us but for some other desire, so we know not to make it too personal. Unless the person wants that, I guess," Promilla said as she crossed her arms.

I noticed the way she crossed her arms, and noted the way she was basically hugging herself. Was she doing that on purpose? It was... slightly obvious what she was doing, what with the way she was forcing her breasts upward.

Promilla then sighed a little as she leaned back, relaxing a bit. "Okay then, Renn. You don't seem to want to flirt or anything, so what is it you're looking for?" Promilla asked.

"Hm? Just to talk. I mean it," I said.

"You... just gave me five silver coins just to have a normal conversation...?" she asked, obviously not believing me.

Frowning a little I nodded. "Yeah...? Or well, maybe not. Actually I really am just interested. In you, this place, this lifestyle. My goal here was to learn about you, to understand you, I guess," I said, blushing a little as I spoke. For some reason I felt like I had just said something very intimate. As if we were suddenly flirting.

Promilla only stared at me for a moment, and then she reached up to cup her mouth. I noticed a slight smile that she tried to hide, as she narrowed her eyes at me. "You must be some sheltered noble indeed. Where are you from?" she asked, speaking between her fingers.

"Far north. Where I'm from the act of prostitution is either outright illegal or so looked down upon it may as well be," I said.

"Ah. That explains it then. You're one of those Blind people. Still... whoever dressed you knows what they're doing. A lot of the others hesitated to choose you because they thought you were a mercenary," Promilla said.

"Hm. My husband's idea," I said.

"You're married?" Promilla perked up at that.

I nodded. "Yeah?"

"Does... he know you're here?" she asked as she glanced to the window. Even if she knew what Vim looked like it wouldn't matter. He was sitting with Sivra far away, even I could barely see him.

"He does. He's the one who gave me the coins I just gave you," I said with a smile, even though it was likely that a few had been coins I already had.

She sighed. "I'll never understand nobles..." she mumbled as she stopped looking out the window.

Finding that funny, I decided to start making use of my time. "Can I ask a few questions Promilla?" I asked.

"Sure, dear. Ask away," Promilla said with a small smile. She looked like she was suddenly relaxed; maybe she had simply given up trying to understand me. Or maybe she just firmly believed I was an eccentric noble from afar.

Excited, I leaned forward and spent not one hour talking to Promilla, but nearly three.

Chapter 390 Decisions and Courtesans

Walking out onto the street, I felt strangely happy as I headed for the restaurant.

"Bye Renn! Visit again someday!"

Turning, I grinned and waved happily at Promilla and the dozen others who were waving at me from the windows and open doorway. I hadn't met all of them, but I felt like I had come close. It had only taken an hour or so with Promilla for the rest to approach, sitting and joining our conversation. By the end, nearly three hours later, they had needed to move and shuffle some of the chairs and couches because not everyone had a place to sit as to join.

I had enjoyed the moment immensely. Not only had their way of life been something I had never envisioned before, they all had been widely different people. There had been fallen nobles, former slaves, wives, those with faith and those without. Their little brothel had almost felt something like our Society.

It was a place where many different people were gathered, and all looked out for one another. Held together by a single, common thing. Their work.

After spending time with them, and realizing most of them were as normal as anyone else, I realized a couple things. Things that made me feel a little... more privileged than I thought myself to be, at least.

"Welcome back!" Sivra happily greeted me as I approached the table they sat at. They had some plates of food, but most of it was eaten and gone. I picked up the cup that Vim had obviously been nursing this whole time and took a long drink before sitting down next to him.

"Well, least she didn't join them," Vim said calmly as I took a seat.

"He was worried when a bunch of them started gathering around you," Sivra said with a smirk.

I grinned at that and glanced behind me, to the brothel in the distance. From here I could barely make out the silhouettes of people beyond the window. Vim's sight was better than mine, so he had likely been able to see me and the group talk this whole time. Likely the reason he hadn't come in to save and rescue me even after I spent hours longer in there than I had originally planned.

"I had fun. You should have come with me Sivra, they were neat and nice. They remind me a lot of many of our members, especially those like Oplar," I said.

"Oplar...?" Vim mumbled, but I ignored him as I took another drink. It was a little warm, likely since he had indeed been nursing it for hours. It was moments like this that I wished Vim was a little more normal. Would it kill him to keep his food and drink more fresh, so that when I stole some it was still edible?

"I'm good. Vim and I spent some time talking so it was fine," Sivra said with a smile.

Oh? I glanced at Vim, who was looking away. Not in shame or anything but instead at one of the workers of this restaurant. Vim waved the young lad down once he glanced our way, and he hurried over.

I stayed quiet as Vim ordered more drinks and some more food. The lad frowned as he took the order, writing it down with a broken pencil, and I noticed the way he tried to not look at me as he hurried away once finished.

"Why'd he not look at me?" I asked once the boy entered into the building.

"He's under the impression we're doing something weird," Vim said simply.

"Weird?" I asked and glanced at Sivra who looked down and blushed. What? "What is it?" I asked, smiling. So they had their own neat moments while I was gone, did they?

"It's my fault... I struggled to order and stumbled and rambled, and asked Vim for help and the boy laughed and I think he misunderstood, and...!" Sivra began to ramble, quietly, as she lowered her head and blushed even harder.

Oh. I see. "Did you tease her Vim? In front of the boy?" I asked, understanding clearly.

"Well..." Vim shifted, and I laughed a little. So he had! Poor Sivra. Poor boy too, since it seemed he had been a victim as well!

Smiling happily, I gestured gently at Sivra. "It's terrible isn't it! His teasing is so painful because of how calm and natural he is when he does it. Makes you question yourself for a moment, only to doubt if he really meant or not, then you try to think of something to say in return and by then it's too late so all you can do is groan and accept it," I complained, feeling her pain.

Sivra nodded, though looked a little odd as she did. She was now staring at me as if I was saying something profound, but I had only been trying to make her feel more comfortable and not as embarrassed.

"So how'd your little visit to the brothel go, Renn? Can I tease you about it yet?" Vim then asked.

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"Hm? It went great! I'm sorry I spent longer with them than I should have, but they were very willing to talk and I was having fun, so..." I lightly apologized, even though I would have done it again had I been given the opportunity.

Vim didn't seem to mind as he nodded. "I'm glad you had fun, you don't seem to have any tear stains so I assume it all went well and you didn't fall in love with any of them at least, right?" he asked.

Giggling at him, I waved a finger. "On the contrary! I found several of them to be very lovely! In fact I plan to tell Kaley all about them next time I see her, she'd probably not just fit right in with them but absolutely love it there," I said.

Vim paused, groaned and rubbed his eyes. "Please don't," he mumbled.

Woops. He looked actually worried about that. Maybe I shouldn't then.

"Kaley?" Sivra asked.

"A member who is uh... very outgoing when it comes to physical relationships," I said carefully.

"Oh. She sells herself too?" she asked, with a tone that told me she had not said such a thing with the intent to be rude.

"No. She just likes sharing her bed," Vim specified.

"Ah... I don't understand that. Though maybe it's because I've never done it," Sivra said as she shrugged.

Perking up, I glanced at Vim and smiled. He ignored me, intentionally, as I happily felt closer to Sivra even though she likely had no idea as to why.

"Well... as long as you got whatever answer you were searching for, Renn. That's all that matters," Vim said.

"Rather than answers... I just now understand a little better, I think. They don't see what they do as something wrong or weird. To them it's as normal as baking bread, or making clothes. Though they are a little more mature and aware of things, such as the girl who first sat and talked to me originally, Promilla, first assumed I was more trouble than I was worth. She thought I was some weird powerful noble from another country, someone dangerous," I said.

"Well duh? You're dressed like a mercenary, but look and act like a wealthy noble. It's your personality. You're weird to normal people, so they believe you to be someone who lives a distant life from them as to explain it. Most assume either mercenary or noble, or some form of them, since that's the only things such people can think of," Vim said.

"Weird? Am I weird Sivra?" I asked, making sure to ask as innocently as I could as to tease Vim.

Instead of teasing Vim, it was Sivra who startled and blushed. "Whuh...!? Uh! Um...!" she began to panic, and I instantly felt bad.

I had not meant to tease her at all! "Sorry, sorry," I apologized and glanced at Vim, to glare at him. "Look what you did!" I said to him.

"Yeah that's about the face she made when I teased her earlier. Made that boy drop a whole platter too, was a mess," Vim said with a sigh.

Groaning, I further regretted missing it.

"Please...!" Sivra covered her face, blushing ear to ear, so I kept my giggles at bay as to spare her.

"Still, I enjoyed it. I had worried they would be depressed, and make me depressed too, but instead I felt like they were all actually happy. It was like a game to them. I watched customers come in, and they all played games and made bets as to pick who took who if the customer didn't specify one by name. It made the whole place feel... like what they were doing wasn't personal at all, and just another part of a life. They sold themselves just as calmly as I would work at the bank in Lumen, or something," I said.

"Some would argue that bank is more evil than that brothel, so that makes sense," Vim said.

Hmph. "You do seem to hate money, what with the way you never haggle or care if you spend it all," I said.

"Metal is metal. I care more about the blood that stains it," he said.

Oh my. It was obvious Vim had just been playing along with my teasing, but that had been quite a statement.

So much of one in fact that Sivra, who had been blushing and mumbling under her breath, now was staring at Vim and I with a rather stunned expression.

Smiling at her, I gestured at Vim. "So? How was your conversations, then? Other than the teasing?" I asked.

"She's decided to go meet the family she was to be married into. As to properly apologize to them," Vim explained gently.

Looking to Sivra, I happily smiled and nodded. "Yeah?"

"Yes... Vim's made it clear I don't need to, and that he's willing to talk to them for me... but that's wrong, I think. What if they worry if I don't at least tell them myself? I know I would, so..." Sivra shrugged gently, smilingly softly as she did.

How wonderful...! "That's great, Sivra. It's not far from here, right Vim? So it's not like it would take us long to do so, plus it lets Vim check on them too so it's many birds with a single stone!" I said happily.

Vim nodded, and was about to say more but the young boy from earlier emerged from the building. He carried over a platter to our table, putting down food and cups with silent haste.

"Thanks!" I thanked the boy as I went to grab one of the plates. It had a delicious looking slice of meat upon it.

"Enjoy..." the boy spoke stiffly and turned and left. He was waved over by another table and seemed relieved to be so.

I wonder how Vim had teased them. I almost wished I had been here to see it.

"You'll have to pay Vim," I said as I went to cutting up the meat as to eat it.

"Huh? Why? What happened to all the money he gave you?" Sivra asked.

"She spent all my money at that brothel. This is why you're smart for avoiding marriage, Sivra, because this is all it gets you," Vim said with a happy tone as pointed blandly at me, and then he went to re-arranging some of the plates and cups. His tone told me he had expected my doing so.

Since I had a bite of food in my mouth, I wasn't able to respond quickly enough, but Sivra had me covered.

"At least she didn't actually taste the goods she bought?" she suggested as she too reached out for a piece of food.

Vim sighed. "That just makes it worse."