Non Human 391

Chapter 391 Renn's Side-Quest – Six – Sivra and a Bet

Sneaking down the hallway, I reached the front door of the house and made sure to open it as quietly as possible.

Luckily the door was well made, and I was able to escape the house without drawing any attention to myself. I sighed in relief as I stepped away from the building and out into the cold night.

I could smell rain in the air, but right now the world was calm. Not only wasn't it raining, there wasn't much wind either. We were a little high up, being halfway up a mountain, but not so high that the incoming rain I smelled would turn into snow.

There were half a dozen buildings here, but the Cloth family lived in only one. The large three storied building was reminiscent of many of the larger buildings many of our members lived in, with the only real difference being the grounds here had a large wall around it. One made of some kind of clay or stone. It was taller than even Vim, and completely encircled the whole area, not just the buildings but a large section of farmland too.

I wasn't really sure why they needed a wall, or why they were called the cloth family when they didn't deal with cloth at all, but what I did know for sure… was Sivra would be staying here.

Vim had thankfully helped convince her to come meet them. Sivra had done so as to apologize, so she could properly move on without causing any undue stress in the Society, yet…

Giggling happily as I remembered Sivra's brightly red face just now, as she ate snacks with the young man who had been just as nervous and embarrassed, I couldn't help but let my tail and ears wiggle happily.

How adorable! The man, like most of the family members here, had a lot of fur all over. His was a dark brown, covering most of his body it had seemed. Other than the fur he and the rest seemed entirely human in shape, but the fur had been rather striking since it wasn't common to meet such members anymore. It explained them living way out here alone in this mountain range, and maybe the wall too, to a point.

Sivra seemed to find animals adorable; maybe that was why she had utterly fallen for him on first glance? She had nearly melted into a puddle just on his hello. It made me jealous, since I hadn't done the same with Vim. It was starting to seem like some people just did such a thing. Sillti had done it too, with Link.

"What are you squirming about?"

I jumped, and thankfully didn't make too loud of a yelp as I turned to glare at Vim.

"Where were you!?" I angrily asked. I had been looking for him. I should have known he'd sneak up behind me!

Vim smiled at me. "Here I thought I'd have to drag you away from them. Did they ask for a moment alone finally or something?" he asked.

I grumbled for a moment as I glanced around to make sure we were alone. We were. "No… but yes, that's why I had stepped away. Luckily the rest of his family is giving them distance too," I said. The family here was actually wonderfully nice. They were all already acting as if Sivra was a daughter of theirs, a member from the beginning.

Plus… unlike Sivra's family, who were quiet and demure people, this family was noisy. Loud. Unafraid to laugh and talk all night long, happily.

It was the perfect place for her.

"She will hopefully choose to stay here, Vim. She's nearly drooling over that lad, even though he's half her age," I said.

"Still a grown man, Renn. It's not like it's weird," Vim said as he gestured for us to start walking. He wanted to go near the wall for some reason.

"Didn't mean it that way. I think…? Maybe I did? Why did I say that?" I asked as I walked towards the wall alongside Vim.

"Not sure. He's a grown man, Renn. Nearly thirty years old. Is that seen as too young for you? To me they may as well be the same age, being so close," Vim said.

I hummed as the wall drew closer. "I… don't know. You're right; it shouldn't bother me at all. Yet for some reason it had? I wonder why?" I wondered.

Vim shrugged, not seeming it worth much worry. But it bothered me, and the fact it did so worried me.

Really, what was wrong with it? Shouldn't I be happy? Even if he had been too young, actually too young, wasn't it still a good thing? After all with just a little time he'd grow up, and it'd be fine, wouldn't it?

"It's not that big a deal Renn," Vim said gently, likely noticing my internal strife thanks to my tail. It was squirming wildly at the moment.

"It bothers me now," I admitted.

"I can tell. Why is that?"

"Well… what really bothers me is the fact that it does in the first place. Why would I be offended over it?" I asked.

He shrugged again, but didn't dismiss it as he had earlier. "Maybe you saw him as younger than he is? He does act a little… young. I think it's his giggling," Vim said.

I smirked at that and nodded. Yes, the lad did have an odd giggle. "I think that was just him being embarrassed. He wanted to laugh, but is holding it back. He's very conscious of her," I said.

Vim nodded in a way that told me he understood where I was coming from, and likely agreed with me.

Reaching the wall, I glanced up at the little tiled roof on the thing. "Did you build this?" I asked.

"Most of it. I taught them how, they finished it. Years and years ago," he said.

Walking up to the wall, I placed a hand upon it and found it to be a little bumpy. Yet it almost looked as if it was one solid piece somehow. It wasn't made of bricks.

"Is it clay?" I asked.

"A type of it. Come on, let's check it all while the lovebirds get cozy," Vim said as he started walking along the wall.

"You haven't checked it yet? We've been here two days already," I said.

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"Nope. I checked other things first. They have a lake nearby with their well system they wanted me to check first," he said.

Ah. Right.

Like usual when distracted by the inhabitants here, I sometimes lost track of Vim.

"How long will we uh…" I continued running my hand along the wall as we walked, somewhat liking the feeling of its bumpy surface. It wasn't so bad it hurt or scraped, but it was also bumpy enough to feel interesting. As if it as scratching an itch I didn't know I had.

"Just a few days. Hopefully Sivra will decide quickly. I'll admit I had hoped for it, but hadn't expected it. Her home, her family, weren't abusive but it was lackluster and she seemed to have hated that environment. So I had expected her to desire to see the world, and all the fun stuff it holds. But after seeing her now I feel stupid for worrying," Vim said.

I nodded. "I stopped worrying the moment they met! Sivra basically turned into a puddle, it had been adorable," I said happily.

A small branch crunched under Vim's foot as we walked into a section of trees. "Hm. I don't know if it's proof our people are just becoming as simple as humans, or if it's just pure happenstance. I've never been able to tell when or who will act in such a way. Some people take years to find their mate, and then others just… fall in love on sight like her. If you ever actually open your little love-inn it might make you feel useless if all anyone ever does is just walk in and fall in love and then leave, happy," Vim said.

Laughing a little, I nodded. "I'd be more than happy with that, Vim!" And love-inn? What a phrase. He wasn't far off though.

"Figured. Well hopefully it goes well. We'll give them a few days, a lot can happen in such a short time during first meetings," Vim said.

"Hm… when you do this, usually, how often do they go bad? That quickly?" I asked.

Vim frowned and shrugged. "Usually if it does go sideways then it's usually real quick. Like within a day or so. Usually it's because one of them says or does something that goes against the other's nature. Remember Celine? The camel? While she was husband hunting there were a few times she almost chose someone else, but then they said they'd not return with her to Secca, or wouldn't be willing to live in the heat or something. Basically one of her qualifiers was whoever she chose had to be willing to return to Secca. She didn't want to join their location," Vim explained.

"Well we don't got to worry about that with Sivra. I bet she'd bite him if he suggested they return to her home," I said with a smirk.

Vim chuckled at that. "Right?"

Still…

While we left the small cluster of trees and approached a building, a smaller one that was likely some kind of storage building, I pondered my own self for a moment.

I admitted that I had likely fallen for Vim far before I was willing to admit. But I did not think I had fallen for him on mere sight alone. It wasn't until I had fully understood his lifestyle, his purpose, that I had fallen for him. It was likely correct to say I had fallen for the protector before I had fallen for Vim.

Yet… "Vim," I said his name as I found myself worrying for a new reason.

"Hm?"

"Do you have any? I know if you knew our relationship was from a prophecy or something you'd want to end it, or had would have before all this, but… is there anything else?" I asked.

"What's this? Worried I'll abandon you on the side of the road all of a sudden?" he asked, amused.

I shook my head. "You wouldn't do that. But… I just realized I have quite a few of things that would have made me abandon you. So I was just wondering if you had some too," I said.

He laughed a little, reaching over to pat me on the back. "I told you before Renn, in my perspective you weren't there… then you were. I don't have a greater reasoning behind it."

"Yeah, but, surely you have a few things? Would you not love me if I wasn't willing to join you on the road all the time? What if I hated humans? Or…" I began to ramble some things that just seemed to make sense in my perspective. Stuff that I thought would bother him.

Vim tilted his head a little, as if to look at me from a new angle. My ears fluttered as I waited for his response, which was joined by a soft smile. "You sure do get sentimental when you witness love," he teased me.

My tail wiggled. "Vim, we're having a nice moment don't ruin it," I warned him.

He smiled and nodded. "Well, ignoring the serious things like beliefs, ethos and morals and stuff… I guess yes. It'd be hard for me if you weren't willing to stay by my side all the time. I'd not mind it much if you had hated humans, but I suppose that would be related to our morals and the balance between them. Basically your hatred would have to be justified in my eyes; else I'd just be disappointed in you. Which… honestly could be said for many things. Honestly Renn we already have quite a bit of differences, don't we? Yet I think we're still a wonderful match all the same. The two of us disagree and debate on many things often, yet tease and flirt moments later without any problems," he said.

My face felt hot. "I suppose we do…" I admitted.

He was right of course. He didn't like religion. I did. He hated many members of the Society, to the point he was willing to step down and abandon them. I didn't want that at all. Just to name a few big ones.

"For me though my biggest thing is trust. I can trust you. With genuinely everything and anything. That's why it's so hard to keep secrets from you, because I don't want to. If you hadn't been so trustworthy it likely wouldn't have worked out in my opinion," Vim then said.

My ears fluttered a little. "Really…?" I asked happily.

He nodded.

The heat from my face quickly expanded to the rest of my body. The wall suddenly felt very cold to the touch.

It wasn't fair he could say such things so smoothly! Just who does he think he is? Being so adorable and…!

"Hm… Let's make a bet, shall we?" I asked, trying to control myself as I stopped walking.

Vim paused, frowning at me. "Bet?" I could tell he was shocked at how drastically I had changed topics.

But I had to! If I allowed him to keep rambling about such lovely things, who knows what I'd end up doing!

I nodded as I pushed all my embarrassment into my tail, letting it wiggle it all out. "On if Sivra decides to stay here or not," I said.

"Oh? Sure. What would you like to bet?" Vim asked, smirking at me. It was obvious he could read me like a book. He knew why I was being weird all of a sudden, and it only made me blush even harder.

"I bet you a kiss she'll end up staying here," I said.

He frowned, and then smirked. "Oh really? So if she stays here I get a kiss? Renn, you'd kiss me anyway I don't need to win that bet," he teased me.

Wanting to groan at him, I clenched my fists and shook them a little at him. "No! I mean if she stays here, you have to kiss me! Yourself!" I said.

Vim blinked, and I immediately saw the understanding on his face. His smirk softened a little, and then returned in force. "I see. You want me to initiate it," he said, understanding.

I nodded stiffly.

"That's still not a loss to me, I think," he then said.

"Vim!" I groaned at him. Don't admit it aloud! That made me want to cry!

He chuckled and nodded. "Sure, then. If she stays here I'll kiss you. What do I get if she doesn't?" he asked.

"I'll kiss you," I said simply.

He sighed.

"What! You should want one!" I complained.

"Why does a random group of street workers get more attention from my wife than I do?" he mumbled.

"Gosh Vim!" I laughed at him. What a thing to say during this moment! I had expected him to tease me about my time spent in that brothel, but to have taken days for it to appear!

Vim reached over, taking my hand, which was still clasped in a tight fist. I allowed him to wiggle his fingers into it as he and I went back to walking. "You know, instead of a kiss… or rather, how about alongside a kiss, we add a neat option to it too?" he asked.

"Neat option…?" I asked carefully. What was he saying?

He nodded. "That brothel. They had something called a neat trick for nine coins, and…" Vim didn't hesitate to tease me even further, making me groan and cover my face and laugh.

Chapter 392 Renn’s Side-Quest – Seven – More Side-Quests?

Following Vim through the forest, I studied the deep footprints he left behind him as he trudged through snow.

I was following him on purpose, instead of walking behind him, as to try and mimic him. He was somehow walking through the snow without causing any of the packed snow to shift or fall. His footprints looked perfect, each time, even when we walked up or down a hill or through thicker shrubbery.

As if he wasn't walking, but somehow standing still with every step.

Occasionally there was a footprint that wasn't perfect, with fallen snow into it or a slight scrape from his heel or toe, but they were rare.

Glancing behind me, at my own footprints, I huffed at the sight of the mess I was leaving behind.

I couldn't step completely into his footprints, and use them as a guide or anything. His strides were too long compared to mine. I was only able to use his footprints once every few steps, and even those looked bothered and ruined thanks to me.

Basically the only way I could somehow mimic Vim's perfect steps, was if I didn't walk forward. I could stand still, push a foot down into the snow, and then lift it up. But I was not able to do it while I walked.

"It's not because I walk any better than you, Renn."

I paused, glancing over at Vim as he turned to look at me. He had a soft smile as he pointed down at his feet.

Hurrying up to him, I watched as he stepped down into the packed snow. He then lifted it, slowly, to display how he did it.

"Oh. It's your weight," I said, understanding.

He nodded. "I'm basically stepping down with such force that the snow around my foot gets compacted. If the snow wasn't so packed already, so solid, it'd not be as perfect either," he explained.

I sighed and nodded. "That makes sense…" I said. I felt a little silly now. I had spent the last hour or so trying to replicate his footsteps.

Bending down a little, Vim moved his foot away so I could study his newly made footprint. I touched the edges of the print, and found it was indeed much harder and solid than normal. To the point it almost felt… smooth and sleek, as if it wasn't snow but ice.

"Do you do this intentionally, Vim?" I asked.

"Not really. I'm always subconsciously walking carefully, Renn, as to not harm the world around me. But right now my mind had been on other things," he said.

"Like what?" I asked as I looked up at him. I smirked at the sight of him staring down at me, it wasn't often I looked up at him from this angle.

He smiled back at me. "I'm looking for a specific place. As to finally give you the neat reward I promised, for Sivra choosing to stay with the Cloth family," he said.

Oh…? I stood up, smiling excitedly. "Out here? It's cold Vim," I said happily. It was cold enough that I mentioned it, but I wouldn't have allowed even this cold to stop his gift giving.

What was it going to be? He had said it was neater than the kiss, but…

He chuckled at me. "That's kind of the point. Come on, I smell frozen water this way," he said as he turned and returned to walking.

Joining him side-by-side this time, I giggled too. "Frozen water? Vim it's all around us," I said with a gesture at the white world around us.

"Well… that is true…" he admitted.

Amused by his oddness, I wondered what he was searching for.

He had made something for me, at our last location. After dropping Sivra off with that family, we've slowly headed farther north. Along the way we had stopped at a few other member locations, but one of them we had spent more than a single day at. While there Vim had made what I had thought had been shoes for us, but he's not given me them yet. He had made them while I had spent time with the elderly couple we had visited. So at first I had assumed he simply had made an extra set, just in case or something, but now I was starting to believe it had something to do with this neat gift he had planned for me.

What could it be…? We were deep in a forest, in the dead middle of winter, and as far as I was aware we weren't heading to another member's location or one of his little hideaway places. We were in fact going a few days out of the way, as far as I understood it.

Basically we were on another little quest. Though this time it wasn't one that concerned the Society or its members. It was… just for us.

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For me.

How fun. Hopefully he found whatever he was looking for. I was really looking forward to this gift of his.

We walked for another hour or so, and a few snowflakes started to fall for the first time in over a day. I could smell on the dry air that a storm was approaching, though was still distant.

"It's going to get cold tonight, Vim," I warned him.

Not that he was bothered by the cold. But lately I'd been feeling it more than usual.

"I can tell. If this lake isn't suitable we'll start heading eastward," he said gently.

Lake…?

Before I could ask what he meant we rounded a small mound, and sure enough came upon a lake.

One frozen over.

Frowning at the glistening ice spanning what looked to be a moderate sized lake, which even had a couple little islands in the center of it, I wondered if this was what he had been searching for.

Vim indeed stepped over to it. He walked right up to the bank of the lake, knelt down and studied the ice closely.

Walking over to him, I hummed a little as I waited to hear what he'd say. Did he want to ice fish? I haven't done that in decades, since Nory had been young. It'd be fun to sit with him and fish, but to be honest I had expected something a little different.

Vim reached out, and I watched as he touched the ice. He didn't break or shatter it, but instead ran his hand along it for a moment. I noted the sound his palm made as it scraped the ice.

"It looks thick," I noted. I hadn't thought it was cold enough for it to be as solid as it looked, but it was obvious the stuff had to be more than thick enough that it would support my weight.

Though if it'd support Vim's…

"Looks good. Plus the weather is perfect. Though it might be too nasty tomorrow, so we might only get the rest of the day," Vim said as he stood up.

"Hm?" So he did want to ice fish? If so I'm going to sit on his lap while we do.

Vim smiled at me and looked around, and found a fallen log nearby. One half covered in snow. He gestured for me to follow him over to it.

I happily obliged, and patiently waited for him to finally tell me his plan. He took off some bags, putting them down near the log, and then glanced around. "Find a spot for a fire, Renn," he said.

Fire…? Oh. I looked around for a bit, finding a small area beneath a huge tree that was suitable. There wasn't much snow on the ground, and the large tree and the ones around it would protect us from heavier snow fall. It was near the lake, but not so close that the heavy winds that would undoubtedly come tonight would bother us too much. I knew from experience how terribly chilling the winds got when rolling along such ice.

"Here Vim," I shouted at him, since I had walked a bit away from him. He glanced at me and nodded, then went to picking up the bags again. He had stuff in his arms, telling me he had dug stuff out of the bags and had been messing with them.

As he approached, I frowned at the sight of glistening blades in his hand.

"Knives?" I asked. Maybe to cut the ice? They looked odd though.

"A form of them. They're blades," he said.

I could see that. And why did he have those shoes out too? They looked funny now that I got a good look at them, some kind of thick boot.

Vim put the bags down, and the shoes and blades, and then went to build us a fire. As he did, and I put my own bags down, I sneaked a look at the shoes. Picking one of them up, I found that they had little metal pieces attached to the bottom of them. At first the things made no sense at all, because one wouldn't be able to walk at least not comfortably, but upon picking up one of the blades they made sense.

"Vim…?" I turned to look at him as he got the fire going strong. A little too strong, but I knew it was because he wanted to dry the area out a little around our small camp. He then grabbed a nearby log, shook it a little, and then placed it near the fire. He gestured at it, and I felt strangely giddy as I hurried over to sit on it.

"Take your cloak off, Renn. You'll likely want it later, but to be safe I want nothing on you to cause issues," he said as he picked up the shoes and blades.

"On me? Want me to get naked?" I asked as I undid the little fasteners and took the heavy cloak off.

He chuckled at me. "No. Just no bags or cloak."

I obliged, and once done he kneeled in front of me. He had connected the blades to the bottom of the boots, and I couldn't help but grin happily as he went to taking off the boots I had on.

"Vim… what is this…?" I asked, doing my best to not sound too excited. I knew he could see my excitement on my ears and tail; I didn't need to make it even more obvious.

"We're going to ice skate. It'll take you a moment to adjust, but you'll be fine. You're more agile than you think. Just be mindful if you slip and fall that you have knives on your feet, so keep hands and fingers away from them," he said as he went to putting the boots with knives on my feet.

Breathing quickly, I felt suddenly apprehensive.

Ice skate.

"We're going on the ice," I whispered.

He nodded.

Blinking blurry eyes as Vim firmly tied and secured the boots onto my feet, I waited until he was content with them before I reached out and grabbed his face.

I gave him a kiss as he lifted me up, carrying me over to the lake.

"Wait," I complained once I realized this was really happening.

He chuckled at me as he stepped out onto the ice, which thankfully didn't creak or crack even with our combined weight. He slowly lowered me, and I carefully placed my feet down. It took a moment to realize how I was supposed to stand and angle with the blade beneath me, but once I figured it out it actually made a lot of sense and didn't feel too weird.

"Take it slow. Crawl if you have to. I'll be out there with you in a few moments," he said… and then pushed me out onto the ice.

Chapter 393 Renn’s Side-Quest – Eight – A Skate of a Date

Holding onto Vim's hand, I focused on the way he moved his legs and feet.

Vim wasn't really stepping… it was as if he was sliding them. Shuffling his feet, more than not.

Mimicking him again, I immediately felt the difference. Not only did I speed up a little more, but I no longer felt like I was going to go the wrong way if I wasn't careful.

Laughing happily, I pulled a little on Vim as to get me closer to him. I kept sliding away a bit every so often, on accident.

I was already able to skate around on my own, without Vim's help, but I vastly enjoyed the feeling of him being there. Not only did he keep me from wandering too close to the edge of the lake, or one of the

smaller islands, he also was faster than me. So occasionally he could pull me a bit, as to give me further momentum.

"Why don't more people do this, Vim!? It's great!" I shouted.

"They used to. I don't know why it's fallen out of memory," he said.

Oh. So this was something people used to do? Made sense. The shoes were intricate, but honestly not too complex. I bet even I could make a rough version if I had to.

Sliding past a stick, that stuck out of the ice at a dangerous angle, I squeezed Vim's hand harder and pulled myself even closer to him. Sometimes I wasn't very observant it seemed.

The world was flying past, most of it either a white blur or a dark green one thanks to the trees, and I couldn't help but get teary eyed again.

How lovely. I had no words to describe how wonderful this was. There was a strange feeling of freedom in sliding around on the ice, even though I was confined to this lake. I knew, from experience, that sliding into the ground only made me face plant. Plus walking on the blades on normal ground was nearly impossible, to the point I didn't even want to attempt it.

And although the lake was large enough that it took Vim and I many minutes to circle all around it, the thing still felt impossibly small thanks to how quickly one could slide from one side to the other. To the point that it annoyed me. I kind of wished we had found a bigger lake, or maybe one connected to large rivers, so we could do this forever.

It was too bad we couldn't travel like this. The mere thought of skating from Lumen to Telmik or something would have been wonderful.

Yet, even though this lake was now my world, I still felt utterly free. As if I was now a bird, free to fly wherever I wanted to.

There was no other way to explain the feeling in my chest. Freedom. Utter freedom.

"Our fire's getting small again," I said as we neared it. It was time Vim once again went to add wood to it. He did so every so often, to keep it warm and strong.

"Hm. We'll be done in a little bit anyway, so it's fine," Vim said.

"Huh? Why?" I asked, a little shocked. Sure the snow was starting to really fall, and the wind was picking up, but still!

"You've become a wonderful skater very quickly Renn, but skating at night is dangerous. Too dangerous," he said.

Frowning at that, I knew better than to argue.

I could clearly see how. Not only were there some parts of the ice that was thin, and at risk of being fallen through, there were spots that were dangerous in other ways. Like the little islands, or logs and sticks that were sticking out. Running into one of them could really hurt me. And even on a clear night, without snow and storms, I wasn't sure if I could see clearly enough in the dark as to avoid such dangerous things.

"I don't want this to end…" I mumbled regretfully.

Vim tugged on me. Enough to bring me closer to him. It wasn't the first time he and I got very close, since in the beginning I had needed help just to stand up, but it was the first time in at least an hour or two that he got so close that he held me by my waist and not a hand. "We'll have many winters, Renn," he said gently.

"Threaten me like that and I'll make us move far north where it's always winter," I teased him.

He laughed, and angled us away from the fire. I was going to ask why, since I had figured he had grabbed onto me properly as to lift me up and help me off the lake and ice, but instead we headed back out into the lake. Towards its center.

"Vim?"

"One last lap," he said.

Oh…? I smirked at that, since his tone told me something very adorable.

He didn't want this moment to end either.

I had expected him to hold me the entire lap, but instead Vim pushed me forward. I wobbled a little, since I was surprised he had done so, and grumbled at him as he skated up next to me. We were no longer together.

"Vim?" I asked again, upset he had separated us. I had been enjoying that.

"Let's race," he said.

I blinked and felt a smirk plant itself on my face as I glanced ahead. "Okay," I said, though knew there was no chance I'd ever win.

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"Around the lake. Stay close to the center, watch out for that bundle of sticks and logs near that one island," Vim warned with a point to it.

I nodded. I remembered the section he was talking about.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yeah!" I happily started to pick up my speed, leaving him behind.

Vim of course kept pace with me, but I enjoyed pushing myself to go even faster. At one point I even stopped trying to go faster, since I worried about turning at the higher speed. Vim kept near me the whole way, as we rounded islands and stayed away from the logs and sticks. At this faster speed it didn't take long at all for us to round back towards our section of the lake, and for our campfire to come back into view.

Once it did… I slowed. So much so that Vim zoomed past at first, only to slow and turn back around.

I slowed so much that I had to start actively swishing my feet, as to stop myself from coming to a complete stop.

Vim came back, approaching me… but then going still. I frowned at him, and was about to run into him… until I realized he was moving too. He was going backwards.

"What the…? How are you doing that?" I asked, a little annoyed. I had nearly opened my arms as to skate right into his, and was now a little upset I wasn't able to.

"What's wrong Renn? You were doing good," he asked gently.

Sighing at him, I did my best to put aside my disappointment that he hadn't been about to wrap me in a hug. "I love this," I told him honestly.

"Hm… I can tell."

Grabbing my own hands, I twirled my fingers a little as we slowly approached our fire. I tried my best to not go any faster, as to stay out here on the ice as long as possible. "I really don't want this to end," I admitted.

He smiled knowingly and nodded. "Yes. I've actually been wondering if one day you'd come to hate your berry smoothies, having drank them so much, but even years later you still indulge in them happily. Which means you could probably do this every day for years and still be happy with it, can't you?" he asked.

Feeling a little called out, as if I was some simpleton or something, I blushed and nodded. "I probably could, yes," I admitted.

"Hm…" he nodded and glanced down at my feet, which made me a little self-conscious in how I was moving them. I tried not to become stiff as he studied my skating.

Really. How was he skating backwards like that…? I wanted to try that too.

For a few minutes we skated in silence, as I realized how he was likely doing what he was doing. But I wasn't confident enough to try it, at least not without Vim holding onto me for support.

"Could we stay here a few days, Vim?" I asked carefully.

Vim didn't answer at first, but then nodded. "As long as the storm isn't bad. It's dangerous to do this during storms, Renn. The water and ice shifts and breaks during them," he said.

Oh… right…

I glanced up, and grimaced at the very dark sky above us. And not just because night was coming in fast. There were terribly dark clouds up there.

Sighing at the world, I wondered how long we'd be up north here. Maybe I'd be lucky and we'd happen upon another lake like this? How often did lakes freeze over like this, anyway? I remembered many doing it farther north, near my home and where Elaine lives, but even those ones didn't do it to this degree every winter.

"Come on Renn. You're going to make me feel horrible if you keep looking like that. You're supposed to be having fun," Vim said.

"I'm not going to cry, Vim. I'm actually very happy. But that's the problem!" I groaned.

He laughed at me. "Yes, so happy that you're angry," he teased.

"I am! Why can't the whole world be covered in ice?" I asked.

"It once was you know," he said.

"Really…?" I startled at that. No way, right?

He nodded. "But let's be glad it's not. You may be alright skating everywhere forever, but the world would be very dreary if it was frozen like that. Though I think I'd rather be frozen than on fire, I suppose," Vim said as he pondered it.

Great he was basically talking about the end of the world stuff found in all the different religions…

Sighing at him, I picked up my pace a little. As to catch him. I wanted to hug and cling to him one last time before I was forced off the ice, as to fully dedicate the feeling to memory.

Before I could though, Vim startled, and then with a sharp motion went to the left. My left. I jumped in shock, nearly falling, and then heard a loud crash and splash.

Skidding to a stop, I barely stayed upright as I hurriedly turned back around. "Vim!?" I shouted, unable to believe it

He was gone!

Skating over to a huge hole, I groaned and kept my distance. A Vim sized hole was now in the ice, and there were these huge white cracks all over around it. I stayed a distance away from them, since I knew better than to think Vim actually needed help.

If anything my falling in would just make it worse, so I skated a bit farther away as I worried for him. I couldn't see him through the ice, but that was because of how dark the lake beneath it was. We were in a spot where it was really deep, and knowing Vim he had likely sunk quite a bit and…

Then a new crack rang out. I turned a bit, and found myself staring at a head. Vim's head had poked out from the ice nearby, causing some broken pieces to slide away along the ice. He huffed a bit, causing a white haze to come from him. "Careful Renn. Go to the fire, I'll meet you there," he said, sounding suddenly tired.

"Jeez Vim, you were doing so good too!" I said happily, skating nearby. He looked absolutely ridiculous with his head poking out from the ice!

"It's your fault," he grumbled as he watched me skate past.

"Mine?" I asked, laughing at him. How was he going to blame me for this?

"You were planning on grabbing onto me hadn't you? You should have seen yourself, you looked like some pervert. I was going to laugh and catch you but this happened instead," he said.

Laughing at him, I wondered just what kind of expression had been on my face. Pervert? Me? "I was only going to hug you," I said, but Vim sunk back into the lake before I could say more.

Watching the spot where he'd just been, I was able to see him now. At least, partially. Through the ice I watched him swim past me, a few feet from me, and I skated alongside him… feeling weird as I did.

He was swimming. Under the ice. Beneath me. And I was skating above him.

How weird!

How utterly wonderful.

I blinked teary eyes as we hurried back to our campfire. I was sad that this moment was ending, but knew I'd have more in the future… even if not immediately.

This was better than a kiss, somehow. Almost.

Some ice cracked nearby, and I giggled as I watched Vim sink deeper. He had likely not meant to hit his head on the ice.

"You're hilarious, Vim," I teased him as we neared the campfire. One that was not very big at all.

Vim would need to warm up, fast. Not because he was at risk of getting sick or anything… but instead so that I could hug and cling to him through the night.

Chapter 394 Renn’s Side-Quest – Epilogue – Little Moments of Respite

The snowstorm was wild. The cave we were in was dark, black stone further accenting its darkness, yet the cave's entrance was nearly pure white. Thanks to how much snow was blowing past.

"How neat," I whispered as I watched it.

We'd stopped in this little cave a few hours ago, once the storm got really bad. Vim thinks we were only a day or so away from our next destination, a small fishing village on the inland sea, but he like usual worried for my health. He didn't want to risk me in this storm.

And honestly I was glad for it. The snow was so strong, so cold, that even here next to a raging fire and curled up into Vim I was still fighting to keep shivers at bay.

"You know such cold used to not bother me much," I said.

"Hm. You've said so, yes," Vim said absentmindedly.

Leaning back a little, I glanced up at him. From this angle I could only see the side of his face. "What's more important than me right now?" I asked, teasing him a little.

He hummed and smiled. "Your safety, for one."

"Huh?" I frowned at that. What'd he mean?

We were alone. In a small alcove like cave. We had a good fire going and the storm was terrible but kept at bay thanks to the angle of the cave's mouth. I was in his arms, sitting in his lap basically, and wrapped in a warm blanket.

Just… what part of my safety was at risk, I wonder?

Vim sighed a little, and then shifted a bit. He snaked an arm under the blanket, as to wrap it around my waist. I felt my ears twitch a little at the action, since he usually didn't do such a personal thing even during moments like this. "You mentioned the house you grew up in had no walls," he said.

I nodded. "Yeah…?" I liked how he remembered such things.

"That means you likely didn't start noticing the cold, really noticing it, until you experienced warmth. Once you started sleeping indoors, likely in a warm bed. It's not that you can't endure the cold, Renn, you just now don't like it because you know it's not the normal thing to be in. You're not supposed to be freezing all the time," he explained.

"I'd rather look at it as if I don't like the cold no more because my heart is warm now," I said happily.

"That's a way to look at it too, I guess."

It was how I was going to look at it.

"If it's this cold maybe we can run into another frozen lake? Will the inland sea freeze over, maybe?" I asked, hopeful.

Vim chuckled. "No. Probably not. The waters here are a little warmer than usual, thanks to the region's temperament. But if you'd like we can find an excuse to head north instead of south maybe. There's a woman who lives on the north side of the inland sea, who we can visit. I've not visited her for several trips now so it is time for me to do so," Vim said.

"Who is she?" I asked, interested in hearing about a woman who lived alone. There were a lot of members that lived alone, and sadly most were women. I wasn't sure why as of yet.

"A pig. Or well, she's not a pig. She's actually a scrawny woman. But that's her bloodline," Vim said, explaining.

"Hm… Is she nice?" I asked.

"Not sure. She never really needs or wants anything, so I've not really spent time with her."

"Hopefully we don't need to go anywhere then," I said.

He nodded, brushing my ear as he did so with his chin.

The whistle of the great wind got a little louder, and I watched the storm for a bit. Although it was cold, and was keeping us from our task… I found myself having a good time.

I liked this. Sitting with Vim, just… doing nothing.

It made no sense. I wanted to be busy. To help our members. Yet at the same time I knew I longed for these moments. It was why I had nearly wept as we left that ice covered lake.

Vim and I were alone often, especially when we traveled, yet… strangely, we didn't get many moments alone. True moments.

Even while we traveled we were busy. Hurrying from one place to another. Or I was stressing and worrying about something, so as such felt in a hurry even if I wasn't.

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I knew soon, in a matter of days, our stressful days would return. I'd once again worry over members, the schemes they wrought, dangers and more. I'd worry over Vim's decisions, his failures, and my own.

Those moments on that ice had been so wonderful because I had not thought about any of that. I had not thought of the Society. Or the drama. None of the sorrow or pain. Just joy. Pure and simple joy.

For a bit I relived the moments on that lake a few days ago. The feel of the cold wind as I skated quickly. Vim's warmth as he held me up, when I was still trying to figure out how to skate it properly. The hours after, as we huddled near the fire and I stared longingly at the lake, wishing I was back out upon it.

"I think that was one of my top five days ever, Vim," I whispered as I placed it far above most others.

"Huh…?" Vim shifted a little, and I could tell he had not understood me. But how could he? We had been talking about a member, a pig, not the skating on the ice.

"Your gift. Ice skating. That was one of the loveliest days I've ever had," I told him softly.

His arm around my waist tightened a little. Not around me, but itself. I felt his muscles coil. "Renn…" Vim whispered my name, sounding hurt.

"What's wrong?" I asked. Why'd he sound hurt? Why had he recoiled like that? He should be happy. He had given me something wonderful!

"If such a simple moment as that was enough to be in your top five… then I'm quite a failure, aren't I…?" he whispered gently in my ear.

My ears fluttered, and I wanted to turn around and thump him. Not just because of how itchy he had just made my ear, but because of what he had said. But Vim's hold, and how comfortable I was, kept me from doing so. Instead I just wiggled a little. "I didn't mean it like that Vim…! I just… really liked it. You and I don't get to be alone often, not like that at least. We don't often get moments just to ourselves… moments for just you and me. That hadn't been for the Society, or a member, or the world. It had been just for us. Special, and…" I started to ramble a little, since I was now not really sure how to properly phrase it.

How did I tell him how much I loved him? How could I prove it? His actions that had made me so happy, that wonderful day, were thanks to him. He had thought of it, planned for it, and prepared for it. And to him it had been but a simple moment. Yet it had so deeply affected me it may as well have been life changing. And he did such things for me often. More than I could count.

How come he could do that for me, yet I struggled to do so for him? He always teased, and said, that he was a failure as a husband… but the truth was the opposite.

I was the failure. As a wife.

Sniffing a little, since I was moments from weeping, I shifted and nodded. "You did great Vim. Don't think like that. I love you… please keep it up," I whimpered.

His arm tightened again, but this time around me. I felt him kiss my head, nearly my ear, and I blushed a little at the feeling. "One day, that day won't be in your top five. It won't even be a thought. I swear it," he promised.

"Mhm…" I nodded, my heart welling a little. What did one say to that? It was moments like this that I wished he was more okay with skin-ship, and…

Then before I could say, or do, anything… something huge stepped into the cave.

I sat up straight, my eyes going wide as a massive bear walked in. It looked nearly white, thanks to the thick layer of snow all upon it. It shook its mighty frame; dislodging most of the snow… made a deep guttural groan, and then stepped closer towards us.

"Vim…!" I whispered as I grabbed his arm wrapped around my waist. I wasn't too worried, since I knew even a giant bear such as this was no match for Vim… but it was so close! I knew how fast they could be. I knew how strong they were. I knew, even without looking at the ones right before me, that their paws and claws were bigger than my head, ears included!

Yet Vim didn't even budge. He simply held me firmly in his grasp. "It's okay Renn," he whispered.

Was it…?

I gulped as the massive creature sauntered up to the fire. It sniffed the fire deeply, huffing with its huge breaths, and with a small glance at us… it then stepped a few feet away and fell down.

My tail squirmed as the thing landed hard on its side, and then rolled over a bit. It laid down, breathing deeply and noisily, as it began to relax.

For a few moments the bear situated itself… eventually ending up with its back facing us. It began to breathe quieter, and even began to sound almost as if it was snoring.

"Did… did it just fall asleep?" I whispered.

"Hm. I don't think this is its den. I think it just came in to escape the cold," Vim said.

Huh…

"Why didn't it attack us?" I asked.

"We don't smell, Renn. At all. To it we don't exist," Vim told me.

Oh!

Oh my gosh…! "You're ignored by animals…" I whispered, realizing that meant even big ones like the bear.

"So are you now, Renn."

Gulping at that… I couldn't help but smile and hold back a giggle. I knew as long as we didn't make too much noise we'd be fine, but if I went ahead and loudly laughed it might grow irate.

And even if Vim could handle it… I didn't want him to.

There was no point in hurting the creature if it was just going to be peaceful.

It like us was just escaping the cold, after all.

This was what Vim had meant earlier, then. He had smelled the bear. I wonder how long the thing had been outside our cave, gathering the courage to enter it.

Leaning further into Vim, I smiled at the bear as I relaxed… even though it kind of stunk.

Another wonderful moment. "It's not a top five, but this is nice too," I said softly.

Vim chuckled at me. "You really are easy to please."

I nodded, glad to be so. "Your love makes it easy, Vim," I said.

"Hm… well, I do love you a lot so that makes sense."

"I love you too. Now what are you going to do when the bear gets hungry? Because I am and I now want you to cook something," I asked.

Vim sighed.

Chapter 395 Vim – Meriah

Stepping out into the rain, I glanced around the small brick road that Rapti's home backed up against. I checked corners, other building's windows, the roofs… and was glad to not see anyone spying on us, or acting suspicious. In fact, I saw no one else at all.

A good sign. Meriah was not someone who would have came to Rapti's home had she been followed, but I always worried for her. Although she herself looked nearly human, she was such a person that I knew she had as many if not more enemies than I did. And that had always worried me about her. This world was a cruel one, even for a normal person. Meriah wasn't just non-human; she dressed and acted a nun, and always traveled. Sometimes even opting to sleep outside over a room at an inn.

Such people as her were often targeted, and that was even before taking into account that Meriah was always sticking her nose where it didn't belong.

"Um…"

I frowned and turned, wondering what was wrong. Why was Meriah being so slow? Yet I already knew what it was before I found Meriah standing there, hesitatingly keeping the door open as Renn stood in the doorway… sheepishly smiling as she glanced at me and Meriah.

Right…

After the few moments of greetings, between Meriah and Renn, I had stepped out. Expecting, like always, for Meriah to follow me without question. Alone. Because it was what we did.

Until now, of course.

"It's up to you Meriah. I've decided to neither shelter her nor keep secrets from her. Though I admit I'm being… resistant in my opening up completely. The only thing I can say, if you'll hear my opinion, is that Renn is likely the only other person on this planet you can actually trust. I can say without doubt she would never become your enemy, for any reason," I said.

Renn stood up straighter, and I noticed Rapti behind her walking away. She had likely heard what I had said, but I knew she'd always pretend she hadn't. She knew what Meriah was like, full well, so knew better than to even stick around when Meriah wanted to be alone.

Meriah studied Renn, and then glanced over at me. I noted the way her white eyebrows arched a little, as if in worry or sadness. "I hear you married her," she said.

"Hm. I have," I said.

Renn smiled, and then looked to Meriah. "I can stay. It's okay. I'm sorry… I just usually follow Vim without thought, so…" Renn apologized, and stepped backward. Back into the house.

I gave Renn a smile. She really was kind.

Meriah sighed, rather loudly. "It's fine. Come on. Just don't be offended if I be rude to you," Meriah said.

Oh…?

Renn paused, as Meriah gestured for Renn to hurry up and leave so she could close the door behind her.

"You sure…?" Renn asked softly as she stepped out of Rapti's house.

Meriah said nothing, only closing the front door to Rapti's home once Renn was out of the way. I nodded to Renn and Meriah as I turned and headed for the road.

Where to go? Maybe the docks? It was late enough, and the rain was steady enough, that it was likely rather deserted at the moment. A good place to talk.

"I saw them earlier, but are your ears as good as they look?" Meriah asked Renn as the two followed me.

"Hm? Yes? Though this hood is really heavy, and I have the hat on too. If you want me to stay back far enough as to give you two some space, I can do that," Renn said without hesitation.

"No… It's fine…" Meriah mumbled.

Was it?

I kept back the urge to glance back at the two, as I slowly headed down the path towards one of the larger roads. To head for the docks.

Renn had her heavy cloak on. Meriah the traveling nun wore a similar cloak, though it had the gray colors of the church sewn into certain parts of her attire. Such as at her sleeves, and at the hems of her cloak. It was impossible to not know who and what she was thanks to her attire. So I knew neither would be too bothered by the rain and cold, especially being non-humans, but I knew better than to think we blended in. A nun walking around on such a gloomy afternoon was thing, but to do so with a pair that looked like mercenaries on first glance? Not the best camouflage for us… but it would have to do for now.

It had been slightly rude to Rapti, to walk out so readily after Meriah arrived, but I knew she'd understand. She too had known and noticed that Meriah had been impatiently waiting for me to arrive, after all.

Plus…

"Well?" I turned to ask Meriah, who had been about to ask Renn something. Renn frowned at me, as if upset I'd interrupted their light talk, but Meriah's eyes went wide as she nodded and harried forward.

Her hood nearly fell off as she came to my side. "The bishop who burnt Lomi's village is dead," Meriah said with a hush.

Looking forward, as to pretend that she and I weren't actively in the middle of a conversation, I frowned. "Where'd you find him?" I asked.

Meriah glanced back, thanks to Renn's hurried footsteps as she picked up her pace as to catch up to us. She took Meriah's other side, walking opposing me.

"I found his grave. And the ones who had buried him. One of them, some kind of nephew or something, had this in his possession," Meriah said as she rummaged into her side, beneath her cloak.

After a moment Meriah produced a small parchment of paper. One that I took quickly, unfolding it near my stomach as to try and protect it from the rain as much as possible.

Upon the little parchment, was a crudely drawn map and some light instructions. Such as to turn at a certain odd shaped tree, and to venture over a river that was small but flowed quickly.

I sighed as I recognized the map to the fox village. Leading from a larger human settlement to its south.

"The lad didn't know where the bishop got it. But the fool firmly believed whoever had done so had also been the one to kill him. Went on and on about betrayal and stuff," Meriah explained.

Folding the parchment back up, I handed it back to her. Instead of putting it back into her pocket she offered it to Renn.

My eye twitched as I watched Renn unfold it and look at it too.

"Your letter here had heavy claims Meriah. Even for you," I said as I watched Meriah study Renn who studied the map.

Meriah didn't take her eyes off Renn as she nodded. "Yes. It did. I do."

So she wasn't denying it. There had been no misunderstanding, or mistaking.

Meriah truly believed Light and the rest had either been directly involved with the destruction of the fox village.

Great.

"This… is a map? To where?" Renn asks.

"Lomi's village," I said.

Renn stopped walking, but I kept going. After a few steps Meriah stopped, to look back at her. I ignored the two as Renn made an odd noise and I glanced down the intersection we were crossing.

There were only a few people on the street, and this was a main road. One was a guard, a knight of the city, and the other was a man carrying what looked like a box of some kind. Likely delivering something somewhere.

"Please, please tell me this was made after the event…!" Renn asked hurriedly as she hurried to rejoin Meriah and me.

"No, Renn. It hadn't been," Meriah answered.

Renn groaned. "Vim…!" she cried.

"Renn," I said gently, wondering if maybe we should have stayed at Rapti's home. Maybe we could have asked Rapti to give us a moment alone. She would have obliged, she was kind that way.

"Vim!" Renn hurried over, and I heard the rustle of clothes and cloaks. I turned just to see Renn nearly push Meriah aside as she grabbed at my arm.

About to ask what she was thinking, as Meriah shifted and frowned at Renn, I found myself a little startled.

Renn, pushing someone she just met aside? That gentle woman?

Beneath her heavy hood, Renn stared up at me with a look of utter devastation, as she lifted the map up. It was wrinkled in her tight grip, and now it was obvious it was soaked. "This drawing! The handwriting…!"

Wait…

"You recognize it?" Meriah asked right before I could as she hurried up to us.

Renn didn't even glance at Meriah as she nodded. "The Chronicler, Vim!"

Before more could be said, something broke.

Many something's.

I blinked, and heard the shouts of shock and screams of fear… as a nearby building shifted and the side wall of it collapsed into itself.

Renn and Meriah both turned, staring in what was likely as much shock as the people inside the building felt. I, however, only glared at the map in Renn's hand.

Surely not.

But…

Closing my eyes, a part of me listened into the shouting and panic in the building, and the nearby other buildings. I listened for cries of pain, or desperation. In case someone had gotten hurt by the collapse of the brick wall. I heard nothing more than confused shouts and worry as people hurried to leave the building, fearing the rest of it was going to collapse upon them.

A quick glance at the building, and the portion of the wall that had shifted and fallen inward, I knew it was fine. It was only a few feet in width at the largest section of the hole, and I could see from here the large tree-pillars that held the rest of the building up. Even if it did break more, it wouldn't collapse completely.

Though…

"We should go Vim, quickly," Meriah said softly as I followed the crack that emerged from under the house's foundation, rolling along the stone path and road to us.

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To me.

"Right…" I nodded and turned. Renn held onto my arm, having grabbed it earlier and since she'd not let go, as I dragged her away from the house that people were starting to gather around.

We left the area before we became the focus of attention, and I sighed again as we turned onto another road… and I lost interest in where we were headed. I knew we were no longer heading for the docks, but I didn't care anymore.

My mind was a mess, and my head wanted to hurt even though it didn't.

I didn't doubt Renn's memory. At all.

If Renn claimed that writing and drawing were that old fake-saint's, then…

"Give that back to Meriah, Renn. Don't let it get ruined," I said, as I remembered the source of my new discord.

Meriah took it, folding it back up carefully as she also squeezed some of the moisture from it before putting it back where she got it.

"I'm to assume she's not wrong?" Meriah asked.

"Huh…?" Renn hesitated, so I nodded and answered for her.

"Renn has perfect memory. If she says that's the Chronicler's writing, then I have no doubt it is."

Meriah said nothing as Renn groaned and squeezed my arm again. "Vim…!"

"Give me the rest of the bad news, Meriah. Since I'm buried in it anyway," I said.

Meriah nodded, her light cloak shifting as she did. "While investigating them, I tracked down some of the knights who did the deed. The bishop, and the nephew I had found, had not actually been there. They had only sent the knight order to do the deed. The knights I found confessed they had done the deed, and had done so at the bishop's orders. The bishop also ordered the deed and location to not be shared or told to anyone else. I don't know if they gave such an order to cover their tracks, or because they didn't want people knowing our kind even still exists or something, though," Meriah said.

"Wait… wait! Are we actually trying to say the Chronicler sent this bishop, the one that destroyed Lomi's home, that map? Led them straight there?" Renn asked, her voice telling me she wanted to doubt it… but couldn't.

Renn stopped, and since she still held my arm I had to too. She was holding far too firmly for me to just keep walking. I'd not outright hurt her, or break a nail since she was keeping them short lately, but I didn't want to take the chance. Fingers could pop off easier than people knew, sometimes.

And right now I knew I wasn't in full control of my strength. Thanks to my internal chaos.

"I confirmed they did the deed. Not only did a couple of them have ears, spoils of war, a few had encountered you Vim. They knew what you look like," Meriah said defiantly, as if daring Renn to claim she was lying.

"Me?" I asked. What…?

She nodded. "You killed a group of them not long after the deed, supposedly. At some bar in one of those logging towns not far from Ruvindale. Some of them saw you do so. You became a legend amongst their little group, claiming you were retribution."

Ah… I had indeed killed a few churchmen while escorting Lomi out of that area. So those men had been involved…? I could have sworn I had asked and inquired about the village while crushing their hearts… maybe I had done so too quickly…?

"It was why their order had split up, Vim. You killed their important members, and the bishop got all weird. There might still be a knight or two left alive, that I haven't been able to track down, but at this point I never will be able to," Meriah said.

"You've done well. More than enough, like usual."

She scoffed at me. "Hardly Vim."

"You… found their ears, Meriah? Really?" Renn asked worriedly.

Meriah only nodded, rain splattering around her as she did as it bounced and rolled of her hood.

I sighed as I glanced around, and decided we needed somewhere to sit. We weren't being followed or even looked at, even though we were standing in the road in the middle of the rain. Odds are it was because this was a port town. A lot of people here weren't as bothered by the rain as some other places. So we weren't too strange just yet.

"Vim," Renn said my name, bringing my attention back to the two women. They were looking at me as if I was being strange… which meant they had said something. Or someone had asked a question.

"Sorry… What'd you say?" I asked.

"He's angry Renn. Be thankful all he did was that small crack," Meriah said to Renn.

"I can tell. I'm angry too, but this is not the time to be so mindless. We need to talk about what has happened and…" Renn began to say, but I didn't want to hear it. Not at the moment at least.

I shifted, grabbing Renn's arm gently, the one that held onto my arm. She turned to glare at me as I, as carefully as I could, got her to release me.

"What about the rest of the northern church order?" I asked Meriah, while staring into Renn's glare.

"As I said… as far as I can tell the knights kept what they did a secret. By order and because of fear. Many of them firmly believed they were being punished, more than a few took their own lives. I found many of them buried like the bishop, and met their families. I'd believe one or two being alive, claiming suicide as to hide, but it was more than a handful and I doubt common peasants would lie about such things. Several had felt such guilt they had killed themselves only months after the deed," Meriah said.

Renn shifted, glancing at Meriah with a look of utter sorrow. "Why do you sound annoyed by such a thing?" Renn asked Meriah.

Had she…?

Meriah smiled at Renn, in such a way that I knew even Renn saw the utterly broken soul within her. "People who kill themselves in grief do so because they're cowards, Renn. They weren't strong enough to not partake in the evil when it happened, and weren't strong enough to pay their debts to the world afterward. They took the easy route on both ends of their mistakes."

"So you believe it was a group used and tossed aside on purpose," I said, before Renn could respond to Meriah's point of view on life.

Meriah nodded, her eyes leaving Renn's and going to mine. "Yes. The bishop had been involved in some corruption which I think had been used to coerce him. I don't have any clue how he died, but I bet it wasn't suicide. Older churchmen like him don't have souls like that, it's the peons who do," she said.

Renn shifted, and I glanced around again. Was there a restaurant nearby…?

No.

Good thing.

I'd not be able to sit. Not without destroying the chair I attempted to do so in, at least.

Or the table. Or likely everything else around it…

Stepping forward, I ignored Renn and Meriah… as I tried my best to parse the information and the knowledge it gave me.

"I have more proof Vim…! Not that I think any more or less would change the fact of what happened," Meriah said as she hurried up next to me.

I didn't even glance at her, or Renn who hurried to join her.

"Mapple. One of the knights described her. Perfectly. Gave her name and described her. She had not been the one to deliver the letter, he had been clear on that, but she had arrived not long after they burnt the village down."

I slowed as we neared a new road. One that was familiar. We were near the docks, I hadn't gone off path, I was just slightly…

Yes. I was disturbed. And rightfully so.

"You're sure she had not just been nearby and overheard what had happened? She frequents the north," I asked, trying to pretend to be my mother and play devil's advocate.

Meriah snarled at me. "She arrived at the village, Vim. As they prepared to leave."

I stopped.

Narrowing my eyes at her, I frowned and shook my head. "I had arrived as the village smoldered. I had found Lomi in a well. Only a day or so after they had left. I had not smelled, or saw any trace, of Mapple."

"Then you didn't look hard enough. He had definitely claimed it was Mapple. She spoke to the bishop and other higher ranks in the knight group, and then left. He remembers her clearly because she had taken the man's prize. Ears."

For a few long moments… I didn't move.

I didn't breath. Or blink. My eye didn't even twitch.

Mapple would have indeed taken the ears from a knight. To the knights they had been treasure. Spoils. Trophies of their kills. Mapple would have not liked that.

Yet…

"Would… would Mapple have actually done that…? She would have seen the fox village destroyed and done nothing? Said nothing?" Renn asked. She sounded closer than I thought she was. Hopefully she wasn't holding onto me again.

I was a mere heartbeat from destroying this whole area, after all.

"She had likely just been confirming the deed was done. Mapple does whatever her mother tells her. Or well… her mother's sister, in this case," Meriah said.

I wanted to nod. That was true. Mapple herself didn't have a bad bone in her body, but she didn't disobey her orders at all. Even if she wept afterward, she'd do it… for so long as the ones she saw as her saviors told her to do so.

A common trait amongst non-humans, regrettably. Though lately few were in such positions anymore to suffer such a thing.

"A map. Written by a hand familiar. Names unique, with corroborating stories from multiple witnesses…" I whispered as I took in the situation.

"At the very least Vim, you need to verify it. This time. You can't just…" Meriah's voice started to rise… but the world lit up. I glanced upward as the lightning flashed, and a very distant sound of thunder rumbled.

A storm was on its way. Arriving now. As we spoke.

Fitting.

Renn groaned, rather loudly. It was a mixture of a whine and a word. She sounded as if she wanted to say something, but was too distraught to do so.

I didn't blame her.

I felt that way too.

Turning, I saw the sea. Not far down the road was one of the docks. An empty one.

The sea looked dark. Foreboding. It was the type of sea sailors didn't willingly set out in. This was a time for bars and barmaids, not hoisting the sails.

"You two… go back to Rapti's. I… need to think," I said as I turned to look at them.

"What…? Vim…" Renn was about to reach out again, as to grab my arm again, but Meriah stepped in for me.

Meriah grabbed onto Renn's arm before she could get mine, and leaned close to her. "Hmph! Come on Renn. Let's become friends while your husband convinces himself to be a stunted man."

"Stunted man…?" Renn asked softly as she allowed Meriah to turn her around and head back down the road, heading back to Rapti's house.

"His rules. He knows he needs to do something but will convince himself not to. I swear, sometimes I wish I could find a way to make one of them a monarch or something so he'd just finally destroy them ruthlessly without thought!" Meriah said, loudly, as if to make a point as she took my wife away.

Being left alone… I sighed as I turned to look at the sea.

Walking towards it, I did my best to step as lightly as possible. I tried not to allow my weight to harm the fragile world around me as I approached the edge of the dock. Where the stone road turned into wooden boards. Slippery ones, by the look of them.

Stopping before the dock, I stared out at the sea beyond. As if to get lost in it, and not my mind.

It wasn't too bad really. Although a storm was obviously here, just now arriving, the sea didn't look too rough. The boats docked not far from here weren't even rocking too badly.

While staring out at the dark sea… I listened and paid attention to Meriah and Renn as they left my area. They were talking about my indecisiveness.

The world became blurry as I stopped looking at anything. I thought about that note. What Meriah had said. The truth behind those facts.

It wasn't hard to imagine how or why it had happened. The Chronicler, or Light or someone else, had seen a prophecy. One that had demanded they take action.

But… why?

What had Lomi and her people done to deserve such devastation?

Why not get me involved? If it was something so drastic…?

Why get a whole village eliminated? A village for that matter that had existed for hundreds of years, without any complications?

The foxes had been a simple people, but good people. They hadn't provided anything to the Society but a lack of problems. They had never needed much. Never desired anything. Were always friendly and welcoming.

Yet even if they had been problematic…

A loud noise forced me to pay attention to the world around me, and I groaned as I turned and watched one of the larger ships roll over, cracking loudly as it snapped in half.

While watching the ship sink, I did my best to ignore that it had been my fault. The sea, the storm, and the world at the moment weren't cruel enough for such a thing to have happened. I was the only threat here, at the moment. Yet no matter how heavy my heart was, I couldn't ignore the fact I was utterly disturbing the world around me.

I'll need to find out from Rapti whose house that had been, and who owned that boat. To compensate them.

It wasn't right that someone, something, like me interfered into the natural order of the world around me in such a way.

Yet…

Cracking my neck, I took a deep breath and tried to not break anything else around me. I made sure not to shift my weight, and just… stand still for a moment.

Reaching up, I covered my face and squeezed my face. I covered my eyes, and tightened my grip… as if I was trying to crush my own skull.

I focused on the feeling of pressure on my temples and head. I felt my skin tighten, I felt the bones creak. I felt my own skull stress under the pressure, though not crack.

The Chronicler… Light… all of them. They hadn't just possibly murdered their own kind, our own members… they had interfered beyond the natural order. Doing exactly what I didn't allow.

It was one thing to use their prophecies to stop major disasters or calamities. To end monarchs. Or to stop great sorrow, like floods or diseases…

But what could have possibly been their reason to do such a thing to the foxes? What motive could have been good enough to cause such terrible cruelty and yet be justifiable enough to stay my hand and punishment? What could they say to stop me from doing what I knew I had to do?

What excuse? What reason? What rationale? What possible excuse could they, would they, give me?

I knew from experience they wouldn't have one.

"This won't end well… What should I do, mother?" I asked the world around me… lowering my hand, as the rain fell onto my face.

My answer was a rumble in the sky. The storm was here.

Inside and out.

Chapter 396 Renn – Games and Worries With Friends

Meriah didn't play like anyone else I'd faced before. Others seemed to try and trick their opponent, by moving pieces intentionally wrong so that I'd not notice their real plan with other pieces. Meriah though seemed to just always be directly on the attack. Each and every piece, even the little pawns other people used as a defensive wall or to sacrifice for another purpose, were seemingly perfected weapons she wanted to destroy me with.

It was an interesting method. It somehow reminded me of how Vim was in real life. When he decided to destroy something, or someone, he didn't hesitate or use round-about methods. He simply stepped forward and did the deed. That was how Meriah was, on the board at least.

I'd almost think it meant she didn't really know how to play, or wasn't trying to play more than re-actively without much thought, but considering I'd lost to her the last five games I knew better than to think such a thing.

We were sitting in Rapti's home, Rapti was watching Meriah and I play the little game with calm indifference. We'd long had lunch, and the tea that Rapti had recently brewed had grown a little cold. But the room was warm, even as the hard and heavy rain fell on the world outside.

Rapti hummed as she watched me move one of my pieces to take another of Meriah's. In doing so I also stopped her from being able to take one of my important pieces.

Meriah didn't hesitate. She grabbed another piece and moved it, taking one of my pawns as she did.

I wanted to grumble, since I wanted to play at her pace. I wanted to reach over and move another piece, one to counter her previous move, but kept myself from doing so… I studied the board for a moment, and then decided to move a different piece. One that instead of going to take the piece she had just moved, instead went for another pawn on the other side of the game-board.

Before I even finished putting her pawn I had just taken onto the table with the other pieces I'd taken, Meriah had moved her own piece again. This time deeper into my little army, putting it right next to my important piece. The one that if taken would end the game, with my defeat.

Yet… as dangerous as it seemed next to my important piece, it was harmless. It couldn't move in a way that allowed her to take it. And I had several pieces scattered around it, positioned to take it with ease and eliminate the threat entirely.

Still I studied it for a moment… and then noticed something interesting.

Instead of taking the piece, and ignoring it entirely, I could just move a different piece. One that would let me win the game here and now.

Picking it up, I smiled a little in strange anticipation as I placed it down on the spot to win the game.

"Why, well done Renn," Rapti said.

Meriah sighed as she crossed her arms. "I was hoping to make you panic," she complained.

"Figured. I almost did react wrongly… though rather than panic; it was just that I wanted to match your play style. You're so quick about moving your pieces," I said, praising Meriah as I studied the board.

Now that I had a few more moments, I could see that I actually could have won a few moves ago. Three at least.

Could I have won even before that, I wonder?

"One should always beware getting caught up in the wild nature of humanity," Rapti said with a nod.

"Humanity…?" I asked. Wasn't Meriah one of us?

"She means in general. It's a reference to one of our religious poems."

Oh…? I nodded slowly at that as I studied Meriah who was frowning at the board, as if upset with it.

She had said their religious poems. Interesting. So Vim hadn't been joking. She wasn't a traveling nun just to blend in with the world and humans, then.

Yet she hated the church…? Or was it just the ones within it, like the Chronicler and Light?

"You almost had her, but I think once she took this piece you were fated to fail," Rapti said as she reached out and tapped one of the taller pieces I had taken. I frowned as she pointed it out, because it was one I had taken nearly twenty moves ago.

"Probably…" Meriah said softly as she continued studying the board.

I smiled at her, since it proved she really didn't just play blindly and recklessly as her style seemed to infer. If anything she likely played with more schemes and tricks than others I've faced, since it seemed her quick and reckless style was on purpose. To make me act foolishly in return.

While Rapti took a drink of, what was likely cold tea, I felt my left ear twitch a little as I heard a splash of water. And not water from outside.

I tried not to focus too deeply on the sound of Vim in the bath. It sounded like he was wiping himself off.

"I hear you usually bathe with him," Meriah then said.

My ears went still, and I tried to not notice the look from Rapti as I slowly nodded. "I… try to, honestly. He doesn't let me most of the time though. Who told you?" I asked.

So she too had heard Vim? Fascinating. She was more than she appeared, even I had barely heard Vim's movements, I'll need to remember that.

She grinned at me, finally looking away from the game-board. "Why didn't you do so here? Because of Rapti? She'd not mind."

Hm…? "I wanted to spend time with you two instead."

Meriah's grin slowly died as she blinked at me, and Rapti chuckled as she lowered her cup. "Beautifully said, Renn. That Meriah, is how we are meant to appreciate our fellow creations," Rapti said.

The traveling nun glanced at Rapti and sneered. "How do you know Vim just didn't tell her no? He's all weird right now, so…"

"Actually… because he's weird is the best time for me to indulge in him. He's more open and gentle with me the more he's worried and stressed. Either because he's distracted and lets his guard down, or because he enjoys my presence while his thoughts are in turmoil," I said.

Meriah shifted, her face becoming a little odd as she raised an eyebrow and glared at me. Rapti though chuckled again.

I smiled gently at Meriah's odd look and shrugged. "I don't like abusing those moments though, honestly," I added.

For a small moment they both stared at me… and then Meriah sighed and reached up to scratch at the back of her head. As she did, I noticed the way her silver hair gleamed a little in the lamplight. It almost looked as if it sparkled.

I wonder what she was. She had silver hair, nearly white eyebrows, and had little freckles all over her face. She was honestly very adorable, but I didn't see, or smell, any outright signs she wasn't human. In fact, thanks to her loose but simple dress, I could even tell that she didn't have any strange features beneath her robes either.

Though it seemed she wanted to trust me, but didn't. Meriah looked away as she went to gathering up the pieces of our little game. She looked as if she was annoyed, and maybe she was.

Vim and others, like Rapti, had told me she hated people. She was a loner, even beyond what Lilly was. So… I had expected a slightly prickly personality, but it almost felt as if she didn't like me.

Yet she was already calling me her friend. So I wasn't sure yet what to think of her.

Vim seemed to trust her though. Even though she was making outrageous claims. Ones that… well…

I blinked and glanced at Rapti, who smiled happily as she watched Meriah put the pieces where they belonged.

Yes. Don't think of that now. Don't ruin the moment. Let it ruin another, later.

I went to help Meriah, and once done I stood up and nodded. "Your turn, Rapti."

"Hm? I'm rather enjoying watching you two, though?" she said back.

"I'm sure. But I just won for the first time against her, and I want Vim to praise me when he hears about it. If I tell him as I lose to her again, he'll just tease me over it," I said.

"Ha!" Meriah laughed at that as I stepped around Rapti's chair and went to grab the tea pot Rapti used to make tea.

I was tired of cold tea. Even if Rapti and Meriah seemed perfectly happy to drink it, I wasn't. Not when I had a perfectly good fire to warm it with.

Maybe it was their pious natures?

Rapti sighed as she changed seats, as to face across from Meriah. "She's definitely a cat, isn't she?" Rapti asked.

"People have always said cats are prideful, but I've always figured them simply independent," Meriah said.

"Is it independent to want your partner to praise you like that though?" Rapti wondered.

I smirked at them as I poured more water into the pot, and went to add some of the tea leaves.

"Does Vim not treat her much differently than us? It seems he's a little firmer with her than us if anything, from what I've seen so far," Meriah asked as they began to play.

Frowning at that as I put the teapot onto the little metal stand hanging near the fire, I glanced at the two as Rapti hummed and studied Meriah's opening move. Unlike me Rapti didn't seem pressured to join her opponents pace at all. She studied the board with only one singular piece out of position intently, as if it was already the end of the game.

"You've only been watching them for a few hours, hardly long enough to tell," Rapti said as she finally picked up a piece and moved it. A single pawn in the corner.

Meriah nodded as she quickly moved another piece, without even looking at the board. She instead looked at Rapti with a frown. "What've you seen then?"

"I see a god being gentle with an even gentler soul," Rapti said as she studied the board.

Shifting, I tried to not let my own thoughts appear on my face as Meriah gave me a look. Based off the way she raised a white eyebrow at me, she too had a similar thought process it seemed.

"Still on that are you? And let me guess, Vim doesn't care to change your perspective," Meriah said as she looked back just as Rapti went to move a piece.

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"Who am I to know why a god does what they do? It matters not. If he wants to keep playing mortal, then that is what he will do. Even if it makes no sense to me, it's not like I can actually do anything about it," Rapti said calmly, as if we were talking about the storm outside and not something serious.

Meriah huffed as she went to quickly move a piece. "And what will you say then? Miss God's Wife?" Meriah asked.

"I… don't believe Vim is a god. I do think he is special, in ways I can't explain, but I believe him when he says he's not that unique or special," I said.

"Hope blinded by love," Rapti stated.

"Or simple truth. Have you not just considered your viewpoint is the one blinded by hope, Rapti?" Meriah asked.

"All faith is blind. Kind of the point of it," Rapti responded.

Oh…? I liked that. At least, I liked the meaning of it, even though I didn't like how she was using that perspective to justify her misunderstandings.

Meriah shook her head at Rapti, but had a smile on her face all the same. Then she glanced at me. "I'm to assume you and Vim are going to be heading south? Since it seems he's not willing to rush straight to the capital and do what he should be doing?" Meriah asked.

"I… don't know, Meriah. I'd think Vim should go to Telmik as quickly as possible too, after today. But if he decides to do so slowly, then yes, he plans to have us check on those along the way. Since… well…" I shifted, unsure of how to say it.

"Since he plans to step down. Like an absolute fool," Rapti said as she finally decided on what piece to move. She took one of Meriah's as she did, the first piece to fall.

Meriah sighed and nodded as she went to continue playing against Rapti.

The two of us had returned here, after Vim had asked us to leave, rather promptly. We'd been here a few hours, talking with Rapti and filling Meriah in with Vim's plans. Vim had only recently returned. He had seemed… calm and fine, really. He said he was going to bathe, and then cook us dinner. Supposedly he wanted to make dinner tonight, and hadn't been willing to let Rapti or I prepare and help.

He had said he wanted to bathe because he was cold from the rain, but I knew better. And I think Rapti and Meriah did too.

He likely had just wanted more time alone. To himself. To think.

I'd not heard any splashes of water recently… hopefully he was okay.

Vim had destroyed that house. Meriah and I had walked past it on the way back, another section of the wall and roof had collapsed into itself. It was half-standing, but it looked unlivable now, especially since it was pouring and storming.

It honestly made me feel sad for them. It had been a nicer home, and it had looked like several people had lived in it. Maybe even two families. I planned to ask Vim if there was anything we could do to help them, as an apology, since it was obvious Vim had been the reason for it.

Surely Vim wouldn't just ignore them, right…? He usually fixed the things he broke, when able. Or did he not care when it wasn't concerning our own people?

A part of me severely doubted Vim would just let it be. His entire belief system, his idea of free-will, centered on the fact that no outside force imposed their will on others. And even if an accident, his act had basically made a whole family have to suffer for no reason.

Strangely it was bothering me almost as much as the knowledge that Meriah had brought to us.

That the Chronicler, and Light and her people, possibly had a hand in the destruction of Lomi's home.

Not just a hand in it… but maybe even the cause.

Such a revelation had been so utterly shocking even Vim had become obviously stunned over it. Even when not taking into account the home he had nearly destroyed because of it, he had also gone wide-eyed and acted… strange. As if suddenly dull in the head. He hadn't even heard or paid attention to

Meriah and myself near the end of that conversation out there in the rain. He had simply stared out at the sea… lost in his own mind.

But I couldn't fault him. Or blame him. The accusations Meriah had brought were… well…

"Well, that happened."

I blinked and looked down to the board. Meriah had just won.

"Yes. It had. Silly me… here I thought I had chosen correctly," Rapti admitted as she frowned at the game she had just lost.

Studying the board, I found three of Meriah's pieces near one of the corner's of the board. Surrounding Rapti's main piece.

The two stared at their own respective defeat and victory, and I wondered suddenly how many games one would have to play to know each and every move.

Hesitating, my mind whirled as I wondered if I could in theory do such a thing. Could I just… remember each and every possible play? And thus know the proper response to every move my opponent makes, having already known it and seen it before?

Each player had many pieces, and a good portion could move from the very beginning… but most could only move certain ways or spaces, thanks to being blocked by their fellow pieces. That meant in theory there weren't many possible options…

"The tea, Renn."

I blinked and turned, thankfully Rapti had warned me before the pot began to get too hot. I pulled the teapot off the little metal stand and over onto the one on the table nearby, as to let it cool for a few seconds before using it to re-fill everyone's cups.

As I did the door to the bath opened. I paused a moment as I listened closely. Vim walked very quietly, with bare feet, down the hallway.

I turned, and smiled as Vim stepped around the doorway and paused before the room. Rapti and Meriah didn't notice him at first as he glanced around, eventually his eyes meeting mine.

For a few moments the world was oddly still, and then Meriah finally noticed Vim. "Finally! Go make food already, I'm starving!" Meriah complained.

"The fact that I know you do indeed know what it's like to actually starve makes me wonder how you can be so quick to claim so," Rapti said with a sigh.

Hm?

"It's precisely because I know what it's like that I refuse to do so when I don't need to," Meriah said as I grabbed the now slightly cooler teapot and went to fill up their cups.

Both of them were empty, which meant they had both drank them fully on purpose. Especially since Meriah's had been half full a few moments ago as I had went to prepare the tea.

Maybe they had both wanted fresh tea too… why hadn't either said anything then?

"Hm. I'll be back shortly then," Vim then said.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

I ignored Meriah and Rapt, who both glanced at me. One looked bored, the other had a slight grin on her face.

"To get supplies. Rapti has some of what I need, but not everything. I'll be back in a few minutes," Vim said as he stepped away, heading for the door.

"Why didn't you do that before taking a bath?" Meriah grumbled as she went to reset the board game.

Sighing, I went to fill up my own cup of tea too. Once I did, I held the cup with both hands and enjoyed the warmth it gave.

"Not going to go with him, Renn?" Rapti asked as she and Meriah went to play another game.

"Hm…? Like I said I'd rather spend time with you two right now," I said.

Especially since Vim still seemed lost in thought. Meriah wasn't wrong… he should have got the supplies he spoke of before returning. He could have still taken a bath before cooking, but it would have made more sense.

It meant he was genuinely unsettled. His mind on other things. And what he was distracted by was obvious.

Although a part of me wanted to talk to him about it, and maybe even see if I can let him vent a little of his obvious frustrations with the situation… I knew at the moment he simply needed time alone.

Plus, if Meriah was right and Vim did decide to just… run off and confront them, which meant I'd have to hurry with him. Leaving behind Meriah and Rapti.

I'd like to spend a little more time with them, if able. Especially Meriah, since she seemed like the type of person who I could go many years without ever meeting, thanks to how we both traveled around so much.

"How can she say such things so smoothly…?"

I blinked and turned a little, to watch Meriah move a piece. She had whispered that statement, rather oddly.

"She's not like you. She actually is a good person," Rapti said.

"You've been rather rude to me this visit, why is that?" Meriah asked, though did so with a smile.

"I've become disenfranchised with those I've trusted and considered friends. So I'm judging you a little more than I should be, because of it," Rapti answered honestly.

I frowned as I stepped over to them, to sit in the chair next to the table that Rapti had been sitting in earlier. As to both watch the game play out and join their conversation.

"You mean because of Crane?" I asked.

"And Vim. I'm rather upset with him at the moment, to be honest," Rapti said.

Meriah nodded. "Welcome to my world," she said.

Hm… I slowly nodded, tapping my little teacup as I did. "I too sometimes am disappointed in how Vim chooses to live his life. But, have either of you considered what the alternative would be?" I asked.

"What? A tyrant? Another monarch that eats or abuses us like all the others had…? Of course I've thought about it. Him now is far better than most other options… but it's precisely because he's better that I expect even more from him," Meriah said plainly.

"A very apt view. I too expect greater from him, since he's already proven himself to be great as he is. It's just one more step. For him it might even just be a single extra word spoken, or stomp of his foot or swing of a sword. Why not ask it of him when it might be that easy for him?" Rapti said, agreeing with Meriah.

Wanting to groan a little, because I fully saw their viewpoint and even… in a way, agreed with them, I wondered what to say.

Should I defend Vim? Side with them?

A part of me, wanting to be his wife, wanted to reason for him. To give them views and perspectives that would make his stance and beliefs not just viable but desired…

Yet the other part of me, as a member of the Society and someone who desired the same safety and living environment as everyone else… agreed with them.

If Vim was just a little more pro-active maybe our lives would not be as at threat. At the very least from ourselves.

But did I really want him to be someone who broke his own rules? It was obvious Vim's rules weren't just things he imposed on himself without reason or thought. In fact, from what I could gather, many were things he had subdued himself to out of terrible sorrow.

He lived under rules he put upon himself, after having seen the horrible chaos and failures that had came after not doing so.

But how could anyone, even I, truly explain such a thing? Most of those events had happened before the Society even existed, it seemed. So…

"Though I have been wondering, Rapti, did anyone from the other continent come say hi to you when they arrived?" Meriah asked.

"Less and Frima did. But I turned them away," Rapti said.

Oh…! "Why?" I asked.

Meriah glanced at me as Rapti moved a piece, putting Meriah in check. "They only showed up after Crane and I started the chaos of the vote. They wanted to be a part of it, to control the narrative. They did not come to be friends, or just to visit, but for their own purposes," she stated.

As I took a small sip, as to keep myself from saying something, Meriah scoffed. "Of course they'd only be interested in their own goals. They've always been that way Rapti. Even you knew so all this time, that's why you're here and not with them," she said.

"I'm here because I don't believe in forcing my faith on others. That is all," Rapti said plainly as Meriah moved a piece, and not only saved herself from utter defeat but pushed Rapti back into the defensive.

A little stunned by the utter switch in momentum, I watched intently as Rapti and Meriah spent the next few moves keeping each other at bay. Both nearly losing several times in the process.

"How come you'd have that belief Rapti, but don't expect Vim to have the same?" I asked once the two's heated battle ended, resulting in Meriah's victory.

The two startled, looked away from the board, and then after a few moments of staring at me… looked at each other.

There was an odd silence for a moment, and my tail curled around one of the legs of the chair in worry. Should I have not said that?

"It hurts to hear it said so plainly, doesn't it?" Meriah then said.

Rapti nodded. "Yes. Especially because of how true it is."

Oh?

Meriah sighed as she crossed her arms and leaned back a little. As she did I noticed the way her loose robe shifted. Was she skinnier than she looked? "It's a moral puzzle. One I bet everyone would have a different answer to," Meriah said.

"Thus the vote having such issues. Even if everyone wants Vim to change, no one will know how or to what extent… or at least, won't agree on it," Rapti added.

"Thus Vim's choice of stepping down. To avoid such conflict entirely," I said.

The two shifted, and Meriah grumbled as Rapti frowned.

"What about you Renn…?" Meriah then asked.

"Me…? Like I said I agree with you, but I don't really know just how I want Vim to change how he acts or his rules. A part of me wants him to be better… but I know, thanks to what he and others have told and shown me, him forcing his will or doing more than he does sometimes causes just as much harm if not more than he is doing now," I said.

Meriah nodded, but frowned at me. "If even his wife wants him to change, how is he going to deny it?" she wondered.

"Aren't you paying attention? He's stepping down. That's a pretty big change," Rapti said.

Meriah's frown was now directed at Rapti. "I don't think he'll actually do that."

"Let's hope not," Rapti said softly.

Yes.

I might even pray on it, too.

To his parents, maybe.

Maybe then he'd listen.

Chapter 397 Vim – His Hopeful Regrets

Who was I to be so cruel?

"I'll make sure they get the money, Vim. The man's mother is a devotee. She's here all the time, I know her well," Rapti said softly next to me.

"Thank you Rapti," I said softly as I stared down at the thin white cotton sheet covering the man's body.

They had not yet had the service for the man, since they were planning to have it tomorrow. It was custom in these regions to have the ceremony and burial as soon as possible. Although they've been proselytized well, the pagan belief that they'd return as ghouls or some other nefarious creature if not promptly tendered was still ingrained in them. Though… He'd not be able to have his face revealed during the ceremony that was also custom to this religion and culture, thanks to half his head being caved in from the wall that had collapsed upon him as he slept. He had been on the floor near the fireplace.

Slept on the floor. Because his family did not have enough beds for everyone. He had slept on the floor, near the fireplace, so that his children and elders had use of the warm beds. A result of extended family moving in with them, having become destitute.

My finger twitched, and I had to start breathing again. As to make sure I didn't make another terrible mistake so quickly.

"This had to have been a divine action, Vim. Here I was demanding you to take action, and now I am shown proof of why you taking reckless action is ill fated," Rapti said softly, speaking almost as if she was talking to herself and not me.

Although I was in absolute no mood for this to be seen as some kind of prophetic teaching, I kept my mouth shut and allowed Rapti to think so.

It was wrong of me, but if Rapti wanted to ease up on me about being more than I am thanks to this man's death… then well…

Let it be, Vim.

Don't make this moment worse than it already was.

Even if it disturbed me almost as much as killing an innocent man as it was to hear people claim I was some higher power.

I blinked and sighed. "The family. They have somewhere else to stay? While their house is getting fixed?" I asked.

Rapti nodded gently. "Yes. They have other family in the city, several of them. Though they will have to be split up, a few to each house. And it won't take long to fix their home, especially not with the donation you just authorized," she said.

Authorized.

Donation.

I wanted to scoff, but didn't.

The money I had asked Rapti to allocate to the family, through her and the church, was no donation. It was appeasement. For myself.

That money was not to ease their burdens. It was a way for me to feel better. To numb the guilt and shame.

Wergild. Nothing more.

Though sadly I could pile all the coins in the world up at their feet and not feel any better.

At least it hadn't been the children.

Though… to me, was he not a child himself? Even from under the thin cloth I could see his youth. Likely not many winters older than twenty.

He looked as young as Renn did.

"I've… also found out about the ship, Vim," Rapti then said.

I blinked and turned a little, barely able to pull my eyes away from the man's corpse. "Yeah?" Let me guess, more bad news.

"No one had been onboard. In fact the ship had been docked for repairs. The hull had been having problems. The Orchid family owned it. One of the few prominent nobles of this town."

I noted the tone in her voice. She too was happy to know no one else had died or gotten hurt… yet sounded a little peeved all the same.

"Just because it had been owned by the wealthy, and falling apart already, doesn't excuse what I did Rapti," I said.

The peacock gave me a rather nice smile as she nodded. "I figured you'd say that. The daughter of the family, one who recently got engaged, comes to every service. She even tithes dutifully, and accurately too as far as I'm aware. If you'd like I can give her some of your funds too, though I'm sorry Vim I do not know how much a ship is worth so you'll have to help me there," she said.

Right… I didn't know what one was worth at the moment either.

I wanted to leave. Before I caused more problems, honestly, and also to continue on my path. I desperately needed to finish my route and get back to Telmik as fast as possible, to confront Light and the Chronicler. Though I was also trying to not do so too quickly. I wanted my anger to subside a little before I finally met them face to face.

I didn't have time to properly assess the damage I'd done and deal with it properly. Which was why I was here, now, asking Rapti to handle it all for me.

"For now let's just give them three gold coins. It's probably worth more than that, it had been a three-mast ship, but with that much they'd be able to purchase another already built ship. If it was worn that's good enough," I said.

"Three to the wealthy noble and one to the poor family who just lost one of their main bread-winners, very well," Rapti said.

"You sound like Renn," I said as what was left of my soul writhed in shame.

"Hardly. I can't wait to hear what she says when she finds out who gets what," she said.

Right… I wasn't looking forward to that at all.

I sighed. "A gold coin could buy that family a dozen houses here. A single gold coin could not replace that ship. It's not a matter of the man's life not being worth a ship, it's a matter of impact. Anything more than a gold coin to the family would draw massive suspicion. Even that single gold coin will, that's why I asked you to give them the money over the year slowly in installments. Whereas that noble family who owns such ships can take those three gold coins and no one will bat an eye, not even them," I said.

"I know Vim… I was just pointing out the failures of our society," Rapti said softly.

Whatever. "If you have a problem with it do as you will. You have five coins. Hand them out as you see fit," I said.

I'd given her all I had. Nevi didn't have a bank or anything here that our Society had relations with, so the only resources at our disposal currently were what we had on us.

Renn had a few more, and although I knew she'd happily give them without a thought if I asked for them, I didn't want to leave her without resources if she needed them. Especially since… well…

If I, or we, ended up actually going to war with the Chronicler and the rest, there was a chance we would be denied access to the funds we've been reliant upon for so long.

And no matter how you tackled reality, the firm truth was one needed money to travel. No matter how frugal you were. And until I went to one of the places I've stored and hoarded wealth and items, we had what we had and nothing more.

Plus... Renn was not frugal. Not in the sense of how much she ate, at least.

"With permission then, I shall use the coins properly. Thank you," Rapti said.

I huffed and shook my head. Who knows what she was going to do with them, then. Honestly… I didn't need to worry about how she'd distribute them. I knew Rapti, I knew her well. She'd likely just feed the homeless better food for the next year or two with them, is all. After giving what she figured was necessary to the families I'd wronged.

Looking back at the cotton draped man, I glared at him.

I didn't need more stress at the moment… but at least it had only been one life, and not thousands.

"You glare at him as if it was his fault, Vim," Rapti said softly.

"I don't blame him. It's not his fault he, like all of you, are so weak," I said.

"Is anything strong enough to survive your existence, Vim?" she asked.

"Just because we're alone doesn't mean you get to become so blunt about it," I said.

"I'd have asked even had we been in front of an audience, Vim. Or well… that would be a lie, so I should add that the audience would have to be our members, I suppose," Rapti corrected herself.

I shook my head at her. "You'd be surprised who and what has survived me. More than a few have done so, even though they shouldn't have," I said.

"Mercy or…?"

"Failure. Those I speak of were ones who needed to be eliminated, at any costs. And I had failed to accomplish it," I said.

"Ah…"

Rapti went quiet, and I heard the sound of someone approaching down the hallway.

"Time for me to go. I'll see you later tonight Rapti," I said as I turned to head for the door. I was in no mood to deal with nuns. Let alone the human ones.

"Mhm… It is right of you to feel pain and regret Vim… but please, do not ignore our plights just because of moments like this. We are all equal, but you've vowed to place us above them. You vowed."

I paused before the door, glanced back at Rapti… and glared at the woman who was now bowing her head and clasping her hands before the corpse. As to pray for him.

Shaking my head I left the cold room and ventured into the hallway. Sure enough a pair of nuns were approaching. I walked past them, bowing my head gently in grace, and was thankful neither of them spoke to me as we passed.

Leaving the hallway, I left the church and found the rain had eased up a little. It was now only a light mist.

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And I also found Renn.

She perked up at the sight of me. She had been standing on the opposite side of the street, across from the church, under a building's extended roof canopy. For what was likely some kind of shop. It, like most stuff on the street at the moment, was closed and dark inside. It was late afternoon, plus it was considered a holy day. Most of the shops in this town were closed today.

Leaving the church, I walked over to Renn since she had stayed still under the canopy. She wore her heavy cloak and jacket, and the rain wasn't that heavy, but it seemed she didn't want to leave its safety just yet.

Or… maybe she wasn't sure if I wanted to be left alone or not.

I did. I wanted to jump in the nearby sea and swim until I couldn't no more. But I knew better than to do so.

"Hey Vim…" Renn greeted me with a soft voice. One that I could hear had been her attempt at sounding jubilant, but had failed to do so.

"Where's Meriah?" I asked. She and Renn had been out here when I had entered the church. They hadn't entered out of request. I had gone in to talk to Rapti, to find out the details. Though Renn and Meriah wouldn't have been too conspicuous, being women and with Meriah looking like a traveling nun, I had not wanted them to enter alongside me. Just in case something drastic happened.

It was one thing for me to become some public enemy; it was another for them to be so.

But as expected no one had even noticed the three of us during the commotion. Humans were sometimes observant, but rarely when it concerned what they considered genuine acts of god. They couldn't comprehend that a man just shifting his weight could cause a whole house to half-collapse or a ship to capsize.

"She told me to not expect to see her until morning. I don't know where she went," she said.

"To be alone. Meriah can only handle company in small doses," I said.

"Oh…? Where will she go? Won't she get cold or tired?" Renn asked.

"I've never been very sure where she goes or what she does. I don't pry, Renn. She wants to be left alone during such moments, so that's what I do. In fact, I'm honestly surprised it took this long for it to happen. She nearly spent a whole day with you and Rapti without a break, that's a record for her I think," I said.

"Was it…? Really?" Renn perked up at that, her happy tone finally sounding legitimate.

I nodded. "Really. She usually only sticks around for a few hours and then leaves, coming back only for a short time and then leaving for good. The only times she actually sticks around entirely, is when it's a life and death situation. Which… well…" I hesitated, since I was about to say it wasn't such a thing at the moment.

Yet life had obviously been lost just recently.

Because of me.

"You hadn't done that on purpose Vim…" Renn whispered.

"You figured out what I meant…?" I asked, a little surprised she did.

"It was obvious," she said.

Was it…? Something told me most others wouldn't have known in that context, had they been listening.

Glancing around, I made sure no one was watching us. There were still a few people strolling around the area. Likely either those who had just been at the service, or people just walking around or heading home. The church was located near the center of the city, near the larger markets, so it was usually busy.

The lack of anything in the world around me to distract myself annoyed me, so I looked back at Renn… and found her softly smiling at me.

"What?" I asked.

Her smile didn't falter as she shifted a little, and gave me a tiny shrug. "I liked the pancakes, you know."

Huh…? Oh. Right. The diner last night.

"I'm glad," I said. That had been a good distraction for me. For the short time it had occupied me, at least.

"They were lovely. I especially liked how both Meriah and Rapti seemed to genuinely enjoy them too. I don't think Rapti to be someone who indulges like that often, so it was nice to see her be a little gluttonous. Though there has been something I've been… kind of wanting, to tell you the truth," she then said.

Hm… "Your smoothie?" I asked.

Her smile turned into a huge grin. "Yeah!"

Smoothies. While I felt like absolute shit, with unsettled anger and resentment stirring within me.

Yeah. Why not.

"Can either make some ourselves or find a place to eat," I suggested.

"Actually…! There's a fancy place, Rapti told me about it. It's open, even now, down that way," Renn turned and pointed, smiling excitedly as she did.

"Fancy?" I asked. What'd she mean by that?

"Some new place. Rapti said people have told her it's got really good food too," she said as she stepped away, heading in the direction she had pointed.

She wasn't even going to wait to see if I was up to it, was she? Though it wasn't like I'd deny her. I wasn't stupid.

Turning to join her, I decided this was what I needed, even if it wasn't what I wanted.

I did not want to flirt, or talk to anyone really. I wanted to do what Meriah had done. To slip away and just… think. Brood, maybe.

But I knew how badly that went. That man, lying on cold stone under white cotton in Rapti's church, was just another reminder of what happened when I allowed my emotions to blind me to the world around me.

One of countless.

"Though I don't know if they have smoothies… do fancy places have smoothies Vim?" Renn asked worriedly as she turned to look at me. I wasn't walking fast enough for her, it seemed.

"Remember that place we ate at in Lumen? With the musician? That had been fancy, and they had smoothies," I said. How can she have such perfect memory yet not remember all the times we've talked about this? Her favorite drinks were just mashed up and slightly cold fruits and stuff.

"Oh…! Right! Good!"

Taking my place next to her, I picked up my pace a little as to keep up. She had a small pip to her step, obviously very excited at what we were going to do here shortly.

Honestly I should make her a real smoothie. One not just puree and mashed but a blended one.

Was there any cultures or nations that had such things today? I couldn't think of any. The finest smoothies we've had during our travels were likely the ones in Lumen so far. Those had been likely made with a sieve. They weren't bad at all, but the texture and smoothness of a blended drink was far different than one she was used to.

In fact, depending on Renn's taste she might not even like a blended smoothie in the first place…

Yet…

As we walked, and I studied the way she hummed while grinning, swaying in expectation, I wondered why I wasn't as annoyed as I should be.

I'd been with women before. More than I could count. I've had my fair share of relationships, unlike Renn, and this was not the first time I've been… upset, while my partner wanted to have fun and enjoy life.

Usually it was moments like this that I broke the connection. Where I drew the line and stepped away from whomever I was spending my time with.

Typically, when this happened, my partner at the time either didn't notice my disgruntled self… or they did, and like Renn, tried to cheer me up. I normally didn't even give them the chance to do so, or care for it when they did.

I didn't like being treated like a child. Nor did I like it when people tried to understand what I felt during such moments.

Because they didn't know. They didn't comprehend. And they never would.

Even those like Renn, non-humans, had no idea what it was like to be so… dangerous.

So wrong.

They had an inkling. More than humans could acquire… but it was nothing compared to the truth. Even the ones who should be able to understand, like monarchs, rarely did too. Because they didn't see death the same way I did. To them it wasn't as… personal.

And so, when people usually tried to relate to me or understand me in such moments… rarely if ever did it work or did I care if it did or not. I didn't want to be understood, nor did I care if I was either. So it just pissed me off usually when people tried. I wanted space and to be left alone, usually, not the opposite. Yet instead of being annoyed or bothered, I found myself wanting to reach out and take her hand. To see just what she planned to do, or say to me. Would she try to relate…? She once told me about those she's hurt on accident. We've talked about this before. I had even told her of some children I had once killed on accident.

The difference between then and now though was I hadn't just done the deed. And… well…

Glancing at Renn, I felt strangely anxious for some reason.

What if her attempts didn't work? What if I just grew even more upset or disenfranchised because of her…?

It scared me, to think she'd fail to uplift me or distract me from my burdens… but at the same time I wanted to find out if she was capable of it or not.

How lovely it would be if she could.

We rounded a corner and Renn pointed at a building. One with a fancier than normal canopy, and it even had a rug just in front of its entrance. A rare sight in today's era, especially for a place like this. "There it is."

"Hm…" I nodded as I glanced at her, and made sure that she had her hat on under her hood. She did.

"It smelled good the other day. I was going to invite Meriah and Rapti, but well…" Renn continued to sound happy as we headed for the restaurant. As we did a pair of people walked out of it. They unfolded an umbrella and headed down the opposite way, away from us.

I studied the older couple, and wondered how much longer it would be until all of humanity looked like them. Moderately wealthy. Happy. Able to enjoy life's little luxuries such as eating out on a date every so often.

There was still a very large portion of the human society that couldn't even imagine such a thing. Such as the man I had killed. He had lived in a house meant for maybe six or seven people at most, and had three whole generations living within it. They had been so stretched thin he had slept on the floor, not even with a hammock or something like it.

"Vim…?"

Stopping, I sighed as I realized I screwed up again. "Sorry Renn…" I turned to look at her. She had stopped a step behind me, and was now staring at me with a sad look. Not the happy smile she had just moments ago.

Why had I ignored her…? I had been enjoying her just a few heartbeats ago, hadn't I? I had even been wondering why I had been so unbothered by her, even though I felt like I should have been.

"Do you… not want to?" Renn then asked.

I gulped, since I think this was the first time Renn had ever spoken to me with such a tone.

It was the voice a woman used when scared. Afraid to be rejected. By someone they cherished.

"I would love to eat with you Renn, desperately so," I said honestly.

She didn't smile or step towards me. Instead she tilted her head and her eyebrows furrowed at me. "You look like you're about to cry," she said.

"My soul is already crying, Renn. It's in disarray. But I will be fine, I promise. I've endured this before, and in reality this is nothing. My killing of that man… the sinking of the boat… they are pale shadows compared to the strain of what is possibly the hard truth that I will likely have to destroy the backbone of the Society with my own hands here any day now," I said.

Renn made a noise. A whine. One that hurt even my heart. "Vim…!"

"Yet… as terrible as that all sounds… it is also nothing. Nothing I haven't endured before. Nothing I cannot face, nor won't be able to with ease. I've endured far, far worse," I told her.

"So why…" she whispered, as I smiled at her.

"So why do I seem so out of it? So bothered? Because I am, Renn. Because there's something even worse happening beyond all of this, and the issues are starting to pile up in ways I cannot allow. Otherwise we'll both get squished beneath their weight. And I can't allow that. I won't," I said.

Renn grabbed her arm, squeezing it tightly. I heard not just leather and soft cotton strain, but bones. "It's… this bad, and I did nothing but laugh and play games all day," she whimpered.

I scoffed at her. "Please Renn. What do you think you should have done? Weep? Become all depressed like me? No. My broodiness is enough for both of us," I said.

"I might not should have become depressed, but I shouldn't have acted as if all was well. It makes me seem heartless," she said.

"You? Heartless?" I asked.

She glared at me. I smiled.

A heavy raindrop fell on my head, reminding me that we were standing outside.

Right. Not the place to have this conversation.

I sighed and gestured at the restaurant. "May we eat Renn…?"

"Should we?" she whispered.

"Please let me act as if all is well for a moment. I'm in the mood to be heartless," I said.

A wry smile planted itself on her face. "Vim, that's horrible!"

"It was. And in bad taste, because everything will be okay Renn. I promise," I said.

Renn's smile tilted a little as she studied me… and then she stepped forward. I stood still, waiting for her to step over to me, and then I held my hand out. A few raindrops landed upon it before she took it, although seemingly a little reluctantly.

"Will it, Vim?" she asked softly.

I nodded, staring into her wonderful eyes. They looked like they were a little wet, and not from the mist and rain. "It will, Renn."

It would be.

I'd handle it. One way or another. I'll keep her, and as many in the Society, safe as much as was physically possible.

Beyond humanly possible.

I'd protect them.

Even if I had to destroy everything and rebuild it to do so.

Again.

Chapter 398 Renn – Heading Southward, Once Again

"Look Vim, it's where we helped fix that cart," I said as I pointed to the familiar stump.

Vim slowed, glanced at me, and then glanced to the side of the road.

Meriah shifted her hood a little, as to glance around. "What now?" Meriah asked.

Smiling happily, I studied the grass and dirt road. It was a little mushy, thanks to all the rain, but it was clear that I wasn't wrong. I could still see the marks in the road from the cart, where they had tried to push it and move it. And I could see the little spot the family had used to set up camp, since they had been stuck there a whole day before we had come around.

"Is it?" Vim asked.

"Yeah! Look, there's not many now since it's so cold but there are still some flowers there. Remember the whole field had been full of them? Little Kealla had gathered them up as a thank you, remember?" I asked.

Vim frowned in a way that made me wonder if he really had forgotten, but then he nodded. "So it is…" he said softly.

"Cart? Flowers?" Meriah asked.

"A wheel had broken on a cart. Vim helped them fix it. They had been a small family, carrying pelts to Nevi. They were very thankful," I explained to Meriah.

"Ah…" Meriah nodded, but had a look on her face that was a little odd as she glanced at Vim. She looked like she wanted to ask Vim what the heck I was talking about.

Vim turned, glanced at me for a moment… and then smiled gently at me. "You really do remember everything, don't you?" he asked.

"I… I don't know Vim, do I?" I asked. He and others sometimes commented on my ability to remember so flawlessly, but how was I to actually know if it was true or not?

"Had they been friends?" Meriah asked.

"No. Just a human family we had happened upon. Did you note she even remembered the name of the little girl?" Vim said to her.

"Was it right?"

"You're asking me?" Vim asked back.

I grinned at the two. "Kealla. Karl. Mary. They had been sweet. They offered us one of the pelts. A moose or something," I said.

Vim huffed at me. "You'd do well to remember that, Meriah. Don't ever do or say anything that she can use against you, even hundreds of years later. Because she'll do so."

"What…? I wouldn't! Jeez!" I complained, but with a smile, as I stepped forward to return us to walking.

"I'd have preferred that warning earlier. I've heard a lot about her, but that memory is not something anyone has mentioned," Meriah said stiffly.

Vim glanced at her, and I enjoyed the look on his face. It was some kind of weird frown. "Then what are they saying about her?" he asked.

Glancing from him to her, since I was walking between them, I watched Meriah shake her head beneath her thin hood. "You think I'll say that now? Not a chance."

"Too bad. I wanted to see her grin and blush when you spoke of cute things," Vim said.

I grinned and blushed, for him, as Meriah chuckled. "Some of it had been adorable, yes. Speaking of past events, did you really send a bunch of southern pirates to Lumen? Without even asking for permission first?" Meriah asked me.

"Well… yes? I guess…?" I answered.

Permission…? Was I supposed to have gotten that first? Vim had been the one to okay it… I had just wanted to invite them to the Society, not necessarily send them to Lumen.

Actually… "Wait… Vim… you don't impose. Does… does that mean I sent them to Lumen? Without warning?" I asked, worried now that I thought about it.

"Worried now? A year later?" he asked.

"Verily."

Vim sighed and slowed, nodding. "You did. I sent them with a letter, you remember us writing it together don't you?"

"Yeah but…"

"Don't worry about it. I've not done it often lately, but back in the day I used to send humans and non-humans alike to many locations on their own, because I had been too busy handling something more important. You sent a ragtag group of women and children. I've sent battle hardened groups of mercenaries to quaint little hamlets. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. But that's part of life, you take risks," Vim said.

I groaned at that. "In other words I really did impose, and odds are the only reason it worked out fine is thanks to those like Merit who accepted the burden. I abused my friendships," I said.

Meriah snickered, which worried me, but at least it sounded genuine and a little happy. "That's wonderful," she said between her giggles.

"They're doing well last I heard," Vim said.

"Don't ignore what I just said, Vim."

"I hadn't. Didn't…? I'm saying they're doing well, as such all is well. It worked out. I warned you when we sent them there that if they hadn't been accepted they would have been sent away, you knew the risk," Vim said.

"Well…" I wanted to groan again, but didn't since Meriah's chuckling died down a little.

"Personally I say it's suitable that the wife of our protector imposes a little on us. You really never ask for anything Vim, from anyone, it's time people started to compensate for all the stuff you've done for them," Meriah said.

Great… was that how people were looking at it…? That everything I did, or would do, was something they needed to oblige just because I was Vim's wife…?

"That argument only works for certain people, I'd say. Don't forget they banished her from Lumen, Meriah," Vim said.

"Ah. But did they do that before or after you two became partners?" Meriah noted.

"Before…" I mumbled begrudgingly.

Vim didn't say anything, and now I was the one feeling depressed.

Sighing again, I decided to get off the topic. "Do you think we'll be able to go to Lumen anytime soon Vim?" I asked.

"At this rate, who knows."

I noted his tone, and decided to change topics again.

Ever since we left Nevi, Vim had seemed… back to normal. But anytime Meriah or I hinted or spoke of the recent events, he's been a little gruff about it. So I had been trying my best to avoid such topics, as well as one could anyway.

"How about you Meriah? How long will you be joining us?" I asked.

"Honestly…? I'd really like to join you to Telmik. To see what happens. If I will or not though, we'll see. There's also some stuff I want to do down south, so I've not decided yet," Meriah said.

Oh…? She wanted to see what happened concerning Light and the Chronicler then. To see how Vim would confront them.

I couldn't blame her of course. At all.

Wait… I had just guided the conversation to where I had been trying to avoid…!

Glancing at Vim, I was very relieved to find him softly smiling. Either he hadn't been paying much attention to what Meriah had said, or he really was doing better.

Maybe it was the weather. It wasn't raining for the first time in a long time… although it was very cold. There was a breeze, and it chilled a little.

Last time Vim and I had traveled this way, it had been raining but it hadn't been this cold. In fact while we had traveled along this coastline I had played in the water along the beach as we had walked at the time. It was a little too cold this time for such a thing.

Honestly I was surprised it wasn't snowing. That was how cold it felt.

"She smiles, blushes, then grows all worried and moody and now she has the look of someone who is hungry," Meriah said.

"Huh?" I turned to look at her. What? I looked hungry?

"Don't mistake it for fickleness. She's a cat but not that kind," Vim said.

I smiled at that. "Was that a compliment Vim?"

"More like a warning. Tell me, Renn, do you have family? Siblings?" Meriah asked.

"Oh? No. My family all died long before I joined the Society. I might have an aunt out there, but I sincerely doubt it. I had only met her a couple times, because she had been infirm and… well…" I shrugged, not wanting to get into details about her and how my uncle had treated her.

"That's a shame. Would have been interesting to meet more like you," Meriah said.

"Trust me, it's not a shame at all," I said.

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Meriah studied me a for a moment and before I could feel awkward for saying such a thing during what had been a somewhat happy moment… Meriah then gave me a gentle smile and reached over to pat my shoulder. She didn't say anything. She simply gave my shoulder a small squeeze, and nodded, and then pulled her hand back to her side.

Slightly stunned by the very obvious gesture, I wished she was the type to not get offended by physical contact. I wanted to hug her all of a sudden.

But I knew better than to do so now. Rapti had offered to hug her when we left, and Meriah had threatened to never return or see her again if she did.

Which was strange, since she had touched me when we first met. When we had walked back to Rapti's house without Vim, after he had destroyed that house. After Meriah had relayed her news about what had happened to Lomi's village. She had wrapped an arm around me, as if to guide me.

Maybe that had just been a spur of the moment thing, or maybe she didn't mind touching people but didn't like people touching her? I wasn't sure. But after finding out she didn't want such skin-ship I'd made sure to not overstep my bounds with her since.

"I heard you mention your parents by the way Vim, since we're talking of family. Might I ask their names? I've never heard you speak of them before," Meriah then changed focus, to Vim.

A little worried, I glanced at Vim out of the corner of my eye. I pretended to keep looking ahead, and not at him, as he glared at Meriah and me. As if it was my fault she was getting personal all of a sudden.

"Normally by now you run off. Why you sticking around? You could just meet up with us at Telmik," Vim said.

"Gosh Vim," I whispered, a little shocked at how brunt he had just been.

Meriah snickered again. "I like this new Vim. Feels more honest somehow."

"New Vim?" I asked.

"Oh definitely. Though I'm still trying to figure out if he's changed because of you, the vote, or if he's just being very moody," Meriah said.

"All of the above," Vim answered.

I smiled at him, since it seemed he had answered in slight jest. He had sounded a little too calm.

"He has seemingly been trying to be more snarky lately. Though most of the time he fails at it," I said.

"Really now?" Meriah asked.

I nodded as a stronger breeze blew past. I shifted a shoulder, since some of the really cold air had slid between my hood and shirt and ran down my back. Really…! I was getting spoiled. I used to walk through snow nearly naked and not even flinch. Yet now even a cold breeze was enough to make me want to shiver. Maybe I was growing old?

"Cold Renn?" Vim asked.

"Hm…? A little…" I answered honestly.

"Winter's in full force. I bet it'll start snowing soon, even here on the coast," Meriah said as she glanced up at the sky.

We couldn't see the sea from here, but I could smell it on the air. Particularly the breeze. I knew if I headed westward for a few hours I'd see it in the distance. Right now there were hills and trees in the way.

Looking away from the distant tree-line, I found Vim staring at me. I gave him a smile, to which his eyes narrowed at and then he looked away.

My smile softened, but not because his actions had hurt me. Instead because it had relieved me.

That furrowed look was not one of disappointment or anger, but instead relief. He had just studied me, likely to see if I looked like I was sick or something. He had found me not needing such worry, and in relief had looked away.

He really was back to normal. These last couple days at Nevi had been… odd. As if he had not been paying attention. To anything or anyone. Not even me.

We had eaten together at that restaurant. It had honestly been a lovely moment, and Vim had not ignored me, but it was clear his mind had been on other things. His answers to my questions, and my attempts at flirting, had been gently responded to with soft smiles… and nothing more. Usually he'd respond in kind, or sigh and growl at me when I did such foolish things. His lack of flirting back, or teasing me and or ignoring me, had been proof he had been… not fully with me that moment. Even if he was focusing on me, the man's heart had been elsewhere. Worried and stressing over something beyond our little moment in the world.

And something told me it was more than the news Meriah had brought. Far more. It was related to what Elaine had said. It had to be. Could… could it all be connected, somehow? Was his strange stress concerning Elaine's prophecy related to what was happening within the Society…? I couldn't really see how such a thing could be possible, but it would make sense. Especially since I wasn't sure yet if Vim's reaction to the news that Light and the Chronicler had possibly destroyed one of our own villages had been genuine and normal.

Glancing at Meriah, I found her gently smiling as she walked. Unaware I was even looking at her. It seemed, like Vim, she was more than content to walk in silence. Even for long periods of time.

I wonder if I could ask her about Vim and his reactions. She was someone, like Lilly, that Vim seemed to trust. I wasn't sure just yet to what extent, but… He had entrusted her to find out the truth about Lomi's village. And trusted her findings on it.

Why had he trusted her with it and not Lilly, I wonder?

Though there was obviously a disconnect a little. Such as her earlier statement about not knowing anything about Vim's parents. Though… Lilly had found his strange openness about them odd too.

Still… even if not as trusted, or as close, as Lilly… she still knew Vim a little more than usual when it came to matters such as these. She might know better if Vim's reaction to the news was normal or not. Meriah had not been too surprised when it had happened… and had in fact been the first to say we needed to sneak away before being seen after the fact too. So she obviously had seen it before or at least something like it… Actually… hadn't I been told that Vim had done something similar before? He had supposedly destroyed a whole lake, emptying it, when he had found out about Merit's attraction to him. It had startled him that much.

Maybe it was more normal than I thought. Him breaking things when getting emotional, or getting stunned, was a common thing. Though usually it was a chair he was sitting in, or a rock he stood upon. Not a whole building, or massive ship.

How had he broken that thing anyway…? Had he been standing on it when it happened? Or on the dock near it? The house breaking I understood, since that crack had emerged from under him… but…

"Meriah…" I whispered her name, getting her attention.

Glancing at Vim, and seeing him not even look our way, I smiled and gestured for Meriah to slow a little. She too looked at Vim, then with a raised eyebrow of interest she smirked and got the hint. The two of us slowed our pace, as Vim kept on walking at his normal one. Before he got too far ahead of us, I noticed a tiny glance from him. He confirmed nothing was wrong, and then kept on walking as usual.

He was being kind. Or maybe, to him, us sneaking back to whisper was a good thing. It meant he'd be free of questions for a moment.

"I am all for this, Renn, but do know he can hear us talking even from leagues away," Meriah whispered as we got farther and farther behind Vim.

"I know. I'm not trying to hide from him… just well…" I hesitated, since I should have realized Meriah would have known how good Vim's hearing was. Didn't I just assume she knew more about him than most? Like Lilly? Jeez Renn, get it together!

"Well?" Meriah asked with a grin as she got closer. We were suddenly shoulder to shoulder as I sighed and nodded.

"I wanted to ask if his reaction was normal. To the news you gave him."

Meriah's grin softened a little, and she glanced at Vim for a moment… then back at me. "You don't know?"

Uh-oh.

"He does stuff like that often. Breaking chairs, and stuff, on accident all the time… but that's the first time… wait no. Technically that's the second time I've seen him react so violently to sudden news," I said.

"What was the first time?" she asked.

"At the Crypt. We found out Tim, one of the men there, had killed Frett's baby and threatened to harm her too if she revealed the truth. Vim killed him on the spot," I said.

"Wait…!" Meriah grabbed my arm, with a hush of a voice. "Tim? Tim, the stupid idiot mutt?" she asked quickly.

Oh no…! Had she been his friend or something? "Yes… He was actually being banished, but then revealed what he did as he left, so…" I started to explain, and hoped that Vim was in fact listening. Just in case this went badly.

Meriah squeezed my arm a little, and I noted that she did so rather strongly… but then she released me and groaned. "Frett you said? Really, Vim? Vim!" Meriah raised her voice, but didn't hurry forward.

Vim turned a little, but kept walking. "Tim and Frett had a relationship. It went south. Tim was abusive and then got caught cheating with another woman, and when confronted threatened violence. He admitted to killing the baby not long after being banished, yes. So I ended his life," Vim answered honestly.

"Aw… poor, poor Frett," Meriah whispered.

I blinked and glanced at Vim, watched him look away from us, and then I glanced back at Meriah who was now gone.

Startling, I turned and found her a few feet away. She had stopped walking… and had bowed her head and clasped her hands.

Oh.

Standing still, I patiently waited as Meriah made a soft prayer for Frett and the baby… and then, after taking a small breath. "And may his soul burn eternally, amen," she whispered, ending her prayer.

"Amen…" I courteously said as Meriah returned to walking. She reached me with a few steps, and sighed.

"Thank you for telling me Renn. I don't get to visit that side of the world much often anymore."

"Um… yeah."

"What was Frett thinking? Everyone knew Tim was a mutt. The fool had more bloodlines in him than a…" she went quiet, and looked at me.

"Hm…?" I frowned at her. Why was she looking at me like that? She looked aghast.

Vim began to chuckle, drawing my eyes to him, and I glared at him even though I had no idea why I should do so.

"What…? What is it?" I asked as Vim kept laughing, and not even trying to hide it.

"I'm so sorry Renn… it was just a phrase, and… well…" Meriah apologized, and I couldn't help but smile at her.

"Really, jeez, what it is? I don't even know why you two are being weird," I said.

Meriah groaned. "I was going to say a cat. That the fool had more bloodlines in him than a back alley cat. I'm sorry."

Oh. I couldn't help it, I laughed too. "You're kidding, Meriah!" I said happily.

"No…! I'm sorry…!" Meriah's face was beat red as we walked, picking up our pace a little. Vim was still many dozens of steps beyond us, but I planned now to return to his side.

"Sheesh, it's okay. That's funny. I've never really thought of it, but you're right aren't you? Cats are always born with all those different colors and stuff…" I mumbled as I understood how her insult worked.

"Yes. Each kitten can be sired by a different father. In fact it's quite common in the animal kingdom. It can happen to humans too, but it's so rare you wouldn't know it," Vim said from over his shoulder.

"What…? Humans too? You're kidding. It's rare for them to even have more than one child at a time as it is," Meriah said.

"Right?" Vim agreed.

Huh…

As we walked, Meriah sighed and reached over to pat my arm. Where she had grabbed it earlier. She did so gently. "Sorry Renn. You were asking about Vim? How he reacts sometimes?" she asked, returning to my earlier topic. Though this time she did so without whispering.

"Yeah… I was just wondering if you found his reaction… extreme? Or not?" I asked.

"Honestly not really? I've seen him break trees, rocks, and buildings before. Sometimes without warning too, without any weird emotions or startle. I think he's just too strong for his own good," Meriah said.

I nodded slowly… but wasn't happy to do so.

I see. So his reaction to the news hadn't been the true reason for his strange emotional state the last few days then.

That meant it was indeed something else. Vim had even said so, after he had confirmed with Rapti what to do about the man he had killed on accident, but…

"Though… not to twist topics too much, Renn… I need to know. How do you two uh… you know?"

Vim sighed as I spent a few moments trying to understand what she meant…. Then I realized she was asking something rather odd for a traveling nun.

"He's held me all through the night and not hurt me once. He's better at controlling his strength than you think," I said with a smile.

Meriah's eyes went wide as she hurriedly looked to Vim, and I couldn't help but smirk in victory as Vim actually groaned and reached up to cover his face.

I wasn't sure if that was embarrassment, shame, annoyance or some mixture of them all… but I enjoyed the sight of it all the same.

After all, I hadn't lied.

And he knew it.

Chapter 399 Vim – Conversations Within A Drafty Hut

Renn hummed as she turned a page of her book, while Meriah mumbled a complaint under her breath as she hurried to pick up the piece of meat that had fallen into the fire.

I glanced at her, and the way she picked at the piece of meat that had slipped off her stick she had stuck it to. She shook it a little, since it had caught aflame, and she sighed as she went to stick it back on her stick. This time she did so properly, so that it'd not fall again.

"So… It seems to me they just… moved some of the stories around. A few of the poems are different too, but not so greatly that I see any real difference between them," Renn said as she studied the new bible Light and her people had made.

"The fact you likely could write word for word the differences between the two from just memory is terrifying," Meriah mumbled as she put her stick back into the flames. The pieces of meat stuck upon it sizzled as she did. She liked her meat rather well cooked. Almost burnt, nearly. But that was also why pieces kept slipping off her stick. They shriveled up and fell, or the little half-broken twigs they were stuck too burnt off from within the meat they were lodged into.

"The way Randle had spoken about this… I had honestly expected so much worse. So far the worst thing I think is that they actually list the tithes needed to cleanse ones sins. The last one had simply said granting time, resources or self to the church was enough. This one outright says money," Renn said.

"That's what Randle has a problem with. They're making it more about money than they are faith," I said.

Meriah went to pull one of her pieces of meat off the stick and eat it. As she did Renn flipped another page and frowned. "I still don't understand the idea how one can just… pay their sin away. If it is that easy why even consider sin so problematic? And also, does it not condemn the poor to their hell? It seems to really favor the rich… though I suppose this new version does say that one's tithes must be a portion equivalent in burden… maybe they're trying to be equal in their demands? To make the rich give more than the poor, yet be equal?" Renn wondered as she scrutinized the new bible.

I wasn't entirely sure where Meriah had got it from, but I didn't doubt either her or Renn's assessment of it. If anything I was glad that Renn was reading it. Her doing so meant I wouldn't have to. She'd memorize it completely in one sitting, and would be able to, as she's doing now, tell me the differences and comparisons with ease.

I should have her deal with all documents from now on.

Renn flipped the page and shook her head as she quoted one of the passages. "And let they who desire sanctuary grant alms to those who preach our words. Giving an appropriate sum in doing so, shall purge sin and grant a sure life here and in the next," Renn read, and then sighed at it. "I could maybe overlook the way they tell you to give alms and payments, but they specifically say to give it to the church. Why not just say to give it to those who need it? To be charitable? Why does it specifically have to be the church?" Renn asked.

"She's tearing my religion apart Vim. Right next to me," Meriah grumbled as she ate.

"What…? Oh! No! Not at all, I'm just…!" Renn panicked, her ears fluttering as she looked at me, and then back at Meriah worriedly.

"Okay. I'll need to stop or else I'll get addicted to this," Meriah then said with a grin.

"Wha…?" Renn leaned back a little, frowning as she looked to me.

"She's teasing you Renn. Meriah actually does not subscribe to the religion of songs and sisters. Why do you think Rapti always made snide comments? They're of the same cloth, but different shades of color," I explained.

"Ah Vim! Revealing secrets like that! For that I should reveal one of yours!" Meriah pointed her stick of burnt meat at me.

"Please do!" Renn nearly shouted, leaning forward. I paid attention to how close she got to the fire. She had been sitting closer than usual, as to easier read the book in the night.

Or well…

I glanced up as Meriah chuckled mischievously, at the roof above our heads.

It was a drafty thing. Made of dark wood. We were in what was likely an old fisherman's hut. Not far from a beach, thus why the ground was littered with sand. But it was empty, worn down, and the sandy grass floor was slightly overgrown with weeds thanks to long years of lack of use.

But it was better than the strong cold winds outside, that had sleet and wet snow flying upon it.

"Couple'a decades back, Vim and I were hunting worshipers of the iron cross. As we did what we had to, we actually happened on one of our own members. I won't say her name, out of a kindness to her, but let's just say we caught her with her pants down," Meriah started to tell Renn.

I sighed as Renn's tail and ears wildly twitched as she nodded, transfixed entirely on Meriah as she blabbed about something stupid.

Meriah shifted her stick, as if to take a bite of one of the few remaining pieces on it. Instead she held it in front of her face. "Vim was in one of his weird moods at the time, and I don't think he even noticed what was happening. Anyway, we had been carrying proof. In the shape of a head. He entered the room, not realizing what was going on, and went to put the head on the table nearby their bed. Our young lady was shocked, but fine, but the young lad she was with? Different story entirely," Meriah said.

"What happened?" Renn asked, grinning ear to ear in anticipation.

"He shat himself," I said.

Renn turned to look at me, her eyes wide, and Meriah groaned at me. "Vim! Don't spoil it! Jeez! For that I should say another."

"You would have anyway," I said as went to put another split log onto the fire.

Renn had eaten her portion of the food we'd prepared already. It made me wonder if I should dig out another batch of meat for from our supplies… but she'd not asked for any yet, and Meriah was almost done with hers. Maybe they were fine.

"Wait… although very funny, I don't see why it's a secret of Vim's. More like a secret for that member and the man she was with if anything," Renn then said.

I rolled my eyes as Meriah snickered. She had been waiting for Renn to say something like that. She leaned forward, nearly into the fire. "It was so bad that it went everywhere, Renn. Even onto Vim himself!"

Renn's half grin scrunched up in disgust as she looked at me.

"Technically it's because it got flung everywhere as the two panicked. And don't let her discount the whole story, she got hit by some too," I said.

"Gah! Don't tell a lady's secrets!" Meriah shouted.

Renn smiled as she leaned back a little, her left ear fluttering in excitement. "What happened? Did Vim apologize or did he just ignore it?" she asked.

"Oh he felt bad, but only because she began to weep like crazy… speaking of that, I wonder if those two ever even saw each other again afterward?" Meriah wondered.

Renn was no longer smiling. "Did you ruin someone's romance, Vim? Really?"

"What? I don't know…?" I hesitated, since I genuinely didn't remember.

She gave me a look that kind of hurt and I looked away from her as to glare at Meriah. "Look, in your attempt to make a joke I'm now being glared at."

"That's your fault. Fine. Here's another, one time I found Vim stuck upside down in a hole, as naked as the day he was born."

"What? Haha," Renn immediately laughed at that, which told me she had undoubtedly easily imagined the scene. Likely was even able to imagine how it had happened too.

"It's been a long time since I've been stuck anywhere like that," I said.

The two laughed at me, and I enjoyed the sounds for a moment. The harsh wind outside, whistling into the building through the many little cracks and spaces between the worn down boards, was loud but not so loud it was a bother. Though it did make the fire sometimes pop and crackle a little stronger than it should be doing.

Plus it made it a little colder than it should be too.

And unlike me, who was warm thanks to the laughter and good company, I knew Renn was likely not faring as well. She had started to wrap her tail around her own waist, something she usually only did when depressed or worried. And she right now had a huge smile on her face, showing teeth even, so I knew that wasn't the case.

She was instinctively trying to keep herself warmer.

Her heavier jacket was nearby, as were our bags that had a blanket and other stuff, but I wasn't sure yet if I should offer to grab them or her… or just go get them without being told to.

I was concerned for her. But it honestly wasn't justified.

She was a non-human. And a very stalwart one too. Plus she had grown up in this kind of weather. Yet…

Yet I wanted to be tender with her all the same.

"Were you fighting a monarch, Vim? To be stuck is one thing, but naked too?" she then asked.

Had I been…?

"Was something like that. Honestly, as much as I'd like to keep badmouthing him… there really haven't been many instances of him making a fool of himself. Not in any grand way, at least," Meriah said.

"Wouldn't be, you never stick around long enough to see them," I said.

"That's true!" Meriah agreed.

"You got any to share Renn? It's only fair you give a few in exchange for hearing some," I said to her.

"Huh…? About me?" Renn frowned at me, and Meriah giggled at her.

"He means about himself. You see him do anything odd?" Meriah asked.

Renn squinted her eyes at me, and then she turned to grin at Meriah. "The only times I've seen Vim embarrassed is when we're flirting, do those moments count?"

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Meriah's giggling abruptly stopped as she glanced at me with an odd look. "Flirting…?" she mumbled, as if stunned.

"I think Meriah was more so wanting to know of any funny or awkward things you've seen me do, or get involved with," I said, hoping to maybe avoid talking about our flirting.

Not that Renn and I would need to worry about talking about how we shared our affection. It honestly was very tame, all things considered.

Plus knowing Renn she might just enjoy yapping about such a thing, so I needed to deflect just in case while I could.

"Oh. Hm…" Renn crossed her arms, tapping the new bible against her elbow as she went into thought.

I studied the woman who was likely going through years of memories, most likely genuinely and literally. I wonder what that felt like.

"You know… not really? There have been plenty of times I've found him adorable, such as when he accidentally breaks something and glances around in hopes that no one else saw. But nothing outright hilarious like getting stuck upside down in a hole while naked. Really Vim, why aren't you more clumsy? I want to see you do silly things too," Renn said, complaining a little as she looked at me.

Meriah snickered.

"I'll be sure to put myself into uncomfortable and embarrassing entanglements more often in the future, my dear," I said.

Renn's arms slowly unfolded as her ears fluttered while she gave me a weird look. Meriah giggled too, a little too strongly. "Gosh he's being weird enough as it is right now!" she said.

"He is, but it's not that weird is it?" Renn asked after a moment of staring at me.

"To me it is. But I'm starting to assume he's been like this with you the whole time, so you've not realized it. For your information Renn, Vim's always been the quiet and stoic protector in the Society. A man of few words, really. Not that he's ever been rude or abrupt, but he's usually not so talkative either. And usually he's very expressionless, too! I've enjoyed seeing him smile and frown so wildly while we talk," Meriah said with a smirk.

"You two are making me want to go back to talking about religion," I said with a huff as I went to add another split log to the fire. It was likely needing more fuel than usual thanks to the breeze slipping through the rotted walls.

They both giggled at that as Renn lifted the bible, as if to display it. "How do they make these anyway?"

"What do you mean…?" Meriah asked.

"It's the same writing. As the last one I read. At Rapti's a few days ago."

"Ah, they print it. They have these little blocks they put ink on, and they stamp it onto the papers. It's actually quite interesting to see, honestly," Meriah said.

Renn glanced at me and I nodded. "It's true. You cut and fashion a small piece of metal, or wood I guess in their case, into the shape you want. A letter or number, and then use it as a stamp. Line many of them up properly, in the form of a page and keep doing that for each page, then put it together, and voila a book," I said.

"Huh… Why aren't all books made this way then? Most are handwritten aren't they?" Renn asked.

"Because only the Cathedral, the Society, has those machines. And the only thing they're allowed to use them on are the gospels," Meriah said.

Renn frowned as she glanced my way again.

I nodded. "My agreement with Celine is they only print their bibles. And they don't share the knowledge with anyone."

"So you're the reason, again," she said with a sigh.

"Hm…? She seems offended, Vim," Meriah noted.

"Renn's a weird one, Meriah. She hates that I keep secrets yet for some reason gets upset when she finds out I taught one of our members something special or unique, such as that," I said.

Renn groaned at us. "It's not that… I just… I mean… do you know how long it takes to make a book? It took Witch entire moon-turns to make a single one, and it had been smaller than this. It just feels… wrong," Renn complained.

"Witch?" Meriah asked softly.

"A saint she once knew. Why does it feel wrong Renn?" I asked, interested to know why she thought so. I'd have thought she would have found it amazing and a good thing not a bad thing.

"Well… it's neat. You say it's like stamping a whole book… that means it's probably able to be made easily, again and again as long as you keep inking the stamp… but at the same time, it feels like it's cheating. Where's the passion? The personal touch? Half the fun about reading books is the little scribbles and notes. The neat ways some people write certain things, or draw certain letters. This just… feels…" Renn shrugged lightly as she opened the book to a random page and shook her head at it.

"Hm… but it makes it cheaper Renn. Thanks to that printer they're able to distribute those bibles for free to everyone. It's one of the reasons the religion of songs has grown so strongly and so fervently. Without those free bibles I bet there'd not be a tenth of the believers there are now," Meriah said.

Renn slowly nodded. "I suppose…"

Interesting. Renn was basically arguing that a printed book had no soul in it.

It told me she really was a sentimental creature. One far more than I.

Which was a good thing, really.

Though… wait till I told her you could do the same print style for paintings, too.

Deciding against doing so at the moment, I gestured lightly at her. She noticed, and smiled as she reached out to give me the bible.

I took it, opened it, and for a few moments read a random passage… but then my eyes blurred and the words became unreadable. Resisting the urge to toss it into the fire as kindling, I shut the book a little loudly and studied its binding.

"Didn't take him long at all to give up, did it?" Meriah teased me.

"I'm surprised he even opened it to be honest," Renn said.

Hmph. "I only wanted to glance at it," I said as I held it back out to her.

She smirked as she took it back. "What for?"

"To see if I could recognize the printing. I do, but only because you mentioned it. Your memory is a scary thing, Renn," I said.

Renn hummed at me as she opened the book again. "But all the letters are so similar… how could you not notice?"

"You'd be surprised. I don't think anyone has noticed, have they Vim?" Meriah asked.

"The general populace? No. Not at all."

At least not as far as I was aware. It's not like I actually kept tabs on such things, after all.

"But… how could one not notice? All one would have to do is pick up two at the same time and look at them," Renn wondered.

"Who does that Renn? Most only pick one up and open it during the sermons anyway, and do so with a hangover," I said.

I ignored Meriah's scowl as I added another log to the fire once more. I realized I was going to have to go outside and get more here soon. At the rate the fire was burning there'd not be enough through the rest of the night, and I didn't want the two women to have to sit in the cold for no reason.

"Vim's so gentle for most things, but he's sharp tongued when it comes to this stuff isn't he?" Renn said lightly as she flipped another page. She had gone back to reading it.

"The woman who raised me once told me she had watched him build a church, and then before the sun had set on its first day in service he had torn it all down to rubble. Sometimes I don't know what to think about him. He sometimes treats faith gently and with reverence, then other times spits upon it as if he was a heretical demon," Meriah said.

I smirked at the memory. I'd not thought of that in decades.

"Look at that smirk! Gosh, and Rapti and the rest think he's one of their gods. Ridiculous!" Meriah said.

That made me smile even more genuinely.

Finally someone gets me.

"There's one of those adorable moments I spoke of, right there," Renn then said.

I glanced at her, and found her happily smiling at me. In a way that made me wish we had been alone.

"Hm… I'll admit that smile is nice on him, and not something one usually sees, but that's what you find adorable…? Maybe you're as odd as he is, Renn," Meriah said.

Renn's smile didn't fade at all as she happily chuckled. "Maybe I am!"

The wind picked up a little, and for a moment I watched some rain and sleet droplets sneak into the building. They glistened in the dark a little, and faded quickly. Neither of the women seemed to notice as Renn went back to reading and Meriah finished up her last piece of meat.

"So Vim… did the gods write these? Or did one of us?" Renn then asked.

I wondered what part she was reading to have asked such a thing, but instead of answering I glanced at Meriah.

She had a worried expression on her face as she tried to not look at me. She was acting as if she was still chewing food, yet I knew she had swallowed the last bite a few moments ago.

"Can I ask why you're asking first? Before I give an answer?" I asked gently.

Renn frowned, and then looked up from the book. She glanced at me first, and gave me a small nod. "It feels like it's written in our perspective. Even the parts that speak from some kind of greater viewpoint or power, I guess? Plus you and others have mentioned that Celine and her people had started the Church of Songs, and as far as I'm aware there were no gods involved back then, right? So…" she spoke calmly, not even noticing Meriah's squirming.

I did my best to ignore Meriah too. Even though she kept glancing between the two of us. She had grabbed the stick she had been cooking with tightly, enough that I knew it'd snap at any moment under the stress.

"Celine helped found it, and make it what it is, but the religion had been around long before her. She had been born to what you'd consider a society. Something like the one we belong to. It had been full of saints and worshipers of them. She converted that religion, modifying it for the general populace, into what you're reading now. The core tenants and morals and stuff are the same though," I explained.

"So… this was made by Celine, but the religion it was based off wasn't? Was that one made by a god then?" Renn asked as she glanced at the book.

Meriah made a tiny groan of discomfort, which made Renn finally look at her. Renn startled, frowned and glanced at me then back at Meriah. "Are... Meriah, are you okay?" she asked.

"No. Not at all," Meriah said.

"Um…" Renn worriedly looked at me, and I gave her a gentle nod.

"Meriah is stressed. She likely wants to say something very ridiculous but is afraid of what I, or you, will say or do upon hearing it," I said.

Renn tilted her head at me for a moment, then after a single twitch of an ear looked back to Meriah. "You've not seemed like someone who would hesitate to do such a thing before now, Meriah," she said.

"That's because we've not talked about anything like this until now…" Meriah groaned.

"If it's any relief, I don't think Renn would be bothered to hear what you have to say, Meriah," I said.

Renn perked up as she nodded. "Yea! I promise not to react too crazily," she promised.

"It's more Vim I'm worried about, to be honest…" Meriah mumbled.

"Vim…? Really? Now I really want to hear it," Renn said with a grin at me.

I shrugged and gestured at Renn, to tell Meriah to just go ahead and say it.

Meriah sighed, cracked her stick… and then nodded. "Fine. I was raised by one of the people who had been a part of that convent. The one Celine was from. Don't believe Vim's gentleness, Renn. It had been a cruel and wrong religion. It had given birth to not just the faith you know now, but other even crueler ones. Like the Epoch and Iron Cross faiths," Meriah said.

Renn was quiet for a moment, and then after a few tail twitches she glanced at me. "Her saying that makes you angry?" she asked me.

"No. She fears what I'll say about her faith. One of the ones that had been born amongst all the rest, as she says," I said.

Meriah made a noise. "Yes, yes. I get it, Vim. They all have faults, but…" Meriah went to start defending her faith, but I smiled and raised a hand to stop her.

"I'm not even in the mood to talk about religion at all, why would I debate you Meriah? Debate with Renn instead," I said.

"Rather than debate I'd like to hear more about it. Vim and a few others have told me about Epoch, but I've not heard about this Iron Cross before. I'd like to hear about them too," Renn said happily.

Meriah groaned and glanced at me, with a look that told me she had felt as if I had just tossed her into a boiling pot.

She was likely about to panic. She, like most of those who knew about the Epoch and Iron Cross, didn't like spreading its doctrine. People became corrupted by them. Cruel. Evil.

And even the people who had seemed gentle and pure, like the Clothed Woman, have and had succumbed to them. So I understood Meriah's worry. She had worried that I'd bite her head off for talking about them in front of Renn, my wife.

Little did she know, Renn was not one she needed to worry about. At all.

I smirked at her. "You can still run off you know," I suggested, giving her an out.

"What…! Please don't… we don't have to talk about them, and well…!" Renn started to panic, but Meriah sighed and smiled.

"Fine. But only if you promise to not tell anyone I told you," she said to Renn.

Renn nodded firmly, so I stood up and stepped away.

While the two went into deep conversation, about the convent, Meriah's godmother, Celine and the faiths all around them… I did my best to hide and run away myself as I left the drafty hut and went to gather more firewood.

I made sure to take my time, finding myself more comfortable standing outside in the cold sleet carrying rain than by the warm fire next to the woman I loved, and someone I saw as a reliable comrade.

Far more comfortable.

Chapter 400 Renn – Sparring and Snoring

We weren't far from Kaley's home.

We were taking different routes than last time, which made sense since we were supposed to be checking on people we'd not done so last time… but it was a little odd to go to Kaley before Tor, when it seemed like we were going out of our way to do so. Like how we had gotten slightly north of Nevi compared to last time, visiting the family of moles after the elk family.

I didn't mind of course. I was looking forward to seeing everyone again. Though, it was too bad the world was so nasty as we did so.

We were inside a large barn. One that was actually better made than the half-fallen apart hut we had stayed at last night. And it was a good thing too, since it was storming outside.

"Are you sure Vim?" Meriah asked once more as she folded up her robes nicely. A stark contrast to the mess of robes and clothes piled next to hers, my own.

"Yeah. She not only wants to learn, she needs to. Especially now," Vim said.

I glanced at him, and wondered why he was staring at Meriah so closely. Like me, she had stripped to only her undergarments. So that we would not rip or dirty our clothes as we sparred. Since we weren't going to fight with weapons, but fists.

"Well I suppose it'll keep us warm, at least," Meriah said as she stretched a little. I watched the way she pulled her arms behind her head, pulling on one and then the other.

She was… kind of scrawny. But she was a little taller than me, and she had little hairs all over her body. Ones that had the same silver and white sheen as her hair on her head and eyebrows. They were barely visible, until the light hit them just right.

It made me wonder why she seemed so sensitive to the cold. The reason, per Vim's indirect way of saying so, that we'd been stopping so often and resting… was for her. It was getting really cold, and just like since yesterday the world was noisy. The wind was howling, as if in a storm, and on that wind wasn't just rain but frigid ice. The type that hurt.

So I understood Vim having us stop occasionally, as to rest and warm up our bodies, but honestly I hadn't needed to.

I'd not said anything, since I believed it was for Meriah's sake and not my own, but although absolutely cold and annoying… it wasn't so cold yet that I needed to spend hours warming up as she supposedly needed to.

But it was fine. It gave me the chance to have conversations, and moments like this, with Meriah and Vim. Since while walking and traveling, thanks to the harsh winds and elements, it was difficult to do so.

"What if the family comes, Vim?" I asked.

We were on the outskirts of a small human fishing village. The barn we were in didn't even have any animals in it, but it had plenty of hay and fishing equipment. Even a boat was leaning up against one of the walls. Vim had knocked on their door, startling them a little, and paid them a few coins in exchange for letting us sleep in the barn tonight. They had actually been rather accommodating. They had even offered to give us blankets and food, but Vim had turned them down. Saying we had such things.

"They won't. Not only because of the weather, but because of Meriah and you. The two of you are great at appearances. She is undoubtedly a nun, and you're a mercenary. They'll be too scared to bother us, especially after we kindly asked to borrow it and paid for it too," Vim said.

I wanted to argue his point that they'd not bother us, since in my opinion a simple human family would instead be more inclined to bother us because we seemed less conspicuous than usual… but I didn't. He was likely right, after all.

"You know… how come I don't have any real features, but she does, yet I'm hairier than her?" Meriah asked as she studied me.

I shifted a little, and felt a little silly. I was nearly naked, as she was, and although we were both women and usually I didn't mind… for some reason I felt very conscious. Maybe it was because we were both naked in front of Vim? "My family had fur all over. Covered their arms and bodies, and stuff, rather thickly. I didn't inherit any of that, for some reason," I said gently.

"Hm…" Meriah frowned at me as she crossed her arms. As she did, I noticed the way her thin undergarment shirt shifted. It looked worn, and had holes here and there upon it.

It made me feel even more conscious. My own undergarments were well made. The shirt even had little designs sewn into it, such as flowers and stuff. It made me feel like I was either a child compared to her, needing such pretty things, or someone who boasted and thought myself better.

The strange feelings didn't belong here in this moment, especially since I knew neither Meriah or Vim thought such a thing of me. But it was bothering me that so many of our members seemed to… live so frugally. Even if they did so on purpose, because of their own desires and beliefs.

Yet I always seemed to have very well made clothes. Sometimes made by Vim's own hand. It made me feel… special, but not in a good way.

I didn't want to receive nicer things than our members. I wanted Vim's love, but not his favoritism. Not like that.

"By the way, so it'll be fair, I'm a type of weasel. I don't know the exact species or whatever, but yea…" Meriah shrugged gently as she told me.

"Really…? That's cute!" I said happily as I thought of the recent weasels and minks I'd seen, comparing them to her. One not long ago had even sat on Vim's shoulder, when we had met Sap up north.

Meriah sighed and gestured at me. "Cute she says, Vim."

"Hm…? Yes. She likes cute, and small, animals. It's annoying."

"What's wrong with finding things cute?" I asked.

"Nothing at all. I just think you're the only person who has ever called me cute. Makes me upset for some reason," Meriah said.

Oh…? I glanced at Vim, who glanced at me gently without showing any emotion on his face.

That was sad. By what I'd gathered Meriah was about my age. Younger than Lilly, but not by much.

No one's ever called her cute…? Ever? At all? Hopefully she was just joking, and not being serious.

But… I knew better than to assume that. Meriah did joke and laugh, but not like that in that way. Her beliefs, her religion, believed that lying was a sin. A terrible one. It was why she wasn't able to lie or hide truths, which was why Vim sometimes didn't want her help even though he could use it. Because he knew she'd tell others what she had seen or done, if they asked.

And… honestly I'd never been given such compliments either. Before joining the Society. But ever since joining, I've received far more than my fair share of them. Most of them not even from Vim. So it was sad to think that those same people who complimented me all these years hadn't given any to her.

Did that mean the ones I'd gotten had been biased? Were people nicer to me because I was Vim's partner, maybe? It was a terrifying thought, one that I didn't want to think about right now. Especially since it made sense.

Anyone would be nicer than usual to the wife of the man who kept you alive…

"Just uh… so you two know, I really don't know how this works. I've fought before, of course, but only to keep myself from dying," I said as I glanced at my hands, to forcefully stop thinking of sad things. Luckily my nails weren't sharp or long. I had cleaned them up before we left Elaine's and although they were starting to grow out again it wasn't enough to worry about hurting Meriah as we sparred.

"We're wrestling, Renn. The idea is to pin your opponent down and put them in a position to make them give up. Basically overpower me to the point that I have no choice but admit I was defeated, that if we had been actually fighting to the death I'd have lost," Meriah explained again.

I nodded and glanced at Vim. "She means like when we spar with swords, right? That the moment one of us could have died, had it been a real fight, is when we lose?" I asked.

"Yeah. Meriah will likely try to pin you down, getting her arm around your neck or something. Don't let her," he said.

Vim looked tired. Or bored. He wasn't even smiling.

Yet he had been the one to ask Meriah if she'd be willing to do this with me, while we had the chance…

Plus…

I glanced down at my bare feet, and felt the straw and hay all under it. There was a thick layer of it, and I knew beneath it was likely the same sandy dirt that was all over this coastline.

It was actually a good type of floor to do this, if I was going to be rolling all over the ground and stuff. There'd be no sharp rocks or anything to dig at us as we did so.

Such a floor made me wish back when I had sparred with Brom on the roof of the Animalia Guild building that we had instead done so on grounds like this. Maybe then neither he or I would have gotten hurt the times we did.

"Just don't stab out my eyes, or rip my throat out please," Meriah said.

My heart fluttered as I shook my head. "No! Absolutely not!" I said worriedly.

Vim scoffed at that. "If you can pin her Renn, I'll brush your hair for you," Vim then said.

My eyes went wide and I felt my tail and ears go stiff as I hurriedly glanced at him. "What!?"

He nodded and smiled at me. "What? Want something else?"

"No! I want that! Yes!" I said quickly, feeling silly but not ashamed to be so.

"What do I get if I win?" Meriah asked with an odd tone.

"What… do you want?" Vim asked as he glanced at her.

Meriah frowned and thought about it for a moment, and I felt an odd squirm of worry slither up my tail. Hopefully she'd not ask for something similar…!

Honestly it hadn't seemed like Meriah was infatuated with Vim like some of the others. She had seemed even a little wary of him, for some odd reason. Maybe because she didn't like how he poked holes in her beliefs and faith. But that didn't mean she didn't have feelings for him, and I had just not noticed and…

"Can I know where Celine's grave is?" Meriah asked suddenly.

All my worry vanished, like a bubble popping, as I shifted and felt stunned. What a request…!

"Can… I ask why?" Vim asked carefully.

"To spit on it, of course?" Meriah said.

"Just spit? Nothing else?" Vim clarified.

"Yeah…? I'd not destroy it or anything Vim. Just want to spit on it and say some curses and stuff, that's all," Meriah said with a nod, being serious.

Vim sighed and glanced at me. My ear twitched at the look he gave me. "I… I don't know where it is. Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked.

Meriah giggled, drawing my eyes. "Because he knows you won't win. He's debating saying yes or not," she said.

"What…? I mean it's likely I won't, since I've never done this before, but really Vim? Didn't we do this with Brom?" I asked angrily.

"Oh shush. Fine. Yes Meriah, I'll tell you where her tomb is," he said to Meriah, and then looked to me. "And you. That wasn't what I was thinking. I was admiring your thighs."

My…? I glanced down, shifting a little and wondered what the heck he was talking about.

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Meriah snickered a laugh. "Vim! What the hell!"

Although I wasn't sure what to really think just yet, I found myself smiling as I looked back at him. "Even during such a serious moment that's what you focused on?" I asked.

"You'd be surprised of the things I focus on during such moments," Vim said.

"I bet!" Meriah laughed.

Sighing at him, I shook my head and felt a little… calmer all of a sudden. As if all was suddenly right in the world.

I wasn't sure why he thought my thighs of all things were worth ogling, but the fact he was doing so in the first place was very relieving.

He stared at me all the time… but it wasn't often he actually admitted to it.

Still… my thighs…?

I glanced at Meriah, trying not to be obvious about where I was looking. Had he been looking at hers then, earlier? Had he compared the two of us, or something?

He had said admiring. Not studying, or looking at. He had used that word specifically… did that mean I had the better pair of thighs in his opinion? How so?

She was a little skinnier than me, but not by much. Plus she had those fine hairs all over her. But they weren't so thick or bad it was an issue, in my opinion. Plus I knew, for a fact, that Vim was not bothered or off-put by non-human traits. In fact he's even a few times mentioned he found them attractive… so…

Actually… she was kind of sexy. Her unique hair color alone made her neat. And even though she no longer dressed like a nun, being partly naked, her skinny and fit body still told any who looked that she lived a life without indulgence or strain. She honestly was a little plain, other than her hairs, but that very plainness made her attractive. Plus she had freckles here and there, far more than I did or most women I knew, which also added to her unique appearance and…

"Alright. You ready Renn?" Meriah asked as she tilted her neck, and then did so the other way.

"No… but yes," I admitted as I snapped out of it and stopped ogling her.

I tried to stop thinking about my thighs, or hers, and shifted a shoulder.

Wrestling. Vim and Meriah had explained it. We could punch and kick, but the real point was to pin an opponent. To make them submit.

Animals did such things. They'd bite at the back of necks not to kill, but to make the other submit. Or push them down and over.

I'd seen men fight many times in such ways. Throughout the years I've not only seen men fight to the death, but for sport too. Sometimes at some villages or towns there were festivals, and occasionally there were times where knights and other men displayed feats of strength and skill as they fought or sparred. So I had an idea… but…

How did one pin someone else…?

How did I get her to admit defeat without actually hurting her?

Something told me I was going to find out, even if instinctively. Or maybe from experience.

"Try not to get too close to the walls or pillars," Vim warned.

I nodded and glanced around real quick. There weren't many pillars, but there were a couple. One was even a few dozen feet away.

The barn was actually rather big. Meriah and I had plenty of room for this. More than one would think, in such a building.

"Ready?" Meriah asked.

I nodded.

Then she tackled me.

Falling to the ground, I blinked in surprise. She was fast! Like Vim!

Landing on my back, I raised my arms in an attempt to figure out what to do next. Yet before I could even think about what to do, Meriah had rolled forward and suddenly I had a pair of knees pinning my arms to my own self. And one of those knees weren't even mine.

"What the…" I grumbled as I tried to understand the position I was suddenly in.

Meriah was on top of me. She had a knee on my own knee, and they were pinning my arms. My other leg was free, but I could feel her other foot near it. I could tell she could push or step on my other leg, to stop me from getting momentum or twisting around. She had grabbed one of my wrists, and…

Staring up at the fist, she smirked at me. "I can feel your strength Renn. You could probably free yourself if you forced it, but…" she started to say.

"But I just lost, huh?" I said as I understood.

"Hm… By the way you're lighter than you appear," Meriah said as she gently got off me. I sat up as she stood and stepped back, and I glanced behind me to find the barn wall.

She had tackled me over here? Jeez…

"And you're fast, too…" I said as I stood up and brushed myself off. I had hay all over my back.

"Says you? You nearly kicked me off the moment I tackled you, that's why I had to pin that leg," Meriah said as she pointed to the leg she had pushed upward and onto my chest.

Oh…? Had I? I hadn't even realized I'd done so.

"Again," Vim said.

I frowned and nodded as Meriah stepped away. She took the same position as she had before, so I slowly walked over to where I'd been too. I noticed a small gap of hay where I'd been standing originally. It had gotten all kicked up in the quick movements.

"I get the idea of pinning now," I said. Basically it was the act of making someone completely vulnerable. I had almost felt like I couldn't do anything even if I wanted to, as if she had full control over my own body.

Meriah smiled at that and nodded. "Ready?"

"Yeah," I said, more confidently this time.

Like before I didn't even have time to blink. One moment she was standing there, over a dozen feet away, the next she was tackling me.

The same way as before. Right into my midsection, underneath my arms. Pushing onto me, as to push me over and onto the ground.

Unlike last time, I wasn't just ready… I comprehended what was she was doing. I spun, wrapping an arm around her own, and then pushed off her left thigh with my own left foot. The movement allowed me to spin farther around, and as we fell to the ground… instead of me falling onto my back, she did.

Landing on her hurt a little. Knees, elbows, and who knows what else poked and pushed, and in a flurry of movement… I went to get her on her side, and force her head and face into the hay. My idea was to put her at my mercy, by pinning her left arm and leg under her own body, and place her neck in such an exposed position she'd have no choice but to submit… yet right as I dodged a punch, and felt her tighten her muscles beneath me…

Blinking… I stared up at the ceiling and Vim's face.

"Hm. How you feeling?" he asked with a smile.

I smiled back at him. "Lightheaded… what happened?" I asked as I lifted myself. Vim leaned back a little, not helping me as I sat up… and found it was not as noisy as it was before.

The wind outside wasn't roaring. The world was still cold, frigid even, and there was now a small fire burning nearby. One that Meriah was sitting in front of… and…

Frowning at the way her arm was wrapped in cloth, I turned and looked around… and found I was still partly naked, but otherwise fine by the looks of it.

"You okay Renn?" Meriah asked.

"I… think so?" I said as I felt my ears and tail shift and twitch. I felt a little itchy, likely thanks to lying naked on the straw covered ground, but I didn't feel any pain anywhere at all.

But it was obvious I had passed out. Or been knocked out. Even though I couldn't remember how it had happened at all.

"Sorry Renn… you broke my arm, and I panicked a little because of it," Meriah apologized as Vim reached out and patted my head.

I frowned at his odd action, and glanced at Meriah. So that arm was wrapped because it had been broken. "I'm sorry," I said softly.

"Oh, I'll be fine! Look, splinted already! It'll heal in a few days, I'll be okay," Meriah said with a smile.

Although it was obvious she was being genuine in her words, I still felt horrible as I sighed and glanced at the man still rubbing my head, as if I was some child. "Everyone I spar with gets hurt, Vim," I said softly.

He smiled gently and nodded. "People get hurt when they fight Renn. That's nothing new. In time you will learn to better control your strength, but until then… we'll just have to take our bruises and grin," he said.

"Easy for you to say. This hurt!" Meriah said.

"I'm so sorry…" I groaned.

Meriah twitched, and then gave me a sheepish smile. "Look at you…! It's okay. Really. I heal quickly, Renn. I'll be out of this splint before we reach Tor's Canyon, so it's all well. Though I'll not be able to spar with you again until it heals, sorry about that," Meriah said.

Right… I fluttered my ears, and regretted doing so because Vim pulled his hand back upon my doing so. I glared at him as he stood away and stepped over to the fire.

Jerk. Why does he keep hesitating and pulling away like that? He's been touching me more, even more openly like in front of others, yet the moment he accidentally touched my non-human traits he reverted back to his normal self. One who stepped away and pretended that he hadn't been touching me at all in the first place.

You'd think my tail and ears were prickly or something. But I knew they weren't… right?

They felt smooth to me… so…

Reaching up, I touched my ears and hair. I verified they felt fine, and sighed as I stood up.

"Come sit Renn. I brewed tea," Vim said.

"How long was I out?" I asked as I stepped over to the fire. I did so carefully, just in case, but I didn't feel dizzy or anything. In fact my earlier lightheadedness was now gone. I felt completely fine now.

"About twenty minutes or so?" Meriah wondered and asked Vim.

He nodded. "Not long. You started snoring a little after, so we knew you were fine," he said.

My face become hot, and not because I sat in front of the fire. "Mhm…" I grumbled as Vim poured me some tea.

He handed me the cup, which I took thankfully, and spent a moment to listen to the wind and world outside as I took a drink. The wind had died down a little, but…

"Is it snowing? For real now?" I asked. It sounded like it was.

"Yes. It'll pick up through the night by the looks of it," Vim said.

A part of me was glad. If it stayed snowfall and not that nasty sleet and rain, maybe Meriah and I could have more comfortable conversations as we walked.

"Now, now! Cheers Renn!" Meriah said loudly, raising her cup as she did.

I joined her, but paused a moment as I noticed the way she was grinning.

"Are… are you drunk?" I asked, not able to believe it.

"She is. She's utterly weak to alcohol, that's her second cup and I just filled it up for her," Vim said.

"Oh shut it! I'm in pain, I earned this!" Meriah complained as she took a drink.

Smiling at her, I nodded and wondered where she had gotten alcohol from. Vim and I didn't carry any with us as we traveled, so odds are it was from her own bag. But her bag was smaller than mine was… did that mean in that small bag, in what little she carried around, she chose alcohol over other necessitates…? Or maybe had Vim gone to the nearby house and family we were borrowing this barn from to ask for some?

"No. You can't have any!" Meriah then said, likely because I was staring at her.

"That's okay. Enjoy Meriah," I said.

"That's no fun! Drink with me!" Meriah's voice grew louder, though at least she didn't try to hand me her cup.

"Ignore her Renn. Give it a few minutes, another cup or so, and she'll literally just fall over and fall asleep mid-sentence. She can't handle it at all," Vim said.

"Nuh-uh! Or maybe, yeah!" Meriah laughed as she took another drink.

Unable to resist I couldn't help but laugh. Gosh she was already slurring her words!

How fascinating! She had sounded normal when I had woken up… but maybe I had been slightly out of it. Or did it just happen that fast?

"Congratulations on your victory, Meriah! Can I come with you when you spit on her grave?" I asked.

"Grave…? Whose?" Meriah asked as she closed her left eye and looked not at me, but next to me.

Wow… "Celine's, remember?"

"Oh… right… eh…" Meriah then shifted, took a very long blink with her one remaining eye… and then fell over.

She fell rather roughly. With a loud thud, causing hay to fling around. Some of it landed in the fire, to which Vim reached forward and made sure none of them were sticking out. So that the fire wouldn't spread.

"Did she just fall asleep?" I asked softly as Vim dealt with the fire for a moment.

"Yep. Told you," he said. He then grabbed her cup, which she had held upward and righted even as she fell. She mumbled in her sleep as he glanced at its contents. "A few drinks left. You want it, Renn?" he asked.

"I'd like to taste it. If it's that strong maybe it'll work on me too," I said happily as he nodded and held it out. I took it carefully, since it might be precious.

I smelled it first, finding it rather dull smelling, and then took a small sip… and realized it was just some kind of wine.

"Doesn't taste that strong at all," I said, a little regretful.

"Because it's not. She's a true lightweight. She's going to be mighty embarrassed in the morning," he said with a small chuckle.

"Why? I'd not make fun of her for it," I said.

"Because she had hoped you'd have slept the night away yourself, so would not have seen her get drunk. She seems to be really embarrassed over it, and as far as I'm aware… no one else knows other than Randle," he said.

"Randle does?" I asked as I took another drink of the wine.

Vim nodded as he stepped away and went to our bags. He dug out a blanket, and kindly laid it over her. "After her godmother died he took her under his wing. You know how he is about orphans and those like them. They don't get along much now, but I've been wondering if they'll become friends again now that Randle and the rest of them are on the outs," Vim said.

I hummed as I studied the taste of the wine some more. "Do you think Randle knows that Light and them destroyed Lomi's village?" I asked.

"No. He would have told me. Or would have tried to stop it, at least. I'm confident in that," Vim said stiffly as he stepped over to me and sat down.

Sitting up a little straighter as Vim took his place next to me, I noted how close he had sat. We were touching. "You sure you're feeling alright Renn?" Vim asked.

"Yeah? Though now I want my smoothie," I said with a sigh as I took the last drink of Meriah's wine. No point wasting it.

He chuckled, and then took the now empty cup from me. I returned to my own cup, the one with tea, and licked my lips. I honestly didn't care much for alcohol, did I? I was half tempted to gulp down my tea now just to wash out the taste.

I wonder why? So many people seemed to absolutely love it. Like Meriah.

Though… maybe I'd like it too, if it made me feel so calm and happy that I just fell asleep like that without warning…?

"Meriah feels bad. She knew you were strong from her first tackle. Yet you still startled her. What am I going to do with you?" Vim asked lightly.

"Teach me yourself, of course? You keep promising to, yet we haven't," I said as I glanced at him.

He was staring at the fire and had that bored look on his face again.

For a moment we were quiet, and I enjoyed the moment. The sound of the snow outside was gentle. The fire warm. Vim was right next to me… then Meriah started to snore. Rather loudly.

I chuckled at her, wondering if maybe it was so loud because of the way she was laying on her side. "She's noisy!" I said happily as she snored the night away.