

# **The Non-Human Society**

## **#Chapter 41 - Forty – Vim - Negotiations - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 41 - Forty – Vim - Negotiations**

*Chapter 41: Chapter Forty – Vim - Negotiations*

"That would be no problem at all, Vim," the older man said.

I nodded, expecting such an answer from him.

"Another water wheel is needed anyway, based off our own report," he added.

"They're willing to pay for half the construction," I said.

"Always with the generous efforts," Jabson said with a sigh.

"It's a wheel to grind our own wheat, and divert water for a new section of farmland. Who else but us to pay for it?" I asked him.

"Us, who reap all the rewards," Jabson said, tapping his finger on the scroll before him.

As Jabson tapped the scroll, a young boy probably not much younger than Lomi shifted in the chair next to him. The young lad, dressed in lively colors and silk, shifted in his seat next to his uncle. His eyes were screaming concern, as if he was hearing secrets not meant for his ears.

Maybe they were.

But all children had to start learning somewhere.

"Our contracts with you, as they have always been, sustain themselves by being the way they are. You allow us our freedom, we give up some small profits. What more needs to be said?" I asked the owner of the Bordu Wheat Merchant Guild.

"How about our embarrassment?" Jabson asked.

"What's some embarrassment between friends?" I asked.

The man's nephew tilted an eyebrow as he went into thought. He hadn't understood my question.

Jabson sighed as he sat back, no longer looking like the upright and proper lord that he had presented himself to be a few minutes ago.

All of his retainers were gone. The four men who had been bothering Montclair were now outside, talking amongst themselves and the other guards that had accompanied Jabson and his nephew here.

Luckily Montclair was out there with them. He sometimes tried to sit in on these conversations... not because he believed himself needing to be here, but because he wanted to serve the humans. He wanted to make sure their cups were always full, and plates stacked with food.

Ridiculous.

"Last month I returned from a trip to Ruvindale," Jabson said.

"Before the snowfall started. Wise," I complimented him.

The nephew looked at me, and then to his uncle. He sat there, studying his uncle's face for understanding. It made his own face easy to read.

What does he mean? The boy wanted to ask. Poor boy didn't realize I was just messing around with his uncle.

Jabson didn't bother with my comment and continued his tale, "I spoke with Master Ultip. They had just renegotiated their contract with the river traders," he said.

I nodded, and let the man continue his story.

"The profit margins, even after the expected upcoming taxes going to be instilled at the docks this summer by the church, are only eleven percent," Jabson said with a stern face.

"Wow, that's not bad," I nodded.

Honestly it wasn't. Especially if the church was going to start its taxes too.

"We're at sixty!" Jabson raised his voice as he waved at the scroll in front of him.

"Sixty? So low? We're just so greedy," I groaned, covering my face as if in shame.

"Vim!" Jabson groaned a complaint, and with a peer between my fingers I saw his genuine worry.

"You're a good man, Jabson," I said.

"Not if I shake your hand and accept this contract!"

I smiled at the distressed man, and noticed the obvious look of distraught on the young boy next to him. He was completely aghast at what he was hearing, and seeing.

He's probably never seen his uncle, the greatest merchant he's ever known and the ruler of his family, act like this.

Let alone saw him negotiating with a man who was acting as foolish as I.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Be reasonable!" he said.

"Okay fine. Fifty-five percent," I said.

He moaned a wordless complaint and went to rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"You're the only merchant I know who actually fights to give up profits," I said.

"Then you only know sinners! If the church saw this contract..." Jabson said as he went to reading it again.

Oh.

Sitting back, I realized now exactly what was wrong.

He and his family had always sniveled over the unfair contracts we created. Even long ago, when we first started, the Lord of Bordu at the time who had been an older woman... she had returned every day for months trying to make it more just and fair.

Humans as greedy as they are, sometimes found too much greed to be a sickness.

And once you brought religion into it...

"Do you plan on inviting the church to Bordu?" I asked.

"It's already begun, Vim. An abbey will be built soon too," Jabson said lightly, still focused on the contract.

Hm... that was a problem.

Not so much for the Society, but for him. That meant, since the church would indeed demand a copy of the contract, he really could get in trouble.

The church for all its lies and deceit still had to play the part. If they saw that he accepted that contract, he would be publicly shamed... probably even charged as a criminal. If not by the church, but by his fellows. They would see him as a greedy unjust man, taking advantage of the hard working farmers who he led.

"How about this then," I raised an open palm, getting his attention.

I had both of their attention in full.

"Two new waterwheels. Plus the extra dike, to prepare for the next hill of farmland," I suggested.

"That won't change the profits," he started to say, but I raised my hand up farther so I could continue.

"We modify the contract. Have the profits of the contract pay for the expansions. Let's throw in some other things too, if the percent is still too high. Say something for Bordu. A few new wells, or something. Something charitable, fund an orphanage or something," I advised.

Jabson's mind worked quickly as he sat forward. He stared at the scroll in front of him, but his mind was reading numbers that weren't written upon it.

The young boy stared at me for a moment, and then looked at his uncle. Based off his expression, he thought it a great idea.

"Yes. We might need to add a few other things, but it'd work. Would you be agreeable with fifteen percent each?" he asked.

I blinked, and was a little surprised he offered such a thing.

Either he and his family were already obscenely wealthy... like the snakes, or he himself was a far better man than I thought.

"Seventy of the profits for expansion. Thirty to split between us," I verified.

Jabson nodded quickly, hopeful. His eyes begging me to agree.

A part of me wanted to argue. To haggle a little, and give him twenty instead of fifteen... but I knew better.

This wasn't just his good nature trying to argue, this was concern. Concern for himself, and his family. For the young boy next to him.

If he was too greedy the church would smite him.

"Deal," I said.

Jabson immediately relaxed with relief. He even let loose a great sigh. "Thank you!"

I nodded, amused at him. Hopefully the young boy would grow up to be like him.

Though I'd need to be careful from now on. This meant the church was firming its hold on him and the people of Bordu.

That meant eventually those here would have to deal directly with the church, or at least facilitate them.

The snakes could... but...

"I'll have Montclair write up the new one," I said as Jabson began to roll up the one before him.

"Please. Would you mind letting Trim here watch? There are only a few scribes in our guild, and it'd do him good to see the skills of another master," Jabson asked, gesturing to the boy.

Trim sat up straight, suddenly alert as he was now the focus of the conversation.

"Of course. He'll have to be careful however, Montclair might make him write it instead as training," I warned.

Jabson smiled, and seemed even happier that such a thing might happen.

As I went to stand from the table, the door to the room opened. Sure enough Montclair quickly entered. "Lord Jabson, Sir Vim!" he greeted.

"Great timing, Montclair. We have new terms. Would you please sit with Jabson and Trim here, and write them out for us?" I asked him.

The squirrel nodded quickly, and hurried out of the room to get the necessary materials.

Walking around the table, since Jabson still sat, I reached out my hand to him.

He took it firmly, but I noticed it was a hand of thin bones.

He was aging faster than he looked. Maybe disease.

"Thank you Vim," Jabson said.

"Thank you, Jabson. You and your family have always been great to work with. I look forward to next time," I said as we shook hands.

"Next time it might be Trim, I fear," he said lightly.

I nodded as I stepped around Jabson's chair to offer my hand to the young boy.

His face went a little pale at my offer, but he found the nerve to reach out and take my hand. The young boy trembled as we shook hands.

"It was nice to meet you Trim. Learn as much as you can from your uncle and others, so that when it's your turn you don't embarrass yourself like some of your ancestors," I said to him.

Trim smiled, but it was an unsure one. He wasn't entirely sure what to think of my comment.

"Thank you as well Jabson for letting Pelka work in the city," I said to Jabson as I stepped away from the table.

"Of course! I'll put her in my branch. I'll keep an eye on her for you," he said.

"Please do," I said.

I walked out of the room right as Montclair returned. He hurriedly went to putting the papers onto the table, and I listened only distantly to their conversation.

There was absolutely no reason to worry Jabson would deceive Montclair on the terms, but a part of me did wonder if he had the gall to lower his percent even further. It'd be interesting if he did.

Walking down the hall, I turned a corner and paused.

Sitting on the ground against the wall, with a strange look on her face, was Renn.

"Why did you not sit in one of the rooms nearby?" I asked her. She had quite literally sat there the whole time. Nearly two hour's worth of talks.

Renn slowly stood, as if she was stiff from sitting for so long. I knew better. She was simply a little embarrassed.

"My hat is thick, and... it makes it hard to hear," Renn said, pointing to the hat on her head.

Yes that was thick leather and fur... but...

Maybe it was also the angle her ears were forced into. I knew beneath that hat, her cat-like ears were probably forced downward.

"I see," I said.

Stepping past her, to the study where I knew I'd find Trixalla, I didn't mind it when Renn went to following me.

"He seemed nice," Renn said.

"Jabson's a good man. He learned his kindness from his mother," I said.

"He knows what we are?" I asked.

"He does," I admitted.

Even during the negotiations... Jabson and I had not ever said such a thing aloud. But since Renn had listened to the whole conversation, she probably had been able to easily figure that out.

"Does the boy?" she asked.

Opening the door to the study, I found Trixalla and Mork inside. They were discussing something. Mork was probably telling his wife the details of the conversation between Montclair and the boy.

Trim sounded very excited. Montclair was offering to teach him how to make scrolls.

"Only the heirs learn the truth. But yes, the boy probably knows. Or at least was told that we were special, based off his reactions," I said.

After all he had trembled at my mere presence.

Entering the study alongside Renn, I took a seat next to Mork.

"Montclair's agreed to teach the boy a few times a month," Mork said.

"Even better. He's to be the next Lord. This will allow our families to become deeper bonded," Trixalla said.

"Is it safe?" Renn asked as she closed the door.

She stood near the door, looking at us with a strange smile.

Looking around I realized why she was standing there. There were no other chairs for her.

"It's safer than the alternatives," I answered her.

Renn didn't like that answer much, but she didn't voice it her complaints. She only furrowed her brow and glared at me.

"Thank you Vim. You did well," Trixalla said.

"I always do," I nodded.

"Structuring the deal like that will reap us great rewards," Trixalla said with a nod.

"For now. Until the church takes hold and claims the credit," Mork argued.

"That will be years from now. And the human's won't forget quickly. You're talking generations," Trixalla argued back.

"Only a couple," I threw in my argument.

"Why was it so wrong for him to make too much money?" Renn asked cautiously. She spoke as if she was okay with being ignored.

"He's a good man. But he also fears retribution," Mork explained.

"From his people?" Renn asked.

"Them and the church. The church collects the taxes usually, since the humans see them as incapable of favoritism. So when they come in the next few years to overlook the contracts and deals amongst the businesses, like ours and Jabson's, if they see him making too much on a simple wheat deal they'll strip him of his duties and titles," Trixalla said.

"Oh. I see."

Glancing at the cat, I watched as she pondered it. She probably had already somewhat understood, she had just...

"You wanted to confirm your suspicions," I said to her.

She blinked, and then smiled lightly. "Yes. Wanted to make sure I wasn't making assumptions," she said.

I scoffed and looked away from her. I didn't like that smile.

It fit her face far too well.

"Hmm..." Trixalla hummed oddly, and I ignored her strange smirk too.

"Once they're done, and the humans head back to Bordu I'll be leaving," I said.



Renn startled, but I ignored her as I nodded to Mork and Trixalla.

"We understand Vim. Thank you for sticking around this long," Mork said.

"I'll return in a few years, to check on Lomi and Pelka," I said.

"Thank you for that too. It's much better for her to be close that way," Trixalla said, happier with that than the contract with Bordu.

"Obviously," I said, and stood from the seat.

Renn stood up straighter as I turned to her. She blinked wide eyes at me.

"Get ready. Get your bag, and anything else you need," I said to her.

She quickly nodded and turned to open the door. A moment later she hurried out.

"Don't be cruel to her," Trixalla said softly. Probably in hopes of not being heard by the one she spoke about.

"I don't have the luxury of being kind," I said.

"Yes you do, Vim. Out of everyone, you're the only one who does," Mork said. He didn't whisper like his wife had. Probably knew it wouldn't matter if they did or not.

Glaring at the two snakes, I was about to say something but Montclair hurried down the hall.

The contract was done. He was coming to get their signatures.

"Goodbye. I'll see you in a few years," I said to them.

"Safe travels, Vim. Farewell," Trixalla said as I left.

*Chapter 42: Chapter Forty One – Renn – Rules, Humans, Conversations*

Vim didn't travel like how I was used to.

He didn't stop to rest, even at night. He didn't stop in any of the towns that we passed through, for food or supplies.

He simply kept walking.

Luckily the pace he walked at wasn't that bad. But...

"Vim did you make Lomi walk this fast?" I asked him.

We were walking alongside a large river. The path was rather empty, even though not too long ago we had passed a small caravan of carts and horses.

I was walking behind Vim, but only a few strides behind. He carried no bags, and even looked a little under dressed compare to the other men we passed. It was still winter, even if the snow hasn't fell lately.

"Lomi ran around most of the time," Vim said without looking back at me.

Frowning at him, I felt sorry for the poor girl. We'd been on the road for a whole day and a half, and as far as I was aware we were not even half way to Ruvindale. He had made that young girl travel like this?

Vim sighed, and then slowed his pace. Wondering what he was doing, I realized a little later than I should have that he was waiting for me to catch up to him. To walk side-by-side.

Hurrying up a little, I went to walking next to him. Suddenly I felt a little out of place, even though there should be nothing wrong with us walking together like this.

"I didn't walk this fast or this hard with Lomi. It took us over a week to get to Twin Hills from Ruvindale, and I had not allowed her to waste time," Vim explained.

"Oh... okay," I nodded, a little surprised he'd explain it in so much detail for me.

He studied me for a moment, and then looked forward. At first I thought he was going to increase his pace, to separate us again... but instead he kept the pace the same. Allowing us to stay next to one another.

"I'm simply hurrying out of concern," the protector said after a moment.

"Oh... I see. I wasn't complaining, just... wanted to make sure you hadn't rushed Lomi is all..." I said, suddenly very aware I probably sounded like I was whining.

"I know. We'll stop and rest tonight at the river this merges with, which connects to Ruvindale. It's a few hours away at this pace."

"I can keep going," I offered. It'd make me tired, but I'd be alright.

"You can. But we've been passing merchants since we left Bordu. Last thing I need is for someone to see us while we're in Ruvindale, and wondering how we made it there so fast," Vim said.

"Ah... so you intentionally keep track of such things like that too?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Would a human actually notice?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you notice if someone outpaced you by leagues?" he asked me back.

Blinking, I hesitated.

Yes. I would have. But not because I was being observant for such things... but because of how rare and ridiculous it'd be.

Though maybe that was the point. In a human's eyes, I was a young woman. Probably not even old enough to actually be on the road on my own. So to them, me being better or faster at traveling... would indeed be strange and unique.

"Exactly," he said, noticing my thoughts.

"Can... Can I ask what you expect to find? In Ruvindale?" I asked him.

Vim walked in silence for a few minutes, and I watched his expression. It never changed. He looked as calm and normal as he always did.

That's a no then, isn't it?

Looking away from him, I wondered what else I could ask instead.

"I'll be checking first and foremost that our members are safe. If they aren't, I make them safe. If they are..." he stopped talking for a moment, and I watched as he lightly shrugged. As if the rest didn't need to be said.

"If they are?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't get upset at me for inquiring further.

Vim sighed, "If they are I'll investigate Amber's cause of death. Just to be sure."

"Oh."

He nodded, and I didn't need to ask for what he'd do next. His tone told me all I needed to know.

"So... you do see Amber as an actual member then, huh?" I asked him.

Vim suddenly stopped, which caused me to come to a stop too. My heartbeat doubled, and I wondered if I had finally asked something I shouldn't have.

"Amber earned her place in our Society. Just as her mother had."

My ears went stiff beneath my hat, which I knew caused it to move out of place. But I didn't reach up to adjust it. Instead I kept hold of the hard gaze before me.

The man before me now genuinely looked like a protector. A warrior.

Suddenly he wasn't genial or placid. He was...

"I read the letters too," I said to him, while staring into those stern eyes.

Vim blinked, and then lowered his head. "Yes. I know."

Gulping a dry mouth, I shifted a little. My tail beneath my pants coiled and twisted, trying to stretch free. Sometimes I couldn't control it completely.

"What is a human, Renn?" Vim then asked.

For a moment I considered his question, since I knew he wasn't looking for the obvious answer. It was related to our conversation... at least, somehow.

"Probably anything that is the norm, maybe," I said.

"Is that how you see it?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Somewhat. Sometimes... sometimes I think of our kind as monsters. While other times I feel we are more human than not," I said.

"A very human answer," he said.

"Didn't say it wasn't," I countered.

"Hm," he nodded, and glanced down the road. Sure enough off in the distance there was a pair of silhouettes. People were headed this way, but were more than far enough away that I didn't need to worry about them yet.

Even though they were off in the distance, I still reached up to adjust my hat. Just in case.

"Mork despises humans," Vim then said, as he returned to walking.

Hurrying to join him, I nodded... even though I hadn't known that.

"Took his whole family from him. He's not blind because of his age," Vim said.

"Humans then," I said.

Vim shook his head. "No. The humans didn't take his sight."

I hesitated, since that meant it had been one of our kind... but... I studied Vim as he remained silent, letting his odd expression answer for him.

Surely not...

"And Trixalla loves them. She cherishes them so much she'd live with them, if she could," Vim continued.

"Really..."

"Really," he nodded.

I hadn't realized that. In fact, I could have sworn Trixalla had made negative comments about the humans...

Yet... that meant the two were mated, married, yet had completely opposing views.

Somehow that made their relationship all the more precious.

"I'll not get into a deep conversation with you about it, but I will at least let you know that I agree with you," he said.

"With me?" I asked him, wondering what our conversation about humans had to do with this.

"You saw Amber as an equal, didn't you?" he asked me.

It was my turn to come to a stop. He slowed to a stop too, but not directly next to me. He stood a few feet away, watching me intently.

"You mean my willing to risk the Society for her," I said.

He nodded.

"I... I did. And I am sorry that I did that... but..." I wasn't sure what to say.

"But you'd do it again wouldn't you?" he asked me.

For a small moment I hesitated. If I answered honestly, would he kill me? Vim didn't care if those humans might see. He'd simply kill them too, or just ignore them completely. He was that kind of man.

"I've failed the same way before," he then said.

Blinking, I looked away from the approaching humans and to him. He had a soft smile on his face, as he saw something past me. Beyond me. Most likely saw something that had happened long ago.

"It's hard. To disobey. To break a rule, even though it feels so wrong not to," he said.

Vim then turned and returned to walking. Although I wanted to continue this conversation, I knew for as long as the approaching pair of men was in earshot he'd not do so.

Following Vim closely, I chose to walk a little closer to him than normal as we passed the two men. They were rugged looking, and both carried large packs on their backs.

Neither looked at us as we passed one another.

Glancing behind us as we passed, I wondered if they had their own secrets too. Their own reasons to go quiet and not meet our eyes.

"Does the Society have rules?" I asked, once the humans were far enough away.

"No. No real ones. Nothing written and obeyed," Vim said.

"But you do, don't you?"

Vim's placid expression changed a little. His eyebrows became a little more arched. His jaw tightened a little. "Rather I have convictions. And I act against those beliefs often," he said.

What a fancy way of saying you couldn't abandon anyone you held dear.

"I would think the Society would want a protector who would cherish each and every member," I argued.

"Don't sacrifice the village for a single individual," Vim said.

"What if that individual was a child? Or the hope of the whole bloodline?" I further argued.

"What if that individual was the very danger the village needed protection from?" he countered.

"Ah..." I hesitated, since that was very obviously what others... what Lughes and the others had probably seen me as.

I saw Amber as someone worth saving, no matter the cost.

Once I went into action, I became the very danger they were worried about.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I'm not the one you need apologize to," he said.

"Then who? Crane said I couldn't go back," I said.

"You can't. If you step foot into that building I'll be forced to kill you," he said.

"Kill...?" I clenched my teeth, upset to hear such a thing.

"What point is there in banishment if it isn't enforced?" he asked.

"I see..."

Vim nodded.

We walked in silence for small distance. Open rolling hills slowly started to become forest. The river we were following was starting to grow wider, stronger in current.

In the air I could smell something burning. Wood. Maybe a campfire or a forest fire was off in the distance.

The smell was pungent but... somehow relaxing. Alerting yet comforting.

"Lilly brought you to the farm, didn't she?" Vim then asked.

"Ah... yes. I told you that," I said. Had he forgotten? He was usually a lot more adept at remembering such details.

"You had. But..." he paused for a moment, and then shrugged lightly, "Honestly I had been upset."

"Upset..." I whispered, and tried to remember our conversation. The one we had right upon my arrival.

It hadn't been a long one at all. It had just been me rambling in great detail about everything that had happened. Since from the moment he had left Ruvindale with Lomi, to my standing before him in the wheat fields.

"She hates humans too," Vim said softly.

"Ah..." I nodded. I had realized that rather quickly with her. Did that mean we were still on our previous conversation?

"Did she tell you what to expect? Upon meeting me?" he asked.

"She said you might kill me before I can explain," I said.

Vim sighed and nodded, obviously he had expected such an answer.

"I'm glad you didn't, for the record," I said gently.

"If she had truly believed you'd have died she most likely would have approached me herself first. And only allowed you in my sight once she convinced me to stay my hand," Vim said.

"Huh?"

He nodded. "She hates humans. Amber dying is of no concern for her. But you... she'd see you as a potential warrior. Something valuable. She'd protect you, if she could," Vim explained.

"Oh." I hadn't gotten that from her at all.

Warrior? Me?

Glancing down at my hands, I did notice that my nails were a little long. It was really long time I cut them; otherwise I'd nick someone on accident. They were sharp.

Yet, although I had built-in weapons, that didn't make me much of a warrior.

"I'm not a warrior," I said honestly.

"Not yet."

Frowning at his statement, I wondered why he'd say it in such a way. That wasn't some lighthearted comment, but one made with surety.

"I don't like killing," I said softly, hoping to tell him of my thoughts of the matter.

"I figured."

"Do you want me to be a warrior?" I asked him.

"I don't want anyone to be a warrior," he said.

"Do you need me to be a warrior?" I asked instead.

This time he didn't respond, but he did lower his gaze. Going into thought for a moment, we both slowed down a little. We didn't stop, but our trek came to a slow pace.

"Some do," he then said.

"Do... do we have an army? A need for one?" I asked.

"We used to."



Used to. Great.

Vim pointed ahead, to a larger river off in the distance. "We'll stop near there for tonight," he said.

"Okay."

Walking with him, I realized he hadn't returned to the pace we had earlier. We were still slowly trotting along, barely walking any faster than I would on a leisure stroll.

Although I had a lot more questions, and now concerns... I realized he wasn't going to really respond to me anymore. He was now lost in thought. Deeply pondering something.

Studying him as we approached whatever spot he felt was good enough for us to stop and camp at... I realized the man next to me was just as conflicted as any other.

He might be steadfast and quick to act... but he...

He found himself troubled over his choices. His actions. His beliefs.

Yet I knew no matter how troubled he got, he'd never let those troubles distract him. Or cause him to fail.

The river grew louder as we approached, and I wondered if this was one of the reasons he chose such a location. It'd let us sit and talk, without anyone hearing our voices carried along by the wind in the middle of the night... While also being loud enough that he could use it as an excuse to not talk to me at all through the night.

Vim guided me to a slightly flat piece of grassland, near the river. There were logs, and a large rock, all gathered around a small square of dark stones. Obviously others had used this place as a resting spot. I could even see the remnants of old fires, from days if not weeks ago.

"I'll start a fire," Vim said as he went to the task.

Nodding, I hoped by the time the fire was lit I could think of a way to reignite our conversation.

After all, depending on what Vim found in Ruvindale here in a few days...

These conversations might be my last, so I wanted to enjoy them as much as I could. Or at least make them worth it.

I'd talk for as long as I could, since these words may be my last.

*Chapter 43: Chapter Forty Two – Vim – A Silent Night*

The fire crackled, casting shadows on the cat's face.

Her pupils were visibly larger, and were growing larger as the night quickly became darker.

Which meant her ability to see at night was likely very good... maybe even as well as mine.

Concerning, but it made sense.

After all she had sat on the rock, at a somewhat odd angle. It was undoubtedly also colder and harder than the logs she could have sat on instead...

But that rock granted her something the logs didn't.

Far past her, about half a league away, was another campfire. And thanks to the clear winter sky, it was easy to make out the shadows and figures around that fire.

Surely that wasn't four people...? No. It was more. Maybe even five or six.

"Don't say it," Renn said.

I blinked and stopped trying to focus on the bundle of naked bodies in the distance.

"Say what?" I asked her.

Her eyes narrowed at me, and her nose scrunched up. As if she had just bit into something spicy.

Smiling at her, I realized that was why she had left her hat on. She had allowed her tail out from beneath her pants, and it was now coiled around her waist. The end of it was twitching, patting the rock she sat on similar to the way a tapping finger would a table.

"Yet you hadn't been able to hear beyond a few walls," I said.

"That was within a building made mostly of stone. This is an open field, and the night is quiet," she argued. There was a hint of some annoyance in her voice.

"True," I admitted.

Standing from my log, I did my best to ignore the way she stiffened at my movement. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her tail go still, as if she was ready to pounce on me.

Grabbing some of the wood I had gathered earlier, for the fire thru the night, I knew better than to think that prepared pounce was anything but filled with violence.

Did she think I'd do something simply because I saw someone else doing such things?

"Humans are odd," I said to her as I put some more wood into the fire. It crackled, causing some smoke to fill the air.

"Odd? That's not odd, it's disgusting," she said.

Frowning, I wondered what bothered her. The number of them involved in the act, or the fact it was all men.

"Not to them it's not," I said.

Renn's brows furrowed and her tail didn't just tap the rock it nearly slapped it. "You're free to go join them," she said.

Smiling at her odd tone, since I'd never heard it from her before; I wondered if she was as prudish as the churchmen.

"Please," I said, dismissing her tone and look.

Sitting back down on the log across from her, I made sure to sit at just the right angle that she herself could block the sight of the group of men. She couldn't block the sound, but the crackling of the fire did help a little.

"Should I sing a song until their done?" I asked her.

Her glare suddenly shattered, as she gave me a toothy grin. "That's funny," she said.

"Glad you found it so, because I really suck at singing," I said.

Although her smile died down, I was glad to see it still linger. She was either getting used to the sounds behind her, or had for a few moments genuinely worried I'd do something stupid.

"I was worried," she then said.

"That I'd burst into song? Don't be. I won't even if you pay me," I said.

"Shush. No. I..." she went quiet for a moment, then coughed, and I realized she was embarrassed.

"Seeing a bunch of naked men isn't going to put me in the mood," I said.

Renn blinked, and her tail twitched. Somehow I found her tail to be more animated than her face. "Rather I was worried you'd go join them, not leap on me," she said firmly.

"Huh. Did I seem the type?" I asked, suddenly a little concerned.

"No. You had just been staring... more than me," she said.

"Well... it was a surprise," I admitted.

She giggled and nodded.

"Since you now know I'm no threat, nor weird enough to jump into the many arms of a bunch of strange men... might I ask what about it you find so disgusting?" I asked her.

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked, concerned.

I stared at her, waiting for the answer.

"It's... that's something you do with someone precious," she whispered.

"Hm," I studied her eyes as she did her best to focus on the fire between us, and the smoke it put off. Somehow she couldn't focus on it long enough.

"Plus what if someone saw you?" she asked, and reached down to grab the end of her tail. She squeezed it, as if for comfort.

"True, don't want to traumatize the locals," I said.

Renn smirked. "What, the fish and rodents?" she asked, with a glance to the river nearby.

Although the world was dark, and the water darker, she and I could both see the large rodents messing about on the riverbanks. There were dozens of them.

"Beavers. They're probably making a dam," I said.

"The river's huge though," she said.

"Go tell them that," I said.

The cat huffed, but didn't get up from her rock. Nor did she seem too bothered.

"Rather they than the animals behind me," she whispered.

I nodded my head, if anything out of sympathy.

"Are you religious Renn?" I asked her.

Renn looked at me, suddenly far more focused on me than anything else. Based off that look, she now probably didn't hear the men behind her at all.

"Why do you ask?" she asked.

"Your personality is similar to one who is," I said simply.

"I see. No. I don't like the church. They... they tortured Nory. Horribly. I was the one who rescued her," she said.

"The church tortured her?" I asked. She had mentioned this Nory before. Wonder who she was to her. Sometimes the way she spoke about her, it seemed like more than just a simple friend.

"Because of me, yes," she whispered.

"I see. She's not the only one who had suffered like that," I said, carefully choosing my words.

That probably meant Renn herself had suffered at the hands of the church too.

"No... but she was my Nory," Renn said softly.

I nodded, understanding that. I knew that feeling well.

Each time I lost one of the Society, I felt that emotion deeply and for a long time.

For a long moment I let her sit silently, but then I realized this was probably an opportune time.

She was distressed, not just because of the story behind her but my questions. The circumstances were...

Although it might ruin our relationship. Forever.

But if I didn't...

"The church in all its evil is not evil itself," I said to her.

Renn's eyes didn't narrow, but she sure did stare at me all the same.

I nodded to further imply my meaning. "Do you hate the axe, or the one who swings it?" I asked her.

"Both," she said.

The fire crackled, and I sat back a little. To stare at her better.

She held my gaze, unashamed of her answer.

"That's a good answer," I said.

"Yet you don't agree, do you?" she asked me.

"No. I don't."

She was about to say something, but a loud shout drew her attention. She glanced back behind her, only to hurriedly look forward again... back at me.

For the briefest instant she looked shocked, and then I watched as her face slowly got redder... as if in sudden anger.

But I knew it wasn't anger.

Tilting my body a little, to get a look at what I had only barely seen but clearly heard... I watched as the men began to fight one another. A small brawl broke out, and they began to shout and yell as they fought.

"Why... why did you grow embarrassed at their fighting?" I asked... a little shocked that her face was still red.

"They were just making love," she said.

"Not when you turned around, though," I said.

"They had been! Now they're fighting..." she grumbled, her tail wildly twitching.

Frowning at her, I tried to understand... "Are... are you simply embarrassed because you think you're seeing an emotionally private moment?" I asked her.

"I guess?" she groaned, and reached up to grab her hat. Not to remove it, but to push it down harder.

She didn't want to hear the things they were shouting.

I didn't blame her. Some if it was kind of nasty.

"Humans," I said simply.

"Men," she complained.

"Women fight just as much," I said, defending my people.

"I've never seen a bunch of women do that then..." she stopped talking, as she realized what she was about to say.

"Uh... yea, no. I've seen far more women together in bed than men," I said.

Her eyes glared at me from under her hat. She had pulled it down far enough that she almost couldn't see out of it.

"Really," I said, nodding.

A man shouted in pain, and suddenly the fighting came to a stop. Leaning again, so I could see, I watched as all of them stood around another. One on the ground. With something sticking out of his chest.

A sword or knife maybe.

"I think they just killed him," I said.

"Ughh..." Renn obviously couldn't find the words to describe how she felt about that.

Smiling at the sight of her, I couldn't help but find her...

"You're rather adorable," I said to her.

Suddenly I lost all care for the arguing men as I watched the woman in front of me go completely still.

Her eyes went wide. She released her hat, and her ears perked up straight... causing it to fly off and land on the dirt nearby. Her tail went so stiff, it disappeared behind her... and she went absolutely still.

For a long moment I stared at the shocked cat, and realized I probably shouldn't have complimented her so.

I should have known. She wasn't exactly a prude, but...

She was a little... more normal than most. Her embarrassment at the men, and what they had been doing, should have been more than a clear sign that she'd not take such compliments in stride.

"Sorry... I uh..." I hesitated for a moment. What was wrong with me? I was far too old to act like a young fool, incapable of speaking. Why couldn't I just make a statement and laugh it off? Like I always did?

Why did I say such a thing anyway?

Renn finally regained some semblance of control over herself, her right ear twitched. Her tail came back into view, quickly wrapping itself around her waist... this time far tighter than before...

And right as she was about to say something... I stood.

She went completely still again

Taking in the moment, I etched her look into my memory. I wanted to remember that face.

But I didn't want to remember what was going to happen next.

Rushing forward, I leapt past her. Nearly scraping my right foot on the rock she sat upon, as I rushed those who were running towards us.

Renn let loose a yelp, but I ignored her as I hurried forward. Towards the men.

Towards the spears and swords.

The five men had weapons. But not much else. Only one had bothered to put on a pair of pants, and only one other had put on a shirt.

They were charging at us, in a small group. So closely together in fact, that only the man in the front noticed my own approach. He had a spear, what looked to be a fishing spear, and had it raised to pierce. It lowered a little as he saw me, and I could see in his eyes the man's brain trying to process what he saw.

A man. In the middle of the night. Running towards him and his comrades, who without a doubt looked unnatural and dangerous... being naked, and armed. And doing so without a weapon. And alone.

Smiling at the expression on the man's face, I watched as the other four men noticed me finally too.

They all were as shocked as he.

But that was what made it easy.

I charged into the spear wielding man first. He tried to skid to a stop, and tried to jab the spear into me... but he was neither fast enough, nor skilled enough.

Grabbing his spear with one hand, I crushed his throat with the other. His spear jolted as his arms shot forward from my blow as he died, but my grip kept it steady.



"Briam!" the man with the shirt shouted. He skidded to a stop in shock.

His hesitation cost him his life. By the time he stopped shouting his friend's name, I had lunged the spear I had stolen into his chest.

"Gods!" a naked man, carrying a small sword, stepped backward several steps. Completely mortified by what was happening in front of him. Which was odd, considering he had blood on him already. It was covering his waist and forearms.

He had been the one to kill the man earlier.

"Kill him Frank!" the bloodied man shouted, pointing his short sword at me.

Frank was the one with the pants... for he grunted and charged at me. Raising a smaller spear up, I recognized the stance he took. This man had experience. A spearman. He stood toe to heel, and his shoulders were positioned well.

Any normal man would have feared such a sight. Especially since he was growling as he charged, but I ignored him. I instead focused on the bloody man, and the man who stood next to him.

They were both naked... but there was something about them.

Why did they look so alike? Even their beards were...

A spear rushed towards my face. I stepped aside, and with my eyes still on the two other men, I snaked my hand out to grab the throat of the spear wielder.

His strange growling came to an immediate stop as I gripped his throat. The man went bug-eyed, and began to thrash. At first he tried to stab me with the spear he wielded, but he quickly dropped it in an effort to grab and claw at my arm and hand.

He didn't get the chance to free himself, as I simply squeezed. One moment he had a throat, then the next he fell to the ground without one.

"Gods above!" the bloody man shouted, as if he hadn't been the cause of all this.

Rushing towards the two remaining men, I made sure to glance behind me before I reached them.

Renn was fine. Her eyes were wide. They were staring right at me... but she was fine. No men were around her.

Once sure she was safe, I returned my attention in full to the men before me.

"Brother!" the man to the right raised a large sword. Fashioned with fancy metal... it was not just any sword, but a knight's sword.

Brother...?

I didn't have time to process the words as I ducked the large sword. It sliced through the air above me, and as he grunted and coiled his torso as to swing it back down, onto my head... I punched the man in the side.

The blow was deep and heavy. It caused him to belch with blood and phlegm. Yet as bad as my blow had been, most undoubtedly damaging organs, he still kept hold of his blade.

"Brother!" the bloodied man cried out, and hurried towards us. But I didn't wait for him. I grabbed the large sword, right above the hilt, and tugged it from the man's grasp.

He tried to keep hold of it. He fell to a knee, and focused entirely on keeping the blade in his hands. As if it was more precious than his life.

It probably was, if he was a knight.

With another tug, this time a real one, I watched his eyes go wide as I pulled it free. It popped out, more than slid out, and blood splattered the ground because of it.

Turning to the bloodied man, who was now within range with his short sword raised... I simply swung the blade I had just taken from his brother.

"Geh!" the man released an odd sound as I sliced through his chest.

Before his body fell. Before both parts landed, I spun and brought the blade down onto the back of the neck of the man I had just stolen it from.

The kneeling man had been in the process of standing. But because of my punch, and the hands torn apart from my thievery, he had been slow to move. Too slow.

His head fell to the ground a moment after his brother's upper torso did.

With the blade still in hand, I quickly looked around. To make sure the moment was over.

To make sure Renn was safe.

She was. She stood there, not far from the rock she had been sitting on. Actually, had she moved at all since this started? Didn't look it.

The first spearman I had killed was definitely dead. The second man, with the shirt, was making noises but wasn't moving. The spear was stuck in his lungs. There was no need to worry if he'd live.

Glancing to the fire they had come from, I studied the body in the distance. The only other one. The only one I hadn't made myself.

It wasn't moving. And judging by the glistening upon it, and around it, from their campfire...

That had been a bloody death.

With a small breath, I made sure the rest were dead. The last three were more surely dead than the first two, but I checked anyway. Once I was sure, I nodded at myself and headed back towards the cat.

"Are you alright?" I asked her.

She didn't respond, but I wasn't too worried. She looked fine... none of the men had drawn close to her. And none had used bows, or thrown their spears.

Reaching the first body, I hesitated... and slowly came to a stop.

What was that expression? On her face? It was...

"Is... Was this my fault!" she shouted, holding her hands close to her chest.

Stepping over a naked torso, I studied the woman who no longer looked adorable.

She now looked terrified. Yet...

Not of the men who had just tried to attack us.

Nor me... who had just slaughtered them.

"Why would it be your fault?" I asked her, wondering what was wrong.

Was she that worried about what had happened with Amber? Although I was upset over it, and still planned to judge her without bias... I already knew she was innocent. The letters had proved it. Her tears had proved it.

Yet here she was panicking over a similar instance...

Wait...

She didn't just have her hands at her chest, she was holding something. Something long, and hairy.

Her tail.

She thought they had seen her tail... and came to attack.

"Renn," I stepped forward, and got her attention. She looked at me, and stepped back. Nearly into the fire. "Renn, there is no way they saw your tail. Humans can barely see at night as it is, let alone such a distance," I said to her.

"But!" she nearly shouted the word, and looked around. At the bodies around me.

Stepping away from them, to force her to look at me... I stood in-between her and the bodies.

"It's very obvious what happened, Renn. Those men killed another, in cold blood. Petty squabbles. Then they saw our campfire," I said, pointing to our little camp.

She looked at what I pointed at, and realized how close she was to the fire. She took a couple steps away from it.

I nodded at her, and was glad to see her start to calm down. Yet she still held her tail closely... a little too closely. Didn't that hurt?

"Fire..." she said, and then looked out into the darkness. Past me. To the fire still burning, where I knew she could see the other body. The only body of someone I hadn't killed.

"They most likely came to kill us. Out of fear of being branded criminals. Out of fear of us reporting them to the church or local lord," I said calmly.

Renn quickly understood, and her shoulders slowly lowered. Her ears twitched as they moved a little. To the left and right... as if she was listening around us. For others nearby.

There weren't. We were now alone. Even the nearby beavers had gone silent.

I watched watery eyes leak onto what had been an adorable face, and she suddenly sobbed.

For a small moment I stood there, watching the woman cry. At first I worried she hadn't really understood... but her sobbing quickly ceded. That hadn't been sorrow, but relief.

She had sobbed out of relief upon realizing she hadn't been the cause of such a disaster.

"It wasn't me," she said.

"It wasn't," I said.

Even if it had been...

Deciding not to say such a thing aloud, I decided to drop the sword. It didn't clang as it fell, but it did bounce on the grass.

The thing had been well made. Probably a family heirloom.

Stepping towards her, I gestured towards the path. "Come on, Renn. Let's go," I said.

"But..." she glanced at the bodies.

"Let's go. Last thing we need is for some merchant or knight to come by and find us here with them," I said.

A man and woman surrounded by slain men. Naked men, on top of it! What a scene.

"Okay..." she whispered, and I made sure to collect her hat. She remembered to grab her bag, but hadn't remembered her hat. Probably hadn't even realized it had fallen off yet.

Holding it, I felt the warmth of it... somehow still warm, even though no longer on her head.

Renn didn't run to the road, but she did hurry. I hurried with her, and was glad she wasn't bawling or sobbing.

"It'll be alright. We'll just walk for some time, and stop elsewhere," I said to her.

"Mhm," she made a noise as she nodded.

With her nod, I noticed her ears. They were drooping.

"Here," I held out her hat. She stared at it for a moment, and then took it with another silent nod.

Silence... yes...

Heading away from the campfires, and the bodies, I silently hoped such silence would last.

She sniffed as I listened to her put her hat on. She was walking a little behind me, but that was on purpose.

I didn't want to see her cry.

Especially since she had no reason to.

Those humans had only wanted to kill any who could have seen their debauchery. Their evil.

Instead they paid for it.

With a sigh, Renn and I walked on the path towards Ruvindale. The river continued along one side, and a quickly growing thicker forest on the other.

I'd have her join me into the forest if we chanced on anyone as we walked. But for now there was no point in not using the road.

After all in this silence... I'd hear anyone approaching. Especially now that I was on guard for it.

Her sniff made my eye twitch, and I wished I wasn't the way I were.

What I'd give to be a normal human. A normal man.

She took a deep breath, and the sound of the remnants of her crying could be heard over the light wind. Especially to my ears. Somehow I heard that better than I heard the river rodents nearby chewing on the wood in the forest.

I owed silence an apology. It wasn't anywhere near as bad as this.

Maybe I'll get lucky and I'll find she had been the cause of Amber's death.

As much as taking her life would bother me, somehow I doubted it'd bother me as much as this.

She sniffed again, and I closed my eyes and held in a groan.

This was going to be a long night.

*Chapter 44: Chapter Forty Three – Renn – Ruvindale*

The large city was finally in front of us... and to be honest, as excited as I should be to finally get to rest and relax... I was anything but.

I was now worryingly nervous.

My stomach knotted and complained, and not because of a lack of food. Vim had let us stop this morning at one of the small inns along the road, and so I knew my stomach ache wasn't from hunger.

"Don't stress," Vim said.

We were walking side by side, and I was glad that the road had gotten a little larger. We were now just two of many on the road. Carts, horses, and people came and went. If the road had been the same size as the one we were on a day ago, I'd not be able to walk next to Vim as I was.

"How can I not?" I asked.

"Do you have something to stress about?" he asked me.

"That's the problem, I don't know," I said honestly.

Vim raised an eyebrow and nodded, as if he somehow understood my meaning.

I wanted to voice more complaints, but decided against it. Vim already knew full well what I was worrying about, and at this point didn't seem to be wasting any time worrying about it.

Either he'd find I was innocent, or I'd die.

To him it was that simple.

Just as simple as killing those men.

I flinched and closed my eyes as an odd ache ran throughout my body... sourced from my stomach. It even gurgled a little, as if hungry.

"Need to relieve yourself?" Vim asked, a little too naturally.

"No," I said simply. This wasn't that kind of issue.

"Hm..." Vim didn't seem convinced, but said nothing more.

Groaning a little, I wondered why this was bothering me so much.

Even when I had taken the letters to Vim I hadn't felt this bad. Worried, yes. Scared, sure... but this...

This felt as if I was not only going to die or get hurt, but that something horrible was going to happen.

Something unfix-able. Something wrong.

Glancing at the one who was most likely the main cause of these strange emotions and feelings, I tried to focus on his hands.

They looked normal. A little calloused, which was normal for men. Especially since most worked hard labor. If anything they looked a little... too untouched. Most men in today's age didn't just have calluses, but had old injuries. Missing fingers, or scars from chunks of skin being torn or scraped off. Fishermen especially had such hands.

Yet he had no such scars or wounds. At least, none I could see from just a glance.

Which when I took into account his true age, and his true profession...

Gulping a dry mouth, I looked away from his hands when he glanced at me. He said nothing, but I knew he had noticed.

He always noticed such things.

Blinking heavy eyes, I for a moment saw the scene again.

Men charging at us. Naked men, on top of it.

Then I saw them dying. One by one.

I could kill a man. I have. But I wasn't proficient at it.

Nor was I used to it.

Vim hadn't just killed those men; he had done so with precision and... surety.

After seeing him kill those men, I knew now that his title wasn't just for show.

The man next to me was as deadly as could be.

"What's wrong?" Vim asked.

Without turning my head, I looked at him. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the odd look on his face. It was worry.

Worry for me.

Somehow that made me worry for myself even more.

"You're terrifying," I said honestly.



For a small moment Vim didn't say anything, but then he smirked. "I know," he said plainly.

"Guh," I made an odd noise as I looked away from him.

Ruvindale was nearby. I could almost smell the fish already... and the pigs.

This side was where that supposed butcher house was. The one that supplied the whole town.

How many pigs did that take? For it to smell so strong? To feed this many people?

How many a day?

It was an odd thought. A distracting thought. A thought that I focused on, in hopes of distracting me from the terror filled ones lingering at the corners of my mind.

It almost worked.

"I'll take you to an inn. Then I'll go to the Sleepy Artist," Vim then said as we neared the large gate of Ruvindale. It was one of only two gates I knew of. And this side had more walls than the other did. Some parts, like the section to the west, didn't have a wall at all yet. Though I had heard they were planned to be built soon.

"Okay," I said, unable to say anything else.

"You've been banished, Renn. So you can't go near that building anymore. If you leave the inn, you're free to venture throughout the town but you need to stay away from there. Just don't go near that road at all, okay?" Vim's voice was low, but firm.

He wasn't asking.

"Okay," I said with a nod.

As we got closer to the gate, I heard the sound of the city begin to grow stronger. The sounds were muffled, thanks to the great walls around it... and the gate was surprisingly not busy.

Two guards stood at attention as we neared, and I wondered if I'd be forced to pay a fee again.

It had cost me a single renk to leave Ruvindale, on my departure a week ago.

"Greetings," one of the guards nodded his head as we drew near.

"May the Lord bless you," Vim said to him.

"And you also!" the guard said as we passed.

I nodded my head at the two guards, who nodded back with smiles... neither of them impeded us as we entered Ruvindale.

Staying close to Vim, I frowned and wondered why we hadn't been stopped. Not only had they wanted a fee to leave last time, they had wanted to see the inside of my bag.

"You alright?" Vim asked, slowing his pace as he noticed my stare.

"They didn't charge us to enter," I said.

"Ah. Yes it's free to enter, but you must pay to leave," he said.

"Really...? Why to leave?" I asked.

"Because they hope you can't afford to leave, of course," Vim said.

I didn't like that at all.

"What inn did you stay in when you came here last time?" Vim then asked.

"I stayed at the Harbor Inn," I said.

"Of course you did," Vim said.

"It wasn't that bad," I said.

"No. But it's also the most expensive. That's a merchant's inn," he said.

"Oh... I see," I said. Merchant inns were more expensive? Wouldn't a merchant stay where it was the cheapest, to save the most money?

"Not everything is profit and loss," he said, most likely noticing my thoughts.

"Ah..." I nodded, a little disturbed over the fact that he could read me so easily.

Following Vim down the road, I somehow felt a little... happy, to see the town again.

The familiar black stone everywhere was... calming. Even if the town seemed to stink a little more than I remembered it being.

"This way," Vim guided me down a street I didn't recognize, and I wondered if he was going to take me to that inn that was near the butcher's house. The one I had been told stank.

If it smelled worse than this, than I now understood why that was so.

As we walked, I noticed the many people out and about. Most were working, as usual here in Ruvindale... but a few were just leisurely strolling around. Some kids were running around too, chasing one another.

While passing people, I nearly panicked each time I saw someone new.

After all, this was Ruvindale.

Lughes or Crane could be anywhere.

I really, really, didn't want to run into them here and now...

Rounding a corner, we came to a street that was a little cleaner than most. It still stunk, but this road had a strong smell of burning wood and ash. Fireplaces.

These buildings were homes, mostly.

Not too far down the road was a medium sized sign. The only letters upon it spelled out our destination, "Inn," and nothing else.

This inn wasn't the one I had thought it was going to be. It was only two stories, and... kind of small looking.

None of the buildings around us looked to be a slaughterhouse... plus, although I still smelled the pigs nearby, the stank wasn't as strong. So this wasn't the one I had been told about.

Walking into the building behind Vim, the first thing I noticed was the warm air. I was a little shocked as I tried to control my breathing. The air didn't stink, but it was warm. A little too warm.

Two large fireplaces were the cause, and they were roaring. By the look and sound of the flames, they had just fed the fire with logs.

A pair of women sat in front of the fireplace, talking to one another. Another table was nearby, where a man and woman sat. They stared at us as we entered. Other than them, the only other person here was an old man behind a counter.

While I followed Vim to a small counter in a corner, I watched as he approached the older man who sat behind it.

He looked calm. I had honestly expected Vim to want to go to the Sleepy Artist right away.

I had expected him to tell me to go find an inn, and he'd be off.

"Only room left is in the corner. Single bed," the old man said, his eyes lingered on me.

"How much for a week?" Vim asked the old man.

"Ten renk," the old man barely moved as he took the coins from Vim.

Once the coins disappeared into the old man's pocket, a flat key was tossed onto the counter. Vim took it with a nod, and then turned and headed for the nearby stairs.

Heading upstairs with Vim, I noticed the steps were a little worn down. Half of them were angular, because of the wear.

Looking away from the worn floorboards that the stairs led to, I studied the hallway as we headed to the last door on the right. It honestly didn't look much different than the one in the Harbor Inn. A little older, maybe... but it wasn't worse enough to justify the difference in price.

If I remembered correctly it had been twenty five for five days... but that had also included meals.

Standing still as Vim opened the door, I was about to follow him into the room... but instead he turned to look at me.

I stepped back a step, simply because it looked like he was going to talk to me... and I didn't want to stand too close as he did. It felt weird to be so close to him when we spoke to one another.

"Here," he held out a cupped hand, and I noticed the coins within.

I accepted the handful of coins, mixed of renk and penk, and then looked up at him.

"I'm going to check on everyone. You can get food either here or elsewhere if you'd like. I'm sure you know most of this town well enough to not get lost," Vim said.

Gulping, I glanced into the room. It looked dark inside, for some reason... even though the shutters on the window were open wide and it was sunny. "Uhm..." I wasn't sure what to say.

"Remember. Don't go near the Sleepy Artist," Vim said.

I nodded.

"But also don't leave. I'll come back once I can," he said.

I nodded again.

He began to step around me, as to leave... obviously feeling like all that needed to be said had been... but then he stopped.

Thanks to his movement, we were close to one another again. But this time I had no more room to back up. I'd walk into the wall if I tried again.

"Do not worry, Renn. I believe in your innocence," he said to me.

Blinking at his... oddly sudden offer of comforting words, I wondered what to say to him.

He nodded, as if to tell me he was being genuine. But he didn't need to. I could tell he was.

Not only had his tone been gentle, so had his eyes. They were looking at me like...

Well... like he had looked at Lomi.

"Okay," I said softly.

He nodded again, and then glanced into the room. "Seems dreary, but it is fine. I've stayed here many times. I'll be back as soon as I can," he said.

Then with that he stepped around me and left.

Watching him go, I watched as he became... blurry.

I allowed my eyes to fill with tears, especially since I knew he'd not turn around and see me allowing it to happen.

Once he stepped into the stairwell and disappeared, I stepped into the room.

The air inside the room wasn't as hot, which I was somewhat thankful for. Warmth was precious, but sometimes hot was too hot.

Closing the door behind me, I was glad to find that just like the Harbor Inn, there was a large wooden beam that I could use to lock the door.

This one though, was a little thicker, and not sanded down. I put it on the metal latches that had been nailed to the wall.

It clunked, and I realized it wasn't hollow. Chances were it was quite heavy. Something that other women of my size, or rather human women, would have struggled with.

Once the door was handled I went to checking the rest of the room. I had somewhat been hoping that a painting, from the Sleepy Artist, would have been here... but there wasn't. The walls weren't bare however.

A giant rug had been hung on the eastern wall. Over the large bed. The tapestry had an odd design on it, one I didn't recognize at all... but it was pretty. The rug was made out of some kind of thick wool and was dyed reds and yellows.

Studying it for a moment, I was glad for the distraction. My stomach wasn't knotting as bad as it was earlier, but I still felt... a little...

While thinking of my aching stomach, I realized I should probably check to make sure where the bathroom was. Just in case my stress turned into an actual issue later.

About to leave the room to go find it, I paused right before lifting the wooden bar off the door.

There was no need to go check. Right next to the bedroom door, was another door. And within it was a...

"Of course," I said, staring down at a large empty bucket. Another bucket, a little smaller, was next to it. Full of water.

Closing the door to the small bathroom, I sighed and hoped my issues would remain simple stress.

Although the buckets were clean, I could tell by the sight of them that they were old. They've been used here for years.

That was a nasty thought.

There had been only one bathroom at the Harbor Inn, but at least it had been an actual bathroom.

"No complaining," I told myself.

Walking the room, I checked the drawers and dressers. They were all empty, of course, but luckily were also empty of bugs and rodents.

The bed too, seemed clean. It felt like it was just many large pelts sewn together, but I neither saw nor smelled anything wrong with it. No bugs, or... gross stuff.

Old. Worn... but clean.

"Ho!" a loud voice drew my attention to the window. Glancing at the window, I was surprised to see the familiar brown brick that most of the buildings here were made of. The sight made my heart hurt, since...

"The same view, yet not," I said. Peering out it, I found that the window opened to a back alley. One where workers were carrying boxes of goods. I wasn't able to tell which building they were carrying them to, but wherever it was... was definitely busy. More than a dozen men were in a line, hauling items.

I retreated from the window, and closed the shutters. Although interesting, and a good distraction... I really wasn't in the mood to watch men hauling boxes.

Walking back towards the other side of the room, I realized I was going to have to calm myself down. Even if forcefully.

With a huff, I decided to just take a nap. For all I knew Vim would be hours, if not the whole night. He might not even return for a day or two. After all he had paid for a week here.

I'd not be allowed back into the Sleepy Artist. Vim made it very clear I wasn't to even go near it.

He didn't say anything about me not being allowed to walk around the city, but...

The mere thought of seeing Crane or Lughes out and about was enough to devastate me.

If I saw them... even at a distance... I'd probably break. Then I'd spend the next few nights crying myself to sleep.

Because of that I decided long before we got here that I'd just stay in the inn. In the room.

Maybe I'll get lucky and be able to sleep through this whole event, and leave before I knew it. So this could all just become a... distant memory.

Untying the little strap on my pants, to let my tail have enough room to come free... I stretched it out. Shivering at the relief, I sighed and wished I didn't have to hide it so painfully all the time.

Taking my hat off, I scratched behind my right ear. My ears weren't as strained when hidden under the hat, thanks to how much room I had inside the hat, but they too were still... stiff and ached a little.

While scratching my ears, I heard an odd sound. I stopped scratching, since I could have sworn it had sounded like something had fallen right outside the room and...

Yes something heavy was bouncing down the hall.

Frowning, I wondered what happened. I didn't hear anyone in the hallway, nor had I heard any doors open. Maybe something had fallen? But from my memory I couldn't think of anything big enough to sound that heavy being in the hallway. In fact, there hadn't even been anything in the hallway to fall like so. No tables or fixtures or...

Then something hit the bedroom door.

Jumping back, I focused entirely on the door as it rammed against the wooden beam.

With my heart in my throat, I watched it burst open. Sending wooden splinters, and metal fragments into the room.

A man stepped in, and I felt the hairs all over my body stand up as blood began to pump through my veins.

I stepped forward. To face the attacker. To stand my ground and defend myself. I couldn't understand how they had broken into the room so easily, but there was no way I'd just let them do as they pleased.

But the attacker didn't charge at me. The man instead turned and closed the door behind him, closing it almost as loudly as it had sounded when he broke through it. Once the door was closed, I hurriedly glanced to the ground. To where the wooden bar had flown to.

Maybe I'd be able to use that as a weapon.

Holding the hat in my hand, I stared at the wooden bar. It hadn't snapped, but the iron clasps that had held it in place had. The door he had nearly slammed behind him was closed, but there was now a visible gap between it and the frame. He had torqued the door... and... he...

"Vim...?" I was barely able to ask.

It was Vim. He was back already. It had only been a few minutes!

Somehow though, even though it should have calmed me down to realize it was him... I didn't feel any relief yet.

Was this it?

"We have a problem," Vim said.

The seriousness of his tone, and the very obvious rage hiding beneath this calm face made my heart nearly stop.



I instinctively stepped backward, and my leg hit the edge of the bed. With a somewhat blank mind, I fell back and sat down on the bed. My hat which I had been clinging to flew off, landing a few feet from him.

Feeling a little dumb, I remained seated in case I fell forward or back onto the bed.

Was it my entire fault in the end? Was I really going to die after all this? Or get banished entirely from the Society?

Tears welled up as Vim reached up and rubbed his forehead, and for the first time I saw not just anger...

But actual exhaustion.

"What happened?" I asked. There was no way he'd be this distraught over having to banish or kill me.

"The building has been seized by the Lord's Office," Vim said.

"Building... the Sleepy Artist?" I asked.

He nodded, and stepped towards me. I sat up even straighter, which I hadn't thought possible, and went completely still. Instead of approaching me, or killing me, Vim instead stepped to the right... and began to pace.

Watching him step towards the wall, turn and step to head to the door... I watched the protector of the Society slowly grow upset as he began to pace around in the small room.

If I wasn't the cause, then I pitied whoever was.

"The building's been condemned. Boarded up. Seized. The note on the door says because of criminal activity," Vim said, speaking lowly. Not because he wanted to whisper, and keep it quiet... but...

"What... where's everyone else?" I asked.

Vim came to a sudden stop, and my tail went still.

"Let's go," he then said, turning to look at me.

"H...huh?" I shivered, since his eyes were cold.

"Come on," he ordered.

Hurrying to obey, I inwardly groaned as my stomach began to hurt again.

I knew something bad was going to happen!

*Chapter 45: Chapter Forty Four – Vim - The Sleepy Artist*

The final board snapped off, and I quickly ducked into the window.

Stepping into the Sleepy Artist, I took a deep breath and regretted it.

"Damn," I cursed at the smell of lifeless emptiness, and...

"That's blood," Renn's cracked voice said as she too snuck underneath the boards I had just broken. I didn't need to turn around to see the face I heard from her.

"Don't cry," I said.

"I am," she said without shame.

Glancing around at the balcony room, I tried to listen to the rest of the building. For any hope.

I couldn't hear Lughes's odd footsteps.

I couldn't hear Crane's feathers brush her clothes as she walked.

And Shelldon's trembling was completely gone.

"Vim," the woman behind me said my name with a broken heart as she stepped past me, hurrying to go deeper into the building.

I didn't respond to her nor stop her as she ran to the hallway.

While she went into the hallway, I tried to put together the pieces. To understand what had possibly happened.

The whole building had been boarded up. There had been a note on the front door, mentioning that the Office of the Lord had seized the property because of criminal activity.

Such a sight was rare, but not uncommon. Usually it was because someone was tried for treason. Or because they had murdered someone and been tried by the nobles and church.

Tried and ruled a criminal.

Lughes? Crane? Shelldon?

Criminals?

Lies. Human lies.

"Crane!" Renn's voice pierced the quiet house, and although I knew better than to expect any answer to come... I still waited to hear a response.

None came.

Stepping towards the hallway, I did my best to ignore the mess around me.

Broken chairs and bookshelves. Rugs moved and tossed to corners of the room. Paintings missing from the walls.

Not only had this house been seized, it had been searched. And by many men.

I could still smell the tinge of metal. The iron and bronze lingered in the air.

As did the blood.

"Lughes! Please!" Renn shouted, from farther below me. She had already ran through the whole building, it seemed.

Walking down the hallway, I stopped by each door I passed.

They were all open. Most had been opened with force, and were broken too.

Each room had been searched. Each room looked ransacked.

As I examined each room, I quickly understood something obvious.

"Vim they're gone!" Renn shouted up the stairs.

"I know," I said. My voice sounded hard and cold.

"They're all gone!" she said, hurrying up the stairs. To me.

Had she not heard me? Impossible. She had as good of hearing as me...

No... maybe she was in shock.

"I know," I said again as I headed down the stairs. She found me before I reached the second floor.

"The paintings too," she said, staring into my eyes.

She was sobbing. Leaking tears as if she was full of them.

"I know."

Renn's eyes narrowed, then she closed them as she shook her head. As if she didn't know what to say or do.

Stepping down, I patted her on the shoulder as I passed her. She released an odd sounding whine upon my touch. As if I had hurt her.

Leaving her alone in the stairwell I went to the second floor. To check the only place that mattered, now that all of our members were gone and missing.

Heading past what had once been Renn's room, I noticed it too had been searched.

Which told me a lot. Since there had been nothing in there to begin with.

Going to the back room, to the storage room, I stopped at the end of the hall... and stared down the hall to the empty room at the end.

"Damn," I said, confronting the horrible truth.

Walking into the storage room, I studied the suddenly large looking room. It looked thrice as big as it ever had, since it was now empty.

I stood in the center of the room and studied the floor. I could see the marks still. Where large crates had been. Where they had been for decades.

"What...?"

Turning, I found Renn at the door. She was half bent over, as if sick or hurt... and she was looking around the room with what was probably the same thoughts as me.

"Why?" she asked me.

"You know why," I said to her.

Then she stopped looking like she was sick, and actually became so.

Watching her throw up, I for the tiniest moment lost my anger. My rage. It all left me as I watched the woman before me cry as she threw up what little had even been in her stomach.

"Vim!" Renn shouted my name with pure emotion in-between heaves.

"Calm yourself," I ordered her.

She shook her head, and I watched her hair. Some of it got stuck on her face, near her mouth. She was so distraught she wasn't even paying attention to herself.

"Calm yourself, Renn!" I shouted at her.

Her head shot up, and her wide pupils got even wider. Her sobs came to an abrupt stop, and I stepped towards her, pointing at her as if she had indeed been the cause of this.

"Stop it. We don't know what's happened to them yet. And until we do, you don't break. You don't fail them. Stand up and help me, or leave!" I shouted at her.

Renn stood up, her wide eyes going narrow as she glared at me.

Better anger than sorrow.

"I smell blood. Find it," I ordered her.

She blinked a few times, and then... yes. She realized it too.

Without a word she turned and ran. I heard her pause at the stairs for a moment... then she hurried downstairs.

Taking a small breath, I tried to calm myself.

"Take your own advice," I told myself.

Leaving the storage room, I headed for the stairs. Before I reached the first floor, I heard the sound of water splashing.

Once in the hallway, I had to step aside as Renn ran past me. Heading to the front of the building. To the lobby.

As she passed, I noticed the clean face and wet hair.

Had she cleaned herself, because that was more important than not, or did she do it so she could better smell what needed to be smelt?

Heading down the hall, to the kitchen, I smelled the lingering scent of food. The scents that had seeped into the wood and stone over decades... yet above it all, was the smell of fresh dough.

Pausing before the kitchen, I stared into the dark room. Near the sink was now a fresh puddle of water. Where Renn had just been. Past that was a cold stove, and an empty table.

Somehow this room seemed... as clean as it ever had been. Seemed whoever had scavenged this place hadn't touched most of the kitchen.

Yet all the same, the signs of discord and chaos were there.

Unleavened dough, still uncooked. Knives and utensils littered the ground, near the table.

The bucket of water, which Renn had used.

Crane had been cooking when it happened.

Stepping past the kitchen, I went to the door at the end. The stone door, that wasn't visible.

The door that even now wasn't open.

Pulling one of the stones out, I tossed it aside. There was no point to be gentle with it anymore. Where the stone had been, behind it, was a little handle. I pulled it, and the stone door popped out of its joint.

"Vim, there's blood in the..." Renn appeared down the hall, and went quiet as she watched me open the door to Shelldon's Nest.

As I opened it, I frowned at the odd smell.

That wasn't blood or death...

Opening the door all the way, I stared down at the stairwell. It was made of stone, and somewhat wet. Stepping into the cellar, I ignored the musky smell and the strange scent. The scent that was out of place.

Renn said nothing, but joined me down. Her steps echoed as we descended.

The place was dark. Too dark. Shelldon never had lights down here, but...

Pausing right at the bottom of the stairwell, I stared down at the layer of murky water.

"Is he there...?" Renn asked with a whisper.

"You can't see?" I asked her.

"No..." she cried.

Taking a deep breath, I glanced up behind me. At the girl who was staring at me.

She didn't want to look.

Stepping into the water, I studied the hole in the center of the cellar.

It was too dark for even me to see within... but...

"He's gone," I told her the truth.

A tiny sob of relief came from her, and I heard her nails scrape the wet stone as she leaned up against it.

Kneeling down next to the hole, I frowned and wondered what that smell was.

This smell wasn't Sheldon.

And he wasn't here anymore. Although I couldn't see all the way into the hole of water, I knew he wasn't within it.

Yet...

Where had he gone?

Unlike us Sheldon wasn't capable of just walking away. He was...

"You said you found blood?" I asked Renn.

After a few sniffs I heard her hair brush her shoulders as she nodded. "Near the counter in the front."

Standing, I stepped away from the hole.

Whoever had done this... hadn't been down here.

After all, Sheldon's old shell still sat in the corner. The thing was taller than me, and twice as wide.

Although no longer attached to the owner, there was no way anyone wouldn't take it. Either as proof, or trophy.

They had taken the paintings. Why take those and not this? You could even find this shell in some of those very paintings.

Walking over to it, I took hold of the thick shell. It was hard, and somehow... dry.

The only dry thing in this cellar.

Pulling it to the middle of the cellar, to the hole, I quickly went and tossed it in.

The thing made a plunk sound as it submerged... and then slowly descended. After a few moments it was gone, sinking to the bottom of the hole.

Feeling the movements of the water, and listening intently... I realized that the shell continued to sink far below what I had thought possible.

Maybe...

Knowing Shelldon that hole was far deeper than it should be, and most likely even connected to the lake nearby.

Maybe he escaped that way. Hopefully he had.

Yet... if he had...

"Goodbye, Shelldon," I said to the coward. If he was still alive, I'd never see him again.

He'd find some hole at the bottom of some river or lake... and hide there till he died. Or until the world ended.

Whichever came first.

"Was that him?" she asked with a sob.

Startled by her sudden outburst, I quickly shook my head... then remembered she couldn't see me. Or at least, wasn't looking at me.

"No! That... that was his old shell. I just put it into a hole so no one will find it," I said.

"Huh...?" she didn't seem to really understand as I headed back to the stairs.

"That wasn't him. Come on, take me to the blood," I said, ushering her back up the stairs.

She nearly slipped on the wet stone, but found her footing and hurried back to the first floor.

Following her out, I was about to hurry... until I got hit in the face.

Out of instinct my hand darted out, to grab what had hit me.

The moment I grabbed it, however, I knew I had screwed up.

"Lya!" Renn released a weird sound right as I grabbed her tail.



Quickly letting go, I flinched and raised my hands as she spun around to face me. Both her hands were balled into half-closed fists of rage as she basically hissed at me.

"Sorry! Sorry... didn't mean to," I said quickly, raising my own hands to show I hadn't meant to.

Renn glared at me for a moment... and then her face scrunched up as she sobbed.

Feeling very weird, I reached out and grabbed her by the forearms.

Lightly pushing her, I gently guided her as she stepped up the last few steps backwards. Helping her back to the hallway, I sighed.

"Sorry Renn, really," I said to her.

"Mhm," she made a noise as she nodded. As she did so, I noticed a bunch of snot leak from her nose.

A little bothered by her, I realized I probably shouldn't feel for her.

After all, the main reason she was breaking down was because she worried this was all her fault.

And that very well could be the truth.

Gulping that truth down, I gently patted her shoulder as I pointed to the entrance. "Come on, let's check the blood," I said.

She nodded, and surprisingly reached out and grabbed my left sleeve.

Her sharp nails dug into the thin shirt, and poked my arm. I ignored the odd gesture, and turned to head to the lobby. She followed wearily, crying the whole way.

"Damn," I cursed as I found the mess. The front door, and windows were all boarded up by several layers of wood... and the wood had been used from an obvious source.

The shelves had been broken down for the boards.

And just like the rest of the rooms, the paintings were all gone. All that was left were the remnants of the shelves left over from the recycling effort. The front counter somehow had been spared, however, which was odd. The top of the counter had been a perfect sized piece of flat wood... it would have been perfect to board up a window or door.

There was a large carpet in the center of the now rather large room, but it had been cut up for some reason. Maybe they had thought there was treasure or something beneath the floorboards. Hidden fortunes or...

Directly in the center of the room, was probably the cleanest part. There was something of a... small circle, or square, of empty space.

The floorboards there were untouched, and the rug was gone... and there were stains.

Lots of stains.

Sighing, I walked over to the center of the room. Tugging Renn along, since she still clung to my sleeve.

Luckily her sobbing had died down a little, but she remained quiet as I knelt down to stare at the bloodstains.

The smell was undeniable now. "Lughes' blood," I said.

"Is it?" she asked with a broken voice.

I nodded as I ran my fingers along the boards. The blood was of course dry, and none clung to my fingertips. Yet as I smelled my hand, I clearly smelled Lughes.

His children's blood had smelled like this.

"Definitely," I said with defeat.

"No..." Renn groaned, and her hand clenched my sleeve tighter. She released my sleeve for a moment, and for the tiniest moment I was relieved... until she grabbed onto my arm.

Glancing at her, I found that she too had kneeled down next to me. Renn was staring at the bloodstains with watery, yet angered filled eyes.

"This isn't enough blood to tell if he's dead or not," I told her.

"It isn't?" she asked, hopeful. Her eyes darted up to my own, excited.

I nodded. "It's a lot, yes, but... none of the stains are thick," I said, pointing at them.

"Thick?" she asked.

"Deadly wounds bleed more blood, or have darker blood. Especially if a head is cut off, or something like it. He bled here, but the blood didn't pool much. Hopefully that means he had only been injured here... and then ran off," I said, trying to explain the best possible scenario.

Renn sniffed, and nodded.

For a few moments I stayed kneeled, pondering what to do.

"What do we do Vim?" Renn asked softly.

Blinking, I remembered she was there.

"First we verify our member's safety. Shelldon I think ran away, to the depths of the lake. I don't smell his death anywhere near here," I said.

"And this is Lughes' blood," Renn said quickly.

I nodded.

"Let's go check Crane's room," I said.

She sniffed as she nodded, and finally let go of me. Without waiting for me she hurried to the stairs.

One moment she was strong, the next broken... only to be strong again a few moments later.

"Strength. At least, a form of it," I said as I went to follow her.

Right before I left the lobby, I glanced back at it.

My eyes went to the door.

Right above it, still there... unblemished, and untouched... was a little golden bell.

"Goodbye," I said to it.

Heading up the stairs, I quickly joined Renn at Crane's room.

It too was as demolished as the rest... and although smelled heavily of Crane, didn't seem to have any signs of her state.

"I... I can't smell any more blood," Renn said as she looked around the room.

"Hm," I agreed with her. There was definitely blood in the air, but it was faint. And not just because it was old.

Not much blood had been spilled here.

Not enough to warrant the belief that our members were lost to us.

Although prey and not predators, Lughes and Crane were still non-humans. Still sturdy, in their own right.

The damage they could endure was unrealistic, when compared to a human's capability.

Yet they'd be easy to capture. Easy to subdue.

Strong, yet so... so weak...

"Vim...!" Renn began to cry again, and I turned to find her holding a little book. She had it open, and was showing it to me.

I couldn't make anything out on the little pages, and Renn stood to step towards me.

"Crane's diary," she said.

"What's it say?" I asked.

She shook her head, and I wondered if it was something too unbearable to say aloud.

Taking it from her, I quickly found the last entry. It was near the end of the small book.

The date was many years ago.

"This is old, Renn," I said as I read it. It was a normal entry. She told what she cooked that day. She spoke of Lughes, and Shelldon. The game they had played, with cards.

"I know, but!" she made an odd gesture as her hands darted around.

I see. She had simply found it precious.

Handing it back to her, I didn't care that she went to hurriedly put it in her bag.

Leaving Crane's room, I was about to head to Lughes'... but stopped right as I passed Amber's.

The door wasn't broken off like the others, but it was open. The door was being blocked by some of the mess on the floor... I pushed it open a little more forcing the pile of rubble to shift, and stared at the horrible mess within.

Her room was so bad I wasn't able to enter it. It looked like they had torn it apart with a frenzy. Even more so than the others.

"Aww..." Renn appeared next to me, peering in from under my outstretched arm that held open the door.

"Smell anything?" I asked her.

"Paint."

I nodded. Yes. That was all I smelled too.

With a deep breath, I sighed and released the door. It didn't shut, now stuck in the pile of rubble.

Upon releasing the door, I had to step aside since Renn hadn't. She had been under my arm, making it hard to lower it.

"Come on," I told her as I glanced at her. She had a weird expression on her face. It was no longer just pure sorrow, with a hint of anger... there was something else.

Unable to tell what it were, I decided to stop thinking about it.

She was alive and well. She was safe.

They weren't.

Thus they were the priority.

Entering Lughes' room, I quickly focused on the damage. His bed had been destroyed. So had his shelves, and the large trunk that used to sit beneath the window.

The remnants of an easel were up against one of the walls... and it still had a canvas on it.

"Lughes..." Renn whispered his name as she entered the room, going to the broken easel.

Ignoring her odd sounds as she grabbed the half-finished painting that looked ripped and torn, I went to the corner of the room. To where his bed had been.

"Why didn't they take this one?" she asked between tiny breaths.

"Wasn't finished," I said. At least, it was the only thing I could think of.

"Still..."

Going to the wall, which had at one time been blocked by the bed that had sat here... I ran my hand along the wooden section of the wall.

Sure enough, I felt the difference between one of the panels. One felt a little... off. A little softer.

Punching the board, it cracked loudly. I heard Renn yelp at the sound, but I ignored her as I went to pulling off the wooden board from the wall.

Tossing the wood pieces to the ground, to join the rest of the mess, I found the small hideaway in the wall.

Reaching in, I pulled out the small box.

It was surprisingly free of dust, even though the hideaway itself was full of the stuff.

Lughes had taken this out often, it seemed.

"What is it?" Renn asked, stepping up towards me. She held a folded piece of Lughes' last painting in her arms.

"Toss that," I said as I opened the box.

Finding the small black book within, I took it out and tossed the box away.

"No," Renn stepped back, shaking her head.

"Toss it, Renn. Anyone who was involved in this will recognize that painting. We need to find out who did this, and that means..." I started to speak as I slid the little black book into one of my pockets. Renn's eyes were glued to the book even after it disappeared. She glared at my right pocket as she shook her head again.

"Even more so not to! I'll... I'll parade this around! Until someone does recognize it! Then we'll know exactly who did this and!" her voice was starting to rise, a little too much for my comfort.

Reaching out, I put a finger up near her face. She glared at it to the point I made sure to pay attention to her mouth. She looked as if she was about to bite my finger off.

"Then put it away. Go see if any matches are left, from the kitchen," I said.

"No! I'm... oh... matches?" she quickly calmed down, upon realizing I was no longer fighting her on it.

I nodded. "To start a fire," I said.

She blinked real quickly, causing a few tears to leak out. "Oh..."

"Now. Hurry," I said, ushering her out the door.

She mumbled something I couldn't understand, and then went to folding up the torn and ripped sheet of cloth in her hands.

While Renn went downstairs, to find if there were any matches left... I sighed and went through my thoughts.

How chaotic. Not just this whole thing... but her.

Usually during moments such as these, I found survivors. Survivors who were terrified. Worried. Alone.

Like Lomi.

It was very rare I had someone else with me upon finding such a horrible disaster. Especially rare for it to also be someone who was directly, or in-directly, involved with said disaster.

I needed to keep her close. Not just because she might be involved in this somehow...

But also to protect her.

Whoever had searched this building had done so with knowledge of us. Or at least, as they seized the building, had realized it.

Why else take the paintings? How many had been of our kind? How many had been of locations that shouldn't be known?

Why else search for hidden stashes and treasures?

This was bad.

Only three may have died here. Four if we included Amber. Five if I had to eventually include the sobbing girl in the kitchen.

Nothing compared to the loss of Lomi's village.

Yet... this could result in far more damage.

Far more losses could be incurred. Each painting could lead to another death. Another destroyed home.

Closing my eyes, I sent a silent little prayer... to the dead gods of old.

"May their suffering be swift," I said.

"Vim! I found matches!" Renn's voice interrupted the rest of the prayer, and I nodded.

Time to burn that which hurt to see.

So that we must never see it again.

So that nothing else would have to burn.