

The Non-Human Society

Chapter 46: Chapter Forty Five – Renn – Promises. Prayers.

"Did... did we have to burn it?" I asked, staring at the smoke in the sky.

"No," Vim said.

The two of us sat on a bench, not too far from the central market. A small patch of trees were behind us, with several benches all around them. We were somewhat alone. There were people out and about, but most were busy. We were the only ones resting and talking nearby.

We couldn't see the fire, being so far away... but the black smoke told me it was still burning.

"What if the fire spreads?" I asked. I hadn't met most the neighbors, since most of the buildings around the Sleepy Artist had been businesses and not homes... but the few I had met had seemed like genuinely good people.

"The Lord of this city pays for fires. If it spreads, they will protect those who it endangers and will rebuild for them," Vim said.

He was reading from the little black book that he had found in Lughes' room. The fact that he had known its location told me it was something important.

Sitting next to Vim on the bench, I shifted a little to try and make out what was written on the page he read from. He didn't move it, nor try to hide it, but the book was tiny... the words written even tinier.

"What now?" I asked him.

"I'm debating our next move," he said simply.

Reaching up to wipe my face, I hoped I didn't look too bad. I wasn't bothered that I probably looked like I had just sobbed my soul out, but Vim had said some soot had gotten onto my face. I had wiped my face off already, but he hadn't told me if I had cleaned it all off yet.

"Where would they go? Crane and Lughes? If they escaped. Do we... does the Society have somewhere for people to go? During moments like these?" I asked.

"We do. The nearest here would be the Owl's Nest," he said.

"Really? Even though that big creature guards it?" I asked.

Vim finally took his eyes off the little book, and I sat up straighter as he studied me.

"You met it?" he asked.

"Ran from it, actually."

He blinked... and then frowned. "Really."

"Lilly said the only reason I survived was because it had smelled you. That your scent had still lingered in the field, since you had laid in it all day," I said.

His eyebrow rose, and... surprisingly he seemed to completely understand. If anything it seemed to make it far more believable to him.

"There's a small cabin to the northeast of the Owl's Nest. Outside that beast's territory, yet safe. They'll go there," he then said as he went back to his book.

"Then... should we go there? To check if they're there already?" I asked.

"No. It could take months for them to get there depending on how injured or spooked they are. They might also go elsewhere, like Lughes who might return to his mountains," Vim said.

"Ah..." I did my best to not let my eyes return to a blurry mess as I understood now why he wasn't in that big of a hurry.

Odds were I'd never see any of them again, even if they lived.

Taking a small breath, I was proud of myself for not letting tears well up again.

"Before we leave I need to find out who was responsible," Vim said.

"Is it my fault...?" I asked. My eyes became blurry anyway.

"We don't know yet, Renn. Please stop crying, people are around us," he said gently.

"But it could be!" I said, a little louder than I should have.

Vim sighed. "It could be. But until we know for sure you're not allowed to blame yourself," he said.

"Easy to say," I said, and lowered my head. Someone was approaching our area, a young woman.

Vim grunted as he sat back, closing the little black book in his hand.

"Mister! Did you hear? A fire at the painter's house!" the young woman told us as she passed.

"I've heard. Is the fire under control yet?" Vim asked.

I kept my head down, since I knew my face was probably wrought with enough emotion that she'd find it odd if she saw.

"It is! The building's just smoldering!" she seemed a little too excited about that fact.

"Excitement," Vim commented as the young girl hurried away.

"Mhm," I nodded. That hadn't been malice... but simple excitement over something unique happening.

It made me hate her, yet I knew I shouldn't.

"Let's go Renn," Vim said, standing up from the bench.

"Where?" I asked wearily. I felt exhausted. And my eyes hurt.

Vim stared at me as I slowly got up off the bench. Did I still have gunk on my face? Or was he just staring at my tear-stains?

"You mentioned a noble family. Primsdol?" he asked.

"Primdoll. Amber had been hired to paint their young daughter... the surgeons, the doctors at the church... They mentioned that that family is known for their cruelty. Amber wasn't the first one to get... cut up, like that," I said.

A part of me wanted to get angry. Furious. To go and find that family right now.

Yet the rest of me felt beaten and broken. Defeated.

They were all gone.

They had been there for years. Decades. Living peacefully, without worry. Hundreds of our kind have come and gone, getting their pictures painted... Then I show up and it all burns down.

"I should have killed them when I had the chance," I said. Although my anger was directed at them, the truth was I was angry at myself.

"Possibly. I'll allow you to blame yourself for that, if you'd like," Vim said, and stepped away.

Looking at him, I gulped the truth down and hurried to follow him. That tone he had just used told me he had the same thoughts as me.

"Are we going to find them?" I asked him as we headed for a nearby street. One of the smaller ones, not used by carts.

"No."

"Why not?" I asked. Wasn't that the next viable step?

"Because the warning label on the front door had been from the Lord's Office. The noble who owns Ruvindale," he said.

"Oh. Is that our real enemy?" I asked.

"No. It means that the nobles took action as a whole," Vim said lowly as we approached the road, and the many buildings lining it.

I was about to ask another question, but took note of his lower volume. He didn't want others to hear us talking about this.

"Then what now?" I asked him, hoping my question would be alright to ask.

"First we need a new inn. Let's go to the one in the center near the statue," he said.

"Harbor inn?" I asked.

"Yes. I uh... broke that door, remember?" he asked, sounding a little odd.

"Ah. You did," I nodded. He had broken the door lock at the other inn, the one near the gate.

"Probably won't let us back in anytime soon. So come on," he nodded his head.

Choosing to keep my questions at bay since we entered the center market, a place with a lot of people, I stayed quiet as Vim went ahead and got us another room.

"One penk," An older woman charged us for a two-bedded room.

"You don't negotiate?" I asked Vim as we climbed the stairs to the room.

"For what? A few renk?" he asked.

"It adds up, doesn't it?" I asked him. He seemed to never negotiate... and I could think of an easy half dozen times he could have, just recently.

"Sure does," Vim said as he opened the door to our room.

Hurrying in behind him, I rounded him since he had entered slowly.

"Hm," he made a noise telling me he found me odd as I hurriedly found the painting.

"Same one," I said, finding the same beach scene that I remembered.

"Same what?" he asked.

Pointing to the scene, I compared it to the one in my memories.

"When I stayed here last time, it was these paintings that made me search out the Sleepy Artist. They... reminded me of a beach I had seen before. This one's a little different, the beach is more white than the other one," I said, comparing the two.

"I see," Vim didn't sound too amused.

Smiling at the painting, tears welled up as I realized this was probably one of the few paintings left and...

"Oh jeez, really?" Vim asked, most likely seeing the tears slide down my face.

"Amber painted these," I said.

Vim sighed and walked over to me. I ignored him, until he grabbed my bag off my shoulder.

Glaring at him, I watched him put the little black book he had been reading into it. Once he did, he tossed it to the bed.

"Let's go," he said with a nod.

"Mhm..." I followed him out of the room.

Wiping my face with my sleeve, I followed Vim out of the Harbor Inn and to a small alley.

While I followed him, I realized he was actually letting me accompany him.

Honestly I had expected him to leave me behind at the inn...

"Thanks Vim," I said.

"For?" he asked, glancing back at me as we crossed a street.

"Letting me help," I said.

His eyes narrowed at me as he looked ahead, and I realized we were heading to the center of the city. To where the larger buildings, and the church was. "You've not helped yet. But you will," he said.

"Anyway I can," I agreed.

Once we entered another alley, in-between two houses, Vim came to a stop.

Slowly coming to a stop behind him, I hesitated a little.

Was he going to tell me I wasn't allowed to help now?

"What do you know of nobles?" he asked me, turning a little to look at me.

"Nothing. Just that they're powerful, although I'm not entirely sure how that is," I said honestly.

"This Primdoll family..."

"A lower noble family, I heard," I said quickly.

He nodded, and frowned. "Can I trust you?" he asked me.

Blinking, I felt my tail coil beneath my pants. Hopefully no one was watching us, since someone might have noticed that.

"I like to think you can," I said softly.

"Can you control yourself, if I put you in front of the ones who might be our enemies?" he asked me.

Hesitating, I tried to comprehend what he had just asked me.

"Control?" I asked, worried.

"If you stood before the one who took Amber's life, and possibly the others, could you contain your anger?" Vim asked me.

I shivered.

Could I?

"Don't lie to me. This is important," he added.

I nodded. "I can tell," I said.

"Well?" he asked.

Looking at his stern look, I wondered if this meant he actually knew who and where they were already. And...

"For how long...?" I asked him softly.

He blinked, and frowned. "Until I said otherwise," he said, as if it was obvious.

"I... I honestly don't know," I said.

"That won't work for me. I need a real answer," he said.

Opening my mouth to give one, I found myself unable to give it.

He sighed and nodded. "Okay. Trial run, then," he said.

"Trial...?" I asked, unsure of what he meant.

"You get one chance," Vim said as he turned to return to walking.

My stomach tightened for the first time in a short while. "One chance..."

"I need to find out what happened to the paintings. Before I find out where they are, we can't kill anyone. Even if they're the ones who did the deed," Vim said as he walked.

Following him, I groaned as I realized what he meant.

Of course.

The paintings were of us. Not all of them, of course... but... more than enough.

Even I...

"Our paintings," I moaned, realizing how horrible this actually was.

Vim nodded. "Our paintings."

Closing my eyes as I followed Vim down another alley, one a little smaller than the rest, I tried to imagine how horrible this situation was.

Those paintings of course didn't tell anyone where those locations were... nor the names of those painted... but it verified something. It was proof.

Proof of our existence.

"What have I done?" I asked myself as the levity of the situation crushed my heart.

"No time for that. We need the paintings," Vim said coldly.

"Okay. Yes. I promise. I can... I won't kill anyone, until we know," I said.

I could agree with that. I could understand that.

"Good. I'll hold you to that promise. More than your life hangs on that vow," he said.

I nodded, understanding perfectly.

If I failed. If I didn't follow his guidance... far more than the Sleepy Artist, or myself, were in danger.

Lomi had been painted too. And she lived nearby. Close enough that...

I shook the thoughts out of my head.

"First we'll go to the church," Vim said.

Yes we were heading that way. Although I had never traveled these back alleys before, I knew not far from here was the main road... the same one I had carried Amber through, when I had taken her to the hospital.

"Why the church first?" I asked.

"To check the dead," he said.

About to ask why he'd ask that, I groaned at the obvious answer.

That cemetery. The one that doctor had offered to bury Amber in... but...

"Would they bury us? Like they do their own?" I asked.

"No. But they'd know about it. They'll have records. Information," he said.

"I see..."

Following Vim onto a main road, I recognized the fancy stone. We were nearing the noble's district.

While following him, I wondered... how often he did this.

He spoke not just with confidence, but surety.

He's done this before. He's been through these motions, and they had provided him results.

It was a sad thought. How often has he done this? How many times more?

To not only have a preset plan, but to have it be so precise and...

"Don't talk much inside, if you can help it," Vim said to me as we neared the church. The main building wasn't in sight yet, but the giant towers and steeples were close. Close enough that their shadows blocked most of the sun.

"That will be easy enough," I said.

Vim glanced at me, but I didn't need to explain why.

After all, I couldn't screw this up if I just kept quiet.

What better way to keep my promise than to simply not give my anger a voice?

Though...

Rounding a large building, I slowly looked up at the massive building.

It was huge. How was it so big?

How did humans accomplish it?

Feeling small compared to it, I wondered if the church was our real enemy. The true one.

If it was... how would we face this?

It was... momentous.

"Here we go," Vim said softly.

Nodding as I followed him into the church, I did everything I could to keep the anxious feeling from filling my stomach.

By the time we entered, and I heard an odd echo... I realized there was nothing that could keep my worry from overflowing.

Hymns reverberated throughout the massive building, and I was thankful for the hat on my head. It made the loud sounds almost bearable.

Surprisingly... although for some reason it sounded loud inside, as if there were thousands of people singing... there weren't many people inside. A few people were walking around, a few were deeper inside... some were sitting at the pews just to the north and...

"Greetings son, welcome," an old woman approached, dressed in a familiar black and white dress.

The sight hurt to see. It made me flinch.

Nory had worn such a dress when I had first met her.

"I greet you, shepherd of the lambs," Vim spoke calmly, and bowed his head slightly in greeting.

The nun revealed a calm smile. One that told me she was genuinely happy to be greeted so.

Hurriedly bowing my head alongside Vim, I made sure not to bow too lowly... just in case my hat fell free.

"How may I help you children?" she asked.

It was... a little upsetting to hear the authentic concern and willingness in her voice.

This woman really was a believer in her faith. A true devotee.

Someone I would probably find myself liking if given the chance.

"We've come to ask for knowledge," Vim said.

I noticed Vim raised his head, so I slowly stood back up as well.

The older nun smiled gently at me as she nodded, telling Vim to continue.

"We recently moved here from Yeltch, you see... and my wife had gotten a job offer from a house of painters," Vim gestured at me as he spoke.

Going still, I was lucky that the nun had focused on Vim as he spoke. Hopefully she hadn't noticed my ears and tail twitch at his words.

"House of painters... the one that just caught aflame?" the nun asked, worried.

"Ah, yes. We were not harmed, mother," Vim said, sounding apologetic that he failed to mention it.

"Bless the ruler. Come, sit and tell me what I can do for you," the nun pointed behind her. To a...

Going still, I stared wide-eyed for a moment at the countless rows of pews.

Doing my best to count them as we were guided to the nearest seat, I felt...

How to describe it?

There were more chairs than probably the entire population in Ruvindale, and then some.

Why were there so many...?

Sitting next to Vim who sat next to the nun, I tried to keep myself calm as I watched the woman take Vim's hand... holding it gently, as if he was a small child.

"We returned home, you see. Once she had been hired. To gather a few things and say goodbye to our families. I'll be working the docks, as I'm sure you'd expect," Vim said, rubbing the back of his head as he spoke... as if he really was just a young boy like she was treating him to be.

"I see. You wish to know what had happened," the nun said with a nod.

"Yes mother," Vim nodded quickly, glad she had said it herself.

"I'll go get Father Berry. He will know more. Would you two like to offer prayer while I fetch him?" she asked as she stood.

"We would! Yes. We shall be there, mother," Vim stood alongside her, nodding quickly.

She happily smiled and nodded, glad to hear it.

I nodded to her, with as kind a smile I could muster. She smiled at me and then turned and walked away. Slowly, not in much of a hurry.

"Come on," Vim whispered, his hand suddenly coming to rest on my lower back. He guided me along the pew we had just sat at and to an opening in the sea of seats.

"Prayer?" I whispered.

"Do you know how?" he asked as we slowly walked towards the end of the pews.

"I do."

"Play along," he said.

I nodded.

At the end of the huge room, in front of the countless pews, was a small stage. With a podium. No one stood on the stage, but there were a few people scattered nearby it. Several of them, even those dressed like nuns and priests, were kneeling... bowing in front of a large statue.

The statue was obviously some kind of angel. The motif was of a serene woman. Her face was calm, with closed eyes... but she had two sets of arms and wings of feathers behind her. If Nory had been here she probably would have burst into tears at the sight.

It was pretty. The white marble was lit up, thanks the setting sun's rays entering through the colored glass that made up the roof.

Vim's hand left my lower back, and I suddenly felt cold. Doing my best to ignore the odd sensation, I watched as he approached the statue first. Like the others, he didn't step up onto the lifted stage that the statue stood upon... maybe it was considered rude or sacrilegious. Maybe only the leaders of the religion could stand there.

Stepping away from the little path we had walked down, Vim stepped up to the edge of the stage and slowly knelt down. Going to his knees, he clasped his hands and bowed his head.

Mimicking Vim, I knelt down onto my knees next to him.

Once I lowered my head, I realized I could somewhat make out what the others were praying about... even though most whispered their words under their breath.

Most were genuinely praying. A few even begged, with all their soul.

I tried to block out their prayers, but it was hard to do. Their voices carried in this giant cathedral, somehow, and my ears obviously didn't help me.

"Funny isn't it?" Vim quietly whispered. Almost low enough I hadn't heard him.

"Hm?" I tried to be just as quiet. Did he hear me?

"Looks like one of us," he said.

Opening my eyes, I glanced at him. He still kneeled there, with his eyes closed.

"It does," I agreed.

He had a point. Extra arms. Wings.

Why was she holy, yet we weren't?

Returning to silence... I realized there was no point to pretend.

Closing my eyes tightly, I squeezed my hands together and went to praying.

"Please keep them safe," I begged.

"Please save them. Please keep us all safe..." I pleaded.

I begged and pleaded... to the man next to me.

At least he could hear me.

At least he was capable of performing miracles.

At least he answered.

Chapter 47: Chapter Forty Six – Vim – A Tithe For A Glare

Father Berry was a scrawny man.

He smiled as he bowed his head. His brown robe was... old. Frayed. Most of it was re-sewn and patched with layers of worn cloth.

I bowed my head as well, in greeting. "Father, thank you for seeing me," I said to him.

"Of course my son. Come, sit with me," the man gestured to a nearby seat. As he did I noticed the thin wrist and arm that snuck out of his robe's armhole.

Following him to the seat, I was glad that Renn chose to stay kneeled in prayer... even if what she prayed was a little odd.

And especially so since she sounded rather...

She had more faith in her prayers than some of the nuns praying nearby.

Ridiculous.

"I apologize for calling upon you father. But we are lost, and new here... we knew not where to go," I said to the man as we sat next to one another.

Although a little... painful, to act so meek to a man who genuinely was, it had to be done.

Father Berry smiled tenderly as he rested his thin hand onto my knee, patting it gently as if to comfort me. "Speak no more of such shame, for there is none. Any shame you

feel, should be the shame of coming to the house of your god!" he spoke lowly, just a little more than a whisper... and spoke purely.

He truly believed in what he was saying... and such a fact only made me feel even worse.

This man was an ardent clergyman. A true man of his faith. A testament.

The man probably owned nothing more than the clothes he wore, and he'd in an instant offer them to me if I asked for them.

"Of course father, forgive me," I said gently, playing my part.

He nodded, glad I understood. "Now I'm told you ask of the painter," he said.

I nodded. "Yes father. My wife," I pointed to the kneeling woman, and I noticed the hat on her head twitch a little. Hopefully no one else saw. "Was to be employed there. At the Sleepy Artist. Yet when we returned from our last trip home, to come here and make a new life for us... we found it on fire!" I said, a little louder than I needed to.

Father Berry raised his free hand as he squeezed my knee with the other. To tell me there was no need to shout.

"Sorry father," I said quickly, lowering my head.

"It's all well. I understand. Yes, the Sleepy Artist was found guilty of tax evasion to the lord of Ruvindale," Father Berry said lowly.

My mind went blank for a moment... frozen at the sudden information.

Taxes!

Over taxes!

"I... I don't understand, father..." I used my genuine confusion, and the clergyman quickly nodded as he fell for it.

"The owner failed to pay his proper dues, my son. Sadly you and your wife fell victim to the most common sinner amongst the wealthy. Those blinded by coins," he shook his head as he explained; as if he was genuinely pitying those he spoke of.

"So... so they were evil?" I asked, and I did my best to not notice Renn's body tremble.

Not here. Not now!

"They were, child. See this not as unjust suffering, but a blessing... Chances were our lord and protectors did not want you and your wife to suffer because of their sins. To be tainted and led astray! Take this moment as a wonder..." Father Berry lowered his head, and closed his eyes. After a moment he went to saying a small prayer. One of thanks.

I bowed my head and endured the prayer alongside him. His hand clasped my knee tighter, glad to see me do so.

While he prayed, I allowed my thoughts to process this information.

Tax evasion. It was most likely a simple excuse, given by the nobles of this city... but it told me that the church had nothing to do with it.

After all, they would never pass up the opportunity to display demons and devils to their flock. To burn them alive, to further instill their own dogma.

This meant no one in the church knew of us.

At least not yet.

"Blessed be," Father Berry finished his prayer of thanks.

"Blessed be. Thank you father," I said, nodding.

"Always, my son. Tell me, do you and your wife have a place to stay tonight?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

He was done telling me of what had happened to the Sleepy Artist. In fact he didn't even seem to care of the fire, nor why the building could have possibly burnt down.

He only cared that we had not been involved in what he had believed to be sinful activity.

And of course, that we... children of his god... were going to be okay from here on out.

"We do father. I found a job on the boats. The son of the man who owns the boat has lent us a room for the season," I said.

"Ah! What blessings. See? This is all by design. Fear not child, neither of you," he beamed a smile as he glanced to Renn. She was still kneeling there, pretending to pray.

"I believe so, father. You're right," I said.

Father Berry stood, seemingly both happy and pleased with himself and the scenario.

In his eyes it all made sense. We had been saved from evil. From sin. So the end result was the best.

"Father, here," I pretended to dig deep into my inner-pocket of my pants. I made sure to not allow the coins within to clank against each other as I pretended to scoop some out.

Although his face told me that he didn't want me to offer any tithes, he still opening his hand to accept the few renk I offered.

"Thank you so much. She and I will sleep soundly tonight, now," I said with a thankful smile.

"Always, my son. While under their watchful eye, we can always sleep without a care," Father Berry said, looking to the statue looming over us.

I lowered my head in thanks as the priest gave me one last nod, and turned to leave.

Watching him go, I felt as weak as he looked.

Turning to Renn as she slowly stood from her kneeling, I noticed the way her eyes glared at me. Full of questions. Full of worries.

"Let us go," I said softly to her.

She nodded quickly, happy to hear it. No longer looking like the dutiful devout woman she had seemed earlier.

I gestured to the nearest path between the pews, and we made sure to walk as calmly as we could to the exit.

"Voices carry here," Renn whispered.

I followed her gaze, to a pair of women nearby. They were sitting together alone, and weren't nuns.

They were gossiping about their children.

As we left I scanned the church. Looking to the nearby doors and hallways... There. Near a small hallway, where other priests were, I found him.

Studying Father Berry, I watched the coins he dropped into the tithe box.

He put every single one I had given him into it.

Sighing a little, I left the church with Renn and hoped I'd not have to come back anytime soon.

Why did the dead gods always get the honest ones?

"Vim," Renn said my name lightly as we left. We drew closer to one another as I put my hand on her waist. I guided her to the road we had used to get here, since it was growing far too late for us to be out and about in the nobles district.

"What is it?" I asked her since she hadn't continued her question.

She blinked, as if she had forgotten her question all of a sudden. "Taxes?" she asked, and I could tell she didn't believe it at all.

"It's possible Renn. Lughes and Crane, although a little more knowledgeable about humans than most... were growing old. Forgetful," I said.

"Lughes..." Renn groaned and closed her eyes.

She had known then, it seemed.

Although we left the church, Renn and I continued walking slowly. As if we were both tired.

Glancing back behind us, I pretended to study the great cathedral and its towers... and instead studied the windows and doors.

Surprisingly... no one seemed to be watching us.

"What is it?" Renn asked, about to turn around as well.

Patting her lower back, to keep her walking forward, I shook my head. "I was just checking to see if we were being watched," I said.

"Were we?" she asked as she stood up straighter. Her back went stiff as I put my hand back onto her waist to make sure she kept walking forward.

"Not that I could tell."

"Which means we probably aren't," she said with a nod.

Frowning at her confidence in me, I wondered what I had done to deserve it.

"You didn't ask of the dead, did you?" Renn then asked.

"There was no point," I said.

"Yes there was," she argued.

I shook my head. "That would have aroused suspicion. If we had shown more interest in the outcome of everyone they would have begun to wonder if we were more involved. It could have led to them getting the knights," I said.

"Knights..." she whispered.

"Now that I know their excuse I have other methods to use," I said, hoping to get her mind away from confronting the knights.

"Which are?" she asked as we headed down the street towards the merchant district.

"Taxes are useful. I'll be able to go to the business center in the noble's district thanks to that excuse. From there I'll hopefully be able to find the truth," I said.

"Are you sure the church wasn't involved?" she asked.

"I don't believe they were. Father Berry was the genuine article. Probably rather well respected and has many responsibilities burdening him. If they had the paintings, or knew of them, he would not have acted like that. We'll know more by tonight, however," I said.

"Tonight...? Are we going to question the taxes now? Who do we ask?" she asked, hopeful.

"The business center will be closed by now. We'll do that first thing in the morning," I said.

"So... why will we know tonight?" she asked.

"We'll know if the church knows about us if they try to capture us within the next few hours," I said plainly.

"Oh..." she grumbled an understanding complaint, and glanced around. At the buildings around us.

Watching the way she studied the windows, and the alleyways... I realized I could probably use her in more ways than one.

"Think you can play that part again?" I asked her.

"Your wife? I suppose," she said, and I noticed the way her eyes stayed focus on a nearby door. There was no reason to study it closely for long... It was a basic door to a warehouse of some kind.

Smiling at her, I chuckled. "No. This time I think something a little more... special is in order," I said as my plan began to formulate.

"Special...?" she whispered, finally looking away from the door. She looked at me from the corner of her eye, as if she didn't want me to notice her look.

I nodded, proud of my idea.

"You'll see," I said.

"Hmph..."

Walking close enough that anyone watching would see us as husband and wife, I tried to listen and watch for any followers.

"You..." Renn spoke up... then went silent.

"Hm?" I asked.

Was she upset I had my hand on her waist? Or was she simply peeved that we didn't get enough answers from the churchman?

"Do you think it really could be simple taxes?" she asked.

"No. Or well, yes. It is possible. But once they saw the paintings... or worse, if Lughes or Crane had been seen..." I didn't need to continue.

"What of Amber? Would that noble family do this? To stop others from realizing what they did maybe?" Renn asked.

"Also a possibility. Right now my focus is to find the paintings... and who stole them," I said.

"After we get the paintings... can we go after the Primdoll family then?" Renn then asked.

Slowing a little, I had to forcefully step forward. My hand had left her waist since she had kept walking and I had slowed.

"We'll see," was all I said to that.

"Hmph..." she huffed, most likely keeping her complaints inside.

"This way," I guided her down a different street. One that led towards the docks instead of the merchant center and the inn.

"What for?" she asked.

"To make sure we're not being followed. I told the churchman we got a room from a sailor. We'll... get food at the docks, and I'll watch for anyone suspicious while we do," I said.

"If we are being watched what then?" she asked.

"Follow the watchers, of course," I said.

Renn frowned as she processed my words.

"You did well by the way. Although I noticed your ears and tail twitch a few times," I said.

Her frown turned into an odd expression. One that told me she was a little shocked, and hadn't expected my words.

Then she smiled. "You noticed?"

I nodded, wondering why she found that so amusing.

"I want to right any wrong I committed, Vim... so I'll do anything that you need me to," she said with the same smile.

"Hm," I nodded.

"Plus... how could I not help you when it's to protect the Society? To protect us all?" she asked.

"Yes. Many still alive have been painted by Lughes and the rest," I said.

"He had painted me too. And Lomi," Renn said.

Narrowing my eyes at her comment, I nodded. "I know."

"Is there... no way to find out anything more? Today? Tonight?" she asked, glancing up at the darkening sky.

"There is, but I don't want to resort to those methods yet. To be honest I had expected the church to try and seize us upon our asking of it," I said.

"Seize us?" she asked.

Guiding her to the farther side of the road, since a large cart was approaching us, we were suddenly a little closer. She looked away from me, but not because she wanted to watch the cart of fish pass us.

"It was risky going to the church first, but necessary. And so far no one seems to be following us either... It's honestly a better scenario, if the church really doesn't know about the paintings yet," I explained.

The cart stunk a little, and was dripping with water. I noticed the large blue fins sticking out of the barrels it carried.

"If... if they had tried to seize us, what would have happened?" Renn asked.

"Well..." I found a nicely lit building, with a large harpoon hanging off its sign. "How about fish?" I asked her.

She sighed and stepped away from me. Not so far that my hand had to leave her lower back and waist, but not so close that we were touching anymore. "Fine," she said.

"I wasn't avoiding the question, I plan to answer it," I said to her.

"Sure sounded like you were," she accused me.

Frowning at her it was my turn to step away from her. For the tiniest moment my hand felt cold, even out of place. As if it had already grown at home upon her, and was now homesick.

"I'd have forced them to take me to the paintings," I said simply.

Studying her eyes, I watched the way they stared at me... The way her irises narrowed a little... becoming a little less human in shape.

"Doubt me?" I asked her. Did she really?

"No. Far from it," she said softly.

"Then what is it?" I asked her. What was bothering her? What had I said?

"One moment you're a valiant protector, prideful and stoic... the next you act as if we're normal humans on a common date," she said.

Glancing around to make sure no one nearby was close enough to hear our conversation; I was a little surprised to see the lack of people on the road. It wasn't night yet, but was about to be... by now this area should be a little busier.

"Do you not realize I'm trying to make us seem as normal as possible, to those who may be watching?" I asked her.

"Of course I do. That's the only reason I haven't bit your hand off. But... I'll be honest, when you had us set fire to the building... I had expected you to be just as swift with vengeance to the others. To be quick to act," she said as she looked away. To my feet.

Ah... she was upset I wasn't being as active as she herself felt we needed to be.

"Do I look that calm?" I asked her.

"You do. I can see your anger within. Your worry... but..." she shifted, and grabbed her elbow with her hand. The way she stood, holding her own arm, made her seem... very human.

Especially since she still had remnants of ash and soot on her chin. Usually I'd have told her about it, or helped her clean up myself, but it had helped the illusion of us being a poor wedded couple.

Poorer humans were always dirty after all.

"Come. Let's talk over the meal. They have a table that sits near that window, it'll be perfect," I said with a gesture to the lit up building.

Renn grumbled wordless noises as she followed me into the tavern.

The tavern wasn't busy at all. A few tables were occupied, but Renn and I didn't need to wait a single moment to be helped.

Giving a muscular woman our order, I pointed to the table I wanted. "Will be right out sir!" the woman nodded.

Renn didn't even wait for me to finish ordering. She sat down at the table I had pointed at, and glared at me as I sat across from her.

Glancing to the open window to my right, I smiled lightly as I took a mental painting of the scene before me.

Looking away from the scene, I decided to give Renn what she wanted... and looked her in the eyes.

She held my gaze as I nodded. "I'm not as patient as you think, Renn. But I need to be careful. If you had any idea how many times I've made mistakes over the years, out of anger and impatience, you'd probably become more sick to your stomach than you had earlier today," I said, referencing her several moments of sickness as we searched the Sleepy Artist and its burning afterwards.

I had to nearly carry her away as it went up in flames. She hadn't taken it well. At least she hadn't tried to stop me...

Renn shifted in her chair, as if upset that I'd dare bring up such things.

Studying her as her eyes calmed down a little, and began to examine the tavern we sat in... I realized she was exhausted.

Even though not human, we weren't gods. We still got hungry. Still got tired. Still hurt.

Not only had she not gotten much rest, or food, on our trip here... she has had a rough a day. How much longer could she go while under such strain?

"Plus, the humans won't be able to do much too quickly. Odds are the Sleepy Artist had been seized several days ago. Either the paintings are in town somewhere, within a keep or castle, or already being shipped on a boat to elsewhere," I said.

Her eyes wavered, trembling as she let loose a tiny whine.

"Don't cry," I warned her. The waitress was heading our way.

"Here ya are!" I dug out some coins to hand to her as the waitress dropped off two large cups.

The single penk and half dozen renk clinked in her hand.

"Paying first! Don't want to go over budget eh!" she laughed in thanks as she took the coins and left.

"Over budget?" Renn asked.

"She thinks I paid ahead to make sure you and I don't drink too much," I said.

"Pft," she made a noise as she went to taking a drink.

Indeed. I hadn't even ordered alcohol.

"What if we don't find the paintings?" Renn asked after a long drink. She looked relieved as she stared at the cup in her hands... looking at it like one would a friend.

"We will. We won't be leaving this city without finding them," I stated.

Renn looked away from her cup and to me. However she didn't stare at me with that same longing she had for the cup nor that glare from earlier, but instead...

"What?" I asked her.

Slowly shaking her head she looked away from me... back to her cup. Then she took a drink.

Deciding to not try and understand what that look had been, I glanced out the window.

A few people were walking by, but they were obvious fishermen. They were laughing together over something.

Other than them, everything else looked the same. Two of the birds that had been perched on a nearby house's chimney were still sitting in the same spot too.

"This will likely take a few days, Renn. Depending on what happens. Please don't get impatient," I warned her.

"I know already," she said.

Glancing at her, I found an upset face.

Her cup was empty.

Sighing, I offered her mine... and got a smile in return.

Maybe with a full belly she'd be a little less likely to glare at me.

Keeping an eye on the world outside as we ate a simple dinner... I continued to plan our next steps.

We had to find the paintings.

We needed to find Lughes and Crane if we could too, but the paintings were priority.

Those paintings could lead to the end of the Society.

And I couldn't allow that.

Wouldn't.

Chapter 48: Chapter Forty Seven – Renn – A Jealous Drink

Whatever fruit this drink was made of didn't matter. It deserved its high price.

Glancing at the nearby board, painted with prices for several different styles of drinks... I wondered how hard it was to make them.

Did they just gather up the fruit, crush and juice it? Did they pickle the fruit first? Did they have to use milk or sugar?

If it was easy, maybe I'd be able to make it too.

Would they even tell me if I asked?

Sipping the remainder of my drink slowly, I tried to imagine what Vim would say if he came back to find me broke... with not a single coin left.

How many could I buy with what he had given me? Thirty? Thirty two?

Trying to do the math in my head, I realized how silly the idea was.

Buying thirty drinks all for myself... ridiculous.

Gulping down the delicious drink, I couldn't help but find it not ridiculous at all.

Maybe one more...

Glancing around the pillar I sat next to, as to look at the nearby Office of Business, I gulped down the last of the drink in my cup. The building was fancy. There were archways, pillars, and shutters made of fancy green wood. It was several floors high, and had its own garden... littered with colorful flowers and bushy trees cut into shapes to represent animals.

Honestly it looked a little ridiculous. Yet at the same time it was obvious why it looked like it did.

That place was where nobles did business. Or something like it. So it had been made to represent the wealth one could find within.

Vim had looked a little silly as he walked into it... since his clothing wasn't anywhere near as fancy or new enough to not look odd amongst those flowers and bushes. Vim was still in that building. He had asked me to stay here, but hadn't necessarily said why. Granted, that man had reasons for everything he did... but sometimes I felt as if he acted more so on whims and instinct than anything else.

But maybe it was a valid reason. That was the office for business. A place for nobles.

I'd probably only arouse suspicion if I entered it...

Tapping the wooden cup in my hand, I groaned at the sound my nail made as I did so.

"One more," I agreed with my desire, and hopped off my chair. Entering the small shop to order another, I made sure to keep an ear out for anything strange coming from that large building, and Vim as well.

"Another?" the pretty woman who was cleaning the counter asked me as I entered the small shop.

"I'd like to try the... red one," I said, pointing to the board with prices. The third from the top was written in red ink.

"Red berries. One moment," she said with a happy giggle, and then hurried to the backrooms.

Walking up to the counter, I patiently waited with glee. Maybe Vim would take long enough for me to try all the flavors.

Thirty five was silly, but what about one of each available flavor? There were only seven main ones, after all.

"Here you go," the pretty attendant offered me a new cup. Its contents smelled like a rose.

Putting the empty cup of the previous drink I had just enjoyed onto the counter alongside the four renk coins, I smiled in thanks.

"It's his fault you know," I said to her as I tasted the new flavor.

"It is!" she agreed it was Vim's fault as she collected the coins and the empty cup.

For a small moment I dedicated my whole being into savoring the tasty drink. There was a hint of honey in it, somehow... and...

"Do you put honey in it?" I asked her. It was obvious they did, I could taste it... I'd wonder if the fruit itself, the red berries, tasted like honey but I could taste them too. They were slightly sour, but in a good way.

"We do. Just a tad though," she said as she went back to cleaning the counter she had been working on before I interrupted her.

Nodding, I went back outside of the small shop. To sit at the table under the umbrella canopy, near the pillar of lamps.

Peering down the street, I watched a pair of guards walking along the garden of the Lord's Office building. I'd seen them circle it a few times already since Vim went in.

Sighing, I wondered how long it'd be still. It had been almost...

Looking up at the sky, to see where the sun had moved to... I was a little surprised to see how far it had gone already.

That long?

"Well hello Miss."

Forcing my ears not to move, I went still as I slowly turned my head.

Two men... no, two younger men, were standing on other side of the small fence that enclosed this shop's eating area.

"What is it?" I asked them. Were they nobles? They were dressed well, and a little scrawny... although not too old, they should already be a little taller. A little stouter.

A little dirtier.

"Mind if we join you Miss?" the one on the left asked, giving me a smile as he extended his hand in offer.

I blinked at them as I tried to understand what they...

Oh...

Realizing what those stupid looking smiles meant, I decided to look away from them.

Returning to my drink, and staring at the Lord's Office, I ignored the two men as they coughed and mumbled to each other.

"Get going Johnny! She's married!" the pretty shop attendant stepped out of the building and shouted at the boys.

The two jumped in shock, and then darted off. Jogging away as they blamed each other for getting yelled at.

Watching them go, I smiled softly as they ran away. They were still boys. Still young. Not much older than Lomi.

"Sorry about them. I know his mother, I'll make sure she gives him a scolding," the woman said while smiling with a light blush.

I nodded, since I wasn't sure if I should say anything about it.

"His fault, right?" she then said.

Pausing in my drinking, I laughed and nodded. "Indeed!"

She giggled as she went back into the shop, and I wondered if it was indeed her store...

Glancing up at the sign hanging on two metal spikes, I hoped it was. It wasn't big. It shared the building with another store next to it, one that was closed. Some kind of bakery. Yet it was a pretty building, although most buildings around here were fancy.

There was actually only one that wasn't pretty. The ugliest one in fact was...

Looking behind me, at the building across the street... I wondered why the dark, lopsided looking building hadn't been rebuilt.

It looked old and decrepit, yet people were coming and going from it. It looked very out of place here in the noble's district, where everything was clean... Especially since nearly every building had its own sitting area in front of it. Some even had small gardens.

While I studied the ugly building, a pair of women approached the store. They ignored me as they entered, while they talked about some animal one of their husband's had captured recently.

My ears perked as I listened into their conversation. They both ordered drinks, and sat down inside the building to talk.

"I swear it does nothing but whine all day. The barn is two buildings away, yet I still hear it all night!" one of the women complained.

"It'll stop in month or so. It has to be weaned Gloria... I told you," the other said.

Ah... they were talking about a cow, or something like it.

Nory had always wanted one.

I nursed my own drink as I patiently waited for Vim. Time passed slowly, but every so often I was able to listen into the passing conversations. Of nobles. Of servants... of the guards...

Most talked of the weather. How it was still cold, even though it hadn't snowed lately. Some talked of the upcoming change to the taxes at the docks. It started in a few months. Most didn't like it... Nobles and workers alike.

After another hour, I got another drink from the pretty woman. This time though it had gotten a little busy, so she didn't get to tease me about Vim's late return. Most of the seats inside had been filled. Surprisingly, mostly by younger kids.

Returning to my seat, I sighed and hoped it'd not be much longer.

Surely nothing had happened, right?

But I knew that was a foolish worry.

Vim was strong. And not just in the general sense.

Something told me that man could face every human here, one after the other, and walk away without a single wound.

For a small moment I went over the memories of the scene from the other night. At the river. Where those men had charged us.

They had not been armored. Most had been outright naked... but...

But they had been genuine in their efforts to kill us. Their weapons had been real.

Vim had slain them effortlessly.

I could still remember the look he had on his face, as he swung that sword.

It hadn't been...

"Is it tasty?"

Blinking, I looked down to my right and found a young boy smiling up at me.

He was missing most his teeth, and was dressed similarly to the other children I had seen lately.

"It is," I admitted.

"That's my favorite," he agreed.

"I like it too," I said. I wasn't going to mention that the red berries with honey had been better.

"Mark come on!" a woman shouted. He turned, saw his mother waving at him, and ran off.

Watching him go, I wondered why humans were always so...

Why were some so... peaceful? So honest?

It made it so hard to hate the ones that needed to be hated.

While looking around, I noticed that most of the shop had emptied again. There was only one other table occupied, and it was the one behind me. Near the door to the shop.

A young man and woman sat at it. She was giggling, and was red in the ears.

Studying them, I wondered how human's mated so early. Those two were probably the same age as the boys who had just tried to flirt with me.

Though granted, outwardly I probably looked just as old as they.

In my eyes they weren't much older than Lomi. If not the same age in honesty.

The idea of partnering with someone that young was...

Walking out of the shop, the pretty shopkeeper carried another drink out to me.

"Oh?" I watched her put it down in front of me, and then she slid easily into the only other chair at my table.

"As an apology," she said.

"For what?" I asked as I reached for the drink. It was the last flavor on the list. The liquid within was a light blue. And...

Was that ice inside?

"For your husband," she said with a smirk.

Frowning, it took me a moment to realize that she meant Vim.

Yes... she, and others, seemed to always think we were married.

"Now I can't get him to buy it for me when he gets back," I said with a sigh as I went to taking a drink.

She giggled, finding no harm in my words.

I focused on the new drink... mostly because I wasn't sure what to say to her.

What had she wanted? Or was this just the familiarity of humans. To sit and rest for a moment with a random customer she didn't know, and would likely never see again.

For a small moment the idea of owning such a small shop came into mind.

Spending days... years... decades... watching people come and go.

New faces every day. New people. New friends.

"It's a wonderful shop," I said to her.

She blinked a few times and then gave me a huge smile. "Thank you!"

Suddenly the woman I had found pretty became stunningly beautiful.

Sitting in awe at the sight, I wondered how often I encountered someone with such beauty.

The last I could think of had been Porka. And before her...

I couldn't remember any before her. Nory had been beautiful, but not outwardly. Her personality is what I had found to be gorgeous.

"Do you run it alone?" I asked her.

"No. My brother and his wife help me," she said.

No husband?

"He died. A long time ago," she said gently.

Woops. She had read my expression. I really should be more careful... "Sorry," I said.

She giggled, waving my apology away. "It's quite alright! I've plenty of suitors to have my fun with, so I'm okay," she said.

It was my turn to giggle at her strangely wry smirk. "All's well then!" I said.

She nodded. "It is! It's all his stupid fault for going to war after all!" she said, laughing alongside me.

As she laughed, I realized how sad that laugh was.

Even if she really did find it funny... she still found it painful to say it aloud.

"Is it hard? Finding a new husband?" I asked her.

Her smile soften a little as she leaned forward, resting her head on her hand. "It is," she said.

For a small moment I thought of Nory. Although our relationship hadn't been like that... it had still been special.

The idea of replacing her was an almost impossibility... yet wasn't that in fact what I had set out to do?

To find others to fill the void in my heart?

Yet now all I've done is make more voids. More holes. More sadness.

"It's not that sad, young lady. I'm alright," she suddenly said.

"Ah..." I nodded, afraid to mention I hadn't been saddened over her situation but my own.

"You are lucky though, I'm jealous," she then said as she sighed.

"I am?" I asked. Jealous of what? My cup was almost empty; there was nothing to be jealous of.

"He cherishes you. That's rare," she said, looking at me with envy.

He... she meant Vim.

What had she seen?

I quickly thought of the conversation between Vim and I when he had left me here. It had been a short one, since we had spoken mostly about all this before getting here.

He had asked me to wait. Gave me coins. Said I could shop around here, as long as I stayed nearby.

Nothing he had said or done should have been seen as... Him cherishing me. If anything, when I replayed the memories in my mind I saw not a husband fawning over his wife, but an old man grumbling to a grandchild.

"I... I'm not sure," I said to her, honestly.

Unless, of course, she had somehow heard or witnessed Vim's strange protectiveness. His steadfastness.

A part of me felt like he would protect me. From anything... but...

Wasn't that his job? Wasn't that what he had vowed to do?

If he saw it as a simple task... a duty, that he endured...

Then was any of that really genuine care? Did he really do it because he wanted to? Wasn't it just because he simply had to?

"Must be nice..." the woman said gently as she watched me process her words.

Unsure of what to say, I decided to just nod at her.

I couldn't tell her she was misunderstanding everything... since that would not only seem strange, but also ruin that wonderful smile on her face.

"Well, make sure you get him to buy another before you leave!" she said as she hopped off the chair, and headed back into the shop.

"Thank you!" I said to her. For the free drink. For the sight of her smile.

She waved as she left.

"Making friends I see."

My hat almost fell off as I spun my head, finding Vim.

"Ah..." I started to stand, but he gestured for me to stay seated. He sighed as he went to sitting in the chair that the shopkeeper had just been in.

"Welcome back," I said, a little embarrassed.

Was that why she was smiling like that? She had seen Vim? Why hadn't I seen or heard him...? Why hadn't she said anything?

"Mhm," he grumbled as he got comfortable, and then reached out to check the contents of my cup.

A little unwillingly, I was a little offended as he took it from me. There were only a few sips left!

Vim quickly drank the rest of the cup, and I groaned as he did.

"Jerk," I whispered.

"Hm. Too much honey," he complained.

"If you don't like it, why'd you steal it?" I asked him.

"Because you seemed to like it," he said, as he then went to check the other cup. It too must have had a little left in it, for he drank that as well.

Sighing, I watched as he licked his lips and studied the taste of that drink. "That one's a little better," he said.

"Well?" I asked him.

He raised an eyebrow at me, and then nodded. "It was taxes," he said plainly.

Closing my eyes, I lowered my head and felt the whole world get a few degrees warmer.

"Lughes hadn't paid any taxes for six years. The Commissionaire sent his people to collect for the Lord of Ruvindale. What we saw was probably the simple results. The consequences. Chances are the timing was bad... Amber died. You left. They came in, and Lughes and the rest... panicked. Fearing the worst," he said lowly.

The two flirts behind us were giggling at each other, so they obviously weren't listening in... but it was a little surprising to hear Vim speak so openly. Seemed Vim was being a little willing to be risky today.

Though... maybe he was just being kind to me.

"Did... did they tell you what happened to them? Lughes and Crane?" I asked, peering at him between barely open eyes.

"They were supposed to take Lughes into custody. Crane was seen as just an employee, so wasn't prosecuted and was allowed to leave upon the seizure of the building. Lughes wasn't detained," Vim said softly.

"Wasn't detained? So... He got away?" I asked, hopeful.

Vim's hard gaze was my answer.

My tail and ears twitched as I felt my toes scrunch up in my shoes. For a small moment the whole world became...

"We don't know for sure yet, Renn. For now we'll just assume they all got away," Vim then said.

I tried to nod, but was only able to tilt my head. Taking a deep breath, I was a little proud of myself for keeping the tears in.

"So... it's not my fault...?" I asked after a few moments.

He shook his head, and then stood from his seat.

I was about to stand up with him, but he stopped me. I barely saw his outstretched hand through blurry eyes as he raised the two empty cups with his other hand. "Just getting more," he said.

"Ah... okay," I nodded, and looked away.

"Here," he put something in front of me, and I reached out to find a cloth.

Smiling at him, I used the little cloth to wipe my eyes.

I wasn't full on sobbing, or crying, but I couldn't help the tears welling up.

What a relief.

Though...

Sniffing, I took a deep breath as I heard Vim order another pair of drinks. The pretty woman teased him, telling him of all the men trying to take me home while he was gone.

Smiling at her, I couldn't help but chuckle. Somehow her little joke kept the true tears at bay.

Vim returned, putting a cup down in front of me. "This one's the best," he said.

Blinking wet eyes, I was surprised to find the red berry drink.

"It is," I agreed.

While he sat down, I took a small sip.

"It's very likely that the Primdoll family was the noble family who alerted the tax office of Lughes' lack of payment... but even if they had been, it's not something you could have caused or did. So, as I told you, hold your head high Renn," he said.

"Mhm," I nodded, unable to say anything else.

"The paintings being taken as payment for taxes makes sense. It would also explain the lack of them alerting the church as well. Either whoever took them hasn't really examined the paintings yet, or are afraid the church will take them for themselves. Leaving them with nothing of worth," Vim said.

"Nothing of worth?" I asked.

"If the church seizes them, even if they're nobles, they'll get no money for them. No payment," he explained.

"Oh. That's a good thing, isn't it?" I asked.

He nodded. "It is. Human greed can always be relied on."

I wasn't sure about that, but I was glad to see the relief in his eyes.

Odds were the reason he was so willing to speak of this here, where usually he'd not be willing to do since there were people around... was because of the simple reason he was happy. Excited. Relieved.

He wanted to share the good news.

Or well, as good of news as it can be.

"So... what now? Did you find out where the paintings are?" I asked.

"No. Only that the Commissionaire ordered them taken. Odds are he utilized a noble's personnel. Maybe their knights or something," he said.

"What is a Commissionaire?" I asked.

"A low rank noble who works for the Lord of the city. Usually appointed by charity," he said.

"Charity...?" I asked.

Vim nodded as he swirled the liquid in his cup, by the sound of it there wasn't much left in it. He took deep gulps. "It's one of those positions the nobles take not for pay or glory, but duty. It lets them feel special, and earn credentials amongst the other nobles and churchmen," he said.

"Ah..." I wasn't entirely sure how that worked, but it made sense. "That's why he doesn't have them himself," I said.

He nodded. "Odds are he picked a noble at random. But I have a few ideas on where to start our search."

"Primdoll," I said with a nod.

Vim was silent for a moment... then a small smile appeared on his face. "They're our second stop," he said.

"Second?"

Vim held out his cup. At first I wasn't sure what he wanted, but then I realized. Pushing my own cup forward, I happily toasted with him. Yes! This was a great moment, and should be celebrated!

"Uh... no... I was offering you the last of it," he said with an odd look.

"Huh? Oh..." A little embarrassed, I grumbled and took his cup. Sure enough there was another gulp or two left.

Staring at it as I was about to drink it down... I saw something out of the corner of my eye.

Turning a little, I flinched at the huge smirk on the shopkeeper. She was smiling at me through the window, and giggled at me.

Quickly gulping down the remainder of Vim's drink, I did my best to ignore her as we left the store.

She was too kind and pretty to hate... and it wasn't fair!

Even still, I waved goodbye to her all the same.

Her jealous smile as she waved back earned a spot in my long memories.

Chapter 49: Chapter Forty Eight – Vim – A Thief's Regret

The scent was familiar.

How was it even after all this time... all these years... this smell still lingered?

I didn't close the door behind me, but that was because a large man was already in motion to do so. It shut solidly, locking in the disgusting air into the building.

Looking around, I counted the people. The ones on the floor, passed out. The ones in a cage in the corner. The three women sitting at a table, counting coins. The two large men peering at me in silence, sitting at a counter.

The ones not drugged up, nor beaten into submission, all looked at me... but no one moved. No one said anything.

Was I going to have to make a scene or...?

I did not.

Appearing from behind a hallway wall, a tall thin man approached me quickly. He had a soft smile, and his eyes studied me as I had just studied his den.

"What can I offer you today, good-sir?" the man asked once close enough. I noticed he didn't get too close to me.

I studied him for a moment, and wondered if this was what some of the Societies members saw sometimes when they looked at me.

A man who thought he was above everyone and everything. Even though he himself was small. Even though he himself was frail and worthless.

"Shall we speak where the air isn't so thick?" I asked him, putting a little bit of disdain into my voice. Not just because I didn't like the smell of old sex and drugs, but also to imply a point.

The thin man smirked a little, and then nodded. "This way, sir," he said, and turned on a heel.

Following him, I ignored the two large men who followed us down a hallway. One had been the man who had closed the door behind me.

It didn't take long for me to get guided to a far more normal room. One that smelled of incense, and was clean. It was large, and was full of higher end furniture. The type found in the houses of nobles.

There was even a window, even though it wasn't open.

Quite a statement, to have such a room in the slums. Especially in a building made of wood and held together with mud.

Only one of the large men entered behind me and the thin man, the other remained outside.

"Please, sir," the thin man offered me a seat in a large couch. He himself took a seat across from the couch, into a thin wooden chair. A plain one, without decoration.

It didn't belong in this room.

Yet, it made the point clear. The chair didn't belong, and neither did he. At least not in this room of comforts and wealth.

As he sat in it, I stayed standing. He smiled at me as he continued to study me, seemingly amused that I had refused his offer for a seat.

There was no reason for me to feed his amusement. I wasn't in the mood to play his weird games.

"My master has heard of a recent... seizure. I'm sure you heard of it?" I asked him, choosing to find out if he was going to be legitimate or not.

The thin man's smile got wider, and he nodded. "I have. I hear the paintings were vivid and detailed," he said.

Good. Although weird, he was at least what he pretended to be.

"My master would be very happy to come into possession of... those vivid pictures," I said.

The large man behind me, standing in front of the door, shifted his weight. For a small moment I thought he was about to attack me, but then I saw the smile slowly die on the thin man's face.

"To be frank... and to respect your master... I am sorry but I'm unable to aid you in the acquisition of any paintings," he said stiffly.

Frowning, I studied the look on his face. The sweat that begun beading on his forehead was fresh.

That wasn't from drugs, or alcohol. Nor heat, since this place was somewhat cold.

He was worried.

"If it is a matter of price... my master is beyond such limits," I said, crossing my hands behind my back.

The man cleared his throat, and stood from the chair that didn't belong. He seemed to have wobbly feet for a moment, as if drunk. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm neither in possession of any of the paintings, nor will I ever be... most likely," he said.

Watching the man's face, and the sad smile that was slowly dying on it... I realized he was being serious.

He wasn't trying to hide anything from me... he was actually worried about something. Worried and sad. Regretful.

"Not even willing to entertain the idea?" I asked him.

The man sighed and then his smile disappeared completely. Suddenly I was talking to the man, and not the persona he tried to pretend to be. "The ones who seized those paintings are the Knights of Carvill... the only honest knights in this whole damned city," he said.

The man behind me nodded his head.

"Honestly sir, I'd love to entertain it. A single one of those paintings would be worth a handful of penk if I got them to the capital. But the Carvill knights can't be bribed. Can't be threatened. Can't be killed. I lose men to them all the time, and there's not a damned thing I can do about it," the thin man said, suddenly becoming a little whiny.

"I see," I said.

"I was kind of hoping your master was going to offer to sell me some of them, to be honest..." he said with a sheepish smile.

"Regrettable," I said.

Truly it was.

Yet now I knew more. So this wasn't all a waste.

"Sorry sir. Please inform your master that I deeply regret not being able to be of service... truly. Honestly," he repeated that word again, and I wondered if it was one of the few words he knew to convey such a thing.

I believed the man, even if he sounded desperate to be believed.

After all, he wasn't even trying to get a fee out of me. Wasn't even pretending to be willing to try for a few coins.

Either I had found the only honest slumlord in town, or he was actually this scared of those knights.

Knights of Carvill...

With a sigh I nodded. "I understand. I shall endure to inform my master. Here, for your honesty," I pulled out the small bag of coins I had prepared. The one I had intended to use no matter his answer.

The man didn't hesitate to take the bag, but upon feeling the weight of it he suddenly grew a conscious. "Sir... this is too much," he said softly. Looking as if I had just smacked him.

"As I said, my master is beyond such things," I said.

"Ah... I thank your master," speaking humbly as he lifted the small bag of coins.

Turning, I wasn't too surprised to find the door already being opened for me.

This time the two large men not only guided me to the exit, but bowed their heads to me as I left.

Leaving the building, I ignored the odd look of the beggars who had been standing guard. They weren't sure if they should draw their hidden blades, or beg me for change.

Lucky for them they ignored me.

This was troubling.

Honestly I had hoped it had been the Primdoll family. But that would of course had been too convenient. Yet for it also to not have been a merchant, or some lower noble to have been the ones tasked with collecting the unpaid taxes... but some kind of knight order instead?

Knights of Carvill? I had no idea who they were, or what they represented... but the fact that they had scared that thief lord well enough that he hadn't even considered the idea of taking my job offer was unsettling.

"Waste of men," I said lowly as I left the slums.

Ignoring the eyes on me as I walked through the grimy, dirt packed roads; I tried to formulate a plan for my next step.

Finding these Knights of Carvill wasn't that difficult. Odds are they had their own barracks somewhere in town. It'd take me only a few hours to find them.

But I needed to also find out who owned them. Were they owned by the Lord of Ruvindale? The nobles? The church?

For that thief to be so afraid of them, told me it wasn't the Lord of this town or the nobles at all.

"The church then," I grumbled.

Yet that begged the question as to why the church wasn't in an uproar. Would knights known, and feared, for their dutifulness hide such paintings from their masters and lords? Their priests and clergy?

After a few minutes I finally began to approach the stone buildings and roads again. The stink of the slums wasn't as bad here, but I knew it'd linger on my clothes for some time.

"Least of my worries," I said. At least for now.

Even though Renn might complain...

Thinking of her, I frowned and went to searching for her. I had asked her to remain out of the slums, but to stay nearby so I could find her and...

There she was.

Waiting. Like always.

She got so anxious. So worried, when she waited... and she voiced her complaints often. Rather she showed her annoyances with glares and scowls when she complained that we weren't being active enough in our task... But...

For as much as she hated it, she always waited patiently when I asked her to.

Seeing her at a distance, alone, it reminded me of her nature.

Cats stood like that. Alone. Watching, and waiting. Waiting for things no one knew existed.

Approaching her, I decided not to sneak up on her again. Although it was fun to see her expression, and watch her jump in surprise, she looked a little too sad right now for me to entertain myself at her expense.

Stepping onto the stone road, and off the dirt one, I watched her hat. It didn't shift, even as her head hurriedly turned to look at me.

She smiled at the sight of me, and I almost hesitated. Almost paused mid-step.

"Fool," I whispered at myself.

She was simply excited to learn if I had good news.

Nothing more.

Renn ran up to me, hurriedly enough that a few onlookers had stared for a moment. They probably saw a young wife, glad to see her husband return from the slums finally. Glad to see he wasn't fumbling and tripping over drunken feet.

"Well?" she asked, hopeful.

Not just hopeful... apprehensive.

She was obviously happy to have learned that she hadn't been the direct cause... but now she felt she had a duty. An almost too deep belief that she needed to help me right the wrongs that had been committed here. To the point that it was almost akin to a religious faith.

A part of me was glad for it. It meant she herself was the exact kind of person we needed in our Society. The type we desperately needed... but...

"The thieves here are unable to procure the paintings. They said they're in the possession of some kind of knight order. The kind that scares even the wicked," I explained.

"Knights..." she mumbled, going into thought.

"By the sounds of it," I started, and reached out to guide her away from the dirt road that led to the slums. There was no point in us staying here. Especially since I didn't want the smell to linger on her. "The special type. The extreme type," I finished as we went to walking.

She stayed nearby, allowing me to keep my hand on her lower back. Either she no longer minded it, or was too lost in thought to even notice. "The dutiful type," she added. Glancing at her, she smiled softly at me. "I knew one. Remember the children I spoke of? Lujic ended up becoming a knight."

Frowning, I tried to remember what she spoke of... but I only remembered her mentioning that she had lived with human children for a time.

"Lujic?" I asked.

She nodded. "The older brother. Became one to protect his younger sister. He was... a good man," she explained.

Ah. The ones she had helped raise.

Wonder if that was the one who died early.

"Yes, well... in my experience the more dutiful they are, the harder it is to get them to do anything we want them to," I said.

She nodded, seemingly in full agreement.

"But, the more devout they are..." I smiled as I stared at the woman in my arm.

"Hm?" she waited for me to continue, but I didn't yet.

She was perfect.

Her beauty. Her smile. Her age...

"What?" she asked softly.

First I needed to get her some clothes... and then...

"That's an odd look on you," she then said, raising an eyebrow at me.

"Oddly, I think it'll look great on you," I said.

"Huh?"

I ignored her confusion as I guided her to the center marketplace. To the shop Lomi and I had visited.

The high end clothes shop, for nobles.

Time to let her earn her keep.

Chapter 50: Chapter Forty Nine – Renn – Silk and Sweat

For the first time in my life, I was wearing clothes that... made me feel like I wasn't human.

"I don't mind playing a part, Vim... but can I?" I asked, adjusting the thick silk wrapped around my breasts. It was hard to do, especially since a young boy who had been walking nearby paused as I did so.

Doing my best ignore the young boy's odd look, I shifted my shoulders and decided to just let my new clothes be.

We were already in the noble's district. And I was supposed to be a noble. Which meant I was supposed to look comfortable and normal here, in my own environment.

"Why can't you?" he asked, his eyes were focused on the building in front of us.

"Because I feel ridiculous," I complained softly. The dress was... actually not that bad. At least compared to many others that had been in that shop. But it felt really weird. Like it was going to slide off my skin, and reveal my whole naked body, at any moment. It was nerve wracking! I felt like I wasn't wearing clothes but something made to torture me.

The fact humans wore such things so easily made me feel... out of place.

"You don't look it," he said.

"I feel out of place. Now I genuinely feel like I'm pretending to be something I'm not," I said.

"Which is why you'll be just fine. Your real attitude is basically how most noble women act. So... just be yourself," he said with a shrug.

"Attitude?" I asked him.

"Only you could complain about that dress while looking so beautiful in it," he said.

Gulping at his words, I knew better than to take that at face value... Especially since it sounded insincere while he wore what he did. He now wore a dark blue suit... and as much as it pained me to admit it, he looked really good in it.

Saying such words was definitely rich coming from him.

How does such an average looking man look so comfortable in such clothing?

"That's not fair to say when you look so comfortable. You should have picked something better suited for me," I said.

He finally looked away from the alabaster building we were approaching, and smiled at me. "See? Noble women always get what they want. Even when they don't deserve it," he said.

"Ah... I do sometimes, don't I," I nodded, agreeing with him.

Though granted, that was usually only thanks to his kindness.

"I'll be your ward. A type of servant, but not. Think of me as related to you by blood, but still a servant. Or a guard. Someone you trust fully, yet see as beneath you," Vim explained.

I nodded as I adjusted my right sleeve. The soft material was... loose. It wasn't sliding free, or falling down, but it felt like it was. Which made me anxious.

"We're not married anymore?" I asked him with a smile.

He grinned and pointed at a distant glimmer. The noon sun gleamed off what looked to be armor. Armor of knights.

"They'll take one look at you and know you're above them. So as long as you don't stumble, they'll do all the heavy lifting," he said.

"Heavy lifting..." I whispered. What a way to phrase it.

"I as well. It'll be fine. All we need to do is find the storeroom. Once we do, it honestly doesn't matter what happens from there," he said.

"Another fire?" I asked softly.

His small grin disappeared, and I felt bad for being the cause of its death. "Yes."

"Such a waste," I said.

"I know. But there's no other method for us here. It's not like you and I can carry out hundreds of paintings on our backs. And they won't just give them to us," he said.

"We could carry them out over their corpses," I offered.

Vim slowed his already slow pace a little, but said nothing.

"Sorry. Alright. I can do this," I said, hoping he'd forgive me.

He nodded, seemingly unbothered by my earlier comment. Even though I knew the truth.

A part of him wanted to do the same thing. But he, and I admitted I did too, knew that would do almost just as much harm.

My left glove shifted a little, and I wanted to groan as I went to putting it back in place.

"I don't fit these," I said.

"You're fine. You're just not used to the feel of the silk. You look great," he said.

Although I knew he was saying such things just to calm me down... I still found myself blushing at his words.

Vim slowly came to a stop at an intersection. The last one before the large alabaster building, which supposedly housed the Knights of Carvill. It looked like a castle. A glowing one, thanks to the high sun.

"Remember Renn, we have a goal," Vim said.

I nodded.

"Please. No matter what happens... don't get angry. Don't lose your temper. Promise me," he said.

I nodded. "I promise Vim... as a thank you for letting me help, it's the least I can do," I said.

He blinked, and I smiled at him. As I did my right sleeve adjusted a little again. "I know you probably have a way to do this without me... so thank you. For giving me the chance to help. I appreciate it," I said.

Vim stared at me for a moment before nodding. "Alright."

"Alright," I agreed.

"As you say, Renn Proscilla," Vim then said.

"Huh?" I asked. Who was that?

"I have a friend in that family. Their territories are far south, and won't cause them or us issues to use their name here," he explained.

"A... family?" I asked.

"A noble family," he nodded, and then noticed something at our feet.

I stepped back, worried I had stepped in something like mud or worse... but instead he knelt down to tie my shoe.

My heart skipped a beat as I watched him quickly, and easily, secure the lashes on my new shoes.

They weren't too fancy, but they gleamed. Spotless.

He gestured for my other shoe, and I felt silly as I let him check the laces on the other as well.

"Renn Proscilla... are they humans?" I asked.

"They are now," he said firmly.

Frowning at that, I hoped he meant that in a good way and not a horrible one.

"I'll do most the talking, being your ward. But they'll undoubtedly give us grief at first. I'll need you to pipe up and put them in their place for me when they do. You ready?" he asked me as he stood.

"Would you stop dallying already? I will be famished by the time this is over with at this rate," I said with a huff.

Vim gave me a real smile. One that showed teeth as he chuckled. With a nod, he seemed to approve of my performance as he gave me a very distinct bow. He lowered his head, and turned his hand inward in an odd way.

I didn't recognize that bow at all, but something told me anyone watching us would know it instantly.

"Lead the way," I said simply.

"Of course Milady," he said, with an odd voice.

My new hat was not as heavy, nor as nice in my opinion, as my other one. It too was... smooth and silky feeling, and wanted to move and fly off each time my ears moved.

And my ears did move at his odd voice.

Luckily, for me and him, Vim had pinned the hat down firmly for me. A good dozen pins held it in place.

"Hmph," I held in my odd laugh as I allowed Vim to begin guiding me to the Knights of Carvill's barracks.

As we neared the large white building, I watched the pair of armored knights study us on our approach.

Vim was walking close to me, but not as close as he had been lately. Also, his hand wasn't at the small of my back anymore either.

For some odd reason that made me even more nervous.

Why couldn't he have just pretended to be my husband? Or he the noble, and I the servant?

"State your business, Madam," the older looking of the two knights said as we got close.

"I greet you, sir. This is Milady Renn Proscilla. We have come to inquire of your lord captain, if it would please him to meet with my lady," Vim very quickly, and sounding very naturally, greeted the knight in turn.

Although Vim sounded... very odd, and spoke in a way that was far from his norm... I somehow found myself completely believing in him. As if this was in fact Vim, and the life he actually lived.

The two knights seemed to very obviously believe him as well, for they both looked at each other and nodded.

"I shall guide you Madam, please, this way," the older knight was the one to oblige us. With an open palm he gestured to a large entrance, the one we would have probably simply walked into if not for them blocking it.

"As you may," Vim said with a nod.

The guard nodded and turned, heading into the building.

Vim stood still, and glanced lightly at me. Getting the point, I went to following the knight.

Vim bowed as I passed him, and for the slightest moment I feared he was going to remain behind... and leave me to do this alone. But no, after a moment he went to following me, walking a few steps behind me.

Relieved, I did my best to not stare too much at the walls and doors we passed as we went deeper into the building. Somehow the hallways were very big... the ceilings were up high enough that they could have fit a whole other floor inside, if they hadn't wasted so much space.

Oddly the place wasn't that cold, which told me they probably burnt a lot of wood to heat this much open space and...

My jaw clenched as we rounded a corner, and the sight of statues came into view.

Marbled white, people had been carved out of stone. Men. Women. Children. Some naked, others not, but all of it was art. As much art as Lughes' and Amber's paintings.

The sights were a wonder, and I regretted each one we passed. Would it seem... un-noble of me to stop and stare for a moment?

Probably would. Since such sights were probably the norm for such people.

As we walked, the statues began to become fewer in number... which I was somewhat grateful for. Some of them were so detailed I was starting to wonder if looking at them was worth the risk.

"Brother," a man without armor passed us, and nodded in greeting to the guard who was guiding us.

"Brother," our guide said back, his armor clanking as he nodded extravagantly.

Amused, I wondered if this was more of a religious thing than not. There didn't seem to be any... religious motifs anywhere. None on their armor, or the statues we passed. In fact some of the statues had been a little... too much, even for me. Which made it hard to imagine the church allowing them in their temples.

"Ah! Brother Lawrence!" the one guiding us spoke up upon seeing another man. A broad shouldered one, carrying a book.

"Brother, how can I help you?" Lawrence asked as we approached.

"This is Lady Renn. She has come to kindly beg a meeting of Lord Carvill," our guide said.

Brother Lawrence looked from his brother, to myself. I noticed he didn't even glance at Vim.

Which... was a little odd, considering he was wearing an extremely similar suit. In fact, it looked a little dated compared to Vim's.

"I shall oblige them, brother. Return to your post," Lawrence said calmly after staring at me for a moment.

"Thank you brother! Milady, beg your forgiveness but Brother Lawrence shall guide you from here," our guide said with a formal bow. This one I recognized, since it was accompanied by a knights salute.

"Hm, very well," I said gently.

The two men blinked, and for the tiniest moment I worried I had made a mistake. Was Vim supposed to have answered instead?

But no, the two men remained calm and simply nodded their heads. Our previous guide turned, and headed back where we had come from... and our new guide, Lawrence, gestured with an open palm to a hallway nearby. "Right this way Madam."

I didn't nod, and simply went to following him.

He walked calmly, and didn't seem bothered at all. Although he was walking a little faster than our previous guide had.

"My Lord Carvill was just taking tea, so this is a prime opportunity my lady," Lawrence said.

"Fortuitous," Vim said from behind me.

Although expecting the man in front of me to tilt his head, or turn to face us, he instead kept walking. He nodded, as if in agreement with Vim's assessment.

We entered the hallway, and suddenly the place wasn't as neat anymore. Although the white stone was... pretty, and bright... and clean... that was all it was.

Simple stone.

There were no more statues. No more high ceilings. No more pillars or designs...

Somehow that annoyed me. If I was going to endure this, I should at least be rewarded a little... right?

I sighed, but did so quietly. If the man guiding us noticed, he didn't show it.

Not long after entering the boring hallway, we were taken to a large pair of doors. Wooden doors, which the wood they were made out of was a bright red in color. Looking almost painted, yet didn't seem so.

Lawrence knocked on the door with a few taps, and waited for a few moments before opening the door.

He opened it before hearing an answer, which surprised me.

Before I stepped into the room, Vim tapped my shoulder. Looking at him, I watched as Vim entered the room before I did... leaving me alone in the hallway.

At first I thought he was telling me to keep up the good work, but I knew that hadn't been the case.

He had wanted me to wait a moment.

Watching Vim enter the room behind Lawrence, I watched as Vim stopped a few feet from the door. He turned a little to nod at whoever he was looking at, but said nothing.

Listening into the room, I heard Lawrence and another man speak to one another. "Allow her in, please," a man said.

Vim turned and then gestured for me to enter. He bowed as I entered. "My lady Renn Proscilla," Vim introduced me as I entered the room.

The room was much smaller than I had thought it was going to be. Lawrence was standing in front of a large desk, which wasn't that far from the door. Behind the desk, which had books and scrolls upon it, was an older man. Dressed in a light sleeved shirt. He didn't look regal or knightly, honestly. In fact his frame, although larger than Lawrence's, wasn't as wide or stout as the other knights here.

"Lady Proscilla. I am the current captain of the Carvill knights. Part of my families traditions is we abandon our first names, when acting as the head of the family. Please address me as Carvill," I was greeted by the man behind the desk. He put down a large feather... which was undoubtedly being used as a pen.

"Lord Carvill, I thank you for forgiving this sudden visit," I said.

The man nodded gently, seemingly accepting my thanks in stride... as if I really did need to be thankful for his kindness.

For a small moment the silence started to linger, so I glanced at Vim. Making sure to look at him with as much normalcy as I could and not allow any of my fear or worry to be seen, I was glad that Vim seemed expectant of my look. He quickly nodded and bowed.

"We've come to intrude out of necessity, my Lord Knight. But we have been placed in a rather stifling predicament, by your actions, and wish to rectify the matter as swiftly and properly as possible," Vim spoke evenly, once more making me feel as if he actually belonged here.

He spoke, and stood, and looked, as if he belonged in this room. Talking to them. Talking for me.

Maybe he was a noble himself.

"Stifling predicament?" The man Vim had called the Lord Knight asked.

Standing up straighter, I stared into the eyes of the man who now glared at us.

Lawrence also narrowed his eyes, as if we had just insulted them.

Maybe Vim had.

"Indeed," I said simply.

The two blinked, and then glanced at one another. My heart thumped, and I worried over my comment... Yet even as my anxiety grew, and a strange sweat began to form on my lower back, I watched as Lord Carvill sighed lightly.

So...

It begins.