

The Non-Human Society

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Chapter 51: Chapter Fifty – Vim – Lord Carvill's Fire

The Lord Knight of the Carvill family appeared to be the real deal.

He sat back in his chair, sighing softly as he studied Renn. At first he had looked at her with interested eyes... maybe either because of her beauty, or her demeanor... but now he was studying her for another reason.

"I've never heard of the Proscilla family," Carvill said simply.

I held back a smile as I lowered my judgment of this man. He was a real knight. A true warrior. But he was not a politician. Not a negotiator.

He wasn't a merchant, or a noble. At least, not the kind of noble I feared.

"The Proscilla family oversees several fishing towns, and river villages, in the south of Harden. They do so for the principality of the Winged Church," I said smoothly. The man's eyes never left Renn, even as I spoke.

"Don't boast."

For the smallest of moments I didn't realize who had spoken... until I saw the two men raise their eyebrows in respect.

Lowering my head, to bow to the woman who had spoken so flatly and calmly, I wished I could give her a smile.

She probably had no idea how flawlessly she had just proven her legitimacy to these men.

"I do know of our sisterhood the Winged Church. Forgive me as I've not had the pleasure of spending much time in the south. So... to what degree did my household wrong you, pray tell?" Carvill asked calmly.

Although he had relaxed a little, there was still a hint of worry in his eyes. It didn't reach his voice, but I heard it in the way his left foot had started to twitch. He most likely thought we wouldn't notice, especially since we couldn't see it since the desk blocked it, but I could hear it clearly.

He was anxiously fidgeting.

"Milady has a fancy for... certain quality paintings. She had commissioned a portrait from an artist that called your city home. We arrived a few days ago, after finishing up a small matter in the port of Nevi, to take possession of it. Only upon our arrival here, we've come to learn that you had confiscated the painting," I spoke evenly, explaining the situation.

For the first time since I had entered the office, the Lord of Carvill looked at me.

Now he studied me, and I noticed the way he smirked a little as he did.

He had originally thought me a simple servant, yet now saw me as someone worth keeping an eye on.

Interesting. He really was the real deal.

Seriously... why did the humans always get the good ones?

"My men did indeed confiscate paintings just last week... you say that one of them was yours?" he asked.

I nodded, but did so with reverence. "All the Proscilla family asks is to be allowed ownership of the painting they purchased rightfully," I said.

Carvill frowned, but not in a bad way. He looked at the man named Lawrence, who stood next to the desk with a troubled expression. "There were hundreds of paintings in that building sir," Lawrence said.

Carvill nodded. "Indeed there had been..." the man then reached over, to the edge of his desk, and tapped a bundle of scrolls. "Three scrolls. Three years of payments missed, another two still not gone through," he added.

A small part of me wanted to walk over and grab those scrolls of his desk. Even if I had to do so over his body.

I kept myself in check as I nodded. "We only ask for the one owed to us, nothing more," I said.

"'Tis an honest and genuine request," Carvill said as he scratched his chin. He, like most of the knights here, were clean shaven. Yet I heard stubble as he scratched.

"Do you have proof of this purchase?" Lawrence then asked.

"Of course we do," Renn said flatly.

The two men flinched, and Carvill actually glanced at Lawrence with a glare.

It wasn't really an answer that deserved such a reaction... but it wasn't the answer that bothered them, but the tone in Renn's voice.

They interpreted her quick response as if she had felt insulted by them.

You never insulted a noble like that. Especially when one was a knight.

Even if Carvill, and this Lawrence, were nobles themselves... right now they were simple knights. Acting commanders and captains, yes, but not liegelords or rulers themselves.

Pulling out a small letter, I strode towards the desk calmly and placed it upon the desk.

Neither Carvill nor Lawrence made any move to open and verify our claims.

"What if the painting... your painting, madam Proscilla, isn't there? What if we hadn't been the ones to claim it?" Carvill asked, a little worried now.

"Then compensation would be in order, would it not?" Renn asked... Somehow sounding a little fed up with this conversation.

Carvill winced, and nodded. "Indeed it would."

Stepping away from the desk, I turned to walk back to my spot. Allowing me to give Renn a tiny smile without being seen.

She blinked, and I heard her tail beneath her silk dress shift its position.

Going back to my spot next to Renn, I turned around and watched Carvill tap the letter I had just given him. He hadn't opened it. Probably didn't plan to either, at least not anytime soon.

Opening it now, after he had just insulted a young woman of a prominent noble family, would only be a further insult.

He'd wait until we were gone before opening, lest he dared risk her anger.

Carvill sighed and nodded. "I shall allow your man to inspect the paintings. Lawrence, please summon Codey," he ordered.

"Sir," Lawrence nodded and turned to leave. He must have been expecting the order, for he had nearly begun to move before Carvill had finished speaking.

"We thank you," I said with a small bow.

Carvill nodded again. "Please return if you fail to find it, Madam. And we shall properly handle the mistaken misplacement," Carvill said gently.

Renn luckily understood his words for the simple dismissal they were, for she nodded and turned away.

Giving the Lord of the Carvill Knights a bow, I too went to follow Renn out of his office. Dutifully accompanying her as a servant would.

Leaving the office, I found that Lawrence was rather far down the hallway already. Renn stared at him, unsure of what to do.

I stepped forward just enough to give her the right guidance. She glanced at me, and then nodded and went to walking forward.

She walked slowly, and I was thankful for it. A servant was to hurry to us, not the other way around.

After a few steps, we grew far enough away from the door that I felt comfortable enough to give her a compliment.

"Well done. That went great," I said softly.

Her hat shifted a little, and I wondered how no one else noticed. Granted it was... small, tiny movements... but...

Though maybe the only reason I noticed was simply because I liked to see her reactions to certain things.

"What now?" she asked with a whisper. One low enough that even I barely understood her.

"I'm sure that man will return with whoever is to guide us to the paintings, Milady," I said lightly.

She glanced at me, as if upset I'd keep playing along at a time like this.

"Almost there. A little more. Keep it up, you're doing phenomenal. I might marry you off to a noble at this rate, since it seems to suit you," I said.

Renn was about to say something to me, but went quiet as Lawrence and another man approached us. The two hurried down the hall, and I watched as the young lad who accompanied behind Lawrence stared at Renn.

Amused, I stayed silent as the two bowed their heads to Renn. "Madam, this is Codey. He shall guide you to the storeroom where we put all the paintings we've confiscated," Lawrence said.

Studying his eyes, which strained to look at Renn as he bowed, I wondered if maybe I had severely underestimated how good looking Renn was.

I should have realized it. After all, even I had found her attractive...

"I'll be your guide, my lady!" the young boy, Codey, happily introduced himself... even if he did so with a red face.

"Lead the way," Renn said plainly.

The two nodded, and Lawrence stepped aside... going closer to the wall of the hallway. He stayed there, watching us go as Codey lead us away, back towards the entrance of the building.

Following Renn, who followed the young boy, I did my best to ignore the stare from Lawrence as we left him behind.

Her good looks were definitely a factor.

Somehow, even though it helped us in this subterfuge, I found it upsetting.

Luckily we didn't run into any other knights as we were lead to another section of the building. So I didn't need to glare at anyone else, other than the young boy who sometimes tried to glance behind him to catch a glimpse.

Being led to a large door, I found it a little odd how there wasn't a lock upon it as he opened it for us.

Sure enough, within the room... I could not only see familiar looking crates, but could also smell the stink of old paint.

They were here.

"It will be... dark in there. Shall I procure a torch, Milady?" Codey asked as he stared into the dark room.

To me, and undoubtedly Renn as well, the room wasn't that dark at all... but we weren't ourselves here. We were humans.

"Please," I said for Renn.

The boy nodded, but seemed disappointed that I had been the one to answer and not her. He spun on a heel and hurried off, towards another hallway.

"He's cute," Renn said softly as we watched him hurry away.

"Is he?" I asked. Really?

Suddenly Renn turned... then after half a second she snorted and smirked at me.

"What?" I asked her.

"So are you when you're jealous," she said.

Renn suddenly broke out into a huge smile, and she quickly covered her mouth with her hand as she chuckled. "Ha!" she did her best to stop herself from laughing aloud.

Although I knew I should chastise her, and tell her to calm down... instead I found myself smiling at her.

For the tiniest moment, I forgot we were in enemy territory, surrounded by quasi-religious knights.

For a single moment, I forgot that my entire goal for the last few days was finally right in front of me. Literally within reach.

Instead all I could think of, see, or hear... was the woman next to me.

"Your face!" she snickered, covering her mouth so her voice didn't sound too loud.

Watching Renn snicker as she did everything she could to control herself... I stepped back and bit my tongue.

Don't laugh. Don't smile.

"Haha," she giggled away, pleased with herself. Her happy eyes were getting watery, which I hoped was just because she was emotionally excited at the sight of the paintings before us... but I knew the truth.

Renn stifled a sniff, containing herself, since off in the distance near the end of the hallway we noticed shadows dancing. A light was approaching. Most likely our torch.

"Collect yourself," I said softly as the young lad rounded the corner, carrying a small metal lamp. It flickered as he hurried.

"Sure, sure," Renn smirked, doing all she could to control her amusement.

Sighing, I glanced into the storeroom before me.

I'd not be able to tell if this was all of the paintings... but it definitely looked like it. There had to be over a dozen large crates, and several piles of stacked paintings as well.

"Milady," Codey approached, and smiled warmly at Renn as he hefted the lamp for her.

Stepping forward, the young knight went stiff as I reached out to take the lamp from him.

He didn't stop me from taking it, but it was quite clear he had expected to hold the lamp for Renn. To both aid her himself, and be near her.

"Do you know anything of these paintings, sir knight?" I asked him.

He blinked at me, a little shocked by the question. "I... I helped unload them, my lord... but nothing else, no. I heard that they're to be auctioned off this festival, however."

"I see," I nodded, and then turned to look at Renn. "I shall be prompt my lady... however..." I spoke slowly, making a point.

"Hm. Indeed. Prompt as the snowfall, I'm sure. You there, Sir Codey? Where may I go to sit and rest, then?" Renn asked the boy.

Codey stood up straighter, and didn't succeed at all in hiding his happy smile. "Of course! Right this way Miss!" he gestured down the hall he had just come from, happy to oblige.

I bowed lightly, both in thanks to the young boy... and to Renn.

When the boy turned, to guide her, I noticed the happy smirk she gave me as she went to follow him.

Nodding lightly at her, I stood back up straight and watched her go.

"There is a pleasant waiting area in the nearby greenhouse," the boy said happily, unable to take his eyes off her.

Shaking my head at him, and the woman who gave him a welcoming smile, I glanced around to make sure I was now alone.

The hallway we were in wasn't as fancy or as large as the others... but it was also definitely one often traveled. The white stone was worn down in the center of the hallway, from many years of metal boots and feet.

I'd need to be swift.

Stepping into the storeroom, I closed the door a little. Not all the way, just enough to hopefully block the dancing shadows caused by the lamp I carried.

Hefting the lamp up, I scanned the room. It was about thrice the size of the Lord's office, and...

Yes. These were the paintings. Very likely all of them, too.

Stepping into the mess, since the crates and piles had been stacked a little randomly... I wondered if they had even catalogued them yet. By the looks, they'd...

Running my fingers along the face of one of the paintings that had been laid upwards, on the top of a crate, I stared at the line of dust I had made.

They hadn't studied them at all yet.

Chances are they had seized them... and then promptly brought them straight here.

There was still of course the chance that some of them had been pilfered, by the knights who had transported them here... but...

Picking a random crate, I pulled a painting out of it. To study it closer.

It was the painting I'd seen before in the attic. One of an old lumber village.

Putting it back, I found another. It was one of Lughes' old paintings, of his mountaintops.

The sight hurt, so I quickly put it back too.

Another painting was one of ours. Of the Society. The hairy cheeked family, that stood around the crib of their newborn, made me sigh.

Dropping the painting back into the crate, I stepped around to another crate. Within was many smaller paintings, closely packed together to the point that I had to tug rather hard to pull one out. Part of the paintings frame broke as I pulled it out. I ignored the wood as it splintered and fell back into the crate.

This painting was an old one. One of the first human painters that Lughes had employed.

I couldn't remember her name... but I remembered those eyes. She always gave her paintings a strange glossy gleam, in the eyes of those she painted. It made the artwork look... special. Alive.

Putting it down, I glanced around at the... hundreds of pieces of art.

"A legacy," I said.

That was what this was. A legacy. Not a page in a history book, but an entire book of history itself.

The lamp in my hand clanked as I lifted it higher, as if I actually needed the light to see better.

This was going to be horrible.

This was going to actually hurt me.

Maybe even hurt me more than finding the Sleepy Artist destroyed and ransacked had.

Closing my eyes, I tried to smell any hidden scents mixed into the paint and wood. I tried to smell for blood. For death.

I couldn't make any such things out, but the stench of paint was overpowering.

If Lughes or Crane had been killed near these paintings, and their blood had splattered upon them... I couldn't tell.

How regretful.

I was about to destroy hundreds of years of history.

Hundreds of years of skill and effort. Dozens of masters of their crafts had made these. Some of these paintings, even the normal ones, were more valuable than one could imagine.

Yet... even beyond that...

Stepping around a crate, I stared down at a painting that had been laid up against a crate. Its frame had been cracked, but it was still in one piece and hadn't been ripped.

Bringing the lantern down, to illuminate it better, I stared at the picture of Rungle and his daughter.

Frowning, I blinked and was suddenly before them.

The large man, with hands bigger than my head.

The young woman, who had inherited her mother's round ears.

The two had been the last of their family. The last of their kind.

And had been good friends, even till the end.

Blinking again, their voices faded... and I was back inside the cold stone keep of human knights and monks.

Taking a deep breath, I forcefully looked away from the painting.

I was likely the only one to remember them. Even if Lughes' still lived, which was doubtful, his mind was too gone. He might remember them upon seeing that painting... but...

He'd not remember their stories.

Lifting the lantern, I tried to count the crates around me. Eight... nine?

All these stories. All these people. All these scenes.

I'd be the last to remember them...

Quickly my eyes ran along other paintings. Even the ones barely visible, where only a corner or part of the painting was revealed.

A certain grove, by an inlet.

A family of deer, running through yellow flowers.

"I'm so, so sorry," I whispered.

Rungle and his daughter.

"Really, I am," I said again.

Crane, and her human masters who died protecting her.

Stepping towards the crate in the back, farthest away from the door... I reached into my pocket to pull out the satchel.

Opening the small bag of twine, I poured some of the powder onto the painting on top of the crate's lid.

Watching the powder accumulate on an ocean scene, where fishermen were trading with those who used to live in the coastal waters... I felt sick.

"Forgive me," I told them, as I stepped away to pour some of the powder elsewhere.

The fact that the boy mentioned they were to be auctioned off at the upcoming festival, most likely the winters-end festival, had been a great blessing.

It meant that they hadn't noticed yet how unique these paintings were.

A part of me had worried, since these knights were a religious order, but... their very religious tenants had saved us.

These knights, although most were noble born, weren't nobles of the higher ranks.

Most probably knew nothing or very little of artwork. And as such, although probably looked and glanced at the paintings... hadn't found them that interesting.

And if we were lucky, none of them had pilfered any yet. Or if any had been taken, by say the Lord Carvill himself, hopefully they had been one of the simple ones. The normal ones... of villages or religious motifs that had been commissioned.

Such thoughts were all that I could think of to keep myself from growing furious.

Walking around the room, I poured the powder where I could. Onto paintings. Into crates. On the floor, between the stacks, so the fire would eventually spread easier.

Getting closer to the door, I poured most of the remaining powder onto the crate nearest the door. As much as I could.

Then with a flick of the hand, I sent the satchel and the powder into the air. Spreading the remnants all throughout the room.

Taking a small breath, I noticed the new scent.

Mixed with paint and wood.

Lurking beneath the scents of the Sleepy Artist... was one far more pungent. Far more dangerous.

Looking to the right, at a medium sized painting... I hesitated right before throwing the lantern into the room.

Studying the painting... I suddenly heard a strange clanking sound as something snapped.

The lantern broke, falling from my hand.

Although I didn't startle, I was a little surprised as I watched the metal lantern land on the floor and bounce. Turning my hand around, I stared at the little circle piece of metal that had acted as the handle.

In my anger I had squeezed it tightly enough to snap it.

Then the glass of the lantern shattered on its final bounce. The metal frame sparked against the alabaster stone.

The oil within the lantern splashed out, covering the nearby paintings and the powder now covering them.

Some of it even splashed my right shoe.

And finally the lantern stopped making noise. Stopped bouncing... and the world went still.

For the smallest moment nothing happened...

Then the fire ignited.

Chapter 52: Chapter Fifty One – Renn – The Last Painting

The fire was... oddly dark, in the murky night.

Most of the fire had died down, it seemed, but every so often I could see the dark orange flames inside the black smoke.

Luckily, thanks to the size of the building and the fact it had been made mostly of stone... the fire hadn't spread very far. Only a single other building had caught fire, a storeroom and barn that the Carvill knights used to house their horses and other items.

Glancing away from the cloud of smoke, I dared a glance to the man sitting nearby.

Vim sat on the wall's ledge, with slumped shoulders. Watching the fire like a hawk... had he even blinked in the last hour?

Looking away from him, I glanced up and down the... what had Vim called this part? The battlement?

He sat in-between two of the extruding parts of the walls, which somewhat hid him from view in the dark of the night.

I stood behind him, but not because I was afraid to sit on the ledge of this wall. It wasn't that high, honestly, only a few stories tall... but...

If I sat in one of the crevices, as Vim was doing, I'd not be able to keep an eye on him.

No one else was on this section of the wall. Most of the guards of the city, and in fact most of Ruvindale, was on the other side of the town. Either aiding in fighting the fire, or watching it.

A part of me was... pained, to know that there was a very good chance that the fire had killed someone. It had spread so... so fast... Hopefully they also got the horses out of that barn, too.

And hopefully that young boy also found peace.

That young knight had guided me to a small garden, covered in glass. In fact it had been very beautiful. The kind that made me forget the severity of the moment... and because of that I had been ensorcelled by it. I had gotten lost in those flowers, which were blooming even during this cold winter.

What had been a simple trick to allow Vim to be alone in the storeroom... turned into me losing track of time.

Then the world had exploded. Glass shattered. The floor had rocked.

And in that moment, not only had I been forced to realize how serious the moment had been...

Closing my eyes, I groaned softly at the memory.

Of the young boy, who had been all smiles.

Of his shocked expression, upon seeing my ears.

Opening my eyes, I looked at Vim. He still sat there, staring at the fire... focused on it and nothing else.

Stepping towards him, I tried to look over his shoulder. To see if his right hand still had that young knight's blood on it.

That young knight's terrified expression as he died would haunt me for some time.

It hadn't just been shock. It hadn't just been terror...

It had been betrayal.

And somehow that hurt the most.

"Was... was this the right choice, Vim?" I asked the man with the tear-stained face.

Studying the Societies protector, I wondered how such a man cried so openly. So purely.

Yet... what were those tears for? How many of those tear stains were for the humans he killed? How much of his grief, so obviously visible on his expression, was for the knights... and how much of it was for us? For Lughes and Amber? Crane and Shelldon?

Me and him?

"No," he then said.

A shiver ran down my body, reaching my tail.

"But... my choices are never the right ones," he added.

His voice didn't match his heartbroken appearance.

It sounded strong. Firm. Unyielding.

Just like it always did.

Which was the real man?

The one who could set aflame paintings of his own kind, and the humans who took them from us...

Or the one who silently sobbed at the horrible scene he had created with his own hands?

"I... I share this burden with you, Vim," I said lightly. In hopes that he'd not blame himself completely.

He had only personally killed two men upon our escape of the burning building.

The young boy who had guided us and an armored knight who had seen him do so.

Vim turned suddenly, looking at me.

I stood up straighter, shocked a little he had actually looked away from the fire. He hadn't done so in hours.

"Blame. You knew them for a mere few moons. Moons. Moments. A sliver of our lifetimes. Don't get full of yourself, woman," he said to me.

My jaw clenched, and I kept myself from growing too upset over his words. I kept myself from crying, and growling at them at the same time.

He didn't mean those words. And I could tell... and not just because of his worried eyes.

He was trying to tell me none of this was my fault.

"Don't you dare, Vim. Don't you dare try to coddle me like a child. Don't you dare not include me in the blame of..." I glanced at the fire in the distance. I couldn't see flames anymore. "Of this atrocity," I finished.

Returning to Vim's eyes, I hesitated.

How were they so clear? So...

It felt as if I was staring into someone who knew everything about me. Someone that knew all of my faults, and failures...

And yet wasn't judging me for them at all.

"Don't pity me," I whispered, a little worried as I stepped back a step.

Vim's eyes narrowed and he reached up and grabbed the higher part of the wall. With a single motion, he stood.

Stepping down from the wall's battlements, he took in a small breath as he stepped up to me.

"I knew crane when she was but a child," Vim said.

I gulped as he lowered his head, his voice going a little deeper. "I helped Lughes bury his wife and daughter," he continued.

"I..." he went to say more, but stopped himself.

Vim suddenly looked hurt, and he looked away from me. To the floor of the wall. Where the wood and stone stuck together in a misshapen mess.

"Don't stop. Keep going," I said firmly.

"No. Let's go... before..." he sighed and shook his head. "That's enough mistakes for one day," he said.

Vim turned, stepping towards the section of wall we had come from. Where the stairwell was.

Opening my mouth to say something... I realized I didn't know what to say.

He was blaming himself. For everything.

He had even tried to make me angry, so that I would not blame myself.

Then upon realizing it hadn't... wouldn't work... He decided to stop trying.

Reaching out, to stop him... I found myself unable.

What could I say?

What could I do?

Vim ignored me as he slowly walked away. He didn't even glance at the fire as he went for the stairs.

"Ooff..." I groaned, swallowing a sob as I went to follow him.

Nothing I said or did would change this man's opinion. His beliefs.

He blamed himself. Completely. Always would.

Which... really wasn't fair.

I was here too, wasn't I?

I had cried too. I still would.

I had been involved as well. I had been the one to carry Amber's corpse. I had been the one to deliver those letters and...

Following Vim down the stairwell, I was a little surprised to find a guard at the bottom of the stairs. He was polishing a metal boot.

He stared at us, with wide eyes full of concern... but said nothing as we left the wall's rampart, and went back into the city.

Glancing behind us, at the man who slowly went back to polishing his boot... I was a little glad that he hadn't said nor did anything to try and stop us. To question us.

Right now Vim would have simply killed him.

For a few good minutes, I followed behind Vim in silence. Occasionally I glanced up to the sky, to the dark clouds hiding the stars above us.

The smoke was covering the whole city... and the smell was...

Wait... we were heading back into the city. Deeper into it. Back towards the fire.

"Vim...?" I asked.

He didn't respond, so I hurriedly stepped up next to him. He frowned as he glanced at me, with a look that told me he really wasn't in the mood to deal with me.

"Where are we going? Aren't we leaving?" I asked him.

Vim's eyes grew soft, and he looked away... and after a moment slowly came to a stop.

"Leave..." he whispered to himself.

"Shouldn't we? The paintings are gone now... and we don't know where anyone else is right?" I asked.

"Right..." he said softly.

A little worried, I wondered if he had...

No...

"What were you planning on doing, Vim?" I asked him, a little bothered by that look on his face.

Vim looked at me, and I noticed the way his eyes slid up and down my body. If he had been anyone else, I would have shied away at that look.

"Go to the inn. Get your bag. Change your clothes," he said.

"What of you?" I asked, not letting him step away. I even started to reach out, to grab his arm.

"Primdoll."

My arm went still, a mere inch from his.

He nodded. "One last thing."

My hand clenched, and the silken glove protested. I felt it stretch... becoming looser than it already were.

"I'll come with you," I said, nodding to him.

"You've done well. You've been a great help, Renn. But please... let me pity you. Let me protect you. Let me do what I have to," he asked me.

My face twitched as I grabbed his arm. Right below the elbow. "No! That... that might very well be my fault, Vim...!" I said sharply.

Vim's face told me he didn't believe me, but I persisted. "Really! I... I was the one who agreed. To that families servant. I was the one who took that order!" I said. Nearly shouted.

"I know," he said gently.

Going still, my breath caught as he smiled softly at me. "I know. I read your note before Lomi and I left. I remember seeing it on the counter," he said.

My mouth went dry, and I nearly choked as I shook my head at him.

He had known all along?

"Thus, why I've told you. Hold your head high, Renn. You weren't at fault. If it had been anyone else at the counter that day, this still would have happened. Amber, Lughes, Crane... they all would have agreed to it. They all would have accepted the contract. Even I would have, had I been there," he said.

"But..." I didn't know what to say.

Vim reached out, but did so with his other hand. He patted my head, which was a little... painful. The pins keeping the hat on my head prodded me as he touched me.

"Go get changed. Get your stuff. Meet me at the eastern gate. The one near the docks," he said.

For a small moment I considered arguing. But...

That tone in his voice. That look on his face...

Vim stopped messing with my head, and then reached into his shirt. He shuffled something around, and I watched as he pulled something out.

The sound of crinkled paper drew my full attention... as he extended it to me.

Looking up from the rolled up painting, I stared up at his blurry face.

"No..." I whispered.

He smiled and nodded.

Taking the painting... I forgot about the hand still connected to Vim's arm, and allowed the painting to unfurl on its own.

With a shaky hand, I watched a familiar scene come into view.

"Vim..." I sobbed, staring at the scene Lughes had painted before I had left. The one with Lomi in that odd dress...

The one with all of us. Sitting before a fireplace.

Yet... there was now a new addition. A small part of the painting had newer paint upon it. Dried, finished... but the layer was a little bit more raised than the others.

Standing near where I was seated, was now Amber. She wasn't smiling, and instead had her familiar frown on her face... yet somehow, that made me smile all the more.

I cried as I remembered my other hand and released Vim as to unfold the painting even more. To take the whole thing in.

It was rough at the edges, telling me that Vim had probably cut it free from a frame... but I didn't care.

Right now this was the most precious thing in the world.

"Go on. Eastern gate," he repeated, not even giving me time to tell him how much this meant to me.

Where had he gotten it? The Sleepy Artist? The storeroom...? And why, out of all the paintings he could have taken...

Why this one?

Sniffing, I nodded. "Okay. Eastern gate," I accepted.

He nodded and gave me a small smile. "Thank you. I'll not be long," he said.

Vim stepped aside, to round me. He walked away gently, as if he had no idea just how deeply he had just placed himself into my heart.

Watching him go, I felt conflicted.

This was normal for him, wasn't it?

Enduring this. Bearing the whole thing. Alone.

It made me sick.

As Vim left, heading back towards the noble's district... I made a small vow.

To the painting in my hands.

To the many paintings that were now lost.

To those in the paintings.

To Amber.

To Vim.

Folding up the painting carefully, I sniffed and glanced around. To make sure no one was looking at me.

There wasn't. Only Vim was on the road with me. And he was drawing farther away.

One day he'd let me bear this burden together with him.

One day I'd share in the blame and sorrow.

"One day."

Chapter 53: Chapter Fifty Two – Vim – Primdoll

Pulling the chair over to the bed, I studied the old man.

His thin chest and body told me he had been bedridden for years. His eyes were lucid and clear, but the exhaustion that mired his very clear concern made even me feel tired.

He tried to sit up... but couldn't. His body wobbled in the effort... then abruptly fell back to the lush pillows he laid upon.

"I can't even face my death on my own two feet," he complained.

"That is why they warn you not to wait too long to die," I said.

The old man coughed as he smiled... as if his body reluctantly fought back against a laugh.

Sitting down, I sat right near the bed. Close enough that if we both extended our hands, we'd be able to touch... but not any closer.

Glancing around at the room, I noticed the... odd stillness of it. The morning sun-rays filtered in from a half-closed curtain. There wasn't much dust in the air, and the room was rather... clean, considering how big it was.

The man was obviously too frail to keep the room tidy, so the servants did so.

Either the servants cherished this old man, or did a very good job out of fear.

Judging from the carnage that lay just outside the room, littering the long hallway and the rest of the house...

"You had a few loyal men," I said to him.

His eyes narrowed at me, and I noticed the hint of amusement in them.

It's been a long time since I had sat in front of a man who was capable of tossing aside his fear and hate... and find amusement in his upcoming and inevitable death.

Usually women got like this more than men.

"Two good men. Three wonderful women. My sons stole the rest," the eldest male of the Primdoll family said.

I nodded. Those two men were right outside.

Or well, their bodies were.

The women... hopefully were still alive. I had only killed four since entering this house, two had been his daughters. The other two had been guards themselves.

Most of the maids had hidden. Or cowed, curled up against the floor and walls in my presence.

I had left them alone.

Sitting back in the chair, I studied the old man. He wasn't trembling... he wasn't crying...

In fact, he somehow looked a little better now than he had upon my entering his room.

The adrenaline probably helped.

"My children are evil," he then said.

His voice was raspy, but not strained. He wasn't in pain.

"They were," I agreed.

The man squeezed his eyes shut. Finally, the first tear slid between the old wrinkles around his eyes.

"I hate you... yet I thank you. For stopping them," he said.

"You're welcome," I said... and honestly meant it.

The old man breathed deeply, and I noticed his heartbeat. It was beating fast... but now there was a strange rhythm to it.

Poor man was about to die from the grief. The torment of emotions, and shock, was too much for his old worn heart by the sound of its weak thumping.

Would it be a heart attack or stroke, I wonder?

Would it be kinder to just...

"Who was she? Your wife?" the man then asked.

He didn't open his eyes to look at me. Even though his old age hadn't robbed him of his sight.

He didn't want to see me as he heard the truth.

In a way that was its own form of fear.

"She was the daughter of a very good friend," I said gently.

His hands clenched, grabbing the thin blankets that covered him. Sudden strength filled his old body.

"It's my fault, isn't it? For not stopping them. For not being strong enough to..." he went quiet as he struggled to say the words. Struggled as he both admitted to it and faced the truth of his weakness.

"Some say it is the job of the father to face the sins of the sons. In your case, daughters as well," I said.

One of the daughters had been caught in the act. She had been the second person I killed upon entering this house.

I tried not to think of that room. I tried not to think of what she had been doing.

Disgusting wasn't a strong enough of a word for it.

"My children..." the old man finally broke. Tears poured as he released a sob.

I didn't really pity the man. Nor did I find his sudden regret a valid excuse.

He may be infirm and incapable now, but years ago? When his children had been young?

He had to have noticed. He had to have seen what his children were becoming.

People did not become so cruel and diabolical over night.

They either progressed into such atrocities, or learned it from elsewhere.

For years they had probably abused their servants. There had to have been plenty of signs.

No matter how much he cried... the fact remained the blame rested upon his shoulders.

"They died quickly," I told him.

His breathing deepened as he squeezed his eyes shut. As if trying to not hear me speak.

"No one will suffer anymore," I said. At least, not at the hands of his family.

Slowly standing, I watched the old man as I heard his heart skip a beat.

"Your line ends here. No more shall your blood taint this world," I said to him.

His teeth, what remained of them, made noises as he clenched his jaw.

Then his neck coiled in stress, and...

Watching the man open his eyes in shock, he suddenly grabbed his chest. Scratching at it to the point of wounding himself. He went rigid, and he opened his mouth to say something... but nothing but gagging came out.

Heart attack. From the stress.

"Goodbye," I said to him as his eyes rolled upward and he passed out.

The man rolled a little, going limp. Fingers and toes twitched as I heard his heart thump wildly for a few second... then come to a stop.

Suddenly the room went quiet.

Off in the distance, beyond the door and walls... I heard sobbing. Crying. From women. Most likely the maids nearby.

Reaching out, I put my hand against the old man's throat. I avoided the slobber and tears, but there was a layer of sweat.

No heartbeat.

Hm...

Putting my hand against his chest. With my palm spread open, I felt the lack of heartbeat. The lack of movement.

With a little pressure, I pushed down. At first all he did was sink deeper into the soft bed... but then there was nowhere else to go.

A little more pressure was all it took to break the sternum, than the ribs. Half a moment later, I felt the organs within get crushed as well.

He didn't twitch as his bones broke. The man didn't cough as his lungs were punctured by broken ribs.

Once I was sure that I had injured him enough to ensure his death, I sighed and turned away.

Walking out of his room, I entered back into the hallway... and found only a single person still alive.

A young girl was kneeling in front of one of the men I had killed. She was digging through one of his pockets while doing her best to not step into the blood pooling on the carpet.

Walking towards her, I watched as she glanced at me. She paused for a brief moment, and then went back to searching for whatever she sought.

"Was he precious to you?" I asked her as I neared her.

"No. He... he stole..." she hesitated, and then finally found whatever she was looking for. Pulling it out, she showed me a small locket. Something worn, and old. Probably not worth much at all.

With shaking hands, she fumbled it as she tried to open it. Once she got it open, she stood and held it out to show me.

Looking down at the little mirror and the small crack it had... I nodded. "I see," I said.

"Was my mother's," she said with a wobbly voice. Was it shaking because she herself was trembling, or was that a vocal tick?

"Then don't lose it again," I said to her.

She gulped, and then nodded quickly.

Walking around her, heading to the front of the house... I frowned and wondered how many I had just put out of work.

At least a few dozen, based off the size of this estate.

A whole knight battalion lost.

A noble castle too, now.

Innocents suffered, even when I righted wrongs. Even when I killed the evil...

Stepping over the body of a man, I tried to remember his name. He had been the oldest son of the Primdoll family.

He had tried to run from me, upon realizing what my goal had been. He had hurried down the stairs, because of the commotion. He had watched me kill his sister.

At first he had tried to escape. He failed at that. Then he tried to pay me for his life.

When that hadn't worked, he had actually tried to take me to his father. To offer him to me. In exchange for his own life.

Somehow that made him all the more disgusting.

Reaching a large stairwell, I slowly began to descend it.

I could hear talking. Arguing. Coming from downstairs.

Most likely other guards, and servants, all arguing about what to do. What they should do. What they should do about me.

Surely by now someone had to of ran to the Lord's Office. Or another noble's house... but I wasn't too worried about it.

It actually hadn't taken that long to break into the house, and finish the job.

Especially when the servants had been so helpful.

"Did you kill him?" An older woman asked me as I reached the first floor. She had been the one to guide me to the oldest daughter... back when I had first broken through the front door.

Although she had guided me to the stairwell, and told me which hallway to go down... she hadn't ascended with me.

"He's dead," I said. Although I had crushed his chest, I had not actually killed him myself. His heart had done that.

Though I suppose one could argue the stress that killed that heart, had been made by me...

The older maid took a deep breath, and released it slowly. Seemingly relieved.

"There's no other children, right?" I asked her.

She shook her head.

Two daughters. Renn had said that Amber had been hired to paint a young girl, but she hadn't been that young. Not young enough to escape my wrath. Nor young enough to be innocent.

This very maid had told me what she had done. To not just Amber, but others like her.

"If I find out you led me astray..." I really didn't need to warn her. But just in case, I tried anyway.

A hard look was my answer as she nodded. "I swear it."

"Good. Are the other servants nearby?" I asked her.

"Most have run away," she said.

"Smart," I said, and gestured for her to follow me.

She did so, walking a few feet behind me to my right. As if suddenly this was my house and she my maid.

Heading for the entrance, I noticed the looks as I walked past rooms and windows. Nearly a dozen people were watching me, peering at me from behind curtains or doors.

Entering the front foyer, I found that they had laid a drape over the youngest son. The first person I had killed upon entering the house. The body lay in the center, in front of doors and paintings.

One of those doors led to a room underneath, to something of a basement. The body of the eldest daughter was in that one.

Hopefully they simply burnt that body. It didn't deserve any compassion.

A few other servants were in the foyer. They all went silent, staring at me with wide eyes as I headed for the center of the room. The most notable was an armored guard. One of

the very first I had encountered upon entering the building. He no longer carried his sword nor looked willing to confront me. His defiance was gone.

I had broken both his sword and will earlier. Off near the front door, it laid in many pieces.

Standing near the body, I glanced around and nodded. There weren't many. Probably twenty people or so watching me... but it was enough. Especially since the oldest maid, and one of the guards were here.

"I've killed the Pimdoll family. As far as I'm aware their whole family line. I did so out of revenge. They had tortured and murdered someone precious to me," I spoke loudly, but clearly. Many of the servants shifted and startled at my voice, as if it was deafening.

"You're free to try and take revenge for them, if you'd like. It will be futile, but do as you wish," I said.

I waited for a few moments, but it was clearly obvious none were going to try. A few even looked around, not so much to see if anyone would try with them... but to see who was stupid enough to actually try.

"To all here tonight! Leave this building! Take only what you can carry. Go back to your homes, or family. Tell no one what happened. I spared you. I'll not do so again!" I said loudly.

Standing still for a moment, I waited to see who would be the first to take my advice.

Surprisingly, it was the guard who I had spared.

He turned on a heel and ran. Back down the hallway I had just come from.

Chances were he knew where the most valuable stuff was.

With his hurried footsteps, many other servants suddenly turned and went into motion themselves. Many ran in different directions, but all ran deeper into the building. Not out of it.

Before I turned, I found the old maid who had guided me. She was in the middle of bowing to me. The act was proper, and she did so slowly... telling me just how much emotion she was putting into the action.

Smiling softly I nodded.

Turning away, I left the Primdoll Estate. It wasn't as big as some other noble houses, so it didn't take me too long to leave.

The morning sun was already overhead. Birds were chirping, and there was a light wind.

That wind wasn't strong enough to disperse the cloud of dark smoke in the sky. The fire was probably mostly stopped, but the embers remained.

The fire was most likely the reason no other knights had arrived yet... or of course, maybe all those who had ran away had not gone to get help at all.

Odds were the servants hadn't cared for their masters. Some, like that maid and knight, had been more than happy to let me by. To even guide me to where my next target had been.

Heading for the nearest road, I took one last glance at the castle.

Four stories. Many rooms with hundreds of windows split amongst them. The Primdoll family I had heard was a family of lesser nobles. Those without real status or stations.

Yet that house definitely didn't look like a lesser family's household.

Either the human's society and its wealth was growing disproportionate, or the Primdoll's were more powerful than I had been led to believe.

Rolling my shoulder, I stepped down the road and headed for the eastern gate.

There was no point in hurrying, but yet at the same time I found myself walking faster than normal.

To get away from the carnage I had just committed.

To get away from the smoke in the sky.

To get away from the evil I had just seen with my own eyes.

Getting revenge for Amber wasn't just the reason I had done what I did.

She had been a member of our Society, yes... and I had hoped for greater plans for her... but the reality was humans died. They perished quickly, and easily.

But I knew soon many would hear of these events. Right now no one else knew the Sleepy Artist was gone... but I'd tell the next member I saw the truth. Then they would tell others. And before long the whole of the Society would know.

When that story got told, two simple things needed to join it.

One, there was hope. That the members who called the Sleepy Artist home could still be alive.

And secondly, possibly most importantly... there was a cost to our losses.

I had burnt down an entire knight order's base, and slaughtered a whole noble family who had harmed our members.

The acts weren't just in vengeance... they were proactive. The Society had to know that I'd always get revenge. No matter who or what tested us.

Hopefully it'd be enough.

Rounding a corner, I hesitated at the sight of someone waiting for me.

"Really..." I whispered, and wondered what I was going to do with her.

Renn sat down the road, kicking her legs lightly as if lost in thought. She was sitting on top of a stone wall, something of a fence, for a large plot of land. In this district, the noble's district, she'd usually get shooed away or chased off by a knight or servant. Today though, this early in the morning, she had been left alone.

She smiled at the sight of me and hopped off the small stone fence she had been sitting on. Nearly slipping, as if the stones we walked upon were wet, she steadied herself and approached me quickly.

Luckily she no longer wore that silk dress. Although it had suited her... it also hadn't. It made her look too human.

Renn wore a huge smile as she hurried up to me. Her small bag flopped on her back, not made for the burst of motion.

That smile was pure. Real. A little toothy, and...

Not something I normally saw at times like these.

Giving Renn, who obviously hadn't waited for me where I had told her to, a nod to tell her the deed was done was easy to do.

But when I nodded and her smile grew even brighter... I found myself hesitating.

I needed to be careful.

I didn't want to grow too attached to that smile.

Yet as she approached closer and her tears began to join that strange smile... I realized it was already too late.

Far too late.

Chapter 54: Chapter Fifty Three – Renn – Wagons

The sky was passing slowly. The clouds were... stagnant. As if there was no wind at all. The sight above me was so lackluster and calm; it almost put me back to sleep.

I yawned as I finished waking up.

Lying on my back, I rocked alongside the cart. The road was a paved one, luckily, so it was actually... kind of comfortable to ride in the back.

To my left, and behind me, were large barrels. Barrels nearly as tall as me, and several times wider.

There were twenty nine of them on the cart. And they were all full to the brim.

Some apples rolled around near me. One bumped up against my head occasionally. None had fallen from the barrels in the last few hours, but when Vim and I had first gotten back here and sat on the cart they had fallen often.

A few had even landed on my head, in the beginning.

With groggy eyes I glanced around for my hat. It had fallen off in my sleep.

Finding it under an apple, I went to putting it on my head.

To my right, sitting up instead of lying down, was Vim.

Looked like I had spent most the day sleeping while curled up next to him, based on the sun's location.

He sat close enough to me that we were touching. Not a surprise since there wasn't much room in the cart. Enough that if he lay down too, we'd be fine... but there would be no room for anything or anyone else.

I was a little thankful for his closeness. It didn't just keep me a little warmer in the chilly air, but it also allowed me to not have to worry about not being able to fall asleep. If I had been alone, or if he had been walking next to the cart or elsewhere... I'd not have been comfortable enough to do such a thing. Especially since another cart was following the one we rode. Even from a distance I could make out the red apples it carried.

It wasn't directly behind us, but it was close enough that the two drivers who rode in the front of the cart could see us.

Which meant if I wasn't careful, and my ears or tail were revealed... I'd be in trouble.

He being next to me while I slept made it safe for me to sleep. Since he'd keep an eye out for me, and make sure I didn't accidentally reveal myself.

He made a good guard dog.

One of the horses pulling the cart snorted, as if finding my thoughts ridiculous.

Turning a little, I rolled over so I could stare at Vim. He sat near the edge of the cart, with one leg hanging off the end. The other was curled up underneath the other, giving him a somewhat childish sitting posture.

"Hey Vim."

He turned his head, and his eyes studied me for a moment. "Was wondering why you stopped snoring so loudly," he said.

I smiled, and wondered if I really did snore that bad. From what I've been told, I didn't... but I had been exhausted.

The last few days had been hectic, to say the least.

"What's one of these barrels worth?" I asked him.

"The apples...?" Vim frowned and glanced at the one next to me. Even though he sat up against one himself.

"Probably three penk or so," he said after thought.

"Really? So much?" I asked.

"These are river apples. They're one of the few fruits able to be harvested in winter here in this region. They're sweet so the southern folks like them a lot. They are also big, which makes them stand out on the stalls," he explained.

Looking behind him, to some of the apples that rolled around near him... I wondered if I could eat one or not.

"Go ahead. They'll not notice one or two missing," he said.

I smirked and wondered if I had looked hungry.

While I was sitting up slowly, Vim grabbed a nearby apple. He glanced it over, most likely looking for bruising, then went ahead and handed it to me.

Taking it from him, I held the large apple in my hand and tried to judge its weight.

It was rather heavy.

"They won't care?" I asked.

The drivers of the cart couldn't hear us talking, we had already proven that. The two were complaining about the upcoming toll on the road we were approaching. It seemed between the distance, the four horses pulling the cart, and the large barrels they just couldn't really hear most of what we said.

"Even if they did I'd just pay for them. Look, they lose them anyway thanks to the road," Vim said as he pointed behind us.

Following his eye, I saw the two red orbs on the side of the road. Obviously apples... though I hadn't heard them fall from our cart.

That meant they had fallen from one of the carts in front of us.

"Hm... You first," I said, offering him the first bite.

"Why?" he asked with a frown.

"So I can blame you if I get yelled at," I said with a smile.

He stared at me for a moment, and then nodded. Without taking the apple from me, he bent over and took a bite.

Holding it steady for him, I watched in amusement as he... literally ate out of the palm of my hand.

Finding the sight somehow precious, I smiled and watched as he slowly ate and swallowed the bite.

Once done he nodded. "Tastes fine," he said.

"Hm..." I believed him, but I had kind of hoped he would have been a little more...

What? Embarrassed? Happy? Pleased with the taste?

A little upset at myself for thinking he'd actually find the act of eating out of my hand anything but normal made my own bite seem less important.

Eating the apple slowly, I realized it was a little sweet. It wasn't amazing, but wasn't bad either.

A good apple, but not so tasty I'd spend a fortune on it.

"Well?" he asked.

"It's okay," I said honestly.

He smiled softly and nodded, as if he had expected my answer.

With a sigh, I scooted a little closer to him. Not close to the edge of the cart, as he did, but nearer him. So that I could talk with him a little deeper, and not risk being heard.

Vim didn't seem bothered by my action, and in fact seemed to know what I had wanted. He calmly stared at me, waiting for my next question.

It made me feel young, honestly, to be treated like this... but...

What else was I to do? I had questions. Worries. Concerns. And I didn't want to wait until we reached our next destination to ask them.

"Where are we going now?" I asked him, keeping my voice low as I continued to eat the apple.

"The coast. We'll head east until the port town of Nevi. There's a member of ours there, we'll check on her and then head south along the coast."

"Nevi?" I asked. He had actually mentioned that before. In that knight's stronghold.

He nodded. "A large port town. It's where these apples are heading. We'll be able to stick with this caravan nearly all the way," he said.

"Huh..." I hadn't heard them mention that. But... I had been tired. Vim and I had walked nearly a whole day after leaving Ruvindale, to a strange little village full of trees. It was there that Vim had paid for a ride in this cart.

"We're a little off my normal route. I need to get back on proper schedule. We'll head to Nevi, then to the inlet. From there we'll make a few stops until we eventually reach the Cathedral. From there I'll return to my normal route," Vim explained.

"The Cathedral. You've mentioned that before," I said.

He nodded, and glanced at the apple I was still eating. There wasn't much left.

Did he want another bite?

"It's in the capital of the holy nation to our south. We hide in plain sight there. Capital City Telmik. A massive city that houses hundreds of thousands of people," he explained.

"Hundreds..." I tried to imagine it. "Really?" I asked.

He nodded. "There are only a few places with more people than there. Five others, that I know of," he said.

Hundreds of thousands... that was...

It was impossible to imagine. Ruvindale was one of the largest cities I had ever seen. And that had only... "How many people were in Ruvindale?" I asked.

"Probably fifteen thousand or so," he said.

My mind went a little numb upon realizing that the world was far bigger than I had imagined.

"Along the way maybe we can find you a home," he said.

My mind stopped trying to comprehend the vastness of the world, and I instead focused on the single man before me.

He nodded with a frown.

My jaw clenched, and I tapped the apple in my hands absentmindedly.

"We'll find you one, I promise," he said.

I sighed, since obviously he didn't understand.

But it wasn't his fault.

After all, I hadn't said anything yet.

Taking a bite out of my apple, I looked away from him. His calm face was now painted with worry. He thought something had bothered me.

Knowing him, he was thinking that I didn't believe myself worth finding a home. That I blamed myself for everything that happened in Ruvindale.

Honestly, it wasn't that far off from the truth...

I did blame myself.

But that didn't mean I wasn't worthy of finding a home, or being able to earn my place.

Rather... it was because I blamed myself that I felt the need to balance the scales.

I had arrived, and then a peaceful home that had existed for years went up in flames.

Because of that I needed to help, save, or at least protect another home.

And to do that I needed to stay with him.

The problem with that, obviously, was he undoubtedly didn't want me with him. And...

Taking the last bite of the apple, I glanced at the man who no longer stared at me. He was now looking ahead, or rather behind us, at the carts following us. I counted three of them in the distance.

He didn't need my help.

That much was obvious.

Tossing the apple off the cart, I made sure to throw it a little off to the side. Into the grass, on the side of the road... so hopefully, the cart following us would not notice I had eaten it.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"No," I said honestly. But not because of anything to do with food and hunger.

"Hm... I'm sure we'll stop soon. There should be a small village up ahead. It acts as a tax buffer, taking tolls from the roads and rivers around here," Vim said.

"I heard them talking about it earlier," I nodded.

"The wagoners? Yes."

"Is that what they're called?" I asked, a little surprised.

Vim frowned and nodded. "They're like coachmen... but for wagons," he said.

"What's a cart then?" I asked.

"Well... I guess you could call these carts too. I do sometimes, as well. But carts usually only have two wheels," he said.

Ah. These had four. They were huge too; I could make out the top of them over the barrels we sat next to.

"Wagons..." I said. I had indeed heard such a term before. I hadn't known they were actually their own separate things...

"What's a coach then?" I asked.

"One that people ride in, more specifically," he explained.

"Huh... Why didn't we get one of those then?" I asked. That was probably what I had rode in when I had been banished from the Sleepy Artist. I had ridden it for two days until I reached the Owl's Nest forest.

"There weren't any. And those are always full. I prefer it like this," he said.

Full... yes... they had been. More and more people had hopped into that carriage as we traveled... "Wait. What's a carriage then?" I asked.

"They're the same basically," he said.

I sighed and shook my head. Humans.

Vim smiled, seemingly amused at my annoyances.

"What's it like Vim?" I asked him.

"Hm?" he tilted his head... already far used to my questions.

"Understanding humans so well," I asked.

"Who says I do?" he asked me.

Curling my legs upward, I wrapped my arms around them. For some reason I felt a little cold. "Is it because you need to? To protect us?" I asked him, ignoring his sad attempt to not answer me.

"That is part of it," he said honestly.

"You... Sometimes look really human to me," I said to him.

He blinked, and my ears twitched at his expression.

Was that shock? It had only been visible for a moment but...

"Do I?" he asked.

"I mean... beyond your appearance. Sometimes when you talk, I don't hear one of our kind... I hear one of them," I said gently.

"Thanks," he said with a huff.

"I didn't mean that as an insult," I said quickly.

"Nor a compliment, I'm sure," he said with a smirk.

"Well... No. But I meant it honestly. You speak like them. Think like them sometimes too and..." I stopped talking, but only so I could watch a small rabbit run across the road behind us.

Vim glanced away from me, to watch the creature as well.

"Still hungry?" he asked.

Frowning, I hoped that wasn't what he had seen on my face when I had seen the creature.

"No," I lied.

He chuckled, and I knew he had heard my honest lie.

Sighing, I tapped my feet. The wood this cart, I mean wagon, was smooth. It wasn't that comfortable honestly.

"I guess it's a silly question. I... honestly don't know many of our kind, I guess," I said, returning to the topic.

"It's not a silly question. If you'd like to know, most of our kind doesn't see me as human at all," he said.

"Really? How's that possible?" I asked. He looked like any other normal man. He was... broad shouldered, and well-built, but nothing else about him stood out. He was average height. Average in looks. He even looked... old yet young. He looked as if he was almost past his prime, yet at the same time just entering it. It gave him an odd yet simple look.

"Am I really human in your eyes? You've seen me kill haven't you?" he asked me.

"Yes but... I've seen other humans kill. I've seen my brothers kill, and my mother. I've killed people too," I said.

"Hm... maybe I've not been as brutal as I normally am. Am I getting lazy?" he asked himself.

"Don't boast," I complained. Men who said stuff like that were usually not worth talking to.

"It helps when those who know me have known me for as long as they have. Most have known me their whole lives. And of course, they've all heard the stories. The legends. Most have seen those very stories play out right in front of them too, which helps," he said.

"Legends?" I asked.

Vim waved me off lightly. "Ask someone else. I'm not in the mood to get into that stuff."

"What... why not?" I asked, a little annoyed with him. Usually he was so honest and upfront about stuff.

"You just chastised me for boasting, and now you want me to tell you the stories and legends they all tell about me? You can't be serious," he said with an odd look.

Oh...

"Well..." A little embarrassed, I realized he was right.

He chuckled and patted my knee. It was an odd gesture, and made me even more conscious about how close we were to one another. "Just ask someone else. To be honest Renn, the reason you see me as so human... honestly, is your own fault," he said.

"My own fault?" I asked, wondering what he meant. I rubbed the knee he had just patted. It was a little warm now.

"You're so human yourself you see me as one. Most of our kind doesn't see me as human at all. I mean that. You probably spent a long time with humans, didn't you?" he asked me.

For a long moment I tried to understand his words... and then I realized what he was trying to say.

"You're saying since I'm so human, I see you as one. If I was more inhuman, I'd easily be able to tell you weren't one?" I asked him.

"Basically. I know that's an odd concept but..." he shrugged.

"No. I do see what you're saying. That would explain why Lomi and the rest never really..." I went quiet, as I thought back to some of the conversations I had with everyone.

Crane. Lughes. Amber... Lomi... Porka and Lilly too.

They had all mentioned similar things as he was. A few had mentioned how kind and gentle I seemed.

Maybe instead of saying that because they were comparing me to a standard predator... they were instead comparing me to our kind in general.

I wasn't kind for a predator.

I was kind for a non-human individual.

A little bothered by this revelation, I tried to think of all the humans I had spent time with.

Nory. Lujic and his sister Ginny. That old witch, the first human I had known...

Yes. It's very likely I had become who I was today because of them.

"You're rather cute when lost in thought," Vim then said.

My ears went up straight enough to knock off my hat. It fell on my lap as I stared at the man who had a large smirk. "Huh!"

He chuckled and nodded. "What were you thinking about?" he asked.

"Uh... um..." What had I been thinking of?

Gulping, I tried to remember... yes... how human I was.

"I uh... was thinking of the humans I had spent time with. You're right. I've spent more time with humans than I have not. After... my family... I pretty much only spent time with humans. I only met a few of our kind, and two of them had tried to kill me," I said.

Vim frowned, losing his happy smirk. "I see," he said.

"But..." I started to say, but wasn't entirely sure what to add to my question. Or my whole point in the first place.

Vim reached over and grabbed my hat. I let him put it back on my head, and moved my ears accordingly as he did.

"But? But what? You want to be more human or something? Are you asking for guidance in being more human-like? You're rather human, Renn, even if you don't want to admit it," he said.

A little disturbed he believed so, I knew better than to argue. He was right. Even Nory, who had so often told me how strange I was... had always said I was more human than not.

"I meant... I more so meant..." I pointed at the cart behind us. "If you were sitting there. Holding those reigns... I'd not realize you were one of us. I'd see just another man. Just another human, one of countless," I said.

"Thanks," he said with a huff.

"Stop! I'll start thinking you actually are hurt by my words and it'll make me conscious," I complained as he smiled at me.

"Sorry. Yes. I know what you're saying. Maybe in time you'll see differently. I'm not the only one of our kind to look as human as I do, you know. You're not far from it yourself. A simple tug on the tail, some swipes of a sharp knife near the noggin and..." Vim shrugged.

It was my turn to huff and glare at him. "I get your point, you don't need to specify how you'd do it," I said. Especially since I could actually see him doing it. He was strong enough to pop my tail off with a tug, and maybe even cruel enough to chop my ears off too.

He'd do it if it was meant to help me survive. To protect me.

While thinking of that, I shifted a little. "Have you done that?" I asked him, before he could say anything else.

"Done what?" he asked.

"Removed... our traits. For someone. For yourself?" I asked, wondering if that was why he had none.

"Ah. Yes. Not for myself, no, but I have for others. A horn. Some tails. A few wings," he said, speaking softer than before.

Wings...

Thinking of Lilly, and her missing wings... I really hoped she wasn't the one he spoke of. It was hard to believe, since so much of her still wouldn't fit in even if she had. Plus her personality had been...

"If you tell me to chop any of your parts off, I'll become very upset," Vim then said.

Blinking, I looked into his eyes.

They were rather serious.

"I wasn't thinking that," I said honestly.

"Good. I'd cry you know. I find your tail and ears to be very beautiful. Be proud of them," he said.

My eyes watered at his words... especially since he had said them so sincerely. So purely.

He nodded and looked away from me, deciding the conversation was done.

Unable to argue, I hugged my knees closer to my chest. The sun was starting to set... and it was getting cold... but now I didn't do so to keep warm. I wasn't cold anymore after all.

Instead I did my best to hide my smile behind my knees, just in case he turned and looked back at me again.

I didn't mind showing our protector my smile... especially since he usually earned it when it was there. But...

Happily staring at the side of his face, as he watched the wagons in the distance... I was glad to have learned a very inhuman part of him.

After all no human would have said such a thing. And that was something I could say with confidence. Especially since after all these years, none ever had.

The wagon continued rolling on, rocking a little as it did. Yet even as it rocked, it couldn't ruin the smile on my face.

Something told me nothing could... especially since he'd protect it.

He was our protector after all.

Chapter 55: Chapter Fifty Four – Vim – A Few Moments Rest

"Two at least!" Renn haggled, and a little horribly at that.

It wasn't that she gave in easily, or didn't comprehend how to do it...

"Fine, take them," the stall owner said. The older woman had a smile, but not because she had just made a good deal.

Rather she smiled simply because she found Renn's happy joy at getting two for the price of one too pure to dislike.

Renn was handed the two baked pastries. The things were steaming since they were freshly cooked from the outdoor kitchen right behind the stall. She happily accepted them, and I handed the three renk to the stall owner. The older woman gave me a

strange smile as she took them. The smile told me she saw a man out of his depth, who was whipped and owned as much if not more than a workhorse was.

"Thank you!" Renn thanked the woman as we left the stall. She went straight to taking a big bite out of one of the pastries.

It was full of some kind of meat. Venison, by the smell of it... and she must have found it delectable because she actually stopped walking as to savor the taste.

"Watch it," I warned her, since this area was rather busy. A few other travelers gave us glares as they had to go about rounding us.

"Mhm," she nodded and returned to walking.

Walking with her through the small marketplace, I guided her back to the caravan we had joined.

There wasn't much chance of her being incapable of knowing where it were, since this town was only few buildings and a market... but she was right now entirely focused on a single thing.

Her snack.

"This is great," she said.

"I bet it is," I said, as I watched her devour over half of the large meat filled pastry.

Was she going to even offer the other to me?

Granted I wasn't hungry at all. And she, like most of our kind, needed a lot of sustenance... but...

The scary part was she had eaten nearly a dozen apples before we had even got here.

While she ate the snack, I studied the stalls we passed. Most were food, or traveling supplies. Rucksacks, hats, camping gear. A few were also obviously traveling merchants themselves, since their goods were things one normally didn't see in this territory. One of the stalls, guarded by a large man with a spear, had silk wraps. Chances are they were headed for Ruvindale.

"How can these be so tasty?" she asked as she took the final bite of her pastry.

"Helps when you're real hungry," I said.

Noticing a stall, one of the last ones at the corner, I saw the large barrel on the cart that sat right behind it.

Pointing at it, Renn quickly nodded as she swallowed her last bite.

"A single renk!" The man behind the stall said as we approached.

A single renk...? What was it then, diluted slop?

Still, there was no stopping Renn now. She quickly ordered two of them.

"Two more renk for the cups!" the man said as he hurried to grab them.

Ah. That made sense. So he was making his money on the cups, not the drink itself.

Funny. He probably thought it was some great business idea that was going to catch on, but who wanted to carry cups around all the time?

"Sure, sure," I said as I dug out the four renk needed.

The man smiled, as if glad to find a sucker.

He went to filling up the cups from the barrel behind him. The light liquid that poured out told me it was some kind of mead.

Once the cups were in our hands, I knew it was light mead. Probably made with only a single spice.

Renn happily smiled at herself, pleased.

The cups he used were basic wooden ones. In fact... Yes. There was a slight leak in mine.

Looking to hers, I was pleased to see nothing really dripping from it.

With a careful smell, and a slow sip, I confirmed it was mead and nothing too strong. She would be alright to drink it.

Actually...

"How do you handle your spirits?" I asked her.

"Spirits?" she asked, and I noticed the way she said the word.

Again. I keep forgetting that although older than usual, she was still... somehow young.

She very likely had spent most of her life with her family, hidden away, before venturing out into the human world.

"A type of liquor. I'm asking if you get drunk easily or not," I said.

"Oh. Why? Want me drunk?" she asked, amused at me.

"The opposite," I said plainly.

She huffed and nodded. "I don't think I can get drunk. All I get is a horrible headache if I drink too much of this stuff," she said.

"Oh?" That was a little interesting to hear. Although some of our kind were... inhuman, in many ways, there was a rather strong constant.

Our kind got just as drunk as humans did. Even if it sometimes took a few more glasses than them, the end result was normally the same.

That meant, if true, Renn was simply one of those types that either couldn't or hated the feeling and subconsciously kept herself from it.

Or she had simply never drunken anything of quality, which was also very likely.

"Yet you drink that with a happy smile," I said as she took a drink.

"Because I am thirsty. And I like stuff with honey, too," she said.

Honey...

Walking with Renn away from the marketplace to the dozen wagons situated to the north, I studied the caravan group who were bundled around a large fire.

They were already drinking it seemed.

Scanning the horizon, I tried to imagine how much money a small brigand group would make here. It seemed most of the small villages and all the roads around here were... a little too defenseless.

They better hope the wars down south don't reach here.

"Want some?" Renn finally offered me the other pastry.

"Some," I noted.

"Well... a few bites," she said with a small smile.

"Eat your fill, I'm fine," I said.

"Hm..." she studied me as we approached the wagon we had been riding in. The third from the front.

A few of the caravan members waved at us as we approached the cart, and I heard some of the jokes and hollers they gave at the sight of us.

Renn glanced at them, and I noticed the way her ears twitched under her hat.

"They're just drunk," I said to her.

"Hmph. It's better we're seen as a married couple anyway, isn't it? So it's fine," she said.

Something told me she wasn't as upset as she sounded.

Reaching our wagon, I noticed we were alone. The nearest other member of the caravan was two wagons down, and was putting up a small tent to sleep in. She had attached the tent to her wagon, which made it easy to do.

"Won't rain will it?" Renn asked with a glance to the sky. There were clouds.

"Not here," I said. We were still a few days away from the ocean.

Renn then offered me her cup and pastry, smiling at me.

Putting my own cup onto the wagon, I took her items and waited for her to clamber up into the wagon.

As she did, I noticed her tail peak out from the end of her right pant leg. The tip of her tail twitched, barely sticking out.

Was it that long? For some reason that was a little surprising...

"Really?"

Looking away from her heel area, I found her glaring at me.

"What?" I asked.

"You were looking at my butt!" she said as she reached out to take her snack and drink back.

"Oh... no, your leg actually," I said.

"That's somehow weirder!" she said, and was about to take a big bite out of her pastry but had to stop since she started to laugh.

"Your tail was sticking out is all," I said as I hopped up onto the wagon to sit next to her.

"Huh...? Oh... Was it?" she asked, suddenly a little worried.

"Nothing to worry about. I just noticed it. For some reason I didn't think it was that long," I said as I sat against one of the barrels. It was the same spot I had been sitting in all day.

Renn didn't say anything as she put her drink down and went to fumbling with her pants. Watching her pull her pants as far away from her waist as possible, I watched as she squirmed and wiggled until her tail popped out.

With a smirk she proffered her tail to me, basically laying it on my lap.

It was indeed longer than I had thought. Nearly as long as she was tall. The brown tail had noticeably lighter spots all along it.

"Well?" she asked, seemingly proud of herself.

I flicked it, which caused her to yelp and pull her tail back away from me.

"Vim!" she grabbed the spot I had flicked, and looked at me with an expression of pure shock.

"Sorry," I said, feeling a little bad.

She grumbled, leering at me out of the corner of her eyes as she messed with the hairs on her tail. As if I had shifted a few strands out of place with my flick.

"Did it hurt?" I asked. Usually tails such as that were a little sturdier...

"No, but I didn't think you'd actually touch it let alone attack it," she complained.

I sighed and nodded. Great now she'd never trust me with it again.

"I was going to share, but you don't deserve it now," Renn complained as she quickly went to stuffing her face with the remainder of her snack.

Nodding in defeat I went to drinking what was left from my leaky cup.

A whole renk for a hollowed out piece of wood. Ridiculous.

Renn's tail twitched as she ate loudly, glaring at me the whole time.

This trip was going to be hard, wasn't it?

"Look what you did," Renn complained, pointing to the spot I had flicked. There was a small indent in the hair. It'd definitely go away soon, but she had a pained expression on her face.

"I did apologize," I said.

"You did," she nodded.

Her tail twitched in the air and smacked me on the thigh. Surprisingly a little hard.

Frowning in approval at her ability in using it to such a degree, I watched as she smirked in pride and coiled her tail back around her waist.

"Did all of your siblings have tails?" I asked her.

"Hm?" she quickly chewed and swallowed, seemingly a little surprised at the sudden question. "They did. All of my siblings were just like me. Ears and tail. My nails get long and pointy too," she said, showing me.

I had already noticed her nails before. That was a common thing with our people.

"How many?" I asked.

"Three brothers and two older sisters," she said. "A younger sister too," she then added after a moment... with a tone that told me she had probably been precious to her.

While she spoke, I noticed an odd change. Her eyes got a little softer, her voice a little quieter... and not because she worried someone was listening in.

This conversation was probably not a happy one for her.

"None of them alive. I'm the last. My aunt might be alive, but something tells me she's not," Renn said quickly, most likely seeing my next possible question.

"I see," I said.

Renn nibbled on her pastry, which was probably quickly growing cold.

After a few moments I sighed and nodded. "What?" I asked her. Her look wasn't a normal one.

"Do you have any? Family?" she asked.

"Oh. No. Never did," I said.

"Never?" she asked.

"Never," I said.

"Ah... what about... similar? Have you ever run into anyone like you?" she asked, smirking a little as she did.

"You mean have I met any like me?" I asked, smiling in return.

She nodded.

"I meet them all the time," I said.

For a tiny moment Renn's eyes went wide, and I watched her mind crank out thoughts as fast as possible... then it quickly slowed down as she sighed. "You mean us in general," she complained.

Well... no. But that was fine.

Sometimes I shouldn't speak so openly.

"Possibly. Does it really matter what I am?" I asked her.

"Well... I guess not," she said as she took another small bite. There weren't many bites left

After chewing for a moment, she then held out the remainder of the pastry.

"What?" I asked her.

"Your share. You said a few bites," she said, gesturing for me to take it already.

"Rather I asked if that was all I'd get..."

Renn huffed, but didn't pull the pastry back. "Hurry up before I stuff it in my face," she complained.

Although I really didn't want any, I went ahead and took her kind offering.

Once it was in my hand, I realized that what had looked like a few bites for her was but a single one for me.

Plopping it into my mouth, I couldn't help but smirk at her jealous expression as I ate it.

"You should have just eaten it if you're going to be that big of a baby about it," I said to her.

"I'll just get more later," she said, nodding at her decision.

Sighing I nodded. Of course she wanted more.

While she went to drinking from her wooden cup, I glanced around. The campfire nearby was loud still, but the rest of the world was growing quiet. Dark. The woman who had set up a tent a few wagons down had already retreated into it, and if I focused I could hear her soft snoring.

"Do any of us do this?" Renn then asked.

"Do what?"

"Travel like this. Selling stuff. Merchants?" she asked.

"Oh. Yes. There's a few," I said.

"Is it hard?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Not really. Or well, I guess it depends on what you consider hard. In your case it would be," I said.

"Because I'm not smart enough?" she asked, and I noted the odd tone in her voice.

"No. Because I doubt you'd be able to make enough profit to feed yourself, let alone anything else," I said.

"Oh..." Renn glanced at the odd cup in her hands. "Did we spend a lot of money just now?" she asked.

"Yes. I bet most of these merchants spent less than two renk here," I said.

"Hm..." Renn went into thought, and I wondered if spending time at the Sleepy Artist had spoiled her.

"Most humans only make a few dozen renk a week. Most merchants make a little more, but that's because they incur risks. Think of these apples. What if it stormed? What if birds decided to feast upon them? Bandits, or wolves, or such," I explained.

"Ah. That makes sense. But... you said these were worth a few penk right?" she asked.

"About three I'd guess, yes."

"So..." she glanced around us, and I knew she was counting the barrels.

"Judging the number of people in this caravan, chances are there are only a few who actually own these barrels. The rest are just workers. Employees. Maybe family. They'll

probably make a few penk in profit if they can get all of the barrels to their destination, after paying all the salaries and whatever credit they took out originally," I said.

Renn was focused on me as I spoke, but her ear twitched as if annoyed.

"Although you're special. You're smart enough that you'd learn quickly if you spent a little time learning it all. And being a woman you'll be able to manipulate men and get along with the wives and women. And you're one of us, so strong enough that you can save money on guards or guides..." I nodded as I spoke, realizing she would probably succeed in being a merchant after all.

"Why pay for workers when I have you?" she asked.

"You must be drunk," I said with a huff.

She frowned; her tail unwrapped from her waist just so it could dance in the air as if annoyed. "I'm not!"

"I'm expensive," I said, changing tactics.

"You are!" she agreed.

"If you want to be a traveling merchant I can take you to the Cathedral. You can join the transport company," I said.

"Transport company?" she asked, nearly spilling what little was left in her cup as she drew closer to me.

"A small company, full of our members. They mostly deal with ocean and river routes, but they do have a caravan. You can join them if you want," I said to her. "Or maybe I could take you to Lumen, but..." I stopped talking since she no longer was smiling.

She stared at me, suddenly...

Wait... was she upset at me all of a sudden?

Yes. She was. That look on her face was actual annoyance.

"I'm not Lomi," she then said.

Tilting my head, I tried to comprehend why she would say such a thing.

Renn shook her head, and placed her cup down next to her. It clunked in a way that told me it was only a few gulps from being empty.

Scooting closer, I felt more of the barrel I sat up against as I pushed myself back against it, as if to keep the distance between me and her the same even as she got closer.

"What?" I asked her, a little worried. Was she actually drunk?

"I admit my heart is heavy and I... I'm very sad. But I'm not going to break. You don't need to treat me as you treated Lomi," she said, staring into my eyes.

Quickly realizing what she meant, I felt a little stupid.

Of course she would have interpreted my words that way.

"Renn, I hadn't meant it that way. I was... trying to tell you that there are options for you. Ones you might find yourself enjoying," I said.

"All the while treating me gently, as you did with that little girl who lost her whole family! I lost a home, but..." she went quiet, and seemed to realize she couldn't honestly say it hadn't affected her that badly.

"It's alright. I know what you mean," I said, raising my hand in defeat.

"Do you?" she asked, a little loudly.

"I do. It might sound like lip service right now, but I honestly wasn't trying to treat you that way. I thought I had been treating you rather normally," I said.

Renn blinked a few times, and then drew a little closer. To get a better look at my eyes.

"I'm not lying," I said.

"I can tell. How strange," she said softly.

"Is it?" I asked. Was I that rude in her eyes? To treat her like some little girl? Some meek woman without her own will and heart?

Did she think our last few hours of interaction had been me treating her gently? As if I was afraid she'd break?

If anything that just made me wonder how I had been treating her all this time. I hadn't been that rude had I?

Renn sighed and then sat back, seemingly losing interest in staring at me. She turned to grab her cup again, but stayed seated near me. Close enough that our knees were touching.

"For your information, I'm usually a nice person," I said to her.

"So I've heard," she said.

"Funny, considering you seem to doubt it..."

She hid a small smirk behind her cup as she took a sip.

Grabbing one of the apples, to hopefully help wash down the taste of that snack she had just given me... I felt a little odd as I bit into it.

What was I going to do with her?

I didn't blame her for what happened in Ruvindale... Although a part of me wished she had been a little more observant. A little more...

What? Like me?

If I had been there, would I have been able to stop any of that from happening?

Probably not.

How could I have known Lughes hadn't been paying his taxes?

Amber, I might have been able to save. I would have noticed that families debauchery rather quickly...

But the taxes...

I could not have saved the Sleepy Artist... but I could have at least ensured that Lughes and the rest would have been safe.

I could have also saved more of the paintings, too.

Was that why I had been a little upset at her? Because she hadn't done what I would have?

Yet how would I have done such things?

Pure force. Of course.

Glancing at the woman who sipped the last bit of her drink, while eyeballing me, I wondered why I had even thought her capable of it.

She could be strong. Strong enough even to face knights, in numbers to boot... But strong enough to face a whole city? An army?

Likely not.

Which meant if she had remained in the city... if she had not been banished...

She'd just be dead, or missing, like the rest.

Sighing, I looked away as she reached out to grab her own apple. Still hungry. Or maybe her odd anger had made her so.

"Think they'll be loud all night?" Renn then asked.

Glancing at the nearby fire, and the three people dancing around it in drunken stupor... I shrugged. "Who knows?"

"They're going to keep me up all night," she complained.

"Go yell at them," I said with a wave.

Her eyes lowered at me, and she sighed.

"What?" I asked.

"I shouldn't have said anything. Now you're going to be mean again," she complained.

Shaking my head at her, I wondered what she had wanted me to say or do. Go tell them to shut up? They were harmless... plus...

Humans' being so distracted and drunk was good for us. It was the only reason I was comfortable with her having her tail out as openly as she was.

She munched on the apple she had picked up, while staring at the humans in the distance. Her eyes...

"Your eyes reflect in the night," I said.

"Huh?" she glanced at me, and it became more clear.

I had noticed it before, but the last few days we'd been a little... busy.

Pointing at my own eyes, I then pointed at hers. "Your eyes. They reflect like a cats," I said.

"Well... I am one," she said.

Smiling a little, I nodded. That was true.

"I meant just be careful. Humans notice such eyes, and get scared, especially on the road in the middle of the night," I said.

"Oh. I know. I look down because of that, at people's feet and stuff. At least at night time," she said.

"Hm? Do you?" I asked. I hadn't noticed.

"Well... yea... I was attacked once because of it. So I've made a habit of it since," she said.

Nodding, I understood that completely. That reason was very believable...

I stretched out, laying a little farther out along the end of the wagon's lip. Renn scooted back a little as I did, since I basically stole some of her area.

Resting against the barrel, I let my head rest back against it and nodded.

This would put me between Renn and anyone who approached the wagon from this angle. I wasn't worried over someone actually sneaking up, or even into the wagon, without me first hearing them... but one was never sure.

Mistakes did happen.

"Are you actually going to sleep?" she asked, sounding excited at the thought.

"Only if you don't keep me up all night," I said.

Renn chuckled.

The sky was getting rather dark. It was still a little too early to really... fall asleep, but it was necessary.

These merchants would be up early. Before the dawn, they'd be back on the trail.

Listening to the dancing and laughter, and the snores from the few sleeping around us... I closed my eyes.

The wind was light. A little cold, probably too cold for humans to be comfortable. Likely the reason for that large fire in the distance.

That fire crackled and popped. Somehow it sounded louder to my ears than all the drunken voices.

Off in the distance I heard the grass in the wind. The trees and bushes. Animals, all around us. Snakes, rabbits, something a little bigger... maybe a wild dog, was not far from us. Over a hill nearby.

A few birds still made noises in the nearby trees, and the sound of bugs began to start their chorus.

And above all of that, were far more precious sounds.

Renn's munching as she tried to quietly eat an apple.

Her breaths and the sound of her tail as it lightly moved along the floor of the wagon and her lap. Her ears, beneath her hat.

Focusing on them, since they were the most important... I tried to not think of the last few nights.

I didn't think of the deaths. Or the chaos.

I didn't think of the fires, or the paintings within them.

I didn't think of the village lost, and the little girl left behind.

I didn't think of the ever increasing threats and dangers to my people.

I only thought of this moment. This singular place, right now and here, in this vast world.

Just me and her.

And thanks to that... for these few seconds...

I was able to sleep.

Chapter 56: Chapter Fifty Five – Renn – A Burden Twice Carried

Dark clouds loomed in front of us, and seemed to be drawing closer every minute.

They were being brought in from the ocean. I couldn't see the ocean yet, since we were surrounded by hills covered in trees... but I could smell the sea on the breeze. The scent of the sea had begun to mix into the air's scent a few hours ago. Not long after we had separated from the apple caravan.

I was walking not too far behind Vim, but not because he was walking quickly. Nor because the road was busy... in fact, it's been a good amount of time since we had passed or seen anyone else.

Rather the reason was somewhat simple... "Who are we going to meet Vim?" I asked him.

"A nun," he said.

"She's one of us right?" I asked.

"She is. She's a bird, but doesn't know what kind she is. I think she's a peafowl," he said.

"Peafowl?" I asked. What was that?

"You might know them as peacocks," he said.

I increased my pace a little, so he could see me shake my head at him. "Don't know them either," I said.

He studied me for a moment before answering. "They're birds that have massive feathers. And they're usually very colorful. They're not common here but down south they're seen as good luck so aren't hunted. Kept as pets," he explained.

Hmm...

"Is she colorful then?" I asked.

"Rapti is a calm woman. She looks rather human. She used to have feathers that grew on the back of her head, and neck, but she plucked them so often that they stopped growing," Vim said.

"Oh..." I didn't like that at all.

"But yes. Her feathers had been colorful. And long," he said.

Studying Vim as he nodded, since I knew he was remembering those feathers... I wondered if he realized he seemed to find non-human features interesting. Beautiful even.

It made his earlier comments about my own features a little less... important, to a degree. Especially since it meant he probably thought such things for everyone... But I still found myself cherishing them.

Common compliments to him... but valuably precious rarities for me.

"Is that what you did, Vim?" I asked.

"What did I do?" he asked, glancing at me.

"Pluck your features off?" I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "No. I've not done anything like that."

I nodded, since I had expected such an answer. It'd have made sense, since it would explain why he looked so human... but yet at the same time, something told me he wasn't the type to do such a thing.

"She's a nun, so does that mean she's part of... that Cathedral you were talking about?" I asked.

"No. She's simply a devout member of the northern faith. Technically it is the same branch as the Cathedral, but she's not necessarily a part of it," Vim said.

"Oh..."

"What? You thought she was some kind of saboteur? A spy?" he asked, amused.

Shrugging, I wasn't sure what I had thought.

"Or is it that you are displeased to hear of one of our own kind being a devout believer in the faith that hunts us?" he asked.

"I know better than to judge each human just by the symbol they pray to," I said quickly.

After all several I had known had been devotees themselves. And they had all been wonderful people, and had never harmed me in any way.

I also knew plenty who had indeed been dangerous, and... were evil, in my perspective... So I was always weary around such people, but I knew under the right conditions they could be just as friendly as any other.

"Then why the face?" he asked.

Reaching up to touch whatever he saw, I wondered what kind of face I had on right now.

"You looked annoyed. Upset," he clarified.

"Oh...?" I couldn't feel such an expression on my face, but I could kind of feel and admit that I was upset.

Vim smiled at me, as if amused. Maybe my expression had changed again. "We'll spend a day or two with her, and then head south along the coast to another member. Rapti is one of our more steady members. The worst issue she's ever had was she wanted me to tell a man to stop trying to court her," he said.

I paused in touching my face and quickly took in what he had just said.

"Court her?" I asked, interested.

He nodded. "He was a little... pushy," he said.

"What'd you do? To deter him?" I asked.

"Threatened to drop him off a roof," he said.

"Oh... violence," I said. Of course it had been.

"No. I threatened the use of violence. It was the next day, after he dismissed my threat... That was when I used violence," he said, correcting me.

"Oh..." I groaned, especially since he smiled at the memory. While walking, I realized something important. "Wait... Does that mean..." I flinched as he nodded.

"Yes. I dropped him from a roof."

I sighed, but knew that Vim wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been necessary... or would he?

"Did you kill him?" I asked.

"No. It wasn't a tall roof," he said.

"Was he that bad?" I asked.

"He was. I'd not break the legs of someone if they didn't deserve it," he said.

Hmph...

"Do you help people like that all the time?" I asked.

"Not necessarily because of those reasons, but yes. Most of the time what I need to do is simple stuff like that," he said.

"Simple stuff. Breaking legs is simple, I guess," I said with a sigh.

"It is," he nodded, proud of himself.

Still...

Passing a large rock, I studied the crumbling cracks covering it. Had someone tried to crack it open recently? It looked it.

Vim helped any way he could, didn't he?

Guiding Lomi to a new home.

Studying the city that his members, the Sleepy Artist, resided in to see if it was still safe.

Helping negotiate a contract.

Getting revenge... and protecting those he could...

Helping a member with an admirer who was dangerous, or unwelcomed, was an odd thing but understandable.

I knew that there were probably far harder things he had to help with. But honestly...

"I... I want to help," I dared to say.

Vim frowned and glanced at me, as if he hadn't really heard what I had said.

I nodded, as to affirm it.

"Help what?" he asked.

"You. The Society. I want to..." I shrugged, unsure of how to phrase it exactly.

Which was silly. I'd spent a long time thinking about this. Since I had been banished.

"How do you plan to do that?" Vim asked. He sounded a little tired.

"Well... I was hoping you'd let me," I said.

"Let you what?" he asked, glancing at me.

"Help you."

He frowned. "With what?"

Gesturing to the world around us. "Everything?" I asked.

Vim paused for a moment, and it made me very self conscious as he stared at me.

With a gulp, I wondered if I had upset him. He was looking at me oddly, but it didn't really seem like anger.

"Is that a no?" I asked him.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to help the Society at all. In fact most would be happy to hear that," he said.

"Yet for some reason you're not, are you?" I asked him.

"I..." he went quiet, and looked away for a moment.

"You believe in free will... Yet look as if you don't like the idea at all," I said.

Vim sighed.

My tail went still as I watched the man seemingly give up on something.

What was it? Me? My desires? Was he annoyed at this conversation, or upset? Was it something else?

"You... you mean you want to help me, don't you? Not the Society, but me," he said.

I felt every hair on my body stand up, and I realized I had mistakenly said too much too fast.

For a long moment Vim and I just stared at one another. The light breeze felt cool on the skin, yet not cold enough to make me shiver.

Yet I shivered all the same.

"Can't I?" I finally found the nerve to ask.

"Help me?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Why?"

"I... was part of their demise. So I'll give my life in exchange," I said.

"That is the wrong decision," Vim said.

"You'd dare say that?" I asked, offended.

"I don't dare. I did."

Glaring at him, I ignored my tail and ears as they squirmed. I didn't like the way he was glaring at me.

"Help, although good intentioned, is nothing but harm if done improperly," Vim said.

"I'll!" I started to argue back, but instead found myself stepping backward. Away from him. It made me feel ridiculous... I knew I had nothing to fear from this man. He was not just the protector of our Society... I knew now he wouldn't hurt me.

But I knew the truth.

I wasn't scared of him himself.

I was scared of his words. His opinions.

"Go find a home, Renn. Settle down. Make friends. Have children. Protect them and those around them. That is how you earn forgiveness. That is how you can right any wrongs you think you've done," Vim said.

About to step away from him again, I was able to stop myself from doing so. I held my ground, and shook my head.

"I failed, so you're going to toss me aside," I said.

Vim stared at me for a moment, and then sighed. "You didn't fail Renn," he said.

"I did!" I screamed.

"Even if what happened was actually your fault, how could I or anyone else blame you for it? You knew, and still know, so little of our Society. Blaming you for any of that is simply absurd," Vim said.

"But I know humans! I've lived amongst them for...!" I started to shout more, and stepped forward. He needed to understand that I also understood and...!

Vim shook his head, stopping me. "You do. But your knowledge of them is limited. Confined to the ones you spent decades with. They were basically family. We can't blame you for failing to see the danger hidden amongst a human's smile, when most of your experience is with trustworthy ones," he said.

"That's just a fancy way of saying I'm stupid!" I shouted.

He blinked, and frowned at me. I could tell he found my sudden outburst a little... strange, but I wasn't going to just nod my head and accept his opinion over my own.

"I failed, Vim. No matter what you say. No matter what you think. Amber and the rest died and are gone, and I had been there right next to them when it happened. I... It's all my..." I stopped talking as my eyes finally became filled with tears.

Great. Now I was going to sob. Which meant he was going to become nicer again. Which meant he'd just let me cry and I'd not be able to get my point across and...

"You can blame yourself. For failing to protect them. I'll allow it. But I'll not let you endure the brunt of the blame. It's simply not right," Vim said.

"How long had the Sleepy Artist existed?" I asked him.

His eyes narrowed.

"How long?" I asked again.

"Seventy years," he answered.

Closing my eyes, I groaned at that number.

"Precisely, Renn," Vim said.

I sobbed as I shook my head. "It's my fault..."

"No," he shook his head and stepped towards me. I must have been too sad to be scared, because I didn't budge as he drew closer. "Not at all. Or are you saying Lughes and the rest were incapable of taking care of themselves? They knew what they were doing. They knew what to do and how to do it. That noble family might have been the cause, but Lughes and Amber were the ones who vetted them. Not you. Not me. Them," Vim said.

"But..." I groaned.

"The fault lies on us all, Renn. Some more than others, yes, but in that perspective it is on me. Me and Lughes. Any blame that can possibly be attributed to you is..." he stopped talking as I groaned and grabbed my head. It was suddenly throbbing.

"But...!" I didn't know what to say.

"Enough Renn!" Vim raised his voice finally.

I shook my head.

"We've been over this," he said.

I shook my head, and gripped my hat. To keep it from flying off.

"Renn!"

Looking up, I stared at Vim through blurry eyes. He was closer than he had been. Only a few steps away.

He looked upset... was that grief on his face?

It reminded me of the face he had that night we burnt the paintings... That expression I had first seen there on that wall.

"They were so special," I cried.

"They were," he agreed.

"I failed them..." I groaned.

As I started to sob, I began to fall to the ground. My legs went weak, and I felt exhausted all of a sudden...

Yet before I fell onto my rear...

Blinking wildly, I stared in shock at the fist coiled around my shirt and jacket.

Reaching out to grab onto it, I flinched as Vim hefted me up.

Vim tightened his grip on my shirt, and lifted me upward. I felt my tail squirm and wiggle in my pants as I was lifted off the ground.

A little shocked by the protector's sudden actions... I blinked tears out as I squirmed, holding onto his wrist.

He had lifted me up rather high off the ground, and was glaring at me.

"Enough Renn!" he shouted at me.

"But Vim!" I shouted back, and tugged on his arm. To try to both get myself lowered back to the ground... but also to keep my shirt and jacket from tearing.

His arm was solid and firm. It didn't budge. Even when I tried to put more force into moving it, all I did was move my own self.

He was strong!

"No more wallowing in your own self-pity! You messed up, yes, you did!" he shouted at me.

I stopped trying to free myself, and started to cry again. "See! I knew it!" I cried.

I knew he had just been saying those things to be kind. To be gentle. Treating me like a child...!

Then I was suddenly moved. A small jolt of movement brought me closer to the man who held me. Lowered a little, I now found myself face to face with Vim.

"Who am I?" he asked me.

Making odd noises as I tried to speak, I knew he could see my answer even though I couldn't find my voice.

"Exactly. I'm the protector," he stated.

With a small sob I nodded. He was.

"And who are you?" he asked.

"Renn..." I said softly, knowing exactly what he was trying to actually ask.

My feet found the ground again, and I slowly slumped down to my knees. Kneeling in front of Vim, I watched as he slowly released me.

"Two homes lost... as I held them in my grip. And you have the nerve to look so at fault?" he asked me, looking hurt.

Staring at him in shock, I watched him shake his head and turn away.

Vim returned to walking, uncaring that I still sat here. Left behind.

The man shook his head with a sigh, and I knew he had deemed the conversation over.

Hurrying to stand, I found it a little difficult. My knees felt weak... as if I had been kneeling there for hours.

Quickly following him, I fixed my shirt and jacket as I wiped my face off.

That's why, Vim.

That look. That hurt. That pain.

That was why I wanted to help you.

That was why I was going to.

I'd share that burden. Even if just a little. Even if only for a moment...

Better two to carry it than a single man.

Now I just needed to find a way to get him to let me.

Somehow I found that harder to do... His permission, his acceptance... was going to be harder to get than it was to actually protect the Society.

Especially since it seemed tears weren't going to be enough.

Chapter 57: Chapter Fifty Six – Vim – Nevi

Nevi was as bustling as always.

Renn followed behind me closely as we walked through the busy street. This road was too narrow for carts, nor was it a main thoroughfare, but it was still one of the main roads leading to the downtown portion. I brushed up against people as I headed deeper into the city, wading through the crowd. Most of the people we walked amongst were older, dressed casually even though it was lightly raining.

The rain was just barely more than a light mist, and was easy to ignore. But I could hear the far off storm. Coming towards us from the ocean. I heard not just the roars of thunder, but the wind and waves as they crashed together.

A part of me was glad we had made it here in time before it arrived. I had no problem traveling amongst such a storm, but something told me she would have found it uncomfortable.

Plus...

Glancing at the nearby crowds of people, coming and going from the many shops around us... I was thankful for their noise.

It was noisy and busy enough that the woman following behind me had no chance to do anything but follow quietly. Obediently.

I was growing a little tired of her selfish resentment of herself.

Not because it was misplaced or because it was inherently bad... but simply because I was tired of feeling sorry for her.

My people were pitiful enough as it were. I didn't need a woman like her following me around at all times, making it all feel even worse.

This world was infected with enough pity as it was. I really wasn't in the mood for it to suddenly get worse.

Which in truth just made me feel selfish myself...

"Just two Renk! All need to go now!" a woman raised a bunny by the ears. It wasn't moving. Someone in the crowd reached out to grab it, seemingly more than happy to hear that price.

She sold out before we left earshot.

Crossing a street we entered another alley. One small enough that allowed us to walk without bumping into people.

Renn huffed as she entered the alley behind me, sounding glad for it.

"I can't believe how busy it is," Renn said from behind me. She sounded annoyed... yet happy all the same.

Walking past the back entrance of a shop, I glanced at the woman behind me. She was still staring at the crowded road we had just left.

"Nevi is the last main port on this coastline. Up north there are a few others, but they're smaller and only export common goods," I said.

"So this is the biggest port city?" she asked, excited. She hurried to walk next to me, which only worked thanks to the lack of anything in the alley. Usually there were boxes, or barrels placed out here.

"No. Just the last big one," I said. Hadn't I basically said that already?

"How much bigger is this place than Ruvindale? It hadn't looked that big from the outside," Renn said.

"It's not. Just a little bigger. There're more people here because of the port. Half the people here are travelers. Merchants," I said.

"Ah... like those apple merchants," she said.

"Yes."

"They're going to get soaked aren't they?" Renn asked, and I noticed the way she looked up at the sky above us. Or more so at the dark clouds rolling in that covered it.

"Yes, they will."

"Will it ruin their apples?" she asked.

"Not right away. A little water won't harm them at all," I said.

Well, as long as none were bruised or broken open at least.

Coming to a crossroad, I ignored the small bird that chirped at us as we took a left. The thing had made its nest on the little truss of stone above a door.

This alley wasn't very long. We quickly came up to another busy road. However I waited a moment before venturing out into it.

Renn hid behind me, only sticking her head out to peer at the marching soldiers who passed by.

Their boots weren't metal, but their greaves were. They clanked loudly as they went by. Most were carrying swords, but a few had spears.

"Knights?" Renn asked quietly as we watched them.

None of them noticed us as they passed; all were focused on their marching. Most looked exhausted.

"No. Just mercenaries or something," I said.

"Mercenaries?" she asked as the final row left.

Stepping out from the alley, I alongside most of the other occupants of the road turned to study the soldiers. One of the younger men carried a banner, a bland brown flag with a white bird on it.

"Don't recognize that banner. My bet is on mercenaries," a man nearby said.

"Been a lot of them showing up," another local said with a sigh.

Although they didn't sound too happy for their presence, they weren't panicking or running away either. Odds were there was just something happening nearby, and the mercenaries were using this town as a hub. A place to rest and resupply.

"Vim?" Renn asked quietly. She looked more worried than the locals did.

"Did you notice most were women?" I asked her.

"Oh. I did. Is that not normal?" she asked.

"Not at all," I said, and turned to guide her down this road, in the opposite direction the mercenaries were going.

Renn and I continued on our way, and I heard a loud thunder in the distance. One that not only Renn heard, but others nearby did as well. Renn smiled softly at one of the women who had jumped at the sound, startled.

Rounding a large building, a tower came into view. One with familiar spires and symbols.

"Another massive church?" Renn asked.

Glancing at her odd expression, I wondered how much of that upset look was her real opinion on the church and its believers.

"They do have a large one here, yes. But Rapti isn't there. She lives a few buildings down," I said.

"Oh?" Renn seemed to like the sound of that.

Another loud thunder rolled in from just beyond the port. It rumbled not just the sky, but the earth and everything on it.

Renn drew closer as we walked, and I noticed the way she stared at the sky.

"Scared?" I asked her. Surely not right? Yes she was a cat... but...

"Huh? No. I like storms," she said, blinking at me.

Then why did she keep getting closer to me?

Looking away from her, I decided to just let it be. Maybe she just preferred to walk next to people... although sometimes she walked behind me from a distance too.

Turning a corner, I pointed to the two story building. "See the brown building? With the small trees?" I asked.

"Is that hers?" she asked, excited.

"It is," I said.

The building had a small yard in front of it, with four small trees. They still had their leaves, but I didn't see any of the orange fruits on them. But it was winter.

Opening the small iron gate, I let Renn enter first. Following in after her, I watched as Renn studied the trees and grass in the yard.

"What's that smell?" Renn asked quietly.

"Paper," I said as I went to the front door.

Knocking on the door, I refrained from using the little iron knocker.

"Smells kind of like the paintings," Renn whispered to herself.

It did. But not for the same reason.

I stepped back as I heard hurried, but light, footsteps. Glancing to a nearby window, I watched a curtain get pulled back ever so slightly... and then hurriedly get dropped back into place.

Rapti quickly opened the door, smiling at me as she stepped back to let me in. "Vim!" she happily greeted me.

"Rapti," I greeted her as I stepped into the house.

Renn entered after me, and I studied the look on Rapti's face. She hesitated for a moment as Renn and I entered, only closing the door after a few moments of staring at Renn.

"Rapti this is Renn. She's a forest cat," I introduced her. As I did so, I kept an eye on Renn. Not because I worried she'd do anything strange... but because I noticed her tail beneath her pants go stiff and still.

She was nervous.

"Oh! My... It is a pleasure to meet you Renn," Rapti quickly calmed herself, and offered both hands in greeting.

Renn hesitated for a slight moment, just enough to make it weird, and then took both of Rapti's hands in hers. "Pleasure, Rapti," she greeted her.

Rapti happily smiled as she shook hands, and I took a small moment to smell and examine the house.

We were alone.

"You're soaked! Come. I have the fireplace going, and I'll get you a fresh set of clothes," Rapti hurriedly invited us deeper into her house.

Watching her run off, I noticed the new wimple on her head. The silk was undoubtedly new. Last time I'd been here it had been an older one, and was a little brown in colour. This new one had a silver sheen.

"I'm not too wet, am I?" Renn asked quietly.

"Just go," I said, and pushed her forward so she'd oblige Rapti.

Renn made a noise but did as I told her. I went to taking my shoes off as she did.

After all, I knew Rapti would give Renn clothes and a blanket... but not I.

We weren't that soaked anyway. The rain had been more of a light mist than not...

Once I removed my shoes and socks, I also took off my jacket. The sound of the two women talking to one another filtered down the hallway, from what was probably the living room.

Their voices sounded happy.

Heading deeper into the building, I took a small moment to glance at the two front rooms. Opposing each other, they had no doors and both had large windows.

Each had giant bookshelves, full of books.

I nodded as I compared the rooms to my memories. They hadn't changed much. A new rug maybe, books in somewhat different locations... but otherwise the same. She had the same chairs still.

"Oh! Ruvindale. One of my apprentices just moved there this spring," Rapti sounded happy, but she was usually happy.

Entering the room, I grimaced at the naked woman holding up a shirt as to study it.

Renn was in front of Rapti, who was holding clothes. What looked to be underwear and a pair of pants.

Only Renn noticed me, since Rapti had gone into a spiel about her recent apprentice. Telling Renn about the young girl who, for some unknown reason, couldn't eat fish.

Turning away, I left the room and sighed. Renn didn't say or do anything as I left, and I realized it was my fault.

Rapti had said she was going to get her new clothes. Or rather dry ones. And of course she'd change quickly.

"You're flushed...! Sit, sit! I'll get you something warm to drink!" Rapti's voice sounded worried, but I knew better than to believe that Renn was sick.

Shaking my head, I rested up against the wall near the door. I'd just wait here until it was fine.

Rapti emerged from the living room, passing me with a small nod of the head... but otherwise ignoring me completely.

While Rapti ran deeper into the house to the kitchen, I listened to the hurried dressing of the woman she had left behind.

After some rummaging, Renn huffed. "You can come in now," she said.

I noted her flat tone as I entered for the second time.

She glared at me, and I did indeed see a light blush on her face. It wasn't bad though, which told me she had simply been embarrassed. She wasn't sick.

Renn now wore a pair of older clothes. Worn down, and suddenly looked... very human. If not for her ears, which were visible thanks to her hat being on a rack near the fireplace. It hung there with the rest of her clothes.

Heading for one of the larger couches, I sat down with a sigh.

"Well?" Renn asked.

"Well what?" I asked back. What did she want? An apology?

"Did I look weird?" she then asked.

"Weird?" I asked, and wondered what she was asking.

She wordlessly complained with an odd noise, and then sighed. "Never mind..." she mumbled and then went to sitting in a nearby chair.

Sitting back to relax, I studied the woman who was staring intently at the fireplace nearby. Trying to distract herself, it seemed, since her face looked a little...

"You looked fine. Honestly I had expected you to have a bunch of hair on your rear, thanks to the tail," I said to her.

She sat up straight, and for the tiniest moment looked shocked... She opened her mouth to say something, but she wasn't able to collect herself fast enough. Rapti entered the room before she could.

"Here you go Renn," Rapti happily offered her a drink with a familiar aroma.

Renn was just as happy to take it, and she smelled it for a moment before taking a sip.

"Oh! It's very tasty!" Renn smiled as she went to take a real drink.

"Ah so it is... Too tasty in fact, seeing as how my brethren wish to ban it," Rapti said with a sigh.

"Only the good stuff gets banned," I agreed.

Rapti glared at me but said nothing as she too went to sit in another chair. The couch I sat at had enough space for her, but being the devoted religious type she chose to sit in a chair that was a little farther from the rest.

"What is this? It's great," Renn asked as she licked her lips. They were slightly stained red.

"Pomegranate," Rapti said.

"Hmm..." Renn must have heard of it before based off the way she nodded.

"That's similar to those drinks you had in Ruvindale. The fruit mixtures," I said.

Renn nodded. "This is warm though!" she said with a smile.

Rapti also nodded. "Warmth changes a lot of things."

The fire crackled, and I knew here in a moment I'd have to stand and put another log or two in.

"Anything new Rapti?" I asked her.

"Oplar visited," Rapti said.

I sighed and nodded. Of course she did.

Renn hid a smirk as she went to taking another drink.

"Was she fine?" I asked.

"Oplar is never anything but," Rapti said with a happy smile.

"Regrettably..." I groaned.

Rapti lightly giggled and then looked to Renn. "I've never met you before, are you from the south?" she asked.

"Ah..." Renn's ears went still, perking up as she glanced at me.

"Renn's a new member of our Society. She joined a few months ago," I said.

Rapti glanced at me, and then hurriedly back at Renn. "Really...?" she asked.

Renn nodded.

"Oh bless the gods!" Rapti quickly clasped her hands, and went to saying a small prayer.

Watching her thank the gods for Renn's entire existence, I studied Renn who suddenly looked more out of place than she had even when wearing that noble's silk dress.

Her ears were perked but tilted. Her tail was straight, and the hairs on it were puffed up... and her eyes were wide, with thin pupils. She even held the small cup with both hands in such a way that reminded me of a cat ready to bound away at a moments notice.

"May you continue to bless her and us all," Rapti finished her small prayer, and then nodded in content satisfaction.

"Uh... thank you," Renn whispered softly.

"So rare. Especially for us women!" Rapti said.

"That is true," I agreed with that at least.

Renn softly smiled and glanced at me, as if she found my own comment the strangest thing so far.

"Destruction of a Monarch, and a new member to boot! The Gods are gracious," Rapti said happily.

Gracious. Sure.

The Monarch being slain was probably worth the lives of Lomi's family and the Sleepy Artist... But...

Was it?

Sometimes it hurt to compare such losses and gains.

I needed to steer the conversation carefully. Renn had already begun to display a horrible trait of blaming herself for everything. Last thing I needed was for her to start thinking that her emergence into the Society came at the cost of her friends.

Such a mindset would only ruin her as a person. It would only make her worthless to us, and make me upset with her.

She really didn't deserve that.

Ignoring Renn's blink of confusion I coughed. "Other than Oplar did anything else happen?" I asked. I had to get any news from her before I told her what had happened. She'd not go irate at learning of her friend's deaths... but she would become quiet.

"No. Nothing of great importance. I've had only a few visitors. Other than Oplar, the twins visited as did Mapple," she said.

Mapple I understood, but it was a little odd to hear of the twins here. "What were the twins doing?" I asked.

Rapti smiled. "They took up sailing. They were headed back south, they transported furniture from the capital," Rapti said.

Huh... sailing indeed. That meant they were probably helping out the trading company.

"Anything new in the city?" I asked before she could start asking Renn more questions. She kept looking away from me to her, and I knew it was because she found Renn far more important than me.

"Not really. Typical human issues. The port flooded a few years ago. A new lord was elected. The market is in an uproar right now because of a pirate fleet, supposedly they're hiring mercenaries right now to try and capture them," she explained.

I nodded, glad for the information. Other than the pirates everything sounded normal indeed.

"I have some bad news as well, Rapti," I said.

Rapti glanced at me, as did Renn. Both suddenly looked hurt, as if blaming me for ruining a happy moment. They had just been about to start asking each other about themselves.

"You don't often bring me bad news Vim," Rapti said softly.

"I try not to. But this time it's going to hurt," I said.

She blinked and tilted her head.

Sitting forward, I clasped my hands before me... not to go into prayer as she had done, but instead to try and keep her as calm as possible.

Rapti was better than most of our members. She wasn't flighty or timid... but she was the personification of her faith.

Which meant when she heard of bad moments, or evil, she became... rather forlorn.

Renn looked panicked. As if not sure if she should say anything or not. I tried to ignore the horrible pain on her face, coming from her own blame. It was hard to.

Rapti sat apprehensively, her pretty blue eyes seemed to shimmer... she probably knows what I'm about to say is going to hurt her, if even instinctively.

"Your dear friend is missing. Crane and the Sleepy Artist are lost to us, and I do not know where they've gone," I said.

Rapti's entire world then shattered, as she broke into a sob.

Half a second later, Renn joined her.

Damn.

Chapter 58: Chapter Fifty Seven – Renn – Thunderous Stew

"She's asleep," I said to Vim as I entered the kitchen.

He was standing in front of a large pot which was hanging over hot coals.

"Hm," Vim nodded as he slowly stirred the stew.

Stepping up to the pot, I glanced in and saw the contents. Meat, vegetables, and the broth was a dark brown.

"Here," Vim then offered me the large spoon he was using to stir.

I accepted the responsibility of stirring as Vim stepped away to the nearby oven. This kitchen was actually one of the biggest rooms in the whole building, and from what I could tell there was nothing above it. The second floor was only half the house.

With just his bare hands Vim reached into the large hole in the stone wall and pulled out an iron cast sheet. The steaming bread on top of it smelled wonderful, and made me wonder how Rapti could sleep through such smells.

While I stirred I watched Vim put the hot sheet onto a nearby counter. He quickly went to removing the bread from the iron, putting it on another counter which still had flour sprinkled on it.

"Didn't know you could cook," I said.

"Who doesn't?" he asked as he went to preparing the bread for our meal.

"Well..." I quickly thought of a few people, myself included.

He glanced at me, and I looked away from him.

It wasn't like I couldn't cook anything at all... I just...

Sneaking a peak at his handiwork, I watched as he used a knife to quickly and easily cut the large piece of bread into many smaller ones. It took him only a few moments to reduce a large bulbous chunk of bread into dozens of small hand sized...

"Bowls?" I asked, wondering why he had cut them that way.

"They are, kind of, aren't they?" Vim said plainly. He sounded bored.

Once he was done he went back to the wall next to me, where he had pulled the bread out from. He shut a black metal plate over the hole, closing the oven off. After that he shut a similar plate beneath it, at the bottom of the wall near the floor. It was there that a small fire roared, full of charcoal and wood.

The coals sitting beneath the pot I stirred had actually come from that hole. He had simply scrapped them out, after it had been lit long enough.

Vim studied the pot I stirred for a moment, and I wondered if I wasn't stirring correctly... but he said nothing as he nodded and stepped away.

A long rumble made my ears and tail move as I looked behind me. To a small window, covered by a thick curtain.

It was the middle of the day, yet not a single amount of light could be seen... and not just because the curtain was too strong. The storm had arrived. The rain and wind hadn't hit us just yet, but the dark clouds surely had.

Not only was it dark... it was getting cold. I was now a little thankful to be standing in front of a bunch of hot coals, and a smouldering pot.

"She just went to sleep... won't it get cold?" I asked him, realizing that the food would probably get cold very quickly once we stopped cooking it. Thanks to the storm.

"That pot will summer all night, she'll be fine," he said.

"What about the bread?" I asked. My mouth was watering from the smell alone of it, and I felt bad for Rapti... the bread would become hard and cold by the time she woke.

"You put the stew into the bread Renn. It'll warm and soften it up, you'll see," Vim said.

"Oh... Oh?" I glanced at the stew I was making and realized what he planned on doing with the bread. It wasn't a side, but a part of the meal itself.

"Don't drool into the stew," he warned.

I stepped a tiny bit back to make sure I didn't. "I'm not that bad," I said quickly, gulping a little.

"Sure," he sarcastically agreed.

A little embarrassed, I decided to look around the kitchen. It was... clean, but there was something about it.

It felt a little empty honestly.

The Sleepy Artist had a lot in its kitchen. Stuff hanging from walls. Shelves and racks. Pots stacked in a corner.

Even the little lodge cabin Nory and I had lived in had a small kitchen. And it had been rather messy too... but that might have just been because of the size. It was just a small corner in the room.

Here though...

A few pans on a shelf. Some tools and utensils on a rack, hanging off large nails. There were only a few knives.

The fanciest part was the oven area. Where I stood. There were two internal ovens, and room between them for things like this pot. It was big enough one could even spit roast a large animal if they wanted to.

There were two countertops, made of flat stone... a large table in the center, but it only had two chairs...

"Does she live alone?" I asked.

"Of course she does," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why can't she?" Vim asked as he went to cleaning the counter he had made a mess. There were remnants of the food he had chopped and prepared for the stew, and the flour from the bread.

"Well... Everywhere else I've been, no one's been alone," I said.

The Sleepy Artist. Lomi's home had dozens of families. The Owl's Nest was a large family, even if most hadn't been there... Twin Hills...

"You've been to three. Hardly many," he said.

"Well... that's true," I admitted.

After a moment I heard Vim sigh. I turned to glance at him and found him pointing one of the thick knives at me. The one he had used to cut the bread. "She prefers to live alone. She's a devout believer in her faith, in case you haven't noticed," Vim said.

I had noticed...

Her bedroom, which I had just left her in...

It was empty.

A bed. A small dresser, barely big enough to hold more than a few sets of clothes...

Nothing else. Not even a rug.

"So no husband," I whispered.

"Feh," Vim scoffed as if he found that funny.

Glaring at him, I had to stop stirring for a moment since I had done so too roughly. A small bit of the stew's broth had splattered out.

Wait...

"Most of our kind. The Society... what do they think of the church?" I asked him.

"Oh I don't know. Only half of our members have lost someone to them, in one form or another, so I have no idea," Vim said.

Sighing I nodded. Yes. I deserved that sarcastic tone.

"So no one likes her," I whispered.

"Well... no. I didn't mean it that way Renn. Didn't you just hear that people visited her?" Vim asked.

"Oh. Yes. I did," I nodded. I had wanted to hear more of them. Twins? Did they mean that literally? So siblings born at the same time? And they owned a boat? I'd love meet them.

Vim brushed his hands together as he walked back to the pot. Looked like he was done cleaning up after himself.

"Is this place special to her? Like how Twin Hills was special to Trixalla?" I asked.

"No, she just likes it here for whatever reason. Settled down years ago," Vim said as he watched me stir.

Feeling a little conscious thanks to his gaze, I did my best to not accidentally spill more. Maybe he was upset because of it.

"She was Crane's friend?" I asked, hoping to keep both him and myself distracted.

"Verily. Which is why I had to tell her so quickly. It would have been rude not to," Vim said.

I nodded, since I understood that. As she broke down and cried, Vim had roughly explained what had happened. And what he thought was the result.

He thought they were dead, but there was a chance they'd appear someday. He couldn't confirm their survival, and as such chose to expect the worst.

Somehow that made it... sad. It meant he always expected the worse outcome.

"She'll wake up in a better mood," Vim said, and then stepped away. To grab something off a nearby shelf.

"I hope so," I whispered. She had... really cried. So much, and so purely, that I had cried myself.

Glancing at Vim as he grabbed some kind of glass bottle off the shelf, I remembered the look on his face when I had wrapped Rapti up in a hug as she sobbed.

When I had glanced at him... I had expected a confused look, or an incredulous one. One that made me feel awkward or ashamed.

Instead I had found a warm smile.

A roll of thunder drew me from my thoughts.

I gulped away the smile the memory had given me as Vim returned to the pot, as to pour some of the little glass bottle's contents into it.

Watching the black flakes fall, I frowned at the smell of them. "Some kind of spice?" I asked.

He stopped quickly, only putting a little in. "Pepper."

"Pepper..." I hadn't heard of it. It smelled strongly though.

"It's good," he said, confident.

"I hope so..." My nose didn't seem to like it... but maybe it'd not be as bad once it soaked in the stew itself for awhile.

Vim put the glass bottle back and I picked up the stirring... to hopefully get the stuff to mix in as fast as possible.

"Still want to help me Renn? You'll end up breaking hearts as you've seen," Vim then said with his back to me.

My stirring stopped, and I opened my mouth to say something. But my mind whirled, quickly understanding exactly what he had said.

This was a common thing.

To bring and give bad news. The kind of news that made people break.

Looking away from him, I was glad that I had taken a small step back away from the pot earlier. My eyes were watering, and I didn't want to cry into the stew.

"I didn't mind crying with her," I whispered.

"I saw."

"It's not always bad though, Vim... I saw Lughes and the rest when you entered with Lomi. I saw Lomi and her new family. I saw Lilly and Windle, they seemed happy," I argued.

"Happy? Those two?" he asked.

"They were," I nodded, confident. I'd not let him tease me about them.

"I suppose they are," he sighed.

Didn't he realize it? Although Lilly chastised him and gave him grief... she had genuinely loved that man. Cherished him beyond measure.

She had abandoned her own desire to fight and wage war, to stay with him. That had to mean something.

For a long moment neither of us talked... Vim sat down at the kitchen table with a small huff, and I didn't like the awkward silence that followed.

Was I supposed to have not agreed with him? Or had he only said that earlier comment without much meaning, and I had taken it too seriously?

Or had I failed somehow? Had he wanted a different answer...?

Blinking watery eyes, I was glad they seemed to stop being blurry quickly. Maybe I had cried myself out already from earlier.

"Rapti seems nice," I said softly.

"She is. Until you preach heresy," Vim said.

Heresy?

Glancing at him, he nodded. "As I said. Devout."

Ah... he meant that literally then.

"Hm..." Did that mean Lilly and Rapti weren't on good terms? Lilly had mentioned her hate for the church quite a few times when I had traveled with her.

"Ah... I'll be back," Vim then suddenly stood from his seat. He did so, so suddenly, I startled.

"Huh?" I watched him leave as he gestured for me to keep doing what I was doing.

Listening to him leave, I heard him head farther down the hall. To the right, past the stairs.

I hadn't gone to that side of the house yet, but I assumed it was where the bathroom was. I hadn't seen it yet after all.

There were two rooms upstairs, and a small loft. Which had a small table and chair. Then downstairs, a large living room... this kitchen, and the two rooms in the front which held a lot of books.

Straining my ears, I realized I heard snoring. It was light, but...

Smiling softly at Rapti's snoring, I realized I was probably going to struggle to sleep if the only other place to sleep was in the room opposite of hers. At that distance I'd hear that snoring so distinctively well, it'd make it difficult to fall asleep.

"Yet it's cute," I admitted.

The Sleepy Artist had been rather quiet, honestly. Sometimes I heard Amber rummaging around at night, since she had seemed to struggle to sleep on occasion... but other than that...

"Hm..." I felt my chest tighten at the thought of Amber.

Then I heard a match. Something sparked, and I heard a flame elsewhere. And not from the nearby ovens, or the fireplace in the living room.

I frowned as I listened to the sounds, and then heard what was obviously wood being stacked on top of each other.

Was Vim starting a fire somewhere?

After a moment I heard Vim again. He sighed at something and then came back into the kitchen.

"Go take a bath," he said.

"Huh?" I went still as he approached, to take over in the stirring.

He gestured to the door. "Down the hall. The small room at the end on the right. Take a bath," he said.

"Oh... I feel okay?" Was he worried I felt weird because we had gotten a little wet? I mean sure it wasn't the greatest feeling but...

"You stink. Don't go sleeping in Rapti's clothes and bed like that, it's rude," he said and grabbed the handle from me.

"Stink!" I stepped back and quickly tried to smell myself.

Did I? No... I smelled myself, yes, but it wasn't that bad. If anything I could smell the clothes I wore now more than anything. They smelled old.

Vim gave me a look as he stood there, holding the large spoon without stirring.

"Do I really...?" I asked, a little worried. If I did... then that meant all this time I hadn't realized it. Since I obviously couldn't smell anything bad. This meant all this time I probably had stunk and...

"Not really. But we'll be on the road for a week or so before our next opportunity, so go while you can," Vim then said as he looked away from me. He went to stirring as if he hadn't just...

Unsure of what to say, or do, I felt my ears twitch, and then felt my tail brush up against the nearby kitchen table. I was frazzled.

Shifting a little, I blinked and wondered if I really did stink though... What if he had just simply seen my expression, and felt bad... and then told me I didn't, but I really did and...

"Jeez Renn. You don't. You have a scent but all of us do. It's not bad either, so just go bathe real quick and stop looking like I just broke your heart," Vim said with a nod of the head.

"You didn't break it... you just shook it," I admitted.

He sighed and nodded, as if accepting defeat.

Stepping up to him, I took a small yet deep breath right behind his back.

I smelled the stew. The flour. The bread... wood, most likely from the fire he had just started for the bath.

Yet I couldn't smell him.

He glanced at me, but didn't say anything or try to stop me. Instead he looked away and returned his focus on the stew.

For a few moments I focused on him, and tried to find his scent.

Even with my eyes closed, and nearly up against him... I couldn't smell anything.

"You don't smell at all," I said.

"So I've heard," he said.

"No... I mean... I can't even smell your clothes. You've been wearing these since I've met you, why don't they stink at least?" I asked. They didn't look... too bad, but they did definitely show their wear. They weren't grimy, but were far from unused. It was part of the reason he looked so average. He looked like any other fisherman or farmer you'd pass on the road.

"I know you want me to stink because of what I said, but come on," Vim said.

Stepping around him, I tried to take a deep breath again, thinking maybe another angle would work... but instead all I got was a deep smell of the brewing stew.

It smelled delicious.

"And now you're drooling," Vim said with a strange tone.

Licking my lips I looked up at him and smiled at his odd frown. He must find me ridiculous.

"Most men stink. Or at least smell of what they wear or their breath..." I said. Most smelled of whatever they had just drank, especially when it was liquor.

"I'll take your word for that. I don't make a habit of smelling other men," he said.

Laughing at him, I nodded and stepped away. Slowly heading to the hallway, I paused for a moment and glanced down the hallway. It was a little dark... the storm had arrived, even though it hadn't really started raining yet.

No...

Tilting my head upward, I listened intently and found that there were indeed raindrops. Little drops landed on the metal roof creating a chorus of sound. They were slowly growing in number.

"The storms here," I said.

"The storms been here for an hour," Vim corrected me.

I shrugged, since I had never really found clouds alone to be a storm themselves. After all, one didn't think dark clouds alone when they thought of a storm.

They thought of rain. Wind. Lightning and thunder!

"Don't eat without me," I said to him.

"Get going. I'll start thinking you're really just a normal cat if you keep acting as if you're afraid of a simple bath," he teased.

Smiling at him I nodded. That was a common assumption.

Heading down the hall, I hesitated a moment... then stepped backwards. To peek into the kitchen.

Vim stood before the stew, and was stirring gently. He had a... small yet gentle smile on his face.

Turning away and heading down the hall for real this time, I blinked the memory of that smile away. To tuck it deep inside me.

Somehow it had seemed precious.

Finding the bath was easy.

Ignoring Rapti's loud snores mixed into the thunderous rumbles of the storm wasn't.

Chapter 59: Chapter Fifty Eight – Vim – Rapti

The storm had died down a little, but the rain continued to fall. Thunder and lightning only showed themselves once in a while, and the wind was pretty much gone completely.

A lull, as the sailors called it.

And this little church was just as quiet.

The pew I sat on creaked a little as I shifted, stretching my shoulder and upper back. For some reason I felt stiff.

Rapti was cleaning the small stone cross of her god. As she wiped it, I could tell there was no real point to. It was free of dust... most likely because she cleaned it often. It probably got cleaned multiple times a day by multiple people.

Yet as repetitive and useless it seemed... Rapti was focused dearly on it. As if the large stone cross that was nearly her size in height, was precious.

Rapti and I were the only ones in the church at the moment. A few other women had been here earlier, but had left to the other church. The large one situated behind this one... or rather, technically, I guess this was the one behind the real one.

That one was probably busy. Around this time should be first sermon of the day. I knew soon I'd hear hymns and a choir as people sang their songs of praise.

"I'm surprised they haven't torn this place down yet. Or turned it into something else," I said.

"They will someday," Rapti said as she focused on a spot.

Luckily she'd be okay with that.

Rapti's devotion was flawless. To the point that even the members of our society who hated the church, like Lilly, respected her. They might not like her faith, but they liked her as a person.

Yet for as strong as her faith... she was also a realist. She'd cry and weep, as she had done when she had learned of Crane and the rest, but the next day would be standing strong... returning to her daily duties.

It was funny that she was so similar to Lilly, even if the exact opposite.

"She's a good person, you know," Rapti then said.

"Who?" I asked. Lilly? Had I said her name out loud?

"Renn," Rapti said with a huff, obviously upset that I couldn't tell whom she was speaking of.

"Oh," I sighed and sat back, making the wooden pew creak in annoyance.

"It's very rare for such a predator to have such emotions. Yet... that can also be dangerous too," Rapti said.

"You're telling me," I said.

I had told Rapti of what had occurred at Ruvindale... but I didn't tell her how easily it could have gone so much worse. And most of the ways that would have happened would have been because of Renn.

One wrong move. One wrong word...

"What will you do with her? Take her to Lilly?" Rapti asked as she stretched to wipe off the top of the cross.

"No," I said.

Lilly would ruin her.

"That's good. I'm glad you've thought about it enough to realize that would be a mistake," Rapti said with relief.

"Why would it be a mistake, in your eyes?" I asked.

Rapti paused and glanced at me, and I didn't care much for the look in her eyes.

She found my question ridiculously out of character, and it showed.

"Lilly would utilize that girl's emotions and turn her into a warrior," she said plainly.

"What's wrong with being a warrior?" I asked her.

"We're not meant to kill our brethren, Vim."

I sighed but chose not to argue at that.

She didn't mean our kind, but all kinds.

She saw us and humans as one.

In a way that was a good thing.

Yet in others...

"So what do you think I should do with her then?" I asked her.

"The Cathedral would be the best choice for now. Let Mother Sight talk to her first," Rapti said confidently.

I groaned, but knew it was the truth.

After all it had been my plan too.

Keep an eye on her long enough to ensure she really wasn't a threat, then let that old woman decide her fate.

Made it easy for me. At least, it was supposed to.

Rapti giggled, bringing my focus back to her. "What?" I asked her odd smile.

"I like to see you worry. It helps remind me even one such as you is still within the realm of normalcy. I like to see it," she said.

"Great. I'm glad I seem more normal the more I stress," I said.

Rapti smiled but said nothing as she finished up her wiping of the cross. With a small gesture she made a small prayer, and then stepped away from it as she folded up her towel.

Putting the towel down Rapti walked over to stand before me. She wore her actual robe today, and it fit her. She looked... content, dressed in the religious garb, while in this religious house.

Most of our kind would be anything but.

"I'm glad you're doing well Rapti," I said.

"As much as I can be," she whispered.

"Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?" I asked her.

She slowly shook her head, smiling all the while.

"You sure? No more busybody nobles sneaking around or anything?" I asked.

Rapti's smile softened as she quickly shook her head. "No. Thank goodness!"

I wanted to tease her about it, but knew better than to do so.

She had genuinely been stressed over that man. To the point she had sent an actual letter asking for help.

When I had seen that letter, and who had written it, I had panicked... but it was also a relief.

I was glad that even someone like her, who held such pious beliefs, was willing to reach out for help when it was needed.

After all I was...

"May I ask you something, Vim?" Rapti then asked.

"Of course you can."

"I fear your answer, however," she whispered.

"Why's that?"

"Because of where we are," she said.

Ah... I glanced at the cross she had just wiped down.

Yes. A place where one was not supposed to lie, no matter what.

"Well?" I asked her.

She blinked, and then nodded... as if to steady herself. "I wish to know if the Monarchs are angels," she then said.

For a long moment I stared at the woman, who was not a human... yet dressed and looked like one. Who believed in a human religion, and devoted herself to it too.

Rapti gulped as I studied her, and I wondered how long she has been brooding such a query.

Probably years.

"Monarchs were created by your gods, Rapti," I said to her.

Her breath caught, and her hands quickly clenched together. I half expected her to fall to her knees in prayer.

Raising my hand to stop her from her next question, I nodded. "Yet that does not mean they're angels. What kind of angel would slaughter their creator's children? After all they don't just hunt our kind, they hunt anything that lives. Humans and animals alike," I said.

"Then why were they created?" she asked with a hush.

"Who's to know?" I asked back.

Rapti didn't like that answer, but I nodded all the same as to further mean it.

"But... but the Monarchs... Why then do they look..." she glanced at a nearby statue. One carved into the stone pillar that held up a part of the roof.

The three headed creature was undoubtedly a reference to some kind of being in their holy scripture. Which probably only further confused her, since it also resembled the last Monarch I had killed.

That meant Oplar had described it well.

"Evils are evils Rapti. Humans over the years have seen those creatures. From up close and from afar. They get told about to others, depicted and shared. Over time they become the faces of evil or judgment, for many religions," I explained.

I was careful in what I said, but not because I feared lying in this house of her gods. Rather, I feared saying something that would tarnish her pure devotion. I might not agree with her beliefs, or the humans in general, but I did like the morals and codes it taught and instilled in people. Plus, I was a firm believer in free-will. And religion was the epitome of that belief.

One could not be free and at the same time not be allowed to believe what they wanted to.

Rapti's hands clasped together tighter, and I hoped I'd not given her a wrong answer.

It wasn't entirely wrong after all. Although a little stretched.

After all none of the Monarchs had been created by her gods.

Her gods were all dead.

Killed by those very Monarchs.

"You know full well that nothing is born evil Rapti," I added.

She nodded. "Indeed. So... were the Monarchs corrupted then? By who? By what?" she asked.

"Ever the philosopher," I said.

Rapti didn't like that comment. She glared at me for a moment before remembering she was in the house of her gods. A serene smile replaced that glare quickly... and oddly, I knew it was a real one. Not forced at all.

Wish I could do that.

"I'll have a book sent to you. That tells a little of the Monarchs, and their... origins," I said, and realized I had just promised something a little outrageous.

"Really?" she stepped forward, excited.

I nodded, since I knew there was no way out of it. Why did I just promise such a thing? Was I tired?

"I'll send it from the Cathedral. I'll expect it back, so just give it back to me when I return," I said.

"Oh! Thank you Vim... really..." Rapti closed her eyes and made a small prayer in thanks, which made me feel awkward.

She wasn't praying to me of course, but it still felt weird.

Slowly standing, I sighed and nodded. "Let's go check on the headache," I said.

"She's anything but, Vim. Really. She had gone to cleaning before I had even awoken this morning, how could you say such a thing about her?" Rapti asked as she hurried to follow me out of the church.

"I can say whatever I want. When she's crying you can just wrap her in your arms and cry with her, but what am I supposed to do?" I asked her.

"Hold her as I had done? Who knows maybe you'll actually shed a tear or two too, I bet you could do it if you tried," Rapti said.

Sure I could.

I shook my head as we left, and ventured into the church's grounds. There were covered paths that connected the buildings around us, and a large open garden situated on both sides of the pass.

The light rain was what probably kept it so empty. Usually these gardens were a little busy. With people, or children, running around. Especially around this time of day. Odds were they'd be offering some kind of lunch soon too, which would draw more in.

Beggars and wealthy alike ate for free here. It wasn't uncommon to see the very merchants who owned entire fleets of boats getting their share, standing right next to the homeless.

"I have noticed you glaring at her. Is that why? Do you dislike her?" Rapti asked as we walked.

I had been glaring at Renn?

"Not entirely," I said honestly. It wasn't hate... or dislike... I just...

"Please be kind to her. She seems frail," Rapti said with a whisper, as if saying something that was a secret.

"Frail?" I asked her.

She had been crying a lot lately, and getting... emotional... but frail?

Definitely not. A few times she had been nearly ready to pounce and attack even me.

"She's endured heartbreak, and recently," Rapti nodded, confident in her assessment of the women.

Well... that was correct.

I hadn't told Rapti that Renn blamed herself for the events at Ruvindale... and hopefully Renn wouldn't either. But I knew in time the Society would hear of it. Lilly and the rest knew, as did Trixalla and the rest there.

And it was the truth after all. No one would probably outright blame her for the end result... but everyone would know and recognize that she showed up, and then something bad happened shortly after.

Hopefully she found a way to earn her place in the Society before then.

"You're acting as if I'm some heartless prick or something," I said.

"You are... sometimes..." Rapti sounded odd, as if she was afraid to admit it aloud.

"Hmph." I huffed as we headed to the main church's hall. The closer we got I could hear the priest, his voice echoing all over.

They sure did know how to build these things in such a way to make sure everyone could hear the word of their clerics.

Rapti followed in silence as we passed another pair of nuns. They both were walking with bowed heads, most likely in prayer, so didn't notice us. Or rather didn't care enough to notice us.

Finding a main door to the church's nave, I wasn't too surprised to find that most of the seats were full.

"Let the word of our Lords dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to our creators," the priest was preaching well, and he had the full attention of nearly everyone present.

Or well... everyone but one.

Finding her was easy. She didn't wear the hat she usually wore, but instead a cloth piece that Rapti had given her. Yet, even though she now looked like any other woman in this church... somehow I found her with ease. She sat alone in one of the last few rows.

Maybe it was the way she sat. A little straight, yet hunched... Or maybe it was her expression. That strange focus, full of wonder yet worry.

I stepped far enough into the nave to be inside, yet not so far that anyone would really notice me. Stepping up to a nearby section of a pillar, I went and lightly tapped on it with my knuckle.

There was no way anyone heard me knocking, especially as the priest raised his voice to initiate a new song to be sung by the choir... but I wasn't knocking for them.

Renn turned her head right after my fourth knock, and she blinked and smiled at the sight of us.

"Look at that," Rapti whispered, finding joy in Renn's simple happiness as she stood from her seat.

Since Renn knew where we were, I stepped out of the church. Back outside, where the rain was a tad bit louder than the song being sung.

"I'm going to walk around and check the city. Would you like to come with us?" I asked Rapti before Renn reached us.

"No. I shall finish my duties here. I'll meet you back at home later," Rapti said.

"It's loud but there're some real good singers here," Renn approached us with a happy skip, as if she was a young child.

"Sister Norbilla is a phenomenal singer. Her hymns will bring you tears," Rapti said with a nod.

"We'll see you later Rapti," I said, trying my best to end the conversation before it became serious.

Renn looked at Rapti with a sad face, losing most if not all of her earlier happiness. "We're leaving already?" she asked, worried.

"Oh, no! Vim simply wishes to examine the city. I'll see you later tonight, unless you'd prefer to stay here with me," Rapti said quickly.

For the tiniest moment I expected Renn to say yes, which worried me. Was Renn that interested in their religion? Surely not...

"We're going to check the city?" she asked me.

I nodded.

Renn nodded quickly, and I realized that I probably shouldn't have invited her... maybe she mistook this conversation as me asking her to help me.

Which meant she might be seeing this as me approving of her foolish idea and...

"It was lovely Rapti. But to be honest it's... a little loud. I think I'll leave before it starts to hurt," Renn said.

"Ah, I forgot. Of course. I shall see the two of you later then," Rapti nodded with a smile, but somehow that smile was... Was that a smirk? What was she thinking? Especially since Renn seemed very genuine in her statement. And who would doubt her? Rapti had seen her ears. Or rather, her real ones.

There was no doubt that it was loud to her.

Rapti bowed to the two of us, and then turned to leave. Instead of re-entering the nave she chose to head back down the path we had come from. Maybe back to that smaller church we had just been in.

"Ready?" I asked Renn after a moment.

She nodded quickly.

With a sigh I nodded and gestured for her to accompany me. First... I needed to find an umbrella for her.

It was still raining after all, and Rapti would not appreciate me letting her get soaked again.

Chapter 60: Chapter Fifty Nine – Renn - Routine

Standing alone, I waited patiently for Vim to emerge from the store.

I was standing under a large terrace, which had several chairs and tables. None of them were being used, and I stood alone... but that was not just because of the rain. I was leaning up against the wall near the shop's window, which gave the real reason for the shop's lack of customers.

The store was closed. It was dark inside, and based off what I could see from the window it was empty inside. It didn't have furniture or anything in it, as far as I could tell.

Vim had left me here so he could go find an umbrella. I had told him that it really wasn't that big of a deal, but he had been a little firm about it. He probably believed if we walked calmly under the rain as we would normally, we'd be seen as odd. And being seen as out of place or strange was the one thing Vim wouldn't allow.

Still...

"Wish I could have looked too," I whispered.

He had gone into a shop a few buildings down, across the street. It had a colorful patio, but nothing to protect from the falling rain. And although it wasn't that far, the rain was now falling hard enough that even if I had ran there I would have gotten soaked.

I sighed and reached up to make sure the headdress was still situated. Rapti had helped me put it on, so I needed to make sure it didn't come undone or fall off... since I wasn't entirely sure how she had accomplished it. Even though it was wrapped firmly around my head, covering my ears and most of my hair, there was still a little room at the top for my ears. In fact, they felt more comfortable in this than my own hat.

Maybe she could teach me before we left, so I could do this for myself from now on.

As I messed with a lock of hair that had slid out from the cloth, I saw Vim finally exit the shop.

I stood up straighter and stepped away from the wall I had been leaning on, and watched him glance up and down the road. Not to find me, because he had already looked at me... but instead to simply look around.

Smiling as he walked towards me, I quickly lost my smile as I watched him carry an umbrella back to me... with it unopened...

After a few moments he reached me, stepping under the terrace and out of the rain.

"Vim..." I groaned.

"What? It's fine," he hefted the umbrella. It was a brown one. Did he think I was complaining about the colour or shape?

"You should have opened it. You looked silly walking here with it all closed up," I said.

Vim paused as he went to opening the umbrella, and then he sighed. "Right..." he admitted it and nodded.

As he popped the umbrella open, I wondered how this man was so observant sometimes yet also so...

"Let's go," he nodded as he hefted the umbrella, to cover us both.

"Sure," I agreed, especially since I was tired of staring at the same street. It was far too empty and most of the buildings here all looked the same.

Stepping out into the rain alongside Vim, I noticed the way he held the umbrella at a small angle. So that the water poured behind us, more so near him than anywhere near me.

"How much was this?" I asked while reaching out to touch the umbrella's canopy. Thanks to Vim holding it, I had to stretch a little but he lowered it a tad to let me feel it.

It felt like leather.

"Twenty Renk. A little steep, they took advantage of the moment," Vim said.

"Oh. And let me guess, you didn't haggle," I said as I ran my fingers along the leather. It felt weird... it was thick, yet thin enough that I could feel the rain falling on it.

"That was after I bargained," Vim said.

Frowning at him, I now really wished I could have gone in with him.

He never haggled in front of me...

"Where to now?" I asked.

After leaving the church Vim and I had been able to walk for a small distance without being subject to the rain. Nevi as a city was... a little more packed than I was used to. The buildings were closer and the streets narrower. It made it easy to go from one place to another while staying under canopies or covers.

But was also the reason why when there were people out and about, it felt far too crowded and busy. Like yesterday.

"The port is that way," Vim gestured to the left.

"I would like to see that," I agreed.

Walking with Vim, I couldn't help but glance around as we walked by stores and houses. Unlike Ruvindale, which seemed to have somewhat segregated their shops and housing, this place didn't... in fact...

Most seemed to live above their stores here. Based off the way all the buildings were two or three stories tall.

"How old is this city?" I asked Vim.

"It's an older port. Been around for about a hundred years or so. But it used to be just a small fishing village. It wasn't until they found that they could farm oysters in the bay nearby, after that this place became like this."

"Hm... why do some villages have churches and others don't?" I asked.

"Because there are still plenty of pagans. And the smaller the town, the harder it is to convert," Vim said.

"I'd think the less people the easier it would be," I said as we rounded a corner. This new road was a little wider, and off in the distance... down a small hill, were people.

They looked busy... and sure enough, right beyond them was the sea.

It looked upset, based off the waves crashing.

"The less people result in a more hard-headed stance and belief system. In a town of thousands, you'll get people to swap beliefs simply out of spite of the ones they dislike," Vim said with a sigh.

Was he tired of this conversation, or did he dislike the method he was speaking of?

"What do you believe in Vim?" I asked him.

The umbrella shifted a little, but not enough to get me or him wet. Instead it tilted just a tad, causing the runoff to go from behind us, to the right of me.

I stepped closer to Vim, even though the water wasn't near me I didn't want the splashing to soak my shoes. They weren't mine after all, they were Rapti's.

She only had a few pairs. I'd hate to be the cause of their ruin.

"Sorry," Vim quickly corrected the umbrella.

"Don't have to answer if you don't want to. I know it's... personal," I said, choosing my words carefully.

"It's not personal. No one should be ashamed of what they believe in. I don't believe in any of the faiths of the humans," Vim said without any hesitation.

Faiths of the humans...

Glancing at the man I was walking shoulder and shoulder with, I wondered if he realized how brazen of a statement he had just made.

"So you do believe in something," I said gently.

"Do you?" he asked.

I suddenly slowed a little, which caused Vim to have to as well. He shifted the umbrella closer to me, to make sure I didn't get wet. By doing so however, I noticed the rain hit his shoulder a little.

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

"Then do so? I'm sure I've made it rather clear my stance on such things," he said with a frown.

"Yet I can tell you really don't like it, do you?"

Vim's eyes softened a little, and he glanced behind me. I heard something, maybe footsteps, but they were far away. I didn't look away from his eyes however.

"Rather I don't like the idea of leaving fate into another's hands. I... find faith valuable. I like how Rapti and others can get so... strong, thanks to it. Yet I don't like how they simply give up because of it sometimes. The moment they believe that their gods or lords or whatever decided their fate, is the moment they give in. And that is what I don't like," he explained.

"You'd enforce your belief in free will even onto a god?" I asked him.

"Why can't I?" he asked.

I shrugged, since I wasn't sure myself.

Our pace returned to normal and he once again readjusted the umbrella.

"Can I try holding it?" I asked as I reached for the handle.

Vim allowed me to slide my hand to where his had been. He held it steady for a few moments, alongside me, and then released it.

Surprisingly it was lighter than I had expected.

"Hm..." I hefted it for a moment, and wondered why I had seen others act as if they were heavy.

"You're stronger than a normal woman, Renn," Vim said plainly, as if able to tell what I was thinking.

"This morning I had seen a younger girl struggle with one of these. It had even been a smaller one... It might have been because of the wind though," I said as I remembered the scene. Rapti and I had watched it together.

"I'm sure," he said.

Glancing at him, I kept an eye on his shoulder. The one opposite of me. Yes... I needed to hold it carefully. He was just nearly sticking out into the rain, and the water falling from the canopy.

"If you wish to know if I believe in the gods, then yes. I do. But that does not mean I follow their doctrine," Vim then said, continuing our conversation from earlier.

"Oh... isn't that sacrilegious though?" I asked. Most of the rules I had heard, if they were rules at all, was that you believed in only them. Not another.

"To some, I suppose."

"Which is why you don't like them. Because you believe anyone should be allowed to believe whatever they want," I said, understanding.

"That's a good summary," he nodded.

Nearing the end of the road, I began to make out more and more of the docks. There weren't any ships docked anywhere near here... but off in the distance, a ways away...

"Those are bigger than the ones in Ruvindale," I whispered as I came to a stop.

Vim didn't complain as he too stopped walking, letting me take in the sights.

The docks followed the city, and even began to round a little. It seemed Nevi had a small inlet. I quickly lost track of the ships and sails in the distance, and was a little surprised to see that most of them weren't docked at all. Most floated inside the inlet port, or off in the distance on the horizon.

One, a larger boat with four rows of sails, looked to be raising and lowering with such movement that...

"Won't they sink?" I worried.

"The boats? Hardly. It could happen, and does, but I doubt it. This isn't that rough," Vim said as he examined the port with me.

Looked rough enough to me.

People walked by, and I studied the familiar skin-tone. They were as dark as Amber had been.

None of them seemed to care about the rain, and were hurrying elsewhere... as if set on some task.

"Merchants from the south," Vim said.

"What do they sell here?" I asked.

"Could be anything. Half the time they aren't even selling goods from their homelands but our own."

I frowned at that, but it made sense. If they sold stuff from home they'd have to go back and get it all the time.

Thinking of Amber made my heart hurt so I focused on attention elsewhere. On the dock nearby. "Can we go there?" I asked.

"No. You'll get soaked," Vim said as we watched a wave crash up into it. It didn't splash the whole dock, but it surely did get it wet.

"Hmm..." I wanted to complain, but new better than to.

He was right. I only wanted to stand there to feel the ocean spray.

"I used to run naked along the sea," I said.

That had been a long time ago. In fact it had been before I had spent any time with humans...

"Please don't..." he groaned.

Smiling at him, I nodded. Yes. That would cause problems here. Especially here.

"One of the humans I knew... a long time ago, in fact she was the first one I had actually got to know... was a witch," I said.

Vim glanced at me, in a way that told me he was now interested in our conversation.

I nodded, to enforce my seriousness of it. "She taught me a lot."

"A witch," he said.

"She was nice. Saved me. I had been..." I hesitated, and knew I couldn't go into too much detail. Rather I didn't want to. "Hurt. She helped me heal, and then taught me how to read," I added.

Vim gestured in front of us, and I nodded. Returning to walking, I studied the people in the distance. Although it was still raining, and it did seem to be picking up... there were still a lot of people on the dock. Working on the boats. On the dock themselves, or the warehouses near them.

"Most witches I knew hunted our kind," Vim said softly.

Glancing at him, I gulped.

Yes. That was why I had to be careful.

"Yes. I know," I said.

Vim nodded, but didn't seem to want to ask further. Or maybe he was simply being kind.

"I killed her," I whispered.

"You said she had been kind," Vim whispered back. Maybe he thought I was worried the humans around us would hear our conversation... but I knew they wouldn't. Not only were none close by, the ocean was loud and the rain was picking up.

"She had been," I admitted.

"Hm..." Vim reached out, and at first I thought he was going to take the umbrella from me... instead, he grabbed a part of the headdress, near the top.

My ears twitched as he tugged on it a little, bringing it back down... Seemed I had let it slip a little during our conversation. Most likely because of my ears.

"Thanks," I said.

Vim nodded and instead of pulling his hand back, he put it onto the small of my back.

I stood up a little straighter because of it, and wondered if he was doing so to remind me not to stand out too much.

"That would explain your personality a little. You like humans, yet don't. Are comfortable around them, yet don't seem to care much about them," he said.

While we walked, I tried to focus on the nearby waves crashing against the docks. They were neat and something I hadn't seen in years... but for some reason, my eyes wanted to wander to the man next to me instead.

Focus Renn!

"I'm tired of humans," I said softly.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Of burying them," I admitted.

Vim frowned but nodded. "That I understand."

"It's a stupid reason, isn't it?" I asked him.

"No. Not really. Least I don't think so," he said.

Squeezing the umbrella's handle, I felt silly.

It had only been a couple days since I had just opened my heart to him... yet here again I was doing it once more.

"Sorry," I said to him.

"For always making me feel bad? Sure, you're forgiven," he said.

"I make you feel bad?" I asked, worried. Is that why he had put his hand on my back?

"Well... no. Not really," he said.

"Hmph," I looked away from him as we neared a large hustling section of the dock.

Nearly three dozen people, not just burly men but women as well, were sorting fish. There was a huge table lined up, seemingly situated on top of barrels, and the group was split on both sides. One side was pouring fish onto the table, from buckets they were scooping from larger barrels nearby, and the people on other side were handling the fish one by one. The small ones they put into one barrel, while bigger ones were put elsewhere. Anything that wasn't a fish was being thrown to the end of the table, where a pair of younger boys stood waiting.

"Sorting?" I asked.

"Someone has to," Vim said.

While walking past, I studied the group. None of them even glanced at Vim and I, and all seemed to focus intently on their tasks. The roaring of the waves, and the rain, seemed to be ignored as much as we were.

"Are fish expensive?" I asked.

"Want fish for dinner?"

Glancing at him, I wondered why he wasn't smirking... that wasn't a joke, he was being serious.

"Not really... just wanted to know," I said.

"Some are. Depends on the season, I guess," Vim answered.

Walking closer to the boats, I slowly realized how big they actually were.

"Vim..." I slowly came to a stop as I stared up at one of the nearby ships.

"Hm?" he paused, more than patient with me.

I pointed at it, and while doing so accidentally moved the umbrella. Vim closed an eye and tilted his head as he was smacked in the face with the canopy.

"Sorry," I quickly fixed the umbrella's positioning, but Vim seemed to not even be fazed as he pointed to the boat.

"What's wrong? Recognize it?" he asked, focusing on what had bothered me originally.

"Recognize? No... I hadn't realized they could be built so big," I said, still worried over the umbrella.

Vim glanced at the boat, and the many near it, and shrugged. He seemed to have completely forgotten I had almost just stabbed him in the eye. "It is big, but there's a lot bigger. In theory a boat can be built as big as one wants... if you can find the material, and have the know-how," he said.

"As big as one wants?" I asked.

He nodded. "No matter how big, it'll float... as long as it is built properly," he said.

Vim let me stand still for a moment, to study the large boat. It had three sets of sails, and I tried to imagine where the trees the masts were made of had come from... they looked far too big to be real.

"The tree. At Lilly's place. Is it as big as that?" I asked.

"No. That tree is bigger," he said confidently.

Really...

That had been hard to verify, since that tree had been covered in not just a forest, but its huge branches and leaves were likewise blocking it from sight. And by the time I had left the forest, it was impossible to make it out from a distance.

After a moment, I turned to let Vim know I was done examining it.

He pushed a little on my back to lead me down a road, away from the docks and boats.

"That way is just warehouses," he said.

"Not going to check them?" I asked.

"I've seen enough," he said.

Glancing behind us, I wondered what he had been looking for. "Was it the number of boats? Or..."

Wait he had wondered if I had recognized that boat...

"Were you looking for boats you recognized?" I asked, wondering if that was why he had asked such a thing.

He glanced at me, and I knew I had gotten it right. "Kind of. I was checking the flags, the people here, and what was being loaded and unloaded," he explained.

"Oh... fish mostly, it seemed," I said.

"Mostly," he agreed.

"You saw something else?" I asked.

He nodded but didn't specify. "The port seems fine. And although it's hard to really tell, thanks to the storm... the city seems fine as well. Nothing odd is happening in the markets, nothing odd in the church and Rapti hasn't noticed anything too strange either. The mercenaries are odd, but not enough to worry about. They come and go."

I tried to process his words, and thought of all the things he's been looking at today.

The dock. The market yesterday... I had noticed we had kind of rounded the city, instead of cutting straight to Rapti's house. I hadn't said anything though since I had thought maybe he had wanted to check to see if we were being followed, like last time in Ruvindale.

"Is that why we went to the church this morning?" I asked.

"That and to spend time with Rapti," he said.

I nodded. That made a lot of sense.

"What?" he asked, noticing my nodding.

"You are... Crane had said you were very structured. I was just thinking you had done similar things in Ruvindale. Did you do it in Bordu before I had arrived too?" I asked. We hadn't gone through Bordu after leaving Twin Hills. We had circled it.

"I had," he admitted with a huff.

Oh? Did he not like the fact that I was calling him organized? Or rather someone who seemed to have a routine down and always followed that set procedure. "You seem to have... a pattern? You get somewhere, make sure our members are safe, and if they are you examine their home. The city," I explained.

"Hm," he made a noise but didn't nod or seem to agree.

"You realize that you do, right?" I asked, worried a little.

"I do. Yes. I know. I don't half-ass it though you know?" he said, defending himself.

"Didn't say you were..."

He blinked and I wondered if he was... he was! He was embarrassed.

"What?" he asked and I knew it was because I had a smile on my face.

"You're embarrassed," I said.

He looked away, and I saw his jaw clench.

"Why does it embarrass you?" I asked as we passed a deep puddle.

Vim shrugged, and pointed down a new road. This one was smaller, but not small enough to be an alleyway.

"Rather than embarrass... it makes me wonder what to do with you," he said.

"Do with me? I didn't mean anything bad by it..." I said, worrying that maybe I had said something unintended.

"I don't mean that... I mean..." He went quiet as he thought of how to phrase it to me, "I don't usually let people watch or know what I do. I don't like it."

Watch what he does.

Pondering that, I remembered the face he had made last night. In the living room, last night after meeting Rapti.

Rapti had mentioned someone. An Oplar. Someone who had visited her before us.

Vim had looked uncomfortable as she mentioned that... and at first I had thought it was simply because of who they were talking about. This Oplar. Maybe she was someone he didn't care for.

Instead though...

"You don't like people knowing stuff about you?" I asked, quickly understanding what had actually bothered him last night. And what was also bothering him now.

In fact now that I thought of it, there were many instances of such an expression on his face.

He sighed, and his hand left my back.

Slightly worried, I hesitated as he reached out and grabbed the umbrella from me. Although I allowed him to take it, I regretted it... and not just because I had enjoyed holding it.

He lifted the umbrella a little, and suddenly we were...

Well, not any farther apart. We still walked shoulder-to-shoulder. Still bumped into one another occasionally, thanks to me, but...

But now we were farther apart. If at least in his mind.

Gulping a dry mouth, I watched Vim's face as he studied the city we walked amongst. "Everyone has a right to know everything about me," Vim then said.

His tone told me he had been serious... but that face...

He spoke the truth... yet didn't like it. At all.

"Hm..." I decided to let it be. For now. At least.

After all that expression on his face told me enough.

And although I wanted to learn about him, and his life... as to try to help him.... as to try and join him on this path...

It would only be going against everything I wanted to disturb him so.

What was the point in making him hurt?

I wanted to help him. I wanted to help them all.

"Think Rapti is back yet?" I asked softly, hoping to change the conversation. I didn't want him to go quiet the rest of the night just because I had asked something I shouldn't of.

"No. The church bell hasn't rung yet," he said calmly.

Glancing at him, I was glad to see he looked normal now. Maybe he had somewhat forgiven me, or at least overlooked my trespassing of his emotions.

Walking quietly for a moment, I reached up to make sure my headdress hadn't moved. It hadn't, but it gave me something to focus on.

"Just watch me, Renn. Give it time," Vim said as the rain began to fall even harder.

I nodded.

Time.

I had time.

We had plenty of that.

Hopefully, at least.