

# **The Non-Human Society**

## **#Chapter 61 - Sixty – Vim – To Pluck a Feather - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 61 - Sixty – Vim – To Pluck a Feather**

*Chapter 61: Chapter Sixty – Vim – To Pluck a Feather*

The Non-Human Society had many members.

Not just those like Rapti and Renn, but also actual humans. And even a few animals, who were more than what they appeared to be.

Thanks to how vibrantly diverse our members were... I wasn't allowed allegiances.

I couldn't follow a singular faith. Even if I wanted to.

I couldn't enforce a certain land's laws and rules over another.

Members in our north did not have the same laws as those in the south, and those in the east were even more different. Members like Rapti had their own code of ethics, and then those like Lilly had another.

Yet I protected them all. I'd defend them all.

Even from each other.

Yet... right now I felt as if it was I who needed to be protected.

Sitting in front of the two women, I studied the little game board they were focused on. The little pieces, each hand carved to represent a knightly order, were freshly painted. I recognized Oplar's handy work, and couldn't help but praise it.

She was good when she wanted to be.

"Neither of you will win at this rate," I complained.

Renn and Rapti ignored me as they both stared at the board, and the pieces littered upon it. Renn was actually losing, but Rapti... being the kind soul she were, was more interested in teaching Renn how to play than to actually finish the game.

"What's this one called again?" Renn asked as she touched the top of a piece. It had a small horn.

"A horse," I told her.

"Why would a horse move sideways?" she asked as she went to move it. She at least remembered its move-set.

"It's cavalry, more specifically," Rapti corrected me.

"A horse," I said again as I watched Renn move it to take a villager from Rapti's side.

It was a good move, but it would open up her own defenses in a few moves because of it. Which, in a normal game, would result in her loss... But Rapti, even though I knew she had seen it clearly, chose to instead of moving her cleric where she should, instead moved her wall forward into danger.

"Rapti..." I groaned and wished she'd just end it.

"Oh hush, I'm having fun," Rapti chastised me without looking at me.

Sitting back, I scratched the back of my head as I watched Renn go into deep thought while staring at the new board.

The worst part wasn't that Rapti was being so gentle with her...

"Should I not have done that?" Renn asked.

"No. A villager is valuable, but you could have put my own cleric into a pincer here," Rapti pointed out her error happily.

I sighed as Renn nodded, learning intently.

Yes. That was the worst part.

Renn knew she was being treated gently, and seemed to actually find it all the more fun because of it.

"He's a baby," Renn said as she went to move another piece.

"He values free will, so this is torture for him," Rapti said with a chuckle.

"If this was her first game, I'd not argue with you Rapti. But this is the twelfth," I said.

They had been playing all day. Since the sunrise, and it was now dark. Late. Stormy.

"I'm a slow learner," Renn argued as she watched Rapti take a villager from her.

"You're doing rather well actually. I look forward to playing you again in a few years," Rapti said.

"Oh that would be wonderful!" Renn happily agreed to the promise, and I groaned.

Surely they both didn't think I'd be bringing her back with me?

Watching Renn make another mistake, I decided to stop paying attention.

It wasn't her mistakes that bothered me, but Rapti's strange smile that she made when she watched them happen. That smile was far too kind. Far too gentle.

It had no place in this world.

I understood teaching. I did not understand such a gentle touch.

One did not learn until they failed, after all.

Standing from my seat, I decided to tend the fire. It was time for another log anyway.

"He ran away," Renn teased.

"Surprised it took this long, to be honest," Rapti added.

"I've been in actual full-scale wars that were quicker," I said as I picked up a small log.

I knew the two women had stopped their game for a moment to stare at me, and not just because I felt their stares behind me. Both had paused as they had been moving pieces.

Putting the fresh log on the fire, I watched it for a moment as it slowly caught aflame.

The storm had renewed again. Not only was it now pouring, but it was windy. Even in this well built solid house, I could hear the wind sneaking in here and there in-between cracks and beams.

In a few more trips I would probably have to help rebuild this house for Rapti, or get her a new one.

Sometimes that was the best thing I could do for someone. Since it meant the world was peaceful for them.

Moving into a new home, in the same city or location... was the best outcome. The best kind of request for me.

That and introducing myself to new members. Rather... newborn members.

"Aww..." Renn groaned as I heard Rapti put a piece down, solidly.

"Dethroned. I win," Rapti said calmly. Seemed not even she could have elongated that game any further.

"I lasted longer this time, but I could have lost a long time ago huh?" Renn asked.

"You made a few bad mistakes, but you're definitely improving," Rapti complimented her in stride.

"Defeat is defeat. Doesn't matter how long it takes to get there, the end result is the same," I said.

"He'd be a boring teacher," Renn said.

"Actually he's a rather good one. It's upsetting to admit, but..." Rapti shrugged as I wiped my hands and stood away from the fireplace.

Although I felt as if I should be offended, it was Renn's look of agreement that kept me from voicing any complaints.

"He can teach when he wants to. The problem is getting him to actually do it," Renn said.

I nodded; glad to actually get a compliment for once.

"Look at his smile," Rapti said.

"It'll disappear once I ask for another game," Renn said.

She was right.

"We'll leave tomorrow Rapti. With the sunrise," I said, before they could get too distracted again. I sat back down on the small couch, close enough that I could go back to watching them play their little game. Even if frustrating, it at least passed the time.

"I figured. You never stay long, Vim. Though usually I don't mind... this time it is a little upsetting," Rapti said with a sigh.

I nodded as Renn smiled at her, obviously understanding what Rapti meant.

"Yes. I know. I'm boring," I said.

"He is," Renn agreed.

"In his case that's actually a positive thing. I couldn't imagine our protector being awkward or unruly," Rapti said.

"Based off animals that would probably be the standard, huh? Males are usually rude to their packs and stuff," Renn said.

"What do you expect? All of you are so annoying... it's a miracle I'm not old and weathered thanks to the stress," I complained.

"Hmph. Old and weathered. Quite a statement from someone who was probably born fully grown," Rapti said.

"Fully grown?" Renn asked with a glance at me.

"She's just complaining because she ages if she's not careful. Don't mind her," I said.

Renn quickly looked to Rapti who nodded as she studied the board before her. As if it had somehow changed in the last few minutes, even though it hadn't.

"It's true Renn. I'll age if my feathers grow too long, it's annoying but not that big of a deal," Rapti said as she finally started gathering up her pieces.

"Finally," I commented.

"You age if your feathers grow? How does that work?" Renn asked, as she and Rapti decided to completely ignore me. Renn joined Rapti in beginning to put the pieces back in place, as to start another game.

"I age quickly if I don't pluck the feathers," Rapti said simply.

"Huh?" Renn hesitated, holding a piece right above a spot. She even glanced at me in disbelief.

"She's telling you the truth. If she lets her feathers grow she'll begin to age. She does let it happen every so often so she can confuse the humans," I told her.

Renn looked back at Rapti who had a strange smile on her face as she nodded to Renn. "Really," she confirmed it.

Rapti reached up and began to take off her headdress. For some reason I found myself looking away as she did. It was so rare to see her without it that it felt wrong.

As I kept an eye on the fire, even though it was more than fine, I listened as Rapti showed Renn the back of her head.

"See where the hair is thickest? Feathers grow from there. Big ones too, that will hang all the way down to the ground," Rapti explained.

"Huh... why would they age you though? And does that mean if you pluck them you get young again? You don't look old at all," Renn said. I could hear her fingers as she brushed Rapti's hair.

"Yep. Once plucked I'll, over the course of a few days, return to this age," Rapti explained.

"That's..."

I looked back at them, and was proud of myself for doing so. Rapti sat there, smiling with her short but messy hair.

She looked happy.

"How long does it take to grow them?" Renn asked her.

"Just under a year. I have to pluck them every moon turn," Rapti explained.

Renn nodded, as if that made perfect sense to her.

"I've never thought of such traits doing such things... My nails get pointy and long if I leave them alone too much, but my fur doesn't shed. I've always wondered why, since cats shed often," Renn said as she looked at her tail.

"You're a forest cat. And who knows, if you tore your tail off you might start growing old too," I said.

Rapti nodded quickly. "Indeed, it's why you need to always protect it just in case," she said.

"Many of our members remove their parts and are fine afterward, don't worry about it," I said.

"That's because he has none. So he can't comprehend the loss of something like it," Rapti argued.

"I could too... maybe," I said. Could I even lose an arm? It'd just grow back... maybe if I tore it off again and again?

"We could chop off something else I suppose," Renn hinted.

Rapti quickly went red in the face and shook her head. "Renn!"

With an embarrassed flutter Rapti quickly went back to wrapping her head in her cloth. As she did, Renn as well grew red in the face... as if Rapti's embarrassment was overflowing to her.

The fire crackled as I watched the two women snicker and giggle at each other, enjoying the moment.

"One last game then I'll head to bed," Rapti then said as she went back to preparing her pieces.

Renn happily nodded.

Although I had expected this game to likewise take forever...

Rapti went ahead and won in eight moves.

A proper farewell.

*Chapter 62: Chapter Sixty One – Renn – To Hear and Help*

It was a cart.

"Is it broken?" I asked Vim.

"Looks like the wheel broke off," he said.

It did indeed. The thing was lopsided, and stuck in the center of the road. It looked like there were a few people standing around it... but one was a little ways away from it too. Doing something... digging a hole maybe... was that a shovel?

Glancing behind us, I tried to calculate how long it'd take the wagon behind us to pass us. Not long now, base off the sound of the voices in the distance. There were two men sitting on the wagon's front, and by the sounds of their conversation... they pitied the people in front of them.

The cart for breaking. And Vim and I for walking.

"Do carts break often?" I asked as I returned to looking ahead of us.

"They break occasionally. Most can go years without issues, but at the same time most don't properly take care of them. I can't make the cart's contents out just yet but they look like furs. I bet they overloaded the cart, and the axle couldn't take the weight," Vim said.

Furs...

Trying to squint, I realized he really could see far better than I could. I could see the black... maybe brown, of the cart itself... but it was blurry still. I could see how Vim would think they were furs though, based off the colours and way it looked situated in the cart.

"Think the wagon behind us will stop to help?" I asked.

"Did any others?" Vim asked back.

I felt my ears droop a little underneath my hat.

No. They hadn't.

The midday sun was a little warm, but it was also humid. Rapti had offered to help me put on the headdress she had given me, but both she and Vim mentioned that since the storm had passed it might be a little too sticky to comfortably wear.

And they had been right. I was glad for it now.

I was walking on the outer ridge of the road. It wasn't the widest road... but it was still big enough for the carts and wagons. The few others that had passed us recently had been able to squeeze by the broken cart, although some had looked like they struggled to do so.

Some of the wagons were huge after all.

"What if one of those road-wide ones come?" I asked, thinking of them. Those were similar to what we had ridden to Nevi. Those apple wagons had been huge.

"They'll break it down and move that cart off the road," Vim said.

"Oh... what will they do with the stuff? The furs?" I asked.

"Carry what they can. If they're smart they'll ask the carts passing by to buy them. They'll take a huge loss, but at least not a complete one," Vim said.

I frowned as I tried to imagine it. How much money could one... no, I kind of knew.

"That could devastate them, huh?"

Vim nodded. "Yes. Even the wealthy could suffer from it, and then of course so will their credit and reputation," he said.

"Reputation?" I asked. Credit I understood, since that meant they'd not be able to get loans or help.



"Most merchants, especially those who operate on their own, belong to guilds. Or companies. Those enable them with credit, and help, but accidents like this... well, they'll be blamed for not properly taking care of their tools. Their carts and wagons, basically," Vim explained.

"Oh. So even though they could be forgiven, or could pay off debts and survive the losses... they'd not survive their fellows judging them as being unwise," I said.

"Basically. They'll be seen as fools incapable of the basics of business. A death sentence for a common merchant," he said.

Seemed sad.

"Right-o!"

I turned my head to watch the wagon pass us. The two men on the front seat nodded and smiled as they passed, acting kind... even though they had been rudely commenting about us on their approach.

After they rolled away enough, Vim glanced at me. "Why'd you glare at them so much?" he asked.

"They're rude," I said simply.

"For having a wagon?" he asked, amused.

"For their comments," I said.

Vim frowned but nodded, understanding.

"Did you really not notice?" I asked which was impossible. He had better hearing than me... or at least, I thought he did.

"Well, honestly... I forgot you could hear them. Your ears are actually pretty strong..." he said with a small smile.

Proud of the compliment, my ears twitched in joy as I nodded. "They are pretty good, aren't they?"

He nodded. "Indeed they are. So was it their comment about your ass?" he asked as he glanced at what he spoke about.

It was his turn to get glared at. "Rather what they had said about you," I said stiffly.

He blinked, and quickly looked away... no longer teasing me. "I see," was all he said.

Smiling at his odd frown, I nodded. "I'd rather walk to be honest. I fear I'd grow fat and lazy riding carts all the time," I said.

Vim scoffed but said nothing.

Did he just not notice or care for insults directed at him, or had those ones simply been ineffective since they had been about me through him?

He didn't care to be offended, since most of their taunts had been about his inability to provide for me.

Maybe he didn't care enough for me to be bothered by such things.

"Oh?" I noticed commotion ahead, and covered my eyes to block the bright sun for a moment.

The wagon that had passed us was now passing the broken one... and...

"Are they arguing?" I asked. It looked like a man was shouting at the wagon, and the two men upon it.

"Probably asking for help, and being ignored," Vim said.

"Can you hear them?" I asked. I couldn't hear shouting at all yet. Though it was a little windy, which might be why?

"No."

"Will you tell me once you can? I'd like to find out how much better you are than I am at it," I said.

"Tell you?" he asked.

"When you hear them. I want to see how long it takes before I do," I pointed at them to make a point.

"Hmm..." he hummed, and I wondered if he was debating against it.

"Please? Surely that's not some secret so valuable that I can't know it?" I asked.

"Secret...? Not really... it's just..." he scratched the side of his neck, and I wondered if he actually felt itchy when he did such a thing. He seemed to perform that movement often when he was unsure of something, or wanted to change the topic.

We walked in silence for a moment and I tried to strain my ears. "Can I lift my hat for a moment? Just a tad?" I asked him.

"You can take it off. I'll let you know when you need to put it back on," Vim said.

Taking it off, I smiled in thanks at him and pointed my ears towards the people and cart.

The wagon was past it now, but not by much. And...

"Can you hear them?" he asked, watching me.

I shook my head. "I sometimes think I can hear a voice, but it might just be the wind," I said.

"Hm."

As we drew closer, I kept trying to make out their sounds. At first I heard nothing... then I heard, possibly, the sound of something metal being struck. "Is that a hammer?" I asked.

"It is. Good job. Rather surprised actually," Vim said.

Glancing at him, I found an odd smile on his face. "What... wait... you can hear them now, can't you?" I asked.

"Somewhat. I hear the child mostly. Her voice is higher pitched. The man is... I can hear him, but have no idea what he's saying. I can't hear the woman," he said.

I blinked as I tried to focus on the people.

Yes. That was what they were.

"A family..." I whispered.

Vim nodded. "A little odd. Merchants do often travel with their spouses, but it's rare for them to bring such little children along. It's dangerous, after all," he said.

"Sure they're merchants?"

"Those are undoubtedly furs. Either bears or moose ones to boot. Spendy stuff," he said.

For some reason I didn't like the way he had said that. Was he snidely mocking them?

Glancing behind us, I found the road behind us empty. No more carts or wagons were off in the distance. In fact, there even seemed to be sheep or something. Some kind of animal herd was crossing the road far behind us, slowly. Which meant no one was nearby.

"But mother!" a small voice filtered through the wind, and I smiled softly at the sound of the child.

A young girl.

I could see them. They were sitting a little farther from the broken car, on what looked to be boxes. Were they cooking something? I couldn't see the fire, nor the smoke, but... I did smell something on the wind.

"I hear them now," I told Vim. I couldn't hear everything, but enough.

"Oh? That's not bad at all. We're still a little under a league away," he said.

"Yet you heard them way back there," I complained. It had been several minutes' worth of difference.

"I'm not normal. For reference I can think of only a few people with hearing as well as you... maybe three off the top of my head. Congratulations," he said.

"Three?" I asked. Really? So few? Out of all of our kind?

Vim nodded. "Just three. And you might even be better than they, honestly... I've not made it much of a habit to actually test and give our members physicals or anything," he said lightly.

Physicals? What an odd statement.

Putting my hat back on my head, since what I had wanted to do was done... I sighed a little as suddenly it was now hard to hear them. The small family was now more muffled than not, making it hard to make out their conversation.

But honestly it was a good thing. They all sounded very...

"They're sad," I said softly.

"They should be. Their whole life might have just gotten uprooted," he said.

"You sound far too calm about it," I said.

"What? Should I weep alongside them?" he asked me.

"Well... no... But don't be mean about it, at least."

Vim sighed but nodded... and in fact had a small smile after he did so. Had he liked what I had said?

As we approached ever closer, the woman noticed us. She alerted the man, and the young girl even pointed at us.

"Hmm..." Vim huffed, and I smiled at him. I hadn't really heard what they had said, but it was easy to assume what he had heard.

"Think... Do you think we can help them?" I asked him.

"Help?" he asked.

My feet came to a stop.

Vim stopped too, and I flinched at the look in his eyes.

Uh-oh.

It's been awhile since I had seen that look.

"Well... I... I was just asking," I said softly.

Vim's eyes narrowed as he glared at me, and my tail went stiff. It was a good thing we were still a distance away from them, since they might have noticed it beneath my pants.

Looking away from Vim, I focused on the cart. It was big, even though it only had two wheels.

There were probably dozens if not more full pelts on it. Each one bigger than us.

I could carry quite a bit of weight. I had done so many times before... and if one took into account Vim's strength...

"Helping them would make us seem strange, wouldn't it," I said gently as I realized why we couldn't.

We could carry all those pelts and furs. But by doing so, they'd question us. Since no human should be able to lift them, let alone with ease.

"Indeed," he said simply.

I sighed and nodded.

We returned to walking, and I felt worse with each step I took.

I was going to have to walk past them, and not only ignore their looks of pain and worry but...

This was going to be hard for me... but I understood it.

It wasn't as if they were going to die because they couldn't get those pelts wherever they were headed. Nevi, likely, based on the fact it was pointed this way.

So not helping wasn't going to result in their death. Which meant...

Studying the three, I wondered how long they had been stuck here. The man didn't have a shirt on, and he was glistening in the sun. Sweat and mud was all over him and...

I see. He was digging for some reason, near the cart. I wasn't sure why, but...

As we approached, I felt horrible. One of the cart's wheels was laid up against the cart, but it wasn't connected. Vim had been correct, it had broken off.

Did that mean there was no way to fix it? I had no idea how they were even made in the first place, let alone how to fix one...

Of course, if it was something easily fixed... they would have done so already.

There were a few boxes sitting in a small circle near the cart. It was where the woman and child sat.

They had a fire, but it was only small embers. They had probably cooked long ago.

They've been stuck here for most the day it seemed.

Glancing at Vim, and his calm look on his face, I knew better than to ask him again if we could help them.

It was obvious that Vim had already made his decision, and it was probably the correct one.

After all if the cart was broken, there was nothing we could do. At least not without endangering the Society.

And Vim would never allow that.

Vim then paused again, even though we were close enough that they had obviously found it odd for him to do so.

"No matter what happens, don't help. Promise me," Vim said to me.

"I promise," I said... even though it hurt to do so.

"Just distract the kid and wife for me, that should be enough," he then said.

"Huh?"

Vim returned to walking, and ignored me as he headed for the cart.

Hurrying to follow him, I gulped a worried question as we drew near.

The young girl looked at her mother expectantly; as both the woman and man stood to greet us... both had expressions of desperation, yet hope.

It seemed I had misunderstood Vim's earlier comments about helping entirely.

*Chapter 63: Chapter Sixty Two – Vim – To Fix a Wheel*

"Just a little more!" Karl strained as he tried to position the wheel back into place.

"You can do it father!" the young daughter cheered her support as I lowered the cart just a small amount in hopes of it being enough.

It wasn't.

He simply wasn't strong enough to lift the wheel high enough and onto the metal axle. It didn't help that the wheel hub itself wasn't the best of work, but...

Karl strained, grunting and panting as he tried to heft the wheel a little higher. The metal hub on the wheel made noises as it banged against the metal of the axle point, yet it didn't slide on.

After a few more moments of strain Karl lowered the wheel back to the ground with a great huff of exhaustion.

When he did I also lowered the cart back onto the stack of boxes beneath it.

Although I made a show to also seem as if the task had been difficult, I still held onto the cart with one hand. To keep as much weight off the wooden boxes as possible.

This cart probably weighed a ton or more. It was a miracle that those boxes could support even a fraction of the weight.

"Just... just a moment. I need to catch my breath," Karl said as he sagged against the wheel which now rested up against the cart.

I nodded, but didn't say anything.

It wasn't his fault of course. The man wasn't that old, and had obviously done physical labor before. Yet before our arrival, he had been trying to dig out a stump from the field nearby to use as a prop to jack the cart up high enough.

Many hours of digging out a stump tired a man as it were. Let alone the many hours trying to fix the wheel itself.

Yet...

Glancing at the nearby women, I did my best to ignore the accusational glare of my companion. It was far more piercing since it was blended with the two looks of worry and hope from the daughter and wife next to her.

I didn't need to ask why she was glaring at me like that.

After all, I knew she'd be able to lift the wheel with ease. She didn't need to tell me that.

Though, odds were that glare wasn't just because she was upset I wouldn't let her help.

She knew I could put the wheel back on myself, without help from anyone.

I nodded, more so at myself than her.

Fine. Next time.

"How's it so blasted heavy? I was moving it fine earlier," Karl complained to himself.

"Just take a rest for a moment. It's not going anywhere," I said.

"Won't ever if I can't do this," Karl said back.

The man sounded crass, but I knew he meant no ill-will.

He had cried upon my offer to help. Nearly fell to his knees in relief because of it.

They had been here since last night, and not only had other merchants and such passed by without helping... so had a small group of knights.

I didn't recognize the name of the small band of knights the family had spoken of, but supposedly they were well known around this area. So it had been quite a shock to them that they'd not help.

I'd remember the Knights of Bleak Glory, at least for awhile.

Karl glanced back at his family, and I watched him study the two. They had retreated a little away, back to the small makeshift campsite. Karl's wife, Mary, had asked her daughter and Renn to help her boil some water. Most likely for tea.

"This is my fault Vim. I begged her to come with me this time. I should have let her stay," Karl whispered.



"So she would worry and panic even more? Trust me, this is the better outcome. We'll fix this and all will be well," I said to him.

Karl glanced at me, and I felt a little silly to be looked at with such a gaze from a sweaty man. Seemed I had just earned a life-long friend.

Kealla, their daughter, broke into a giggle at something Renn had said. Something about my shirt.

Glancing down, I realized my shirt had coiled upward, revealing my stomach. I let it be and ignored it as Karl wiped his face, and seized up the wheel before him.

Yes, I didn't want to remove my shirt and jacket. It'd not look good to be without a drop of sweat or grime, while he was covered in the gunk.

I took a small breath and contained the sigh that wanted to escape.

My plan had been to try and help him until another group of travellers came by. Then request their help and aid, so that we could have four or five men trying to lift this and not two.

Four or five accomplishing a herculean task was believable... but two? Especially when one of them was so blasted tired already...

But no one had arrived. Nor was there anyone in the distance, either direction.

Which meant it was time to risk it.

"Focus on the bottom," I said, pointing to the bottom spokes.

"Bottom?" he asked.

"Lift it from there. I'll guide it. I can't help you lift it, but I can guide it," I said, grabbing the wheel by one of the center spokes.

"Are you sure?" Karl asked, worried.

I nodded. "If we don't we won't get this back on, I'll get too tired. You too. So let's do it," I said, trying to give him a little confidence.

Karl held my gaze, and then nodded.

While he bent down, I glanced to the women. They weren't looking over here, and were stuck in conversation.

Good. Finally.

"Ready?" Karl asked.

"Ready," I said, and lifted the cart up off the boxes with a single hand.

I didn't try to feign a struggle as I had been doing, and instead reached out with my other hand and helped him lift the wheel.

Unlike the cart, I did keep a check in how quickly and easily I lifted the wheel. Since Karl had basically wrapped his whole being around it in an effort to lift it, he'd notice if I took all the weight myself.

Karl grunted, and I aligned the wheel's hub with the cart's axle. Half a moment later, it slid on in.

"It's in!" Karl shouted with relief, and quickly went to pull all the boxes out.

I returned my other hand to the cart, to renew the illusion of effort, and held it just high enough off the ground for Karl to pull back all the boxes we had stacked beneath it.

Once the boxes were tossed aside, Karl grabbed the wooden hammer and went to hitting the wheel just above the hub, to force it together with the axle as much as possible.

I kept an eye on the way he hammered, and where he did, and flinched when he missed. Luckily he stopped the hammer in time before breaking anything, but he glanced at me with worry.

"Let me," I said as I lowered the cart.

The wheel was connected enough that I could lower it, but the axle wasn't all the way through yet. Karl gave me the hammer and I gave it a few light taps.

"They did it!" Little Kealla shouted behind us as I finished reconnecting the wheel.

"We did!" Karl happily joined his daughter in a joyful bounce of a dance. He grabbed her hands and begun to spin around with her, causing her to laugh.

"Get the horse connected. See if it rolls fine," I said, doing my best to stop them from growing too excited.

Not because I felt it wouldn't work, but simply because I didn't want to get caught up in it.

"Oh! Yes!" Karl nodded and hurried away, to grab their horse that had been allowed to graze nearby.

"Thank you so much!" Mary was shaking Renn's hands, and I ignored Renn's pleading look for help.

Bending down to inspect the wheel a little better, I realized it was actually salvageable. The hub was a little... worn. Not enough to have actually caused the original failure in the first place though. What was wrong was the hub, even originally, was that it had been the wrong size.

Either Karl had bought this from a newer, younger, blacksmith or the wheel itself was a replacement and he had simply purchased whatever had been available.

This wheel wasn't the right size for this axle.

But that could be fixed.

Reaching into the hub, I firmly gripped the iron axle with my fingertips... and tugged it.

It quickly and easily slid all the way through the hub, and the wheel locked into place. Hefting the hammer, I then tapped the axle piece along the ridges, forcing the axle to conform and bend a little. Causing the axle itself to act as its own locking mechanism as to keep the wheel from sliding off again.

Once done the finished product looked a lot better. The wheel was a little wobbly, more than I'd like, but the odds of it falling off now were pretty nonexistent.

It'd probably creak loudly as it rolled around, but annoying noises was better than failure.

Before I stood back up and away from the wheel, I hesitated for a moment.

Looking to my right, I stared at the wide eyes of the daughter.

"You're strong," she said in awe.

"So is your father," I said simply as I stood up and away from the wheel.

She kept her eyes on me as I looked around. Karl was securing the horse to the front of the cart. Mary was still holding Renn's hands in thanks.

"Here," I handed Kealla the hammer, which she happily took for some reason. Maybe her father normally never let her touch such stuff.

Walking around the cart, to the other wheel, I inspected its hub and axle.

Sure enough it too was a little... wrong. The axle was fine, but the hub was just a tad bit too big for it.

I pushed onto the wheel, and the axle easily slid all the way through.

"Here!"

Right before using my own hand to replicate what I had done to the other wheel, I glanced to my left and found the hammer being offered.

"Thank you," I said to the young girl as I took the hammer from her.

She nodded and then watched as I preemptively fixed this wheel too.

"Are you a blacksmith?" she asked after my last hammer strike.

"Used to be," I said.

"Why'd you stop?" she asked, full of childish innocence.

"I found I wasn't very good at fixing stuff," I said as I checked the wheel. I gripped it by the felloes and spun it a little. It skidded along the packed dirt, spinning fine.

"Seem good to me," Kealla said with a shrug.

"Alright I'm movin'er!" Karl shouted a warning, and I guided Kealla back a few steps as he ushered the horse forward.

The cart skidded a moment in place, thanks to all the grooves we had made messing with it, and then a moment later rolled forward. Karl had the horse pull it for a few moments, to make sure it wouldn't get stuck again.

He hooped a happy holler as the cart moved, and Kealla clapped next to me.

"Wonderful!" Mary shouted, and hurried forward towards the cart as Karl brought it to a stop.

I ignored the married couple as Karl hopped off the cart and they wrapped each other in a happy hug.

Kealla giggled as she broke into a run to join her parents in their celebration.

While the family happily enjoyed their good fortune, I sighed and went to fixing my clothes. My shirt had gotten rolled up under my jacket, thanks to being up against the cart for so long.

"Is it fine now?"

Glancing at Renn, I nodded. "Should be. It'll get them home, or to Nevi at least," I said.

"Hm..." she nodded too as she watched the family hug and kiss one another.

"Get ready to go," I told Renn.

"Huh... oh... yes," she said with a nod, and hurried to go get her bag. She had left it at the small campsite.

Walking over to the family, Karl noticed me and separated himself.

I didn't want his hug, but accepted it all the same as he wrapped me in a great embrace. "Thank you so much Vim!" he shouted.

"It's all good Karl. I'm glad we were able to get it to work," I said as he squeezed me.

He shook as I patted him on the back.

Being shirtless still, and although no longer straining... he was still covered in a layer of sweat and grime.

I ignored it as he finally let me go, and took my hand to shake it. "Really. Bless you. Thank you," he said again.

Ignoring his tears, I pointed to the cart. "Get it fixed in Nevi. Or sell it. The wheels are the right size, but the hubs aren't. Just get new wheels, or a new axle. Whichever is cheaper," I told him.

"I'll do so! My guild has a craftsman in Nevi who deals with wagons, I'll use them," he said.

"Good," I nodded, glad to hear it.

He squeezed my hand one last time, and bowed his head. I let him make a small prayer of thanks, and smiled as he nodded one last time. "Blessed be," he whispered as he finished his prayer.

"Thank you Karl," I said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Thank you Vim, really!" Mary approached too, to shake my hand.

Shaking her hand, I then shook the little hands of Kealla.

"Thank you!" she happily shouted, a little too loudly.

"Please take a pelt, Vim," Karl went to the cart, sounding excited.

"Oh no Karl, we have a long venture ahead of us. I appreciate the offer though," I said quickly. I had expected this already, so knew how I was going to get out of it.

"Huh? No, really... I have a fine moose pelt that isn't that big, so it would be easy to carry and," Karl tried to point to it, the thing was only a few down from the top.

I raised my hand to slow him down. "It means a lot you'd offer such a valuable thing, Karl... but we really can't accept. I'll be honest I'd not be able to pay the tax of taking it into the town we're headed to," I said.

Karl's face immediately went a little red, realizing he had just embarrassed me.

And embarrassing your savior was a horrible thing to do.

"Then... then uhm..." Karl quickly tried to think, but I knew there was nothing else he could offer me.

After all a merchant didn't travel with much coin. Not during ventures like what he was doing. He had probably only a few coins left at all, which he'd desperately need upon reaching Nevi. They had travelled a long distance with those pelts, after all.

"It's all fine Karl, really," I said with a smile.

"No, it's not! What... what about..." Karl hesitated, looking to his wife.

I flinched at the look shared between them.

They were going to offer the few coins they had.

"I got flowers!" Little Kealla then hopped around her parents and darted for the cart.

"Oh..." Mary made an odd sound as she watched her daughter jump up to the front of the cart, clambering up as to get something.

"Vim I," Karl started to say something, most likely to offer his last few coins, but I raised my hand to silence him.

"It is all well, Karl. The Gods blessed us for our efforts, and that is more than enough of thanks for me. Please, let it be," I said sternly.

The man's face contorted a little, but he knew better than to argue what I had just said.

After all if he did, then he'd be vocally saying he didn't believe his gods were justified in their actions.

"Here!" Kealla hopped off the cart, a little ungracefully, and then hurried over to me and Renn. She had a bundle of different colored flowers, some pretty and some not.

No flower fields were nearby so she must have plucked them elsewhere along their journey.

"Oh! They're lovely!" Renn was the one who happily accepted them from the girl, which caused Kealla to beam a massive smile.

"Thank you!" Kealla thanked us as Renn accepted the flowers, she went to smelling them... and somehow seemed genuine in her happy pleasure.

Kealla's mother approached to pat the girl on the back, and gave Renn and me a gentle smile.

Renn knelt down to offer Kealla a single flower. A purple one that matched her eyes.

While the women went to talking to one another, I stepped aside to give Karl one last handshake.

"I'll repay this, Vim, I swear it on my name. When you return to Nevi please come to the Fellish Guild in the north of town, it's a large red building," Karl said quickly.

I nodded. "Next time. Take care of your family, Karl, and hold your head high," I said to him.

He sniffed and nodded, blinking happy tears.

"Goodbye!" Kealla and her mother waved at me as I nodded and waved to them. With a look to Renn, she nodded and we turned to go.

Leaving the family behind, who continued to wave at Renn for a small distance, I sighed at the sight of the nearly setting sun.

That had taken far longer than it should have.

Renn turned around finally, to walk next to me. She held the bundle of flowers the little girl had given her closely, as if they were precious. "That was kind of you," she said.

"It didn't take too long, and was an easy task," I said.

Her eye's told me she knew better than to believe me, but also knew better than to say differently.

"Still... doesn't change how kind it was. I'm glad you were able to fix it; Mary had been in quite a panic. Their house had been leveraged for those pelts," Renn said.

"Their house?" I asked. Really?

She nodded. "Half of it, I guess," she said.

Ah. Their equity. Probably meant he had needed more credit than his name alone allowed, and his guild asked for equal half of his home in exchange for it.

Which meant those pelts had actually been a little expensive...

While we walked I shifted a little to glance back at the family. They were packing up their cart and campsite as to return to the road.

"Kealla liked you," Renn then said.

"Children like everyone," I said.

"Little girls don't," she argued.

"What of it?" I asked her, wondering why she had even said such a thing in the first place.

She lifted the flowers to show me. "She wanted to give these to you, not me," she said.

I frowned and wondered if she had been right. I honestly hadn't paid much attention to most of the conversations that Renn had with them. Most of it had been upsetting. Not really depressing, Mary had just sounded sad. The kind of sad that made me feel guilty, as if it was my fault.

"I'm just saying I've noticed children like you. Kealla, Pelka, Lomi," she gave examples.

"Lomi hated me." She hadn't even said goodbye.

"She loved you," Renn whispered.

I said nothing, especially since Renn had sounded so hurt by my comment.

"I'm old. I may not look it, but children can sense it. Even human children. Sometimes the young are... astute," I said carefully.

"How old is old?" she asked.

"I was born before the age of humans," I said.

The sudden silence that followed made me realize what I had just said aloud.

Did I really just...?



Glancing at her, I had to look away. Luckily she wasn't looking at me, but instead her flowers... but she had gone into deep thought.

I really should be far more careful with what I say...

"Then... how come you look so human?" Renn then asked.

My insides twisted and I wanted to groan.

Of course she had realized that obvious fact.

"Just happenstance," I said as lightly as I could.

"Hmm..." Renn made an odd humming sound, but I knew better than to glance at her.

She had obviously heard the blatant lie.

Damn me.

For a short time we walked in silence, and I didn't like it. Although I was glad she wasn't pressing the matter, I knew that was simply because she was being respectful.

Somehow that made it worse for me. A part of me wanted to hate her... so when she was so obviously willing to abide and be so understanding... it made me feel like an absolute ass and hate myself instead.

"I'm glad you helped them Vim," she then said.

Although glad for the change in conversation, I felt bad still as I nodded.

"Honestly I had thought you wouldn't," she added.

"Thought I wouldn't?" I asked, wondering what she meant.

"You had told me not to help them. No matter what. I thought you planned to walk on by, ignoring them, originally," she explained.

"Ah..." I nodded. Yes. I had phrased it that way. "I just didn't want you doing anything physical. You look like a young woman, not much older than a teen. It wouldn't do for you to be lifting hundreds of pounds with ease," I said.

Renn nodded. "I know now. But... you glared at me when you warned me to not help, so I figured otherwise."

I tried to remember our conversation before approaching Karl and his family. "I had glared at you?" I asked.

"You did. Rather strongly too," she said.

"Hm..." I obviously did. Renn was not a liar. But, oddly, I didn't remember it.

"I'm just glad, to be honest," Renn then said.

"Of?"

"You. I was a little worried you hated humans as a whole," she said.

I frowned and hesitated with my response, since it was probably one of more serious statements she's made lately. "I am the Societies protector, but that doesn't mean I view humans as simply an enemy to be destroyed," I said.

"I know. I can tell. I just... Well... Hm..." she stopped talking, as if she wasn't sure what to say.

"Many of our kind would have ignored them. But that is because they'd see enemies, not people. Yet don't think I don't see that too, Renn. Karl would burn either of us at the pyre if he knew what we were," I said.

"Would he though?" she debated me.

"For his family, yes. For if he didn't throw the stone, or light the match, it'd be them thrown into the flames next," I said.

"Hm..." Renn nodded, but did so sadly.

"Yet until that happens, I'll not treat them as enemies," I said.

Not willingly at least.

"Lomi said you killed a man for just seeing her ears once," Renn said.

I blinked at the reminder, and then nodded. "I did."

"What if they had seen my ears?" Renn asked.

Glancing at her, I held her gaze as I nodded.

She blinked and came to a stop.

I nodded again as I also stopped walking. "I would have," I said, to say it aloud.

"Even the little girl...?" she asked softly. She squeezed the flowers a little as she asked her question. They ruffled in protest.

"Are you worth her too?" I asked her.

Renn blinked and her back went straight. Suddenly she looked worried.

"Are you worth that little girl's life, Renn?" I asked her again.

She opened her mouth, and her eyes shook as they wavered. Suddenly she was completely unsure of herself.

"To me you are," I told her, before she could say otherwise.

Renn's shaking came to an abrupt stop, and she stared at me with wide and pure eyes.

"I'd have killed all three of them. Without hesitation. For you," I told her.

I'd do so for anyone. Any of our members.

Even the ones who didn't outright deserve such sacrifices. Even the ones who didn't realize what such devotion was worth.

That was part of my agreement. That was part of my promise.

For as long as our members didn't break their promise. For as long as they upheld their pact...

So would I.

"Please don't. Not for me," she whispered, as if afraid to say it aloud.

Holding her gaze, I watched the tears well up in those gleaming jewels.

She took a deep breath and shook her head, to argue. To tell me no. To say I was wrong.

Yet I wouldn't change my perspective. I'd not change my stance. Even if it bought me her ire and hate, I'd still follow through with my words.

And I decided so because of those tears she shed. Because of that look on her face. The despair in her realization to what lengths I'd go through.

It was precisely because she thought herself not worth it, which made her one of the few who were.

"I would," I said again, vowed it.

She hung her head low, crying quietly as she nodded.

I would.

Even if it broke my heart to do so.

I would.

*Chapter 64: Chapter Sixty Three – Renn – A Cold Yet Hot Realization*

There was an odd smell in this inn.

It wasn't stinky. Not bad enough to make me want to leave... but the smell was noticeable enough that it bothered me. I had wanted to ask Vim what the smell was, since I couldn't tell, but he had lain down and closed his eyes right after we got into the room.

I sat on the bed next to him, since it was the only bed... and the only place to sit at all, in this small room.

The inn itself wasn't big. The front entrance had been just a small room itself, without chairs or even a fireplace. It was one floor, which was a good thing since no one would be banging around upstairs.

We were in a corner room, and although the windows were closed and boarded up, the cold rainstorm outside was doing its best to make the room cold as well.

Other than this bed and a weird looking dresser near the door... the only other thing in the room was a fire pit. In the corner, taking up nearly half the empty space of the room, was a large stone pit. A place to put hot coals as to help heat the room.

The man who had given us our key had given us a large metal bucket, full of hot coals and black sand of some kind. Vim had dumped the buckets contents into the fire pit already, and honestly I wasn't sure if they were actually helping or not.

It was a little after sundown. Vim and I had arrived in this small village a few hours ago, and had already gotten something to eat. Honestly I wasn't too exhausted yet... but now that I thought about it, Vim hadn't slept at all at Rapti's house. She had only two bedrooms, and I had slept in the other one.

He could have slept with me or had used it when I hadn't been using it. But...

When I thought of it, I didn't think he slept when he was elsewhere either. He hadn't really slept at the Sleepy Artist, as far as I was aware. Nor at Lomi's new home. And while we were in Ruvindale he hadn't slept at all, for sure.

I knew he had slept a little on the wagon we rode to Nevi... but it had only been for a few hours at most.

There was no reason to assume the little time spent trying to fix Mary and her families cart had been exhausting for him. I knew better than to judge him as I would myself, let alone a typical human.

Human...

Studying the man next to me as he slept, or at least seemed to be trying to, I wondered what he could possibly be.

He had said he was born before the age of humans.

I had heard of that before. My grandmother had told me and my siblings stories of such an era. There had been many powerful beings back then. Great ones. Huge, and overpowering. Humans had not even existed then, per my grandmother's stories. That was how she began telling them; before humans were first born, our ancestors ruled.

If he really was from that time... not only was it supposedly thousands of years ago...

Then how did he look like a human? Or was it some kind of... fake appearance?

Was it possible? Maybe he was something that could shape his own body? Something that allowed him to appear as something else, willingly. Like how certain bugs or reptiles could change colours.

Yet somehow I doubted it. Changing certain aspects, like hair or eyes were one thing... but an entire appearance? Body structure?

After all so many of the older members of our kind seemed to have physical attributes. My grandmother had fur and paws. Lilly had wings. Trixalla and her husband had scales, although they tried to hide them. Lughes had wool, although only his beard had been noticeable.

A small flash of light lit up the room, and then a distant rumble thundered and shook the inn.

Glancing at Vim's face as the thunder rolled away, I noticed the reflection of an eye peering from his right eyelid. It closed after a moment of staring at me.

He had woken up to check on me, because of the sound.

Smiling at him, I wondered how he had been instilled with such protective traits.

That wasn't just belief, or morals... it was instinctual to him.

It made me wonder what kind of animal he could possibly be... since although there were many who were known as fierce protectors, or guardians, the reality was they only acted so for their young. Or territory.

He acted so for all of us, no matter how different we were. Even the ones he didn't care much for.

Earlier today he had made a comment, after leaving Mary's family behind, that he would have killed all three of them... the little girl included, if they had found out our secret.

He'd do so to protect me. To protect all of our members.

At first I was upset over such a vow, since... Killing such kind people, a child as well, was a little... disturbing. But I understood his reasoning. Even if I didn't agree with it, or like it, I did at least understand it.

Even a child could hurt us, because they'd go tell others. They'd tell those who could.

Still...

Did it bother him? Or, because of his temperament and age, was he simply callous? Was he impassive to the evil he so willingly allowed himself to commit?

I had seen the man shed tears in Ruvindale. After burning the paintings. I wasn't foolish enough to think that those tears were for the humans he had killed or harmed in the process... but I also knew a man without any compassion at all wouldn't have shown such emotion. A man without a heart would have burnt those paintings and moved on without a blink of an eye. A man without a heart would not have allowed those paintings to exist in the first place.

And it wasn't just in Ruvindale... several times now he's shown great emotion when we talk about those events. Or rather, when I try to bring up the fact that I have a debt to the Society and need to repay it. That I was at the very least had a part in the blame. He's made it blatantly clear he blames no one but himself... and he's shown he can get very upset. Even angry, while speaking of it.

That meant he really took those failures and events to heart. They affected him greatly.

Odds are there were far too many of such failures to count; based off the conversations I've had and heard from him.

An annoying sound began to fill the air as the wind picked up outside. The wind started to sneak in-between the window frame and the walls, causing a small whine to fill the air. I knew it also would make it rather cold, rather fast.

Although used to the cold, and capable of ignoring it to a great degree... I've come to realize I have been rather spoiled lately. I've had full meals, sometimes several times a day. I've had warm baths whenever I can. And I've been sleeping in well made, and comfortable... Touching the bed I sat on, I knew this was probably the worst one I've had the pleasure of sleeping on for months. Maybe in years. It was hard, and kind of lumpy.

But it wasn't Vim's fault. This was the only inn here in this small town.

Such comforts I've been enjoying had made me more conscious and aware of the discomforts. The stuff that usually, and used to, not even be a thought were now big issues to me. Like the lack of a warm fire, or a nice bed.

Had I even wondered about the lack of warmth before joining the Society? Oddly, I should already be used to such comforts thanks to my years with Nory. She hated the cold... yet...

Thinking back on it, the only reason I ever noticed the lack of fire back then was because I had worried for Nory. I didn't want her to get sick. Yet now...

Honestly as we ate earlier, I had even thought of the warm bath at Rapti's. I had found myself longing for a long soak in such warm water... that I knew I'd not get here and or for some time as we travelled.

Slowly laying down, as to not wake the man next to me... I flinched at the sight of his eyelids slowly open a little, just enough to see what I was doing.

I gave him an apologetic smile as I laid down next to him. As close as I could without touching him, since I feared doing so would bother him. A part of me wanted to curl up with him, to keep the cold at bay, but the rest of me knew how ridiculous that thought was.

"Hm," Vim made a soft sound as he closed his eye again, and then seemed to relax a little.

He had lain down without using a pillow, so I had one... or could have one. I chose to lie down next to him, under his outstretched arm instead. We were lying on top of the only blanket, but I wasn't going to bother Vim with trying to crawl under it. Knowing him, if I bothered him to such a degree he'd get up and not go back to sleep afterwards.

Curling up slowly, and gently, I studied the side of Vim's face. He really did look... human. Normal. A middle aged man, basically. Mary's husband Karl had looked about the same age, at least appearance wise.

Which was probably why it was so easy to pass as husband and wife while we travelled. Mary had automatically assumed we were together before we had even said hello. We

looked too different to be related, yet even though as Vim would say I looked young... I didn't look young enough to be a daughter or sibling. Nor did he look old enough to have a daughter as old as me.

What I found odd about that wasn't how well such a story worked with people... but how willing and easily Vim seemed to accept it. But maybe that was simply because he was so dead-set at never drawing attention. He always did his best to not seem strange or out of place. He even was willing to act as a father with Lomi.

And whether I liked it or not... I believe he saw me in the same vein as Lomi. A young child.

Maybe not as much of a child, of course... but...

He definitely looked at me oddly sometimes. Which was part of the reason so many onlookers automatically assumed our relationship to be a special one. They misinterpreted his gentle smiles, born from the outlook of an old guardian... as the warm smile of a lover. They didn't know he gave such smiles to all of our members. Old and young. Man and woman alike.

It made me wish I had found him earlier.

It made me wish my family had found the Society earlier.

Maybe if they had...

Maybe if Vim had been around back then...

Closing my eyes, I did my best to not make a sound as tears welled and my heart crumpled.

The storm grew louder, but I knew no matter how loud the storm... there was no way to hide from him my crying. So I did my best to not start. To not make any noise and...

Taking a small breath, I found myself strong enough to not break. My eyes grew watery, and a few tears leaked, but nothing more.

Wrapping my tail around his leg, I focused on the sound of his breathing... it was a little loud, thanks to how close we were. Thanks to my ears being angled just right.

His breathing was comforting. It was solid. Steady. Strong. And I knew it'd never go away.

No matter how cold it got. No matter how strong the storm outside became. No matter what happened...



Vim would always be right here.

Even hundreds of years from now.

My heart thumped as I opened my eyes, and went still.

My tail twitched, and I had to actually focus on it for a moment. To keep it from moving too drastically, since I had laid it onto him. I didn't want him to wake. Especially right now, since my heartbeat was quick and...

"You okay?" Vim asked.

Damn.

"Yes. Sorry," I whispered, and did everything I could to get myself to calm down.

Vim's eyebrow raised as he turned his head just enough to look at me. He looked concerned.

"I'm fine. Sorry... I just thought of something and..." I felt the rush of blood, and I knew my face had gone several shades redder.

Great. Just great. Please don't have him ask...

"Hm..." he didn't ask, but he did stare at me for a moment... which made me all the more embarrassed.

I closed my eyes and turned my head, burying my face into the stinky bed.

Groaning a little, I couldn't help it.

Luckily Vim remained silent, and didn't get up. But I didn't dare peek at him, to see if he was still staring at me.

"I'm here, Renn. It'll all be well," Vim then said.

I groaned as I nodded, but still kept my face hidden.

He misunderstood... kind of... which was a good thing. Kind of.

Vim shifted a little, rolling a bit on his side, and I knew he was now facing me. Probably as to keep an eye on me, just in case something really was wrong.

Just great. Wonderful. Now I was going to have to lie here for hours, being self-conscious and...!

Slowly daring a glance, I found Vim a little closer. Close enough that if he had been anyone else, I'd have smelled them and only them... yet per usual, he had no scent. Not even his shirt and jacket, which I knew hadn't been washed in weeks.

Instead of smelling him I smelled this stinky inn. Which for some reason made me angry, at him.

His eyes were closed, and he looked relaxed... yet...

He had moved his arm a little. Just a tad closer to me, right above my head. His leg a little closer as well, close enough I could wrap my tail around it with ease now.

I knew he had done so to further enforce his words, and promise.

He was here. He'd protect me. Nothing was wrong.

Yet... it just made me all the more conscious of the thought that had caused this whole fiasco.

He would live as long as me. Maybe even longer.

It was so obvious. So clear. So... blatant...

Yet it had somehow taken this long for me to think it. To realize it.

I returned to hiding my face, even though I could feel my blushing begin to subside already. Even though my heartbeat was returning to normal. But I didn't want him to now see the weird smile that I could feel growing.

This was troubling. I needed to be careful.

I had buried Nory. I had buried Ginny, and although hadn't buried Lujic... that was simply because I had ran away right before he died. Because I hadn't been able to emotionally handle it.

The entire reason I had wanted to find others like myself was because I had grown tired of burying those I loved. It was why I had been so distraught to have Amber die and the rest go missing and...

I stopped thinking of them, since it hurt.

And yet here, right next to me. Literally within arms reach...

Was a man who not only would live as long, if not longer than me... but was strong enough that I didn't have to worry he'd perish without me. I didn't have to worry he'd die if I decided to look away from him for a few years.

I knew even a hundred years from now; I'd be able to find Vim doing what he was doing now. Travelling around, helping the Society. And to top it off... he actually had a genuine purpose. One I found lovely. One I desired to participate in and make my own!

And that very simple fact made him...

The storm picked up, and I was thankful for the distraction. Even though the room became colder because of it, I didn't even notice. Even the wind didn't seem that noticeable, thanks to my heartbeat and... and his...

I groaned again, and began to try and control my heart and mind... before I said or did something that would really humiliate me. I needed to steady my heartbeat. I needed to stop my mind from whirling as it realized just what kind of position I was in. I needed to calm down and re-evaluate everything about him and...

And I needed to come to terms with the fact that without realizing it, I had found exactly who I was looking for.

After I did all that, I'd be able to accept and come to terms with just how happy it actually made me.

Hopefully it wouldn't take me as long to comprehend as it had to realize it.

Hopefully I'd accomplish it before this night passed me by.

Hopefully I could do it before the one in question realized it too.

Hopefully.

*Chapter 65: Chapter Sixty Four – Vim – Tor*

The torch Silkie carried fluttered, even though there was no wind anymore. We had delved too far into the cave for wind to reach us. In fact it had been cold outside, yet in here it was a little warm.

"Cats aren't as bad as foxes, but they're still trouble! Trouble Vim, trouble!" Silkie complained some more.

I nodded as I studied the small creek we were walking along. It looked... dryer somehow compared to my last visit. "She's only a little troublesome Silkie, I promise," I said to her.

Silkie shook her head quickly, the action living up to her ancestors. "She's a big cat, not a small one!" she continued to complain.

"How're the farms?" I asked her, trying to change topics again. This would be my fourth attempt.

"Probably all hustle and bustle now, since you brought that predator here!" Silkie said.

I sighed softly, but made sure to do so as quietly as possible. The cavern we were in made our voices carry far, and although Silkie was pretty much entirely human... she still had some hen blood left in her.

"Really Vim! You should know better! No one will be able to sleep a wink until she leaves!" Silkie said as she turned a little, to yell at me.

I apologetically nodded to the portly woman. Her neck rolls jiggled as she nodded back at me.

"Any other issues? Before I arrived?" I asked her. Fifth attempt.

"None at all! The whole world was happy and fine until this morning!" Silkie said loudly.

She really didn't like Renn at all... which was too bad. Renn had been so excited to meet her and her family.

Rounding a small bend, I had to duck since the cavern suddenly got smaller. The rocks on the ceiling were dry. I ran my fingers along the ceiling, feeling the dry dust and moss upon it. "Been awhile since a flood has it?" I asked.

"Hm... a year or so, yes," Silkie calmed down for a moment. Just long enough to remember when the last heavy rains were.

This was a little surprising... same with the creek itself. Usually by now we'd be walking in the water, at least a few inches worth, yet the ground beneath us was dry as could be. Not even a little damp.

Considering all the storms we'd been going through on our way here, I had not expected this... maybe there was some kind of ocean storm off the coast a ways, affecting the weather here. It was winter; it shouldn't be this dry here.

"Anything wrong with the chickens lately?" I asked Silkie.

"No, no! But now? Maybe? The poor babies will perish in stress, if they're not eaten first!" Silkie complained.

I shook my head at the woman, and wondered what had happened.

Her mother, and her mother's siblings and their parents... had all been rather stout and hardy. I used to tease them about it.

Chickens, yet fearless.

Maybe Silkie's children will be more like them instead. But something told me they wouldn't be.

Once a bloodline became meek... it rarely if ever stopped being so.

Honestly I'd blame the world, if something had happened... but this farm, and she and her family, had never had any issues. No one's been harmed. No homes burnt... they had no reason to act like this.

Silkie herself finally had to bend down. She wasn't as tall. After a few steps, I too had to crouch even farther.

Luckily the ceiling was all that was shrinking. If the cavern shrunk in other ways, Silkie wouldn't have been able to come this far.

"Here we be. I swear Vim, I hope you know what you're doing," Silkie warned as she turned and hefted her torch as to reveal another path.

Leading deeper into the cave, two more caverns opened up. The one that was darker, and had an odd scent, was the one I was about to venture into.

"You can go keep an eye on her if you'd like Silkie, you need not wait for me," I said to her.

Silkie quickly shook her head, jiggling so much there was an actual echo of the sounds. "Never! I shall wait, as all of us always have! Right here, I swear it," she nodded to herself, adamant.

I smiled and nodded softly. "Alright. I'll not be long. Thank you," I patted her on the shoulder as I passed her, heading deeper into the cavern alone.

"Be safe!" she wished me good luck as I entered the darker section of the cavern... leaving Silkie, and her source of light behind.

After a few steps I was able to slowly stand back up. The ceiling retreated a little, but the jagged rocks started to become sharper. More common. More lethal.

Renn had wanted to join me, and at first I had thought nothing of it. Yet Silkie had put her foot down.

She barely let Renn onto the farm...

It had hurt Renn a little. I had seen the sorrow on her face as she told me it was okay, and that she'd wait for me outside of the cavern... but somehow it made me feel bad.

I've dealt with the prey hating and fearing the predators before... yet honestly this was one of the first times I had gotten actually bothered by it. I had almost ordered Silkie to let her be, and to let her join me.

Which was what actually bothered me. Since that would have been... a little against everything I stood for.

It wasn't my place to order the Society around. It wasn't my place to force them against their wishes to do anything.

Heading deeper into the darkness, I began to hear the sound of far off drops of water. They echoed as they fell, yet sounded... distant. As if not real.

There was a strange smell to the air. A smell I recognized, but yet somehow every time I smelled it I always wondered what it could be.

The world slowly got darker. The light from Silkie's torch was long gone, and although my eyes had quickly adjusted... there was more to this darkness than simple lack of light.

It was very similar to the patches of dark forests near the Owl's Nest... yet I knew if I ever compared the two so closely aloud, I'd be yelled at and casted out from the cave.

He was so touchy lately.

My footsteps began to grow louder as I became less able to see where I stepped. I made a small game out of it, trying to walk as quietly as possible... and although was good at it, there were still echoes and noises I didn't like to hear.

Slowly the path began to grow larger. And began to sharply decline.

It didn't take long for the cavern to become so pitch black that I could not make out much of anything. Shapes were visible, but nothing more. I walked down the path more so from memory than not.

A few minutes later the darkness became absolute, and then even sounds began to disappear.

First it was the drops of water. Their incessant dropping slowly came to a stop, even though I knew there was still water and moisture around me. Then it was my own breathing... and finally even my footsteps, and the rocks I walked upon, went silent.

The silence blended with the darkness, and I realized it was probably a good thing Renn didn't come down with me.

This kind of environment broke most. Even if you were only in it for a short time.

A place where silence is so loud, you can't even hear your own thoughts.

She who was more like me than not, able to hear and see so well... This place would probably be disturbing for her.

Time passed a little, and I eventually felt... openness.

Slowing to a pause, I frowned and tried to focus. I couldn't make anything out anymore, but I could just... feel... that I was no longer walking in a small cavern.

The world was now wide and open. Impossibly so.

A cavern this large would collapse within itself, if it was as big as it felt to me.

"Welcome back, Vim," A deep voice rumbled, bringing sound back into the world.

"How have you been Tor?" I asked.

My own voice seemed to echo, even though his didn't. "Cold," was all he said.

"It is winter. But we're about half way through it already," I said.

"Hmm..."

Off in the distance I saw something finally. A little bit of haze, like a low fog or mist, began to form on the ground. Illuminating the world around me. It shone a little, as if from moonlight.

It poured in from afar, like on a wind... even though the air was still as can be.

"I smell a new scent upon you," Tor said as I watched the haze approach. I knew soon I'd be standing in a small pool of water, even though there was none around me now.

"I've had company lately. A young fox, Lomi, and then now a forest cat. Renn," I explained. Both could have been what he smelled. Both had not only been with me for an extended time, but they both also had a unique scent. Lomi and Renn had both smelled a little... inhuman.

Right as the haze began to reach my feet; a sudden pull of air brought it back as Tor took a deep breath. "A woman," he said, surprised.

Renn then. Made sense, she was the most recent.

"She is," I nodded, amused at the way he found that odd and strange.

Most of our members were female nowadays so it really shouldn't have been that odd.

The haze renewed its approach, quickly overlapping the ground beneath me. Within moments my feet were covered, as was the entire area around me.

"I'd have liked to meet her," Tor said.

"Silkie wouldn't allow it. Ruffled her feathers something fierce," I said.

Tor chuckled, and the haze beneath me seemed to ripple alongside it. "They're simple willed. All the same," he said.

Simple maybe, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. I complained about their weak wills myself, but honestly the more timid they were the easier it was to protect them.

"I felt the Monarch die. Well done," Tor then said.

I nodded. Felt. Not heard, I noted. "It died indeed," I said.

Tor chuckled lightly. Not enough to cause the haze to shift. "And still you carry its heart. Your route is a little off, isn't it?" he asked.

I shifted a little, and wondered if it was a mistake to bring it in here. I should have put it in Renn's bag; she would not have known what it was after all. "Had some issues. The village of foxes near Snowfall is gone. So too is the Sleepy Artist, although I've not found their bodies, so they may still live," I said. Amber was definitely dead... Renn had seen her dead body... but there was no need to tell Tor of the fallen human.

He'd only get happy at that, and I didn't want to blemish Amber's death that way.

"Lughes?" Tor asked, worried.

I shook my head. "Couldn't find his body. I found some of his blood in the building, in Ruvindale... but it wasn't a lot. Plus those who had done so, and had taken the paintings, had not shown any signs of realizing he was one of us. The knights who had done it had been an order of the church, and they had been calm and composed about it," I said.

"Shelldon?" Tor further asked.

"I believed he escaped into the lake near Ruvindale. By now he could be anywhere," I said.

"Cowards flee. Yet I am pleased he did so," Tor said with a hint of relief.

"Crane was gone as well, but I didn't find a hint of blood or her death. Lughes had failed to pay the humans their taxes, and incurred the wrath of the city's lord. I believe Lughes



fought back at first, and Crane ran with Shelldon. I'd give Lughes small odds of having survived, and if he did I expect we'll never see him again," I said.

Tor sighed, and the hazy mist on the ground rolled around. "Such news. Yet, I've come to expect it."

For a moment I studied the mist at my feet. I could see the hint of water now. It'd not take long for there to be a thick layer of it.

"And the cat? This Renn... where did she come from?" Tor asked.

"She was at the Sleepy Artist when I arrived. Lughes and the rest had been alive then. I had spent a few weeks there and then headed east. After I left is when it had happened," I said.

"She still lives... So... Unless you have a reason to not punish her, if she had been the cause," Tor said gently.

"I've determined she is innocent. As far as one can be for having been there, yet not stop it," I said.

"Hm... a tough and harsh criticism from you. Being a predator you judge her harshly, don't you?" he asked, amused.

"Renn hadn't been there when it happened either. She had gotten banished... she had startled Lughes and Crane. She voiced an opinion they hadn't agreed with. Took action when they demanded she didn't. The world must have seen the chaos and emotional drama, and decided it was the perfect time to bring them even lower," I said, wondering why fate was always so unkind that way.

"Hm..." Tor pondered my words for a moment, and as I shifted I heard the sound of water beneath my feet. I was now standing in a small pool of water. Still water, without a current or source.

"To be honest I'm more worried over the fox village. A bishop had burnt it down..." I sighed as I shook my head. "The events at the Sleepy Artist took precedence thanks to the paintings. But I plan on sending someone to that district to find out which branch of the church had done it," I said.

"Meriah would be best suited. She's from the north," Tor said.

I nodded. I had the same thought. "If she's available. If not I'll leave the choice to the Seer," I said.

Tor sighed, causing the misty haze to ripple again. "It's always something."

"Always will be, until it won't," I said.

"That day can't come soon enough," Tor hoped.

I chose to not comment on that. I didn't share his, and a few others, views of longing for the end. It was depressing... if not also a little funny. The human's religions desired the end too, in their own way. Per usual another similarity.

"Anything I can do for you before I leave? I'll not stay the night, I don't want to make Silkie and her family too upset," I said.

"We're fine. I'd not allow failure here," Tor said confidently.

I nodded, and knew he wouldn't.

He'd never leave this cave. Wouldn't dare. Yet it was precisely because of that fact that I could bet on him.

This farm. The people who lived here. Silkie and her family. The humans who were a part of their family... none would suffer. None of them could be in danger as long as Tor protected them. The only thing that could actually threaten them... Or rather, the only thing that could possibly overpower Tor in his own domain...

Well...

"Tell me Vim, have you not realized it yet?" Tor then asked.

"Realized what?" I asked. Was something different here? I quickly glanced around, to scan the mist.

Nothing seemed different or odd. Other than the oddness already blatantly visible, of course.

"Hm... I'll let it be then. It would make sense for you to not notice right away. That is your personality, after all," Tor said.

I frowned at his strange tone. He sounded a little concerned, but not enough to make me feel the same way. What was he talking about?

"Am I missing something?" I asked him.

"You are. But worry not about it," Tor said, a little too gently.

Maybe I should worry. But...

Tor would tell me if something was wrong. For the same reason I could rely on him to protect this village and its farmlands, I could also rely on his honesty. If there was something bad happening, or troublesome danger nearby, he'd alert me to it.

He hated humans too, so he'd even be happy to tell me if it concerned them.

Which meant whatever it was... was something I probably didn't need to worry about at the moment.

"It is nothing Vim. All is well here. I suggest you move on. Disaster breeds chaos. For two settlements to be harmed so quickly is concerning. Fate may be at play," Tor said.

"Hm," I nodded, even though I knew it was mostly circumstantial.

"It's probably best you leave anyway, lest I begin to hunger for that heart," Tor said.

I smiled since I knew he had been eyeing it since I entered. "You can try. I promise not to kill you over it," I said to him.

Tor chuckled, but I knew he had done so only to let me know he was smarter than that.

His mist was already starting to withdraw, and I was no longer standing in a puddle.

Turning to go, I nodded. "Until next time then," I said.

"Bring her down next time you come. Or I'll come up to see her," Tor said with a light warning.

I paused a moment, and turned back. To look out into the retreating mist.

Off in the distance, as if miles away, was a figure in the darkness. It was barely visible. Like an outline of a mountainside Tor loomed beyond sight.

He chuckled as I glared at him, but I chose to ignore his teasing and turned away. He was just trying to get back at me over my earlier joke.

Leaving Tor's nest, I headed back to the cavern.

To return to my path, once again.

*Chapter 66: Chapter Sixty Five – Renn – To See Not Touch*

It's been a long time since I've felt so uncomfortable just because I existed.

This village was in something of a valley, and was situated inside a small collection of large hills, surrounded by mountains. On the other side of one of the mountains, to the

east, was the ocean. Those mountains somehow kept this place a little warmer than the places around it, while also making it feel... secluded. Safe.

I was sitting on a rock near the entrance to a cavern. Vim had gone into it an hour ago with Silkie, a large woman who Vim had said was a chicken. A hen.

She hadn't liked me at all. I had almost not been allowed to even enter this valley. Silkie had recognized what I was instantly, even though my ears and tail had been hidden. With a single glance she had known I was a predator, and had told Vim I was too dangerous to let in. Too dangerous to be near her children, or the humans either.

Luckily Vim had convinced her, a little forcefully, that I would cause no harm... but...

I took a deep breath and sighed.

Not only had Vim warned me that some folks would be... distressed at my presence, so had others. Lilly especially had told me that more often than not predators didn't mix or live with prey. Yet...

Yet this was the first time I had been so blatantly told so to my face. Lughes and the rest had grown upset with me, losing their trust, but it had taken months. Rapti had been more than happy to spend time with me, as well.

They at least allowed me into their home. They at least were willing to talk to me.

Here though...

Off in the distance, down a small hill, was a field. A field of deep green. Some kind of vegetable. It was one of many fields, but they weren't as massive as the wheat fields in Twin Hills. These were more... personal. Odds are they didn't sell anything they grew and only farmed stuff for themselves.

There weren't as many trees here as on the mountains, but there were enough to block most of the village from sight. Their yellow roofs, of odd wood, stood out amongst the green fields and treetops.

That village housed three families of our Society. One was human. Another was a mixture of humans and our kind, and then those like Silkie. Chickens and hens.

I had only seen the residents from a distance. I had seen older people. Children. I had even seen a baby, carried on the back of what was undoubtedly the mother. None had come up to us. None had looked at us kindly, as we passed through their village and to this cavern. In fact it had been a little... disturbing. The whole of the village had gone quiet as we walked through it, and most had not even looked at us. Hiding away, as if we were lepers.

Or well...

I knew Vim wasn't seen as dangerous to them. Silkie had a huge smile on her face upon seeing him, and had only grown discontent when she had finally seen me. Honestly I knew why. He was a predator, yes... but he was first and foremost the protector.

While I... I was...

Just a random woman who no one knew or trusted.

Which made this moment, which I had hoped would have been as fun and wonderful as the others of my kind I had met... instead... it was...

"A little painful," I admitted to myself as I glanced around.

There were a few trees here, but they were skinny. Thin little things, which were barely wider than my waist. They had an odd white and black bark... which oddly I couldn't remember seeing before. I had travelled a lot before meeting Nory... yet I hadn't seen trees such as these before.

Usually I'd be rather interested in them, but right now...

Seeing movement in the distance, I focused on it and tried to see the group of people. They were working near a large building, what looked to be a barn. Nearly a dozen people were moving around, carrying stuff. I could just barely make out the horse-led wagon they were unloading.

I sighed and wondered how many places we'd visit would be like this. Something told me more than I could handle.

Maybe Vim's aversion for letting me help him was sourced from this... and he being the oddly gentle protector, simply didn't voice it aloud.

Maybe I couldn't help people. Maybe they'd not accept my help even if I could give it.

It was such a depressing thought it made me want to cry.

A voice echoed from out of the cavern, and I turned an ear to it. That was most likely Silkie's voice.

After a few echoes, another voice filtered in. A deeper, more solid tone.

Vim.

While staring at the dark cavern's entrance, I then heard a new sound. Something from behind me and...

Glancing behind, I glared at the silky tail that was slowly sliding back and forth.

Putting a hand on it, I grumbled as I got it under control.

What was I, a dog? I cannot believe it.

I had just been about to cry, growing depressed over the realization that most of the Society would hate me. Assuming who and what I was like, without reason. And the thoughts had been dreadful and worrying. My eyes had begun to water and...

Yet the moment I heard his voice...

"Keep it together Renn," I warned myself.

It's been a few days since I had... realized... That Vim was...

"Stop," I said, and then noticed that the talking in the cave died down.

Woops... they had probably heard me.

This was going to be awkward...

Standing up off the rock, I shifted as I watched shadows begin to move within. After a few moments, light appeared. A torch, held high, illuminating the larger woman who was guiding Vim.

She had a severe frown on her face as she exited the cavern, glaring at me as she went to putting out the torch's flame with sand.

While she did so, Vim emerged and sighed with a nod to me. "You alright Renn?" he asked me.

"Yes?" I asked. Was I not supposed to be?

"Of course she'd be! Who'd be able to hurt her here Vim?" Silkie asked, with a tone that was more of an accusation than not.

"The world is dangerous for all our members Silkie, even the strong," Vim said calmly.

"I'm fine," I said again, strong? Was I strong in Vim's eyes?

I really didn't feel it.

"Fha," Silkie made an odd noise and shivered, as if cold. Which should be impossible... she was covered in layers of clothing. Just a glance showed at least three, and they were thick. As if she was trying to appear far bigger than she already were.

"I'll be heading on then, Silkie, if there's nothing you'd like me to do," Vim then said.

Moving on? Already? Really?

I blinked and glanced at the woman, as she put the torch she had been using up against the cavern wall's entrance. There were a few other planks of wood there too, likely used similarly.

What had been in there?

"Nothing time and many hands can't do. You head on, find her a proper place and then help those who need it," Silkie said while ignoring me.

Although she sounded... off-put, I wondered how much of that statement was genuine. Did she really want me to find a home, or was she trying to say he needed to get rid of me as fast as possible so he could dedicate himself to helping those more deserving than I?

"I shall see you again in a few years then. Give my regards to the village," Vim said with a nod, seemingly unbothered.

Silkie nodded and then looked at me.

I stood up a little straighter, and regretted it. She flinched as I had done so, and looked away.

"Goodbye," I said as she turned and began walking away from us.

She didn't say anything, and I felt horrible. A part of me had hoped that we'd spend a week or two here, as Vim had done everywhere else. I had thought that maybe in that time I could earn their friendship or...

Vim sighed as he walked away from the cavern and up to me. He studied me as I watched Silkie walk back down the path towards the village. She walked in a hurry, and I knew it was because she was upset. Bothered and concerned. It was plainly visible in her stride.

She walked like a mother scorned.

"Do not let it bother you Renn. It should come as no surprise for a predator to be treated so," Vim then said to me.

Looking back at him, I hesitated a little. Was that worry? Worry for me? For some reason I didn't like that look.

It had hurt... but I wasn't so weak I'd die over it. He was looking at me as if I had been greatly injured.

"It... is sad. And I'll be honest, I'm bothered by it... but I understand it. Shelldon had never been willing to see me. Crane and Lughes had gotten scared simply because I had raised my voice and stood my ground," I explained.

Vim nodded, yet that look didn't seem to ease.

What was he thinking, while staring at me like that?

Then I felt it. Something dripped on my forearm.

Looking down, I sighed at the realization that I had been crying.

"Again?" I asked myself. I had thought I had actually controlled it and kept it down...

"Again," Vim said gently, sounding almost as if he had been the one to cause it this time.

Wiping my face off, I groaned and knew I was doing a poor job of proving myself.

I wanted Vim to let me help him. To join him and let me help protect our people. The Society.

Yet what kind of protector cried over such a thing so easily? To weep just because people didn't like me?

What kind of man would want someone so weak alongside him?

"Come, let's go. If we head out now we'll get over the mountain before sundown," Vim said, choosing not to say anything as I dried my eyes.

"Okay," I agreed.

Turning to follow Vim down the path, back towards the village, I hoped we'd not actually pass through it again. Although I kind of wanted to look at it and the people more... another part of me didn't.

Before leaving the area, I glanced one last time to the cavern.

"What had been in there?" I asked him.

"A member of our Society. The ruler of this valley," Vim said.

"Ruler?" I asked. So... like Shelldon maybe? Someone who hid away at all times?



"A very powerful rodent. His name is Tor," Vim said.

"A..." I hesitated. "A rodent?"

Vim nodded. "He's about this big," Vim held up both hands, palms open, and showed what was probably about the size of my foot.

"Uh..." I wasn't sure of what to say. Was he being serious? He had a small smirk on his face and...

"He lives beneath the mountain. Doesn't like the sun. He also oddly likes the damp and wet..." Vim frowned as he spoke, as if he was thinking of this rodent for the first time and trying to understand it.

"Uh..." I still wasn't sure of what to say.

"He's a good man. A little... old. He only cares about this valley. He'll never leave it. But all of our members who live here will be safe thanks to him for as long as he lives," Vim said.

"He protects the valley?" I asked. A small rodent did?

Vim nodded.

"Were you being serious about his size?" I asked.

"Yes. He's not humanoid. He's the genuine article," Vim said with a glance at me, he must have heard my confusion.

"Oh. I see... I wish I could have met him," I said.

"Maybe next time," Vim said.

Blinking at those words, I wondered if that was a dismissive thought to end such a topic, or genuine.

"Is he stronger than you?" I asked.

"Why?" he asked back.

Smiling softly I shrugged. "Just want to know. If he is, maybe that means you're something a rodent hunts?"

Vim's eyes stayed focused ahead of us, and didn't glance at me, but he did seem to relax a little. "I killed his brother and sister, if that's any reference for you," Vim said.

Slowly coming to a stop, I watched Vim walk for a few feet before also pausing as to look at me. He raised an eyebrow, wondering what was wrong.

"Why?" I asked softly.

"They were... cruel. To him. To everyone," he said simply.

Cruel. That meant either evil or too dangerous for the Society to leave alone.

They had probably not agreed with the Societies rules and morals.

"And... he's okay with that?" I asked, thinking of my own siblings.

I thought of the one who had killed them, and found myself hating them. Despising them.

"He's the one who asked me to do so," Vim said simply, and turned back as to go back to walking.

Hesitating for a moment, I found the nerve to follow him after a moment.

Yes. I could understand that.

"Somehow Vim, sometimes the things you say shake me to my core," I said once I was back next to him.

"You're the one who asks the questions," he said.

I nodded. I had been. But...

"But I had meant my original question as more of a joke. You hadn't needed to answer so seriously," I said.

He frowned and shook his head. "I don't hide such facts. Unless asked to, of course. I believe doing so belittles the deed. Insults those who suffered and the ones I killed all the same," he said.

Slowly nodding, I somehow found such a belief to be... rather Vim-like. It fit him.

"Does it happen often?" I asked him.

"Being asked not to? Not really. To be honest most involved don't survive the event, so..." he shrugged.

"Ah. I meant, are you often asked to kill someone's family?" I asked carefully.

"Luckily no. But it does happen. Regrettably most who go down that path... kill their family before they can ask me to save them. But..." Vim went quiet for a moment, seemingly pondering something. "It does happen enough, however," he then added.

That meant he had tried to think of all the times it had... and found himself remembering more and more.

I gulped a heavy thought and was glad to see Vim take a left instead of a right, once we reached the end of the path.

We'd head away from the village then, around the fields... instead of walking through it.

Thank goodness.

Walking towards a great field of green stalks, about as high as my waist... I wondered what they were. They looked like heavy blades of grass, yet it was obvious the vegetable was just beneath the ground. Some of them were large enough the dirt at the ground looked... bulbous and odd.

"Family are the first to usually notice depravity. That family, in Ruvindale... Primdol," Vim then brought up.

I nodded quickly. I had asked him what had happened but he hadn't told me. Was he finally going to?

"The father. Or Grandfather, whatever he had been... had been bedridden. He had known of his children's evil, but I don't think he was evil himself," Vim said.

"I... I see..." I said softly, waiting for more.

"In my eyes, a man who doesn't confront the sins of his children is just as liable for every sin they commit and then some. Since they have the ability to stop it. To deny the sin, before it even is born," Vim explained.

I slowly nodded, a little surprised to hear such a thing.

Nory and the others I had known, the religious ones... had always said that the sins of the father hadn't and didn't carry over. So this was... a different perspective.

One a little different from my own, too.

"Yet... life isn't so black and white. A parent's entire job is to protect their children. From anyone and anything... So in essence a parent that kills their own children is a failure. Many can't do it. Many fail to do so. Most do," Vim said.

I blinked as we walked along the green stalks. They smelled a little odd, but I was more focused on Vim than them.

He shrugged as he gestured before us, waving lightly. He wasn't actually pointing anything out, however. "If he had done his job, his duty, then Amber would be alive today. As would many others. Yet if he had done that... if he had nipped that evil before it had time to sprout, he himself would have committed evil as well. Which would have earned him the ire of many, if not most. It's a lose-lose situation," Vim said.

Gulping, I nodded.

Yes.

It was.

"Did you kill the child too?" I asked carefully.

"Child?" he asked with a frown.

"The Primdoll family. They had a young daughter, hadn't they?" I asked.

"She hadn't been that young. Probably a little younger than Amber had been," Vim said.

"Hm..." I was a little glad to hear it. They had originally spoken of her as if a young girl. A child, in the truest sense.

Yet... at the same time...

Amber had been a child too, in a way.

"I've come to choose the lesser evils myself, most of the time. It's... wrong of me, but..." Vim shrugged. "I'd rather kill one than have to burry hundreds. I can sleep with bloody hands, yet dirty ones keep me awake," he added.

Such a statement was a heavy one, coming from him.

It called back to what he had said about that young human family we met on the way here. The ones with the broken down cart.

He would have killed all of them, even the young daughter, if it was to protect us. The Society.

I... didn't like that. I understood it. Yet deep down it bothered me. After all... I felt we should be strong enough, great enough, wise enough, that a little human child couldn't threaten us even if they wanted to.

Yet Vim didn't see it that way.

"I can't say I agree with you Vim... but to be honest, the reason I don't is because I regret it," I said.

"Regret?" he asked, glancing at me.

"I failed to stop evil from sprouting, but I did stop it before it got worse. Before it became... disgustingly wrong. I regret doing so," I said, choosing my words carefully.

Vim kept walking, and I stayed next to him... but honestly I wanted to stop. To become still.

Rather I felt like I wanted to hide under the covers while in bed.

"You regret not stopping it before it became evil then?" he asked, trying to understand.

I shook my head. "I regret stopping it at all," I whispered.

Vim slowed, but didn't come to a stop. "You regret destroying evil...?" he asked, studying me.

"I... don't. I'd do it again. But I wish and pray I hadn't needed to. I wish I hadn't. I wish someone else had..." I hesitated and paused for a moment. Vim came to a stop too, to hold my gaze.

"I wish you had been there to stop it for me," I said to him.

He frowned, but his eyes seemed to relax. He seemed to understand.

I shrugged, and rubbed my arm. I suddenly felt cold.

"Maybe next time I will be," he then said.

I blinked, and nodded. Yes. I'd like that.

"Though I hope when I do, you don't look at me like that," he then said with a small smile.

He turned around as to return to walking, and I reached up to touch my face. It didn't feel odd, nor was it wet again. I hadn't cried... so...

Then my hands went upward, and I found it had been my ears.

They were drooped lowly, almost oddly low.

Rubbing them, I focused on them for a moment until they returned to normal. Pointing upward, proudly.

Hurrying to follow Vim, since he had stepped away from me, I felt... a little proud of myself.

I hadn't told him of course. I hadn't said it. I hadn't revealed it.

But I had hinted at it. I had... actually spoken it aloud.

Something I had never told anyone... and even still, hoped I wouldn't ever have to.

Yet...

Studying Vim as he walked next to me, I found the way he studied the field of vegetables comforting. He looked peaceful, or at least at peace with himself.

If anyone could learn the truth, and not end up hating me... it was probably him.

Since after all, he probably had the same sins and failures.

The same mistakes.

"I wish I could have spent time with Silkie," I said, changing my mind's focus.

"Me too. If anything to see her lay an egg from stress," Vim said.

"Hmph."

*Chapter 67: Chapter Sixty Six – Vim – To Sea A Smile*

Renn walked a few feet away from me, happily splashing in the ocean waters.

"It's warm Vim," she said, enjoying herself.

"Warm enough, I'm sure," I said. More like it was simply not freezing.

She smirked, and I wondered if she wanted to splash me. She was looking at me as if I was something to hunt.

We were walking along a rather large beach. The sky was clear of clouds and storms, and the wind wasn't bad at all... in fact she was probably right that it was warmer than usual. It was still winter, the tail end of it, and this sea was always cold. Had been for hundreds of years... and probably would be for many hundreds more. But the world seemed... generally calm and warm today. The wind didn't chill at all, what little there was of it.

"Oh!" Renn hurried away, farther out to sea. I kept an eye on her as she went deep enough that the water reached her rolled up pants.

She bent down, and half a moment later hefted up out of the water a massive green turtle.

"Look!" she laughed, turning and heading back to me.

The turtle made noises as it tried to flap its flippers, but it couldn't do anything as Renn showed it off to me. "It's huge!" she said, turning it so its large head could glare at me.

"Be gentle with it, that thing is almost as old as you," I said.

"Think so?" Renn asked, tilting her head at it. Water was still pouring off it, splashing both me and her. I took a step back, not because I feared it or the water... but because I carried her stuff. I had her backpack, which I had stuffed full since she had taken off some clothes. Her socks and her hat and jacket. I held her shoes in my left hand, as well.

I nodded. That was a sea turtle... and honestly, seeing her carry it around so easily made me second guess my assessment of her capabilities.

That thing had thrice or more weight to it than she did... and she held it with outstretched arms, turning and moving it around as if it were a toy.

Her appearance betrayed her strength. She looked scrawny and young, especially with the way she had rolled up her pants and sleeves.

Renn slowly put it down, and it released a bunch of bubbles as she put it back into the water. It was pissed.

She had a huge smirk as she watched it splash away from us, heading back to the deep.

"I love the ocean," she said as she watched it go.

"You did mention you lived in a port city," I said, remembering one of our first real conversations.

"More of a small coastal village. Pryti... it was far north, where ice formed over the rivers and inlets around it. The waters there were far colder than here," she said, and bent down to wipe her hands off in the water. The turtle had probably been covered in moss or grime.

"I see," I said. I hadn't recognized the town name, but it wasn't that big of a surprise. I didn't go far north very often. The few members of our society up there didn't like me visiting too often.

Plus depending on how long ago she had lived there, that village could be long gone by now.

"It was... a nice place. A few hundred people lived there," she added as she shook her hands to try and dry them.

An ocean wave splashed behind her, and rolled along the sand. It hit her in the shins, and then after a moment almost reached my feet.

I stood just outside of its reach however, and planned to keep it that way.

I'd never get sick just because I was wet or cold... but that didn't mean I wanted to walk for weeks in soaked shoes and clothes. Soaked by salt water on top of it. Plus I carried her stuff... I had been entrusted with them, and I'd protect them.

"You got your pants a little wet," I warned her.

"I know... I'm sorry, but it looked so neat," she looked away, as if she was a child being chastised and I her father.

Her tail twitched around wildly, further telling me her emotions about it, and I glanced to the shadow in the distance. The turtle had swam away, but lingered nearby. Maybe there was a predator worse than Renn deeper in the depths.

"Usually cats hate water," I said as I returned to walking.

She hurried to follow, but stayed in the water. She splashed around, walking in the ankle high waves. "I've heard that too. I wouldn't know, cats don't like me so I never get to really spend time with them," she said.

I nodded... but knew that she wasn't an ordinary cat. Not just because she was human in shape, but because of what her bloodline actually was. She was a large one. And they didn't like water either, but wouldn't hesitate to get wet as to eat or hunt.

"Rather I... I'm not sure why... but I like it. I used to sit for days staring at the ocean, when I lived on the coast," Renn said as she looked out to the vast sea.

The waves in the distance, a little away from the shoreline, were wild. And big. There must be a storm beyond sight, based off how violent they looked out there.

"Would you choose the sea or a forest?" I asked her.



She paused for a moment, but I didn't stop to wait for her to find an answer. After a few steps she hurried to catch back up to me. "Can't I pick a forest right along the sea? That'd be the best," she said.

"There's a few places like that," I said.

Though none with any villages of the Society. The coast was too dangerous. Too often visited by humans, for entire villages of our kind to live safely within.

"Oh... I mean..." she mumbled as she went into thought.

She hadn't realized I had asked for a rather real reason. A purpose.

I needed to find a place for her, and soon. There were a few places in mind, but they were long-shots. Luckily the Cathedral was one of them. It was a small distance from us, but it was also a place that most of our kind couldn't survive in. If she actually found herself able to live there, it'd not only be a great home for her it'd help the Society out as a whole.

Honestly her picking the Cathedral would be best. Not just for her... but for me as well.

Renn went quiet and retreated from the ocean for a moment. Her bare feet sunk into the wet sand, and I noticed that her toenails were not pointed or sharp like how her fingernails were getting. I'd have her cut them later. Humans could grow long nails, but not that sharp nor as long. It was odd that only her fingernails became sharp... but it was a good thing. It'd make wearing shoes difficult and a pain if they had.

"How long will we walk along the ocean?" she asked, excited. She sounded as if she hoped we'd do so for weeks.

"In a few days we'll come to an inlet. There's a small fishing village there, where one of our members live," I said.

"By themselves?" she asked.

"Kaley lives alone. However, last time I had been there, a few of the humans there knew of her. Or at least had an inkling she was... special," I explained.

"Hm..." she pondered my words as the waves crashed against her feet. I was lucky the tide was retreating, so I didn't have to worry about stepping away for now. I kept an eye on the force of the waves that approached all the same, however.

We walked quietly for a moment, and I studied the shells and crabs we passed. There seemed to be a lot... even for a beach unbothered by humans. Maybe one of the recent storms had been violent here.

"What's beyond the sea Vim?" Renn then asked, as she stared out at the horizon.

"More sea. Then eventually land again... Then islands. Then more sea, until the seas become ice. Layers upon layers of ice," I said.

"You've been there?" she asked, looking back at me.

"I have."

"Why? What were you doing there?"

"The first time, I had gone there... to escape. The second time I had gone in search of a land for our people. For the Society. For a place for them to hide and live peacefully," I said.

Renn's eyes narrowed and I noticed the way her ears and tails went stiff. I was now more important than the sea she found so beautiful. "Oh... you didn't find it, did you?" she asked softly.

Her shoes made an odd noise, and I glanced at them. I had accidentally squeezed them a little too hard. Luckily it didn't seem I had broken or torn anything. I needed to be more careful. Not just with my strength, but my words.

"I... did..." I spoke slowly, both to speak without lying and also to not tell the whole truth. "But I lost the place I found," I said.

She frowned, and her ears fidgeted, as if they itched. "You... lost it? You can't find it again?" she asked.

Her eyes bore into me as we talked, and I wished that the sea had been more pretty. Maybe if it had been she'd have not lost interest in it so quickly.

"I lost the rights to them... is a better way to phrase it," I said carefully.

Renn finally looked away from me, but only so she could stare at the sea-star we were walking past. It was massive, so big I worried she'd try to lift it up as she had done the turtle.

Luckily for it she left it alone, but she stopped walking as to stare at it for a moment.

Watching her watch the star, I found myself staring at her tail. It hovered in an arc, and twitched lightly every so often. Did she even realize it moved alongside her emotions and feelings? She had shown she could move it at will, having proffered it and stuff to me before... but... Sometimes it seemed to move mindlessly.

"Did someone take those lands from you?" Renn then asked.

Take? "Yes... But those who did so, earned them. So I'm not upset over it," I said.

Renn tilted her head and glanced at me, her eyes dug into me as I stood still and waited for the next question.

"So... they're our people then, aren't they?" she asked as she stood up straight, no longer staring at the starfish.

"They were," I admitted.

She glanced out at the sea, and I knew she was trying to imagine it. "Why did you lose them then? If they're our people shouldn't..." she stopped talking, and I knew it was because she was making sense of it.

"They're our people, but not a part of our Society. They chose to... separate from it. They settled on a far off land, where no humans live," I said. I dared not tell her more than that.

"Are there a lot there? Can I go there? Why didn't everyone go?" she asked, turning to me as to ask her questions.

I sighed and nodded, and had to step back two steps to escape a tiny wave of foam. "There's about half the number of us there, as there are here."

"Oh! That's... a lot? That's a good thing isn't it? Why do you look like you're talking about something that hurts?" she asked as she began to rub her arms as if cold. No... She probably was cold. The water wasn't actually as warm as she had teased about, and even though not a human that didn't mean she didn't suffer from such things.

"It is a good thing. It means there are more of us than most know... but the ones who left, the ones who went there... Well, let's just say their methods and rules don't really align with my own. With most of us, even," I said.

"Ah..." Renn's face contorted as she frowned. Odds were she read a little too deeply into my words, but I wasn't in the mood to correct her.

After all, she'd not be allowed there. They'd cast her out... if they even still existed.

"Still... it is a good thing that there are more of us, isn't it?" she asked.

"Maybe. We'll see," I said a little too honestly.

I stepped forward, to put us back onto path. The sun was still high overhead, but I knew in a few hours it'd begin to set. I didn't want to walk along this ocean at night. It'd be too cold and uncomfortable even for her then.

Renn quickly followed after me, and I noted she hopped over the large starfish. It took quite a leap.

"We'll see... did something happen?" she asked, now worried.

"Possibly. But it is likely we'll never know," I said. Or at least, in all honesty, I didn't want to know and hoped I never did.

"Why... why do you sound like you are glad about it? Did something happen?" Renn asked, and I noted the tone in her voice. She was now worried.

I really needed to stop being so open with her. Why did it happen so naturally? Usually it was real easy for me to keep secrets.

"Things did happen. But you need not worry over it. Let's focus on our people here, within reach," I said, trying to steer the conversation a little better. I really didn't want to tell her how close I had come to killing half our society out of anger.

"I'm focusing on you, Vim. No one else," Renn said as she came to a stop.

Coming to a stop as well, I noticed the dryer sand beneath my feet. She stood in the dark wet stuff a little ways away, staring at me.

"The world is vast. Don't try to wrap your hands around it all at once," I said to her.

A larger than normal wave was approaching. I knew I should already be stepping away... fifteen steps maybe. No, eighteen.

Yet I kept still. I didn't warn Renn, who was definitely going to get her pants wet because of it.

I said nothing as she stared at me, looking hurt.

"You're being a little obtuse Vim, even for you," she then said as she grabbed her arms again, to rub it warm.

"Because I'm afraid to trust you," I said.

The wave crashed into her legs, splashing upward. I knew even without looking that it had probably drenched her pants. The wave continued rolling forward and then flowed over my own feet.

I ignored the tug of the ocean and stared into her eyes as my boots got soaked. The water pulled sand around my feet, and I began to sink a little into the sand. Per usual my weight became noticeable as I sunk a few inches.

"I'm afraid to tell you things that could endanger you. That could make you sad and cry. That could get you killed," I said to her as the wave slowly flowed back into the ocean.

Expecting a sad face, or even watery eyes... I was a little surprised to see her smile instead.

It was a warm, gentle, and honestly... a loving smile. One that would have made my heart hurt had I been younger.

Standing before me, with the ocean behind her... I found myself thinking she was beautiful. Her tail was low, nearly touching the water, and her ears were pointed a little off-center. As if she was trying to hear something behind me. Thanks to the angle of the sun, and the reflection of the water... I was able to make out the little spots in her hair. It wasn't just in the thicker hair of her ears and tail, but the hair on her head too. Her colors hid it well, but thanks to the lack of wind which caused her hair to stay still, and the sun behind her they became more obvious. She had small spots, that all seemed to circle around each other in little loops. They were far more prominent on her tail and ears, but there were definitely some in her hair too.

She held her arm still, and stood a little awkwardly. She looked unsteady, even though I knew she was fine. Between the look on her face, her stance, and the world around her... I couldn't decide what was more important to look at. I couldn't choose what to study and burn into my memory.

I chose to remember her smile.

"I'll try harder, Vim," she said softly.

Focusing on her as she squeezed her arm, yet didn't shiver, I watched as the woman before me made a small vow. To me. To herself. To the ocean around us.

"I'll try harder. To earn you," she whispered.

I sunk a little more into the now wet sand, and knew I should say something. To both make light of her comment and dismiss it... Or...

Yet I couldn't. Wouldn't. Her words were bothering me, and I was both too afraid to face them... while also too happy to not accept them. It made me feel uncomfortable, and want to turn away from her.

I tried to resist smiling back at her, and knew it made me seem upset instead. Which was fine, since that was what I wanted to be. Needed to be. It was ridiculous, yet here I was fraught with emotion.

And the worst part was she noticed my struggle.

Renn smiled and nodded, looking far too happy to hate.

Which only made me hate myself.

*Chapter 68: Chapter Sixty Seven – Renn - Kaley*

Why were so many of our kind so beautiful?

No... Kaley wasn't just beautiful...

"A cat! I must know, do you purr?" Kaley asked, leaning forward as if to whisper even though she had asked her question loudly.

I arched back a little, and felt silly doing so. We weren't that close to one another, we sat around a fire pit inside her house. She sat not opposing me, but to the right of me. I was sitting on a large fluffy pillow full of cotton. She sat cross-legged on a similar sized pillow... and honestly looked out of place.

She was stunning. Easily the prettiest woman I had ever seen in my life... Yet...

This village, and her home, were worn and dirty... old and broken down. As were what little clothes she had on.

"Purr..." I knew what she asking, but found it silly. I didn't purr... but could I? Did others like me do so? I didn't remember my parents, or theirs, doing such a thing...

"Like in bed?" Kaley then asked with a smirk.

"Oh. Jeez..." I looked away from her and to the burning coals and wood. Maybe their hot flames would hide my own blushing.

Kaley laughed, and it drew my eyes back to her. She rocked on her pillow, holding her ankles as she joyfully giggled away at my reaction. Her voice was... as pretty as she. It seemed to fill the whole house, yet no matter how loud she spoke it didn't grate on my ears or make me flinch. It was almost sing-song like.

"Still... a cat huh? Hm... I'm not sure where you'll end up, honestly. Maybe the boat builders?" she then frowned as she asked herself, going into thought. While she looked upward at the dark ceiling, I watched her eyes. They glistened oddly, as if wet from tears... yet I knew she wasn't crying.

Thanks to her... lack of clothes, I found myself questioning what she was. The only thing odd about her appearance was her genuine beauty. Her skin was flawless. Her body, nearly fully revealed thanks to the thin cloth she called a shirt, was pristine and without a defect. There wasn't a single part of her that didn't make me very self-conscious of my

own. It made me wonder how she was alone. What man wouldn't want her? Women too. Especially since her personality seemed so... authentic and happy.

She looked inhuman because of her beauty, but not because she herself was so. She looked completely normal.

"Boat builders?" I asked, doing my best to not look at her breasts. They were barely hidden by the gray shirt; it couldn't hold them in thanks to how thin the straps were. The shirt looked as old and worn as her house.

Kaley nodded, which made my eyes dart upwards to her eyes. Her vibrant movements didn't help her shirt in holding anything in at all. "To the south, not much farther than the Cathedral is another nation. Another land. There's a giant river there that has a whole town dedicated to building boats," she happily explained. She even raised her arms to try and showcase how big the boats supposedly were. All the action did instead caused me to blush a little more.

I looked away from her. To study her home again. It was a poor attempt at distracting myself since I couldn't really find anything to study. Her little house was one single room, and was rather normal. A large bed, which was messily covered by pillows and blankets. A few large dressers and cabinets. This fire pit, which probably acted as her stove since there was none elsewhere. Some fishing equipment laid against the front door, and to the left of me was a small wooden table. In actuality it wasn't dirty... just old. It reminded me of the cabin Nory and I had lived in. Something built decades ago and patched together as time went on.

In the end my eyes ended up back on her, and they narrowed as I noticed the way she shifted as to grab the iron poker she used to mess with the hot coals and wood. When she poked at the wood, causing the fire to crackle, I found myself doubting my own appeal.

Even the most basic and normal movements seemed luscious and sexual when she did them.

"So the Society builds boats?" I asked, focusing on Kaley's handiwork as she situated the burning coals and logs as to put a new one upon it.

"A few do. There are a couple predators there. But!" Kaley paused in her work as to look at me. I sat up straighter and kept hold of her odd gaze as she pointed at me with the poker. "One's a complete jerk! No matter what, you better not ever mate with him! I'll never talk to you again if you do," Kaley said firmly.

She looked cute even while angry.

I nodded quickly, even though it was such a ridiculous statement. "What makes him a jerk?" I asked.

"He eats babies," Kaley said coldly. For the first time since meeting her, she no longer sounded happy.

The warm room, and my warm face, both suddenly got ice cold.

Kaley nodded as she finished putting a new log onto the fire. Afterwards she leaned closer to me, and I leaned forward to hear her upcoming whisper.

"While in their poor little eggs too! Isn't it horrible?"

"Eggs...?" I frowned as Kaley nodded harshly... and I was so absorbed in the conversation, I barely noticed the way her breasts dangled thanks to her posture... nor did I notice Vim enter the house.

"She means fish eggs, Renn. Can't you tell what Kaley is by her smell?" Vim had an odd smile on his face as he closed the door behind him.

"Vim! Don't lie! I smell delicious!" Kaley laughed as she greeted him, and I wondered why she was so comfortable to be seen basically naked in front of him.

Leaning back, I studied Kaley as she giggled away... no longer upset. And as Vim went to sit at the table nearby, I suddenly realized it.

"You're a fish!" I shouted, shocked.

Kaley laughed and nodded... then she reached over to pull up her shirt. I startled at the sudden full reveal of her chest, and hurriedly looked at Vim. He was sitting calmly, head on his fist as he watched us.

Looking back at the brazen woman, I found her pointing at something right beneath her right...

Leaning forward, with wide eyes I realized something I should have long ago... especially since they had been visible nearly this whole time. "Gills..." I whispered in shock.

"I am a fish indeed! I'll be honest I really like mermaid. It sounds so much cuter, I like the way it has maiden in it. Don't you think?" Kaley asked as she lowered her shirt. She had the modesty to at least lower it properly; making sure it covered most of her.

"Mermaid..." I tried to remember all that I knew of such creatures, and wondered if she really was one. Or rather... well... I guess she was?

"In some cultures, mermaids are literal monsters. So yes, that is accurate," Vim said.

Kaley giggled in a way that told me that such a statement was a joke.



"The boat builders are gone Kaley. That jerk you spoke of sacrificed his life to save the few children he could. The kids that survived are in the east now, at the Bell Church," Vim said.

"Oh? Really? When did that happen?" Kaley asked with a frown.

"Almost twenty years ago," Vim said plainly.

I groaned softly, not happy to hear of such tragedy... and also to hear that it had taken Kaley this long to hear of it as well.

"In fact that river doesn't have any town on it right now. The war down south is raging strong, and most cities like that have been burnt to the ground," Vim added more information.

Kaley sighed and shook her head, but didn't seem too bothered by Vim's update of the world around us.

"They're at a church? Is that the Cathedral?" I asked of the children.

"The Bell Church is a Society village. It's a horrible place, full of old women who have nothing but time on their hands," Kaley said.

"It's a village with a large bell in the center. But yes it's a place only our kind live in... Last time I was there not a single human had been there," Vim said.

Kaley nodded.

Horrible place? Of old women? Something told me she wasn't entirely joking, but also wasn't too serious.

"Still! How have you been Vim? Find any decent men lately for me?" Kaley asked him.

I blinked at her question and hurriedly looked to Vim. He shrugged. "Not that I'm aware of. Other than this one here, we haven't had any new members lately," Vim said.

"Well I guess she can do for now..." Kaley sighed, sounding defeated and regretful.

I can do!

I can do?

I panicked for some reason, since for a slight moment I had felt happy over it.

"How about you Kaley, catch anything new on your lure lately?" Vim asked as I tried to control the weird thoughts in my head.

"Nothing new. I tried eating young Caleb but he's too devout, so boring," Kaley said.

Eating...

I felt my blush return, and it made me angry. I had just gotten it under control!

"You're lucky fishermen are so understanding. You'd get banished elsewhere," Vim said.

"Banished, pfa," Kaley waved the word away without a care.

"Did Oplar visit?" Vim asked.

"She did! But she didn't stay the night. I had a guest that night," Kaley said.

Staring at the strange, yet oddly comforting, woman... I felt hopelessly out of place.

A part of me wished I could be as... open as she. This had to be the person people spoke of when they spoke of free spirited. It made me jealous. I could barely get too close to Vim without feeling conscious.

"Not like she had anywhere to sleep even if she did," Vim said.

"My bed's big enough for four," Kaley said with pride.

"Four? Really?" Vim asked as he glanced at it. He was seriously calculating it!

Kaley giggled and shook her head. "Why would I share, Vim? Really! You think I'm willing to share the tasty snacks that I work so hard to get? Please!" Kaley laughed at him, as if he was ridiculous.

Somehow I felt as if the most ridiculous one here was me... and that made no sense.

"Well at least you use a bed now. No more drowning men, right?" Vim asked.

"Right!" Kaley nodded, and I now questioned even more things.

"Speaking of beds, want to sleep with me Renn?" Kaley asked, startling my thoughts away from what had just been said before.

"Uh..." I went stiff. Surely she wasn't serious...

Kaley then giggled, and even Vim made a noise, and then she waved my worry down. "I'm kidding! Jeez you're so cute! I only like men... you're obviously lacking in a certain... way, you know?" Kaley said quickly.

Although a relief, I still felt somewhat regretful. She really was pretty.

"She likes to tease. She's harmless. She likes young men. So when the day comes you have sons, make sure you keep her far away from them," Vim said.

"Hey!" Kaley yelled at Vim, offended.

"Am I wrong?" Vim asked.

"Not at all! But they'd be adorable! Look at her! I'm drooling just thinking about!" Kaley pointed at me as if I was some kind of prize.

I couldn't help it, I laughed.

"And I don't only eat young men... I like the older ones sometimes too. Just have to be in the mood for one," Kaley added, defending herself further.

"I've never seen you invite an old man," Vim said.

"You've never seen me desperate, then," Kaley said with a nod, as if it was obvious.

Vim sighed and shook his head, but said nothing more.

"Not going to invite him?" I asked her with a point to Vim.

After all he was the oldest man around.

"Vim?" Kaley then looked at him, and I did too. He had an odd look on his face, a strange smile with a raised eyebrow... as if waiting expectantly.

Then Kaley laughed. To such a degree she rolled back, off the pillow and onto the ground. "Vim! Him! Ha!"

While she laughed, I couldn't help but chuckle at her. His look had been odd, but it hadn't been that funny.

"If I had feelings they'd be hurt right now," Vim said.

Kaley only laughed harder at that.

Smirking at her, I felt... happy.

She was so odd, yet this was so much better than the last place we had gone. They hadn't even wanted to look at me at that farm. Silkie had hated me.

Moments like these made this all worth it.

They were precious. Valuable beyond measure.

I needed to keep them safe.

"So! Go on then! Get on out!" Kaley then pointed at the door.

"Huh!" I felt the whole world come to a screeching halt, as I stared at the woman who had my heart in her hands.

"Not you! Him!" Kaley quickly pointed at Vim.

"Huh!" Vim sounded surprised, but it didn't match his face. He was probably just teasing me since he had said it in the same way.

Kaley hopped up off the ground, and hurried over to the table. She tugged him away from it, and began pushing him towards the door. "Let us have some alone time! Go do your checking the city thing that you do!" Kaley shouted.

"I already checked it, this place is safe like always," Vim groaned. He looked as if he was trying to stop her from pushing him, but he had a smirk on his face.

"Then go jump in the ocean!" Kaley pushed Vim towards the door. He allowed her to, and I could tell so by the way he smirked at her attempts.

"Girls only! Go catch a fish!" she told him as she pushed him, even though he came to an abrupt stop right before the door. She began to groan as she tried to push him, yet he didn't budge.

"Catch a cold more like," Vim sighed, but didn't argue. He pulled the door open and allowed himself to be shoved outside.

Kaley giggled at him, and with a firm nod shut the door on him.

A little worried, I stood up slowly and wondered what Kaley had in mind. It was night! What was Vim going to do? He had said there were no inns or taverns here in this little village and...

"Kaley?" I asked her as she turned and gave me a smile.

"Alright, let me hear it all!" she happily said as she hurried back to the fire pit.

She pulled her pillow closer to the one I had sat on. Putting them side by side, she plopped back down and nodded quickly for me to join her.

The fire crackled, and I felt oddly conscious again. And this time not because of her.

Slowly sitting back down, I gulped and wondered what she wanted to know. I hoped it wasn't my past, since something told me I'd reveal everything to her. She was too pretty and joyful... For some reason I felt like I should tell her anything she wanted to know, and with full honesty.

I really didn't want to tell her what had happened to my family. Or the Sleepy Artist... or the humans I had grown to love, and then hate...

But at the same time I really did want to talk to her. To spend time with her. I felt comfortable with her, and I actually found myself liking her personality. It was fun. So different from those I had known before. So different than the upstanding Nory, or the grouchy Amber. So special in her own way.

Once I was back in my seat, Kaley shifted closer and nodded. "Tell me what you think of Vim?" she asked with a whisper, speaking quieter than she had ever before.

Oddly, I found myself more than willing to talk about that.

*Chapter 69: Chapter Sixty Eight – Vim – To Fix the Unfixable*

Tossing the last of the net out onto the boat, I watched as the two men went to untying the boat from the dock.

"Thank you Vim. I'll get you some fish in exchange for all the help!" the father said as he picked up the oar.

"At least a few, we will!" the man's son agreed as I reached my leg out off the dock and put my foot onto the side of the boat's hull.

With a small kick, I pushed their boat away from the dock. It rocked a little too harshly, which told me I had used too much force... but the two men just laughed as they waved.

Nodding to them, I turned as to leave the dock.

This inlet opened to the ocean, but they weren't headed that way. Instead they planned to go down one of the smaller rivers that fed this inlet. I knew they'd be gone for a whole day or more. Odds were they really would bring back a few fish just for me... but by then I'd be gone.

Leaving the dock, I wondered how long this village would last. They were down to only a few families... and most were elders. That son just now was one of the youngest. He and a Caleb were the youngest of the men. There were a few daughters, but then the rest of the people here were older. Most too old to have children anymore. The lack of children, and the fact that people kept dying or leaving... and no one was moving here...

It'd probably only be a few more visits before I'd find Kaley alone.

Stepping off the wooden dock and onto grass, my assumption only became more viable. The dirt road that used to run all around this town in a large circle was now covered in weeds and grass. They neither took care of it nor had the manpower to do so even if they wanted to. There weren't even enough footfalls, or carts, to keep the road free of weeds and grass.

Another town doomed to die. Even though this place wasn't one of ours, since only Kaley was a member of our Society... it still was depressing. Especially since I knew once this town died, it'd not be long until she followed soon after.

Although the road was mostly gone, I still followed it.

Before I could get very far though, I found Renn.

She was standing still, watching me from the side of the road. I glanced at the dock I had just left... and realized she had most likely been watching me from afar. While standing near one of the few remaining lampposts in town.

Why hadn't I noticed her? The work I had been doing had been simple and monotonous. I had even glanced around often, as I always did thanks to habit...

A part of me worried that meant her presence was becoming too... normal for me. As if I was growing accustomed to her presence. But at the same time, wouldn't that also mean I should have noticed her right away too? If I was comfortable with her, wouldn't I then be glad to see her?

"Do you like to work or are you just really bad with being bored?" Renn asked as I approached her.

So she had been watching me. Surprising. Maybe I was exhausted and didn't realize it.

"Both. How was the cove?" I asked her.

Renn smiled as she stepped towards me, as to join me in walking. She got close, a little too close... "Fun. Kaley is a little... odd, but I can tell she means well. I like her," she said.

I smiled at her words and nodded. Odd. Kaley was, to a point. But that was only because she didn't know her past.

Though maybe she did. I had left Renn and Kaley alone the whole night, out of kindness. They had pretty much talked the whole night through. Honestly after hearing some of the first conversations I had chosen to ignore the rest. I wasn't the type to snoop, but it wasn't like I could just ignore them completely. It was my duty to protect them after all.

At first sign of light, in the early morning, Kaley had taken Renn to the nearby cove. The one somewhat hidden away on the other side of the inlet this village was founded upon.

To where I had found her years ago. To where she used to live.

Renn probably didn't realize how precious such a gesture was. But how could she? Kaley would never tell her.

"Kaley... she uhh... Said we had the house to ourselves tonight," Renn said, a little awkwardly.

"I'm sure. I wonder which poor human she's got wrapped around her fingers now," I said.

"Uhm... the chief's son, I guess...?" Renn sounded embarrassed, as if she was talking about herself.

"Don't hate her for it. She's just... that way. You can't teach a fish to swim as they say," I said.

"You can't?" Renn asked.

I smiled at her odd tone. Her question had sounded serious.

Instead of heading around the village, as I had originally intended, I instead headed for Kaley's house. If she was intentionally going to stay away then there was no point in me doing the same.

"Well... we can either leave now or in the morning. I'll let you choose," I said.

"Huh? Oh..." Renn went into thought for a moment, and I wondered if she had misunderstood my joke.

Should I tell her? Would she glare at me or laugh?

Then her hat twitched, and she looked at me with wide eyes. "Wait..."

I chuckled and looked away from her, so I didn't see that weird happiness so clearly. "Sorry. Was just trying to play off her horrible attempt at a joke," I said.

Renn made an odd sound as she grumbled and rubbed her chin. "So she meant it that way? Really?" she asked herself more than me.

"Not likely. Haley is... special. She had probably said it as a joke, but she isn't letting us have the night alone just over a joke," I explained to her.

"Oh..."

Honestly... her joke was probably more-so self-depreciation. If I knew Kaley as well as I thought I did, she probably didn't like seeing Renn and I together. Such a thing probably only made her remember her past, which undoubtedly only hurt.

Kaley's house came into sight, and I found myself a little upset at it. It looked... decrepit from a distance.

I didn't like that. It made me want to tear it down as to rebuild it.

But I couldn't do that. Not without permission least of all.

"It's a miracle it hasn't gotten her killed yet, honestly," I said as I thought of Kaley and her... certain traits.

"You... you uh, mean because of her gills right?" Renn asked as I went to open the door for her.

Pausing as I grabbed the door's handle, I glanced at her. Renn went red-faced at my look... and I suddenly wished more people were like Kaley.

Seemed Renn had thought of it long and hard already. Not a surprise, yet...

"Hm... I mean... Men are distracted but you'd still think they'd notice. I would," I said.

"Distracted," she scoffed as I opened the door and let her go in first.

Entering after her, I slowly closed the door. Slow enough that I could stare at the road we had just walked along.

No one was on it. No one had been watching us, or following us.

Not a surprise, honestly. This village was... too old. Already dead. They didn't need to care if some stranger came in, in a certain way.

After all it wasn't like they had anything to steal after all.

"Can I light the fire?" Renn asked.

"Hm," I nodded as I shut the door, and noticed the wobble as it did so.

Running my hand down the wooden frame, I felt the large gap... that grew, and then shrunk again. It had warped... most likely thanks to the salty sea air.

Renn struck the fire alit, and shadows danced along the door I studied.



Looking away from it, I looked around and quickly noticed other things that needed fixing. The bed's frame was cracked, the wood was old and... most likely long broken thanks to her activities upon it. The largest shelf was missing half its boards, making most of it useless. The window nearby had crooked shutters. They only blocked the outside world thanks to the shutters on the outside.

The roof was drafty, the blankets and pillows looked a little rough, and the floor although clean of dirt and grime was also rough. The wooden floorboards were starting to creak more than not, and not just because I was heavier than I should be.

"Why uh... why does she stay here? She said she'd love to travel again," Renn asked as she tended the fire. She only put a single new log upon it, which told me she had done it not to warm herself but to keep the house warm in general.

"Because she values this place. Loves it," I said.

"She seems like she'd get along with anyone. She's... a happy person," Renn stated.

"She means well," I agreed. Kaley was indeed a good natured person. She didn't even fear predators, even though her bloodline should have guaranteed that.

Staring at Renn, and her sad look as she studied the fire before her... I realized it would be okay to tell her. After all, most did know already. And she hadn't revealed any other secrets about anyone either. Kaley and her had talked long and hard all night about me, the Sleepy Artist... everything. Renn had not only told the truth, but the only things she had omitted were things and information about the other members of our Society. People like Rapti and Lomi, she didn't tell Kaley where they were... mostly because Renn didn't know that Kaley knew where and who most those people were.

"Kaley's husband and children are buried in the cove nearby. She can't bring herself to leave them," I told her.

Renn looked away from the fire and to me. Her hat nearly slid off thanks to the quick movement. "Buried...?"

I watched as she ran through her memories, and sure enough... she flinched and lowered her head.

"Did she show you?" I asked her. It'd shock me if she had.

"No. But there was a spot she kept staring at. Near the waterfall," she whispered.

"Near there, yes. She had lived in that small pool originally," I said.

"Lived?" Renn frowned, and I noticed the watery eyes. I had expected it, but in actuality I praised her for not full blown crying already.

I walked over to the table, and went to the leftmost leg. I had sat at it last night and noticed... Yes. A wobble.

Bending down to look at the legs of the table, I studied it as I made it wobble. It seemed two of the legs were worn down.

"You mean she actually lived in the water, don't you?" Renn asked.

Glancing at her, I found her staring at me with an odd look.

I nodded. "She had been. Those gills aren't just for show," I said.

"So... she's actually a mermaid?" Renn asked.

"Well no. She's some kind of tuna I think... don't think too heavily on it. She abandoned the cove when she met her husband. He had been a cow," I said.

"A cow?" Renn perked up at that for some reason.

I nodded as I pushed upward on the table and lifted the two closest legs off the ground. Yes, the leg was just a little worn. Easy to fix. "A large man. They fell in love quickly and had children," I said.

"What happened?" she asked softly.

"Disaster. Nothing new. Afterwards she uh... broke. Up here," I pointed at my head as I put the table back down and wondered if I should use a nail to fix the wobble, or simply sand down the other legs a tad to offset it.

Either way it was just a temporary fix. But it was better than nothing.

"She is a little odd, but is she really broken? I know broken. She's not broken," Renn's voice drew my thoughts away from the table as I looked at her. She had stood away from the fire and was nearly glaring at me.

There were no tears rolling down her face, but those watery eyes held a lot of emotion. Not just sadness either.

"The reason she likes to sleep with men is because she can't handle being alone at night," I said simply.

Renn's eyes narrowed and her face contorted, as if suddenly angry at me. But I knew she wasn't.

"So..." she looked around, but didn't seem to find what she was looking for. "So... what's wrong with that? If it keeps her happy? Or strong?" Renn asked.

I shrugged. "Nothing? You know how I feel about free will," I said.

She blinked a few times, and then looked away from me. I see... she hadn't thought I had seen it as wrong, but she herself had.

Renn had judged Kaley for it... at least internally, and now was upset to find she no longer could do so... and didn't know why. Or maybe she did know.

"Does it bother you?" I asked her, wondering if maybe she'd tell me.

"What she does...? I had found it odd but... rather I was more so worried for her. That it'd get her hurt. But she seems quite obviously very happy," Renn said, yet I could tell she was still pondering something else. Something personal, deep down.

"It not only keeps her happy, it keeps her alive. She's tried to kill herself before, I'd not be shocked if she did something similar again," I said as I headed for the corner of the house that Kaley kept random tools.

Bending down to study a section of a shelf, I found a hammer and a saw... but no nails.

Maybe I'd have to figure something else out.

"Once again Vim you say things so nonchalantly, and I find my heart break because of it," Renn whispered.

Glancing over at her, I found the first set of tears fall.

"Sorry," I said gently.

"No... I just... need to get used to it, I guess? Is it possible to?"

"Time will tell," I said honestly. Some could get used to it, others couldn't. And many who could simply ended up becoming worse themselves than not, because of it.

"I had praised her for her free spirited personality. Now I pity her," Renn said as she slowly sat down on the pillow near the fire pit she had been sitting in last night.

"Just look at it is a coping mechanism. Some need it, especially after severe trauma. You can pity her if you want but don't let your pity ignore the fact she is still alive... and is happy in her own way," I said as I found a small box of nails, but they were far too big. They'd only crack and damage the table's legs even more.

"How long ago did it happen?" Renn asked.

"A few decades ago," I said.

"That long...?"

I nodded as I rummaged through a small crate. Pulling up an old cloth I found a large iron... Turning it a little, I realized it was a bracket. For something large. Maybe a barn door. Why did she have something like this? Putting the old cloth back over it, I realized that there was little chance I'd find the right items.

After a few moments I decided to just saw the other legs down enough to even it out. It'd lower the table a little, but not so much that it'd cause any problems. Kaley wasn't much taller than Renn, so she didn't need a whole lot of room.

Grabbing the small saw I returned to the table.

"You're fixing the table, aren't you? Since it wobbles?" Renn asked as she watched me.

I nodded. "I am."

"Will you fix the bed too? It's a little..." Renn looked at it, and I tried to remember if she had actually lain upon it or not last night. I didn't think she had... which meant she had simply seen it. Hard not to, it was obvious.

"I'll try to, yes," I said.

What I'd really like to do is build her a new house entirely. But I knew if I did she'd just yell at me.

Bending down to watch the table leg as I made it shake up and down, I calculated how much of the two legs I needed to cut off. After I did, I glanced at Renn and found her frowning at me. As if upset.

"Does... does it bother you? That I'm doing this?" I asked, wondering what was wrong with her.

"Huh...? No... I uh... Maybe. Does it?" she asked me and herself at the same time.

Hesitating for a moment, I tried to think of what it could be.

"No. It doesn't. But for some reason I feel like it should... yet there's nothing wrong with it. In fact I should be asking if you need any help," Renn stood from her seat, and brushed off her hands.

"You can help me hold it steady if you'd like," I said. I really didn't need help, but... considering her previous outbursts over wanting to help, I figure there was no harm in letting her.

She beamed a smile as she hurried over, and I suddenly realized that was it.

She hadn't been upset that I was helping... but that instead what had bothered her was I hadn't asked if she wanted to help me help Kaley.

Maybe...

"Other than this and the bed, was there anything else you noticed that might need attention?" I asked as she walked over to the table. She kneeled down a little to see what I was focusing on and then grabbed the top of the table as to steady it.

"Some of her pots and pans are bad. One has a hole in it, near the rim. It doesn't stop her from being able to use it but..." Renn said.

"Hm," I nodded and went to saw the tip of the table's leg off, about half a thumb's worth.

"Also if you can, a new blanket? That thing has holes all over it," Renn added.

I nodded again. I had noticed they were worn.

Sawing the table's leg was swift and easy. Once done I right away went to the other opposing it, the one that was worn, and cut a small part of it off too so it'd be even and leveled.

Once done I went to the other side and repeated the process.

Renn watched me as I finished up the last leg, and then the table went flush with wooden floor.

She tried to make it wobble, and found it didn't.

"Nice," she smiled, happy at the result.

"By the way, you don't need to get jealous. Kaley isn't my type, for more reasons than one," I said to her as I went to put the saw back and get something to clean up the sawdust and mess I had made.

The table made a loud sound as she pushed a little too hard, forcing it to skid along the floor.

Smiling at her crazy look, and the red in her face, I went to fixing the few things I could for Kaley.

It was the only thing I could do for her... since I couldn't fix her mind or soul.

*Chapter 70: Chapter Sixty Nine – Renn – Those Who Came Before*

Stepping over a moss covered root, I huffed as I followed Vim ever deeper into the forest.

He was walking a few feet ahead of me, and seemed to have some kind of path he was following... but I couldn't make heads or tails of it. Did he not realize we were walking in circles?

"Where are we going Vim? Another village?" I asked.

"To give an offering," Vim said.

"An offering...?" I tried to think of what that could mean. Offering to whom? Where? Why?

Stepping around a large boulder that Vim had stepped up onto and then down again, I wondered if our strides were really that different. He had clambered up on top of the boulder with ease, taking only two steps...

Pausing for a moment to study the large rock, I realized I could only get up on top with two steps if I actually jumped. It would take a strong leap to do so.

Vim slowed for a moment, but didn't look back at me. He returned to his normal pace once I hurried away from the rock.

Studying him, I realized he was taller than me. I mean, he had always been... but I hadn't thought he was that much more so. Maybe it was because of my ears...

"A member of the Society and her family live in this forest... but they're a little special. They're like Tor, kind of," Vim then said.

"Rodents?" I asked.

He chuckled, and in such a way that told me he found my assumption hilariously silly.

It wasn't that silly. After all I didn't know anything about this Tor... I hadn't gotten to meet him, thanks to Silkie's aversion of me.

"By the way, what do you think of this forest?" Vim asked before I could ask more about these new members I was about to, hopefully, meet.

"Rather than the forest I want to know why you have us circling around so much. Can't we just go in a straight line?" I asked.

Vim suddenly came to a stop, and I hesitated... had I said something bad?

He turned to study me, and I found a frown on his face.

Woops. I did.

"I forgot what you were," he said softly.

"A... very happy friend who wants to live a long time and spend that long life helping the society?" I offered.

His frown turned into a smile, and it made me smile in turn. It looked good on him... especially since I had been the one to put it there.

"You had mentioned you grew up in a forest, hadn't you," he said.

I nodded. "One denser than this," I said.

This place was dense. And... old... The trees here weren't the biggest, nor tallest, but the moss and foliage here told anyone with an eye to see, how long this forest has been here.

We were walking upon hundreds of years of life. Layers upon layers of grass and bushes laid on roots and rocks. Moss and leaves were layered on them. Odds are this forest was due for a fire, based off the density of the duff.

"Yes... I apologize. Instinctively I had been taking the long route, so that you wouldn't remember how to get there... Sorry about that," Vim sighed.

"Huh?"

He nodded and pointed to our left. Towards the very area we had been circling in one form or another for hours. "It's there. Come on," he returned to walking as he headed that way instead.

Glaring at him as he guided me towards the very path we had walked upon nearly an hour ago, I wondered if I should be angry or not.

"You don't want me remembering where the village is?" I asked him. If so that hurt a little. It meant he didn't trust me. Which... I mean... was to be expected somewhat but...

"No. Or well, yes. But there's no need for that. You can remember it if you wish," he said.

"Because you realized I would anyway. Which means you're only trusting me because you have to. Want me to stay here until you're done?" I asked. I could hear my own hurt and whining in my voice, and for once I hoped he heard it fully and well too.

Vim slowed to a stop again. He rubbed the back of his neck, and then turned a little to watch me come up and stop next to him. I stood a few feet away, but close enough that he should understand my own thoughts in the manner.

I wanted to be trusted. And if I needed to earn it, he simply needed to tell me how to do so.

"Renn, to be honest I had just... acted naturally. Usually when I visit certain places, with others in tow, it's because I'm taking them elsewhere and they're just accompanying me on my route for a short time. Those individuals, like Lomi... don't need to know the exact location of some of our members," Vim began to try and explain.

And trying he was indeed. He looked... hurt himself. As if it had been he who had just been told he couldn't be trusted.

"I know I haven't truly proved myself yet Vim, so they're only words... but I promise to never harm any in the Society," I said.

Vim studied me with his heavy eyes, and I hated how young I felt in front of him. Even if he was truly many times older than me, I was still old myself. I was not a child. Yet before him sometimes I felt...

"I've taken you to meet every member on the way so far, have I not?" Vim asked me.

I nodded, he had. As far as I was aware at least.

"I'd not have done so if I hadn't believed in that promise, Renn. Tor is one thing, but Rapti and Kaley are feeble, and alone. I would not have allowed you to meet them, or even know of their existence, if I didn't think you safe enough," he said.

Although I did my best to keep the warm happiness from showing on my face from his words, my tail and ears still showed the truth. But I didn't hide or turn away in shame for displaying such joy... since after all, I had been waiting to hear such words for some time.

"Thank you," I said, and noticed the small crack in my voice. Hopefully he simply mistook that for my typical emotional self.

"That being said... I apologize. I meant no ill will by it. As I said I did so by instinct..." He sighed as he shook his head, as if upset. "Wasted half the day. That's on me."

Half the day... so we really could have been there that much earlier.

"What made you forget? Or... why?" I asked, wondering how to actually phrase my question.



"Not sure..." he whispered.

"Am I that forgetful?" I asked him.

He smiled softly and shook his head. "No... I was actually thinking of you this morning as we entered the forest. I should have simply realized it then... maybe I'm getting old?" He asked himself.

Thinking of me?

"What were you thinking about?" I asked.

"Your name," he answered and returned to walking.

Pausing for a moment before following, I wondered what that meant.

My name? Was there something weird about it?

"The one's we're going to meet are wolves. Old ones. Real ones. Specifically I'm here to see the patriarch of their little pack. Her name sounds weird in our language, so I just call her Bray," Vim said.

"Bray...?" I asked as I picked up my pace as to stay with him. He had begun to walk a little faster.

He nodded.

"Real ones, you mean actual wolves don't you," I also realized.

He nodded again.

"So... You hadn't been teasing when you had said Tor was a small rodent," I said.

"I might have somewhat exaggerated his smallness, but he really isn't human in any form. They're what you'd call ancestors. Remnants of a forgotten era," Vim explained.

"I'd heard of them. My grandmother spoke of her grandparents. They had been large beasts. Able to see the top of treetops while lying down," I said, remembering one of her stories.

"There's likely some truth to that. Many were... special. Large in size, or possessing strange abilities and traits," he said.

"Strange abilities... you mean like Rapti, who grows old if she doesn't pluck her feathers?" I asked.

"Something like that."

I noted the way he said that.

Seemed he trusted me enough to let me meet her, but not know more than that.

Although a little disturbing... I accepted it. After all, I knew it'd take me a long time to really earn his trust.

Maybe even decades. Centuries.

I looked forward to those many years.

While walking, I tried to imagine it. An amount of time equaling, or even greater, than my whole life.

Maybe even many times over. Hundreds of years... learning and meeting so many people. Earning their trust. Earning their friendship.

It made me teary eyed.

Blinking blurry eyes, I paused as I realized we weren't in a forest anymore.

Suddenly we were in a great field. Covered in lush grass and flowers, the only trees in view were far off in the distance.

"Huh...?" I tried to understand what had just happened. We had just been in a forest. A real one. Although there did seem to be a forest, a similar one, off in the distance... how had we ended up so far outside it?

Looking around, I was a little relieved that Vim was still nearby. He was walking ahead calmly, which told me that nothing... unnatural had happened... but...

Surely something had. I had grown emotional in my thoughts but I would not have missed such a thing as this.

The ankle high grass was lush, and the flowers scattered all over were vibrant colors. And huge. Most looked...

Bending down near one, I studied the massive purple flower. It was bigger than my head.

"How have you been Bray?" Vim's voice drew my gaze away from the flower, and I groaned as once again the world changed.

Now there were large rocks. Boulders, of all shapes and sizes... Scattered all around. Some were even covered in grass and moss.

Although the rocks were new, the field of grass and flowers was the same... but what really made me flinch were the large wolves all around us.

Hurriedly standing, I tried to count them as I hurried to Vim's side. Luckily he was only a few feet away.

Once next to him, I slowly began to calm down. Not that I felt I was in any actual danger... but it was very unnerving for the world to seemingly alter itself without me noticing. And I didn't like how these creatures had appeared out of seemingly thin air.

I hadn't even smelled them.

In fact... I still couldn't.

A heavy, and very rough sounding, paw scraped stone. The sound drew my eyes towards it, to the front of us. I had to peer around Vim's shoulder to see it, as a massive white wolf stepped up onto a large boulder in front of us.

This was undoubtedly the alpha... and also likely the one Vim had come to find.

It was several large bounds away from us... yet looked up close thanks to its size. The thing's paws alone were probably as big as my whole body.

It could swallow me whole.

Yet for as huge... as powerful as it looked...

"She's beautiful," I whispered as I stared into its golden eyes. They shone, as did its white fur... but somehow they looked...

"You're not so bad yourself," a deep female voice said.

I shivered, and realized it had spoken.

Bray Vim had said. One of us. Animal yet not.

Of course.

Vim chuckled as he looked at me, but I ignored him. I focused on the wolf in front of me, and the many dozens around us. None of the other ones were anywhere near as big as she or as pretty... but each was still beautiful in its own right.

"Been well I hope?" Vim asked it.

"Yes," was all she said. She lowered her head a little, as if to study us a little closer.

I gulped, feeling suddenly the center of attention. I doubted they needed to study Vim as deeply.

"Family looks fine," Vim commented as he looked around. Did he recognize them all? Did they all have names? There were a few that were the size of a normal northern wolf. Still huge, but nothing compared to the others.

"Yes," the wolf said again.

While glancing around, I wondered why her responses were so brisk and simple. She obviously could say more, since she had earlier... but...

"Glad to hear it. And the forest?" Vim asked further.

Typical of him to ask such questions... they were really common from him, when meeting members of the society it seemed.

"Well," was all she said.

Vim nodded, and then reached around to grab something in the small of his back. I watched him mess with a small pouch, one that hung from his belt.

Wait... had he always had those pouches?

No. He hadn't. Where did they come from...?

He pulled the pouch off the belt, and I noticed the small string it had used to wrap around the belt... fade away. As if disintegrating.

Transfixed, I watched as Vim slowly opened the small bag and pulled out a small blue jewel.

Or rather... an orb? Maybe an egg? It was about the size of my fist, which made me self-conscious cause it looked a little small in his hand.

"Hm," The large wolf stood up straighter, its eyes leaving me finally. They went straight to the orb.

Vim stepped forward, and then bent down. To put the blue orb on the ground.

The thing made an odd noise as it rolled onto the grass. A high pitched sound, that reverberated... as if there was an echo.

After putting the orb down Vim stepped back and then glanced at me. He nodded, seemingly proud of himself.

"Huh?" I frowned at him as he gestured for me to join him. He was walking away.

"See you again later," Vim said to the wolves, and without looking back turned and headed away.

Being forced to accompany him, I tried to look behind us. Behind him, to see the wolves.

The giant white wolf hopped off the boulder, and suddenly was smaller. Now a more normal size, it bent its head down... and then took the blue orb into its mouth.

"Vim?" I asked, trying to understand. We were leaving? Already?

Looking at him, and his strange smile, I wondered why. I hadn't even introduced myself yet!

"Goodbye Renn," the wolf then said.

Quickly looking back, I found a different world again.

The boulders were gone. The field was now an open plane, devoid of flowers but covered in grass.

Only the white wolf was there. Back to its massive form. Inside its jaws, behind pure white fangs, was the glow of blue. Most likely the orb.

"Goodbye..." I whispered to her.

Bray nodded and then turned away.

A few moments later, I blinked and she was gone.

"What the heck Vim?" I complained, looking back at him.

"Hm?" he paused, looking at me with a look of worry.

I was about to complain. To ask why we had left already... but before I could, I noticed the trees.

Glancing around, I groaned at the familiar forest. The one we had been walking through most the day.

"Oh... you wanted to talk to her, didn't you?" Vim asked, realizing it.

"Of course I did!" I complained as I focused on him. I'd think about the forest later.

"Sorry. She's not much of a talker," he said.

"She talked to me!" I argued.

"She did," he nodded.

I groaned as I turned around. To look around us. There was no sign of her. Or any of the other wolves.

"What did you give her?" I asked.

"A heart," he said.

Hesitating, I frowned. It had looked like a jewel. "A heart?"

He nodded. "Of a monster."

"Monster...?" I asked, what did he mean?

"I mean it literally. I told you we came here to make an offering, remember?" he asked with a small smile. He was amused at my reaction.

"You... you did... is that what you meant? Why did you offer the heart of a monster to her? Why did she eat it?" I asked.

"You ask a lot of questions," he sighed.

"Because that was ridiculous! We weren't there, then we were, then we're here again! How does that happen?" I asked loudly. Maybe if I yelled she'd come back.

Vim's smile didn't die off, but he did seem to soften his look as he studied me. He remained silent, however.

"And if that was going to happen, what was the point in trying to make sure I didn't know how to get there?" I asked further.

"Could you come here again? Without me?" he asked.

Hesitating, I looked around.

Yes. There was that boulder. The one vim had walked over, and I had walked around. I knew where we were.

"Maybe," I said honestly.

"Good. There might be a day I'll ask you to. If you walk there," Vim pointed behind us. To where we had just come from. "Between those two flowers," he further explained.

Sure enough there were two flowers. They were small, barely noticeable amongst the foliage... but they were the same purple color of the one I had looked at earlier.

"Pass through those and you'll go to the fields. Once in the field just walk around, Bray will find you. You leave the way you came, and then you're back here," he said.

"Really...?" I asked. Just walk in-between the flowers?

"For now don't think too much about it. Bray is old. And powerful. She's useful, even if a stiff sometimes," he said.

"Stiff?" I asked as Vim turned to return to walking.

Following him, I studied his expression as he frowned. "She's the type to bite you if you annoy her. She doesn't give warnings, usually."

"Oh...?" I didn't like that. Especially since I probably would have talked to her and asked so many questions she probably would have bit me, if I had been allowed to.

"And the heart is..." Vim slowed to a stop, and I went wide eyed as I watched the man hesitate. Seemingly unsure of himself all of a sudden.

He then looked at me, and my back went straight. I felt my tail go stiff, and I gulped as he stared into my eyes.

"If I tell you, it could get you killed," he then said.

"Killed?" I asked, worried.

"There will be those who will want that knowledge. And are willing to kill for it. To torture and do debase things. There are some who will even dare my wrath, given the chance to do so," he said.

"Over the heart...? Then why did you give it to her if it's so precious?" I asked.

Vim pondered something for a moment. I couldn't tell if it was my question, or something else though. "Rather... I suppose it's a good way to give you the opportunity to prove yourself," he said.

My ears perked up, and I was suddenly very excited. For many more reasons than one!

"It could get you killed, though. Are you sure?" he asked me.

"You believe in free will," I said to him.

His eyes narrowed but he nodded.

"I want to know, if it's something I can... show I can be trusted, then yes. Please, tell me," I said.

"That was the heart of a Monarch."

He spoke so purely, and so seriously... I felt as if I had just been told a very severe secret.

Yet I couldn't understand it.

"Monarch... Rapti had mentioned that," I said.

"As had others," Vim said.

I nodded. Kaley had too. Yet she hadn't cared about it.

"It's a great being. Something similar to Tor or Bray," he gestured behind us.

"Huh?" Like them?

"Bray is the offspring of a Monarch. It's why she's able to eat their hearts and not become corrupted. She's one of few I can entrust such things to anymore," Vim said.

I stepped back and tried to wrap my head around what he was saying.

"You... you mean..." I hesitated, and felt numb. As if cold. As if I was floating in an ocean, naked.

Vim nodded. "That was the heart of a creature like them. One I tore out with my own hands," he said.

One of us.

"But... why?" I whispered my question.

"Because it needed to be done. Monarchs are not named such because they are rulers. They're named it because the idea is that their crowns need to be taken. By force," Vim raised his left hand and clenched it, making a fist.

The meaning was clear.



"They gave birth to our bloodlines. To all of us. Yet they're not suited for this world. Not suited to rule. Luckily there aren't many left, as far as I'm aware," Vim said.

"Birth to us..." I whispered.

He nodded. "Somewhere up your ancestral line is most likely one too. Could be a cat, could be something different. Hell, I could have already killed that one too for all I know," he said.

Looking behind, to the purple flowers in the distance... I wondered if that meant...

"Yes. It means one day I might have to kill her too," Vim then said.

Closing my eyes, I groaned and wished I hadn't thought it. Maybe then he wouldn't have said it aloud.

Putting my head into my hands, I quietly tried to calm my throbbing head.

The closer one was in relation to these supposed monarchs...

They were seen as an enemy to Vim.

"Why...? Why are they our enemies?" I asked, trying to understand.

"Because they upset the natural order. They kill. They devour. They poison. They only take, never give," he said.

"They gave birth to us right?" I asked, countering his logic.

"In theory. In reality those like you only exist because of their carnage. You're descendants, but not in the way you think. Think of it more like... pollution. Then eventually your bloodlines are born and spread the more... normal way," he seemed to hesitate at the end there.

Poison...

Maybe that was why my grandmother had said our ancestors were wild. Without reason. Savage.

Still...

"Come on. Don't think about it too deeply. Nothing's changed, you just learned a little bit of history," Vim said as he gestured for me to return to walking with him.

History. Sure. Only if one looked at it from that way. A surface level perspective.

It wasn't history after all.

He had just killed one of those very monarchs. And there were more out there. More to be killed.

That wasn't any common old history. That wasn't something forgotten over the years.

That was our world today. My world. The one I was trying to make a nest in. The one I wanted to join.

"I'm out of my depth," I complained.

Vim laughed. "Welcome to my world!"