

The Non-Human Society

#Chapter 71 - Seventy – Vim – A Floating Moment - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 71 - Seventy – Vim – A Floating Moment

Chapter 71: Chapter Seventy – Vim – A Floating Moment

One of the lanterns bumped up against Renn's foot. She giggled as she carefully pushed it away, back towards the center of the river.

Letting her foot splash back into the water, she sighed with a happy sound as she watched it float away.

"What a nice moment," she whispered.

Was it?

The sun was setting, and the sky was red. Thick clouds rolled over us, giving the sky a luminous shine... but as of yet there was no rain or wind.

Matching the reds above, there were reds below. Hundreds of small lanterns floated along the river. Renn and I sat next to. A fleet of small wooden and paper boats sailed past us. Most were small, carrying only a small candle of wax. But there were a few like the one that had just bumped into Renn that were sizable. The bigger ones were made of finer materials, and carried more candles.

We weren't alone. Like us, many people nearby were sitting on the banks of the river. Although most didn't have their feet submerged as Renn and I did. Though that was probably because the river was a little cold.

Most weren't sitting as close with one another as we were, either.

"Are those prayers?" Renn asked, pointing at one of the lantern boats nearby. Her thigh and arm rubbed against me as she moved, making me feel the eyes that looked at us. Were they staring because they saw something odd, or because of jealousy? It was odd that most that were staring were women.

"Looks like it," I said. The cloth that made the sails had words sewn into it. I could make out a few of the words, and they were mostly religious in nature.

"Humans are... neat sometimes," Renn whispered softly.

"Hm," I agreed with her.

Watching a young pair of humans walk past, on the other side of the small river, I wondered how people always had similar festivals.

The same style of festivities could be found at all corners of the world. Even the two that have yet to really mingle with the others. Those who didn't even know of the other side of the world yet shared similarities that transcended language and beliefs.

A little town was to our right. We were sitting right at the edge, where the two rivers that passed through the village met and converged into a smaller one. It was here that one could see all the boats and lanterns sent onto the river. Odds are every citizen and even visitors had put at least one onto the river, based off the amount passing us by.

There was a small part of me that wished we could have gotten here a little earlier. Renn probably would have enjoyed making one for herself.

"Where... where do they end up? How long will they float?" Renn asked.

"Not all do," I said as we watched one float by. Its candle was long extinguished, and the thing was half sunk. It was one of many like it.

"You know what I mean," she said.

I nodded. I did. "Littered all over. Most will catch fire, burn up and then sink. The rest will just bundle up down river at whatever bend has the softest current. Odds are someone in the city will be sent down river to collect them all as to properly dispose of them later," I said.

Probably a young servant or a criminal paying their dues.

"Hm..." she hummed but didn't further question it. Maybe she hadn't even wanted such a detailed answer.

While watching a man far off up the river, near the fence that made up this towns boundary... I blinked when she laid her head onto my shoulder.

Glancing at Renn, who rested against me... I wondered what the hell I was going to do with her.

I couldn't push her off. There were too many people here. They'd find it odd. And we were already odd enough. There were only locals here.

Yet at the same time I really didn't want to just allow it either.

She was young, but not that young. She was no Lomi.

"What are you doing Renn?" I asked her. Dared to.

"Watching lanterns," she said.

"Are you tired?" I asked. Maybe she was. We hadn't really rested the last few days, since leaving Bray's pack. Maybe I was pushing her too hard. She might be non-human... and rather strong, but that didn't mean she didn't tire.

"A little," she answered a little honestly.

Ignoring the older couple who walked past us, on the small path behind us, I did my best to not hear the light jokes they made at our expense.

I sighed as they headed back to town, and I wondered if I really looked as young as their whispers implied.

Renn giggled, and I felt it as they danced through her body. She seemed to rock with them, as if enjoying a song.

"If only they knew," I said.

"Oh... shush... It made me happy to hear it," Renn then said.

Before I could frown at her statement, she sighed and sat back upward. She was still far too close, and we were still touching, but at least she was no longer laying her head on me.

"Where to next?" she then asked.

Blinking at her, I wondered if I should tell her I had not expected the change in topics. I had expected either teasing or...

Maybe I was reading too much into her actions. Maybe such skin-ship was normal to her. Maybe it was I who found it odd, and was thus the odd one here.

I could only hope.

"The Cathedral. After leaving here, about two weeks later at our pace we'll reach the Capital of the Blind. I suppose it's time you met the chronicler," I said.

"Capital of the blind?" she asked, looking at me with clear eyes. Why did I expect them to be wet?

"The nation to the south of this one is a very... devout one. They believe they're all blind, since they cannot see their god. Honestly it's a very boring nation, albeit a powerful one," I explained.

"Huh... and who's this chronicler?" she asked further.

"An older nun. She's the head of the Cathedral. The proprietor. She controls the main tomes. It's time you got your name officially entered into the Society," I said.

"Oh...! I heard of those books. Crane had mentioned them," Renn said, sounding a little happy. Maybe she liked the idea of putting her name into the books of the Society.

I nodded. That didn't surprise me.

A little boat bumped into my foot, and went still. The river's current wasn't strong enough to make it bounce off me, or move. I stared at it, wondering who could have made it. The thing was... a little rough around the edges. The sail a little frayed. The candle cheap.

A child's handiwork maybe.

Renn gently pushed it away from my ankle with her own foot, sending it back to the current.

"I also need to inform her of what's happened. Lomi's village. Ruvindale. The Monarch," I listed the few things of importance.

"Oh..." this time she sounded sad.

Her tone made me study her, and somehow made me want to cheer her up. For a tiny moment I thought of getting her some food at the festival, before heading to the inn.

Although I'd do so, I pushed the idea down and away all the same.

I needed to keep myself in check. Showing such...

"Why are the books kept at the capital? For that matter why is this Cathedral there too? Isn't it dangerous?" she asked, distracting my own chastising of myself.

"A tree in the forest. Plus several of our members there are... very religious themselves. So it works out. It also acts as a great hub for us. Any of our members who... are normal enough, can easily blend in amongst the thousands of visitors the place gets a week. Easy to come and go without being noticed," I said.

"Ah. That makes sense."

I nodded. It did.

"What about those who... don't? Blend in," she asked softly.

"They send letters. With those who do. To those who can," I said.

"Oh...?" she perked up, getting a little closer. I suddenly felt her breath. It was warm.

"That's another reason to head there. To see if there're any letters waiting for me," I said, focusing on a large lantern. A part of its sail and frame was already burnt, yet it was no longer on fire. It was a good distraction to try and think how long it'd last without part of its structure.

"Hm... if there are?" she asked. She kicked her feet lightly, as if she was a child.

"Then we alter our course accordingly. I usually get one or two, but not always. I had two last time I was there, a couple years ago," I said.

If the war in the south was getting worse... there was a good chance there'd be a few waiting for me. Hopefully I'd not have to ignore a certain someone's, again.

"Are there a lot of us there?" Renn asked.

"Quite a few. But they come and go. Only... well, six now, are steady. Another ten or so come and go. We could meet them all or see none of them, depending on how long we're there. If someone needs me, they also sometimes wait for me there, too," I said.

"That's... a lot," she whispered.

I moved my feet, causing the river to move as well. I inwardly chastised myself as several boats nearby jolted; bobbing up and down from the waves I had created. "Plus there're sometimes travelers. Or our merchants. Remember the company I spoke of? Or the twins Rapti had mentioned? They frequent the Cathedral as well," I said.

"Huh... I would like to meet those twins. I've met a few human ones, would be interesting to meet twins like us," she said.

"They're... odd. But not dangerous," I said.

Renn chuckled, and got closer again. She tilted her head at me in such a way that it reminded me of a dog waiting for a treat. "Dangerous. I like how you describe people," she said.

"Rather my description of their oddness level. Not they themselves," I corrected.

She nodded, but smirked all the same. "By the way how would you describe me? To others? Am I dangerous?" she asked.

"You are. In your own way," I said honestly.

She blinked, and her smile softened.

I had to look away from her look, especially since it made me feel bad. "In a way," I added, hoping to imply to her that I meant it in a rather... specific way. And it wasn't that bad.

After all she was dangerous to me, not anyone else.

At least I didn't think she was.

Was she a predator? Yes. Was she strong enough to kill most of our members? Of course.

Yet if I had believed she was the type to prove those facts... well...

"Vim," Renn pointed with a curled toe.

Following it, I watched as the biggest lantern ship yet floated towards us.

People closer to it clapped at its presence. Children, and what looked to be their older siblings, hurriedly walked along the river. They followed it closely, and probably had been since it had been released.

"It's big enough one of the smaller ones could ride it," Renn commented, seemingly happy about it.

I stayed silent as the large boat passed. It had dozens of candles and most were bigger than the little boats that had floated down the river before. The boat itself was also detailed. Someone had carved it from a single piece of wood... and had spent time on it. Odds were this was a craftsman's donation. Maybe even a noble's.

The toy had windows. Cannons. Little people even, carved and painted, all over it. Most were designed into actions, as if they were in the middle of some naval combat.

"Wow..." Renn's honest, single, word described it well. It was actually... too good... to be used for such a festival.

Maybe they would collect it soon, and re-used it every year. It would explain it. Something that detailed was wasted on a singular event.

"Happy lantern wishes!" a young girl waved at us as she and the rest of the children ran by, following the boat.

Renn waved back, and I wondered if that really was the name of this festival. If so, it was a boring name.

Probably the church's doing.

"Wishes?" Renn asked me after the children were far enough away.

"Prayers. Wishes. What's the difference?" I asked her.

"Quite a bit," she said.

I shrugged. I wasn't in the mood to argue over semantics.

While the boat passed, and the crowd that followed it did too, I studied the people instead.

Most were typical. Farmers. Fishermen. Laborers. But... there were some that were something more. A pair of children were undoubtedly from a wealthy family. Their clothes were worth more than all the rest combined. An older teen, a girl with snow white hair, wore a churchwoman's gown. Probably a nun in training.

A few even looked like foreigners. And not just because their skin was a little too tan for this region. They wore garb not usually seen in this nation. One of the younger boys even had a jeweled hat. Similar to what I'd see in the far east near the tall mountains.

The world was growing smaller.

"Do we have members all over the world Vim?" Renn then asked, drawing my attention away from the crowd.

"We do. My route only takes us through the surrounding nations though. Those too far away I only go to when they request it," I said.

"Sounds like it will take many years for me to learn everything, let alone see them all, huh?" she asked.

I blinked, but knew better than to let her see how bothered her words made me. "At least a few decades," I said honestly. That was usually what it took me to do a full circle, all the while helping all those who asked for immediate help. Between ten and fifteen years, roughly... though I suppose it was getting shorter.

We were losing more members and locations often lately, after all.

"Sounds simple... but fun. I look forward to it," she said.

I nodded, but only to let her know I was still listening.

Lomi's village. The Sleepy Artist.

Two in a matter of months.

It's been a long time since I lost two so quickly... but it did happen.

And did I not just think that Kaley's home would be gone soon too? That it was only a generation or so from being empty?

I softly sighed and pulled my feet out of the river. To begin letting them dry.

"Hm?" Renn tilted her head at me as I scooted back a bit. Both to separate from her, and to let my feet dry.

After a small moment Renn also pulled her legs out of the water. She crawled backward, seemingly taking her more effort than it had taken me to do. She sighed with a huff as she sat next to me, thankfully not as close as last time.

She smiled at me and then looked back to the river. To watch the few boats lazily floating past. There weren't as many as before, but still enough.

Their little flames casted shadows yet lit up the dark waters they floated on. It honestly was a pretty sight.

Yet right now all those flames did was remind me of all those lost. The homes burnt. The people too.

After a few minutes, I glanced around. To make sure all was well.

It was.

The boats were still floating. The people still leisurely sitting nearby, or heading back to the village. Off in the distance the crowd that had followed the bigger boat were now crowded around the edge of the river. Most likely picking up the boat.

A small wind had picked up. The sky had grown a tad bit redder as the sun was finishing up its descent. The darkness of night loomed in the horizon, and the temperature of the world was dropping to greet it.

And... Renn was staring at me.

"What a nice moment," she said gently while staring at me.

Yes.

It was.

For her.

Which was why it needed to end.

"Let's go... Better find some food before the town gets too drunk to cook," I said, slowly getting up and stepping away from the river's embankment.

My feet were dry. Her's should be too, even when taking into account she had dunked most her legs in.

"Huh? Oh... Yea," Renn sounded troubled, but I ignored it. Or at least, pretended to.

Helping her up, I held her hand until she reached the path. Since there were now more people around. Since I wanted to.

She smiled at me, and her playful smirk hurt.

Such a moment was precious.

Even if I couldn't afford it... I still wanted it to last forever.

But nothing lasted forever... which was why these moments were precious in the first place.

"Can we have stew?" she asked as she picked up her shoes we had left at edge of the path. While doing so she grabbed mine, and then held them out to me.

Taking them from her, I nodded.

"Stew. Sure."

I'd give her all the stew in the world if it'd keep her from asking for anything else.

Especially since I was starting to doubt my ability to say no to her.

Renn bounced a little as she put her shoes on, hopping on one foot then the next. Before I could reach out to support her, she already got them on.

"Let's go!" she excitedly ushered me, hurrying off before I could get my own on.

Chapter 72: Chapter Seventy One – Renn – Nation of the Blind

The large building was... a little plain.

Vim and I were walking towards what he had called a checkpoint. The entrance into the Nation of the Blind.

It was the first building in several days that I've seen... and honestly I was disappointed. It was three stories high, yet looked... unfinished, somehow.

There were a few people around it. Two men in leather armor with swords on their waists stood off the road near a field. They were in a heated discussion about something. Not too far from them was a pair of spotted horses, most likely theirs. They were letting them eat the grass.

Off in the distance, was what looked to be a large wagon. I could just barely make out the four people around it, but not much else. It looked like they were getting ready to leave, heading our way into the lands Vim and I had come from.

"Why's there just one building out here?" I asked. It was so odd... there wasn't anything else. The land here was mostly flat, and covered in thick grass. I could see for quite a distance, and saw no other buildings. Not even cabins. The land around here wasn't even being used as farmland. Most of it was covered in grass, while the rest was a mixture of rocky dirt and weeds.

"It's something of an inn. We can get something to eat and rest there," Vim explained.

"Oh. Someone's business then. Why did you call it a checkpoint?" I asked.

"Because it's not a business. It's a small barracks for this nation. To let them monitor their border," he said.

"Is that who those men were?" I asked, glancing back at the two leather strapped men. They hadn't even looked at us.

"Yes."

"Poor guards. Maybe they are blind," I said.

Vim chuckled but didn't say anything. Maybe he agreed with me.

"You said this was a powerful nation?" I asked.

"One of the greatest in this corner of the world, yes," Vim said.

"Doesn't look it," I said honestly.

"Nothing is as it first appears," he said.

Drawing closer to the wagon, I realized the people near it were all women. They wore typical travelers clothing, and... were surprisingly young looking. The oldest looked similar in age to Vim. Or at least, the age he appeared to be. The youngest still had baby fat around her cheeks.

The four of them stared at us as we passed, and the youngest bowed their head in greeting. I waved back, and wondered how common an all female group was. As far as I was aware, it was very rare. Nearly unheard of.

Passing the group and their wagon, I looked around for maybe another of their members. Surely they weren't alone?

Yet no one else here looked a part of their group. Only one man was here, and he was sitting on the porch that led into the building. He was whittling away at some kind of small wooden item.

"No one seems any different," I whispered.

"Why would they?" he asked.

"It's a different nation isn't it?" I asked.

Vim frowned, and then paused for a moment. After he considered something, he nodded. "It is. But humans are humans. You need to go a lot farther to meet people that different. One day you'll see," he said.

"Hm," I nodded. I intended to.

"Also... they are a little different. You probably haven't noticed but their ears are a little different. Maybe you're more cultured than I thought," Vim said.

Their ears? We were too far away from the women now to study them, but the man on the porch was close. He wore a hat, but his ears were visible.

They didn't look strange... or maybe they did? Or was I just seeing something that wasn't there, because I felt there should be? Were they rounder than those I knew? Or more pointed...? Were they thicker?

Glancing to Vim's ears, I realized they were different. His weren't as thick as the man's nor as wide.

Though maybe he wasn't one to use to tell, when I took into account he wasn't human... and old...

I'd need to see more... and...

Reaching up to touch my own ears, or at least the ones on the side of my head, I wondered if they looked odd. I had never paid much attention to them, since the ones on top of my head were much more important to me.

Heading into the building, I followed Vim up onto the porch. The man sitting on it looked to be carving something long and round with a large end. A ladle or something maybe?

"Just in time for dinner," the man spoke with a deep voice, but didn't glance at us. He focused on whatever he was carving.

"Sometimes it works out that way," Vim said plainly, entering the building without looking at the man.

Did he know him?

Entering the building alongside Vim, I slowed my pace to allow my eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness.

Blinking the dark away, I realized why this building was so dark. All the windows were covered by thick cloth. None of the sunlight was getting, except by the open front door.

Neither Vim or I closed it behind us, since it had been open before.

Gentle candles lit up the place, and I found it to be as homely as it was empty. No one stood at the large counter to our right, and the only person here see was sitting at one of the few square tables. He was slumped over the table, seemingly sleeping.

Vim ignored the apparent emptiness of the place and walked over to the counter anyway.

Following him, I found the stairs at the other end of the building. They ran up the side of the wall, and rounded the corner of the building to head upward. Other than the chairs and square tables, there was only one large fireplace at the other end of the room. It was huge, and nearly a dozen logs were set within it... ready to be lit at a moment's notice.

Stopping before the counter alongside Vim, I stopped studying the place and found that he was pointing at the counter.

"Hm?" I stared at the little silver thing he pointed at.

He gestured for me to touch it, seemingly bothered I hadn't done so yet.

The thing was oval in shape, and looked attached to a wooden tablet, or plate, of some kind.

Reaching out for it, I wondered what it was... yet the moment my finger tip touched it a familiar sound filled the air.

Ah... a bell...

"Coming!" A young voice shouted from behind the wall in front of us. Coming through the wall, from a distance. A human might not have heard the shout.

Studying the silver bell, I realized now how obvious the thing's purpose was. It wasn't in the shape of a normal bell, to me, so I hadn't realized it... but yes. It was a bell. Meant to be rung with a tap of a finger.

Set up to be used only when someone wished it to. Not when a door opened.

Ingenious.

Yet... the sound it gave off reminded me of a sad memory.

Thinking of that small golden bell that had hung above the Sleepy Artist's door, I had to hurriedly put away those memories as a young woman appeared.

She stepped through the drapes covering the doorway behind the counter, and her hands were wet for some reason. She approached us with a smile as she dried them off with her shirt. "How can I be of service?" she asked.

"Two meals, and if you have a recent report of the lands I'd like to read it," Vim told her.

The girl smiled and nodded. She stepped to the right, and bent down to grab something. She pulled a bundled up paper from under the counter and laid it before Vim. "You look like you have Renk. Fifteen of them for the meals," the girl said calmly.

Vim pulled the coins out as I reached out to grab the folded up paper. What was it?

As he paid for our meals, I studied the writing on the paper.

I couldn't read it. They were obviously words and letters... but...

"Suns still up, so no ale. You look traveled but..." the girl's words drew my eyes from the strange language.

"I know. Something cold if you have it," Vim said.

The girl nodded knowingly, and then smiled at me. I tilted my head at her, and realized she was waiting for me. To tell her what I preferred to drink. "Same thing, please," I said quickly, feeling silly.

"I'll get to it right away," the girl nodded and turned to leave, heading back behind the curtain covered doorway.

"Hm," Vim huffed and turned. I returned my attention to the papers I held as he guided me to one of the square tables.

Vim chose one as far away from the only other man here, and upon drawing closer I realized he really was asleep. He was just barely snoring.

Sitting down at the table with Vim, I laid the paper out as to get a better look. It unfolded into a single sheet, nearly four times as big as it been folded up.

There were lots of words... which looked stamped onto the paper, instead of written. Every so often there were larger words, in bolder ink.

"What is this?" I asked him.

"News. This nation once a month sends them out. It tells all citizens of the lands they live in. Updates on weather, the wars, the royalty and nobles... merchants... prices, and stuff," he said calmly.

I felt my eyes go wide at the realization of what he meant.

"To the whole nation?" I asked in disbelief.

Although he said nothing, and I hadn't looked away from the paper... I saw him nod his head out of the corner of my eye.

"Wow," I whispered and ran my fingers along the paper. It felt thick, like many pages in a book.

"It is amazing, but it's nothing too surprising. Many nations have done similar, although I will admit this one has done it best and the longest compared to the rest," Vim said.

"I can't read it," I said honestly as I studied a familiar looking word. It was several letters longer than the one it looked like, as if someone had changed it somewhat.

I pointed at it, and noticed the length of my finger nail. I needed to cut them. Very soon.

"That looks like house, but..." I shrugged, as I told him what I thought it said.

Vim leaned forward and looked at the word. "Homeland. It's the term they use when talking of their nation. I'm surprised you somewhat recognize it, this language isn't similar to the one in the north. You must know another language," he said.

"The witch who... helped me learn taught me two. The words of her people and the one I thought was the human's tongue," I said.

"I see. Interesting. I'll need to find out which it were. Probably one of the magic languages of the east," he said as he stared at me.

I shrugged. "She didn't teach me any magic."

"Of that I'm sure. It doesn't exist."

Frowning, I found myself wondering if Vim had lied to me for the very first time. "Excuse me?"

He tilted his head in a way that told me he couldn't understand why I was suddenly upset. "Hm?"

"What do you mean magic doesn't exist?" I asked him.

"It doesn't?" he asked me back.

Sitting back, I strained my ears. I knew it made my hat move, but I didn't care. I needed to hear his words as clearly as possible. This was important.

"Vim..." I whispered.

"You think there's magic?" he asked, rather seriously.

I nodded.

"I see. Well I'm sorry, but as far as I'm aware there is not."

"What about us?" I asked him, a little too loudly. I looked around, and was glad to see that the only other person here still was the sleeping man. He was also still asleep.

"We're different, yes, but not magical. We bleed. We cry. We die," he said.

My eyes twitched, and I did my best to keep my tail under control. It wanted to sway wildly. "What... what about just recently? Bray? What happened there, if that wasn't magic...?" I didn't know what to say.

"That wasn't magic. That was simply a trick. What little abilities and powers those like Bray have only affect the smallest of things. Though..." Vim frowned and sighed. "I suppose in a way you could call it magic, for a lack of a better phrase. But it isn't. Magic used to exist. It doesn't anymore. That era is over," he said.

Very uncomfortable with this conversation, I tried to think of all the things the witch had done. I had seen her with but a word change the colors of water. Create music out of nothing. Heal wounds in the blink of an eye! "I've seen magic," I said.

"I believe you. Rather I believe you've seen things you believe were magic," Vim said.

My eyes narrowed, and I wondered if maybe this was just a miscommunication between us. Or at least, I hoped it was.

"The witch I learned from. She was able to use magic," I said softly.

"I've no doubt she did things that seemed so," Vim nodded, seemingly being honest.

"I saw her heal wounds in a single moment. I saw bones reset, just by her saying a few words," I said.

"Did you?" he asked with a frown.

"My own arm," I said, gesturing to where it had been broken.

"Fascinating. You met a Saint. Is she still alive? Where is she?" Vim asked, suddenly a little more interested in something other than our conversation.

"Dead. I killed her, remember?" At least I hoped she was. If not she probably wished she were.

"I see. That's too bad," Vim said with a frown.

"I don't understand... you know what witches are, and admit they can do those things... but still say there isn't magic?" I asked him.

"Rather I said calling it magic works. But it isn't. Magic is the art of altering the world around us with the energy of another realm. That realm is gone. Has been for thousands of years," he said.

"So... you mean to say magic is a term for something specific, and what I saw was something else. Yet I can call it that, since there's no other name for it," I said, trying my best to understand him. I needed to, before I grew upset with him. Or rather, more than I already were.

"Basically. The only ability that exists anymore to heal someone, without using modern techniques or medicine, is holy divinity. Saints are some of the few that can use it to any great extent. I'm not arguing with you that there aren't... anomalies in this world Renn nor that there aren't those with strange abilities and powers... but magic is an actual art. An art that is not only lost, but literally impossible to perform anymore. It's like a language that is no longer known or remembered," he said, tapping the paper on the table before me as if to prove a point.

Focusing on the paper, I realized I had forgotten about it.

Vim turned it a round a little, to read something that had caught his eye.

As he read, I realized he either had not noticed how upset I had almost just got... or simply didn't care.

Somehow that hurt.

Yet, I wasn't angry anymore.

After all, what had actually upset me was not that he had said something didn't exist; that I believed did... but rather my own internal dilemma.

I had thought he had lied to me. Openly.

I had not thought him the type to do so.

Hide a secret. Speak in a roundabout way, sure. But lie? Outright?

The protector wouldn't do that. Shouldn't.

Not just to me... but not to anyone.

Taking a small breath, I realized I suddenly had a layer of sweat on me. Even though it wasn't hot or humid. Hopefully that girl would come out with our cold drinks soon.

"This one talks of the rise in price of iron and copper. Specifically nails. They blame the war in the south," Vim pointed at one of the parts of the paper.

I gulped and nodded as he pointed at the next batch of words. "This talks of a church being built at some mining town. Paid for by some noble," he said.

"A noble paid for it?" I asked.

"This nation is a land of deist. They become charitable, especially later in life," he said. He sounded a little annoyed over it.

"Hm..." somehow that didn't seem as bad as Vim seemed to be making it out to be.

"Here's talking about a broken boat. During a recent storm. Someone important died during the wreck," he told me of another.

"This one's about an upcoming festival in the capital. Letting people know when it starts, and what it entails," he pointed to another.

"When's it start?" I asked.

"In a few weeks. Although we'll get there before it starts I doubt we'll stick around long enough to witness it. Sorry," he glanced at me, and seemed a little worried for some reason.

"Ah..." I nodded, and felt bad. He looked ashamed, as if it was his fault... but it was just a festival. I wouldn't weep over missing it. He looked more concerned over me missing the festival than the conversation about magic we just had.

Vim took a small breath, but before he said anything his eyes looked away. Towards the entrance.

I followed his look, and watched as two people entered the building.

Two of the women from earlier. The wagon girls.

They stepped into the building, and with squinting eyes looked around. They saw us rather quickly, and then looked at one another and nodded.

"Uh oh?" I looked back at Vim, wondering what was about to happen.

"I don't know them," he said simply, but did so quietly. That was for my ears alone.

Remaining still, I watched Vim closely as he watched the two approach us. His eyes narrowed, and he looked... off-putting all of a sudden.

"Sir, may I spare a moment of your time?" one of the women asked him.

Vim gestured for her to continue, and I glanced at them. They stood a little too close for my comfort.

They had jackets of leather on, but their hoods were down. The older of the two had shorter hair, coming to a stop before her shoulders... but the other had long hair, bundled and tied together several times. Even with all the ties it still reached her legs.

"I feel bad asking this, but I fear more the possible risks that could come than the shame I feel now," the older woman had eyes only for Vim, but the younger one looked at me. She gave me an oddly troubled smile, as if she was embarrassed and worried.

"If you're looking for charitable coin I don't have it," Vim said.

"Ah! No... I'm sorry. We just lost our guard, you see," the older woman coughed mid sentence, and I wondered if it was truly shame or not. She looked... worried. Yet not because of the conversation. Something else, maybe.

"And?" Vim asked, seemingly unbothered by her words or facial expression.

Before the woman could answer, the young girl who worked here walked out from behind the curtain. She carried our drinks, two metal cups and a large pitcher.

"Oh? Still here Melody?" the girl noticed our guests, and obviously recognized them.

"Yes... regretfully," the older woman, Melody, said.

"Figured you'd be long gone by now. Something wrong with the wagon?" the girl asked as she put our cups onto the table. I moved the paper out of the way as she put the pitcher down as well.

"No. Luckily that's not my issue... Though I'm not sure which I'd prefer, to be honest," Melody said.

Glancing at Vim, I found him now focused on our cups. He was filling them up, pouring the light colored liquid into one of the cups. Had he lost interest? He looked as if he had.

"Well... I'll be back with your food shortly. It's almost done," the girl gave me a nod, and I nodded back in thanks. She left with a worried look on her face... maybe she had noticed the odd atmosphere, and chose to retreat.

It was relieving somewhat to learn that they knew each other. Must mean they frequented this establishment.

As she left, I accepted the now full cup from Vim. He had poured me mine first.

"I'm no guard," Vim said as he went to fill up his cup.

"I know a warrior when I see one," Melody

Well she wasn't wrong. Though I had to admit she must be something... since Vim really didn't look that special. He did now, to me, but even I admitted that he really wasn't all that special... appearance wise at least.

If she was being genuine, then she had quite a pair of eyes to notice.

"You have until my food arrives to explain," Vim said simply.

Although his words were curt and to the point, and made the younger woman glare at him... it had only made the older Melody smile in amusement.

"My unfilial son-in-law just abandoned us. Left his wife too. He was our guard for this journey. I'd like to see if you and your wife would be willing to join us the rest of the stretch. You're headed to the capital right?" Melody asked.

Huh...

Vim sighed as he took a drink, and suddenly I was the focus of the old woman's eyes. She smiled at me. "You noticed we were all women. Didn't you?" she asked.

"Oh... uh..." I sat up straight, and my cup nearly splashed as I realized... like always... my thoughts were and had been written all over my face.

"Anyone would," Vim said for me.

"All the same. She had looked at us with worry. Concern. Over complete strangers... I like that. It means you're both trustworthy," Melody said.

Vim's expression told me he not only didn't agree with her, but was also annoyed. Yet he didn't say anything.

The woman then gestured to a nearby table. The one in-between us and the sleeping man. Or well... he wasn't sleeping anymore. He was rubbing his face, which now had deep red lines thanks to the table he had rested it on. Our guests had probably woken him.

Her younger companion quickly pulled one of the chairs over. She placed it in the free section between Vim and I, and the older woman sat into it.

Was that her daughter then? Her expression hadn't changed earlier when Melody had mentioned her husband abandoning her, however... they didn't really look alike. She had dark black hair and eyes, the older woman had a light brown. Their facial structures were different too. Melody had a sharper nose and chin.

"I don't believe I invited you to sit," Vim said as he stared at her.

"You'd deny an old lady a seat?" Melody asked weakly.

Vim scoffed, unbothered by her suddenly weak sounding voice.

Something told me she was far from weak.

"It's only a four day journey, I'm sure you know," Melody continued in her pitch to enlist Vim.

"Nearly two more than it would be while on foot for us," Vim countered.

"I'll pay you appropriately. We're hauling spices, I'll pay you a tenth of the profit of the sell," Melody said.

I had expected Vim to completely disregard her offer, as he had been doing... so it was a little surprising to see him actually look at the old woman with interest for the first time.

Melody smirked, as if happy to finally have his real attention.

Sipping my drink, I was glad to find it cold... and tasty. Some kind of juice.

"Which spice?" he asked.

"Spikenard."

Vim's eyes left her and came to me.

I stopped drinking, but kept the cup to my lips. Did he want me to say something?

Honestly I found this very interesting. They were obviously just humans... but...

Something made me want to help them. Maybe it was because I found their story—the purpose of their request, so fascinating.

A husband, leaving his wife and family in the middle of a trip! What drama.

For a few moments the woman went silent, staring at Vim expectantly. He kept his eyes on me, however.

He was such a contradictory man sometimes. One who seemed to be willing to kill a human at any moment... yet at the same time he was the type to genuinely consider a request for help.

I knew he didn't actually care for the money. After all he never even negotiated or haggled.

Neither the money, nor they themselves were important to him. But at the same time... he was in truth a kind man. A gentle one, to those who deserved it.

Vim could be a ruthless inhuman monster, or a gentle old soul.

Which would he choose to be here?

Hopefully he'd accept. It sounded fun and interesting.

"Just to the capital?" Vim then asked.

Melody nodded, and the woman standing behind her smiled in hope.

"Who do you sell to? Do you have a writ of purchase already?" Vim asked.

Melody finally smiled, and with a swift motion pulled out a brown paper from her sleeve. She handed it to Vim, who took it readily.

He read it quickly, and I wondered why he looked so... natural doing so. He seemed so use to this. He obviously didn't feel any of the excitement I was feeling.

"Hmph... Fine. We'll leave once we're done with our meal," Vim said with a nod to something behind them.

Sure enough our food was being carried out. By the young woman and a large shouldered man, each carrying two plates.

Melody laughed twice, and stood as she took the paper back from Vim. "Sounds good! I'm Melody Constella," she introduced herself.

Vim ignored her for a moment, so I quickly offered my hand. "Renn. He's Vim, it's a pleasure to meet you Melody," I said to her.

Melody shook my hand, beaming me a smile. "Renn! I'll let the others know to get ready. We'll be waiting outside," she said with a heavy nod.

The other woman nodded too, seemingly happy over the outcome. The two then turned to go.

"Goodbye again Melody. When will I see you next?" the woman carrying our food asked her as they passed one another.

"Next fall! Stay healthy Canny!"

"You as well!" Canny said as she put one of the plates she had carried in front of me.

The man put the plates he carried in front of Vim, and then took the large news paper we had gotten upon entering in return. "Thanks," Vim said.

"Enjoy! Just give a holler, or ring the bell if you need anything," Canny said as she and the man hurried to leave.

"Thank you," I said to them and hurriedly went to grab the fork and knife that rested on the largest plate before me. A big slice of... ham waited eagerly for me.

Vim sighed as he too went to cutting some meat.

I had a lot of questions to ask, but didn't know where to start.

Glancing to the entrance, I wondered what to expect to come from the upcoming days.

"A husband abandoning his family in the land of the faithful. Quite a story," Vim said right as he took his first bite.

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that. This is the land of the religious isn't it?" I asked.

He nodded as he looked around, as if to see if they were still here. The only one here was the man behind us, and he sounded...

Turning my head, I watched as the man groaned and headed for the stairwell. He seemed sluggish, as if still half-asleep. Was he complaining that we were being noisy?

Yes. He was.

"Ignore the drunk," Vim said.

"How can he be drunk? She said no alcohol until sundown," I said.

"When you get drunk every night you're always drunk," he said.

Oh... that was true. In a way.

"Think he actually abandoned them?" I asked.

"We're going to find out," he said.

Taking my first bite, I smiled at the delicious taste. They had soaked it in honey or something like it. It was full of flavor.

"These lands are safe. Patrolled by knights and churchmen alike. Something else is at play with them. But I can't blame them for not telling the whole story. It's not like they can actually trust us on a first meeting," Vim said.

I swallowed my bite and nodded. That made sense. "What could it be?" I asked him.

"My guess is they stole the spices, and someone is not too far behind to get their goods back," he said, and after cutting off a piece of meat he took a bite.

"Huh... they didn't seem the type to be thieves," I said.

"Know many?" he asked.

"Just two, that I'm aware of," I said.

Vim smiled at that, but instead of saying anything about it he chose instead to take another bite.

"I'm surprised you agreed," I said to him as I poked at the odd bread with my fork.

"You looked like you wanted me to," he said with a shrug.

Blinking at him, I stared at him as he took a drink and studied the paper next to his plate.

Even though he didn't see it, I gave him a smile. A big one. A happy one.

One to thank him.

One to praise him.

A smile for many things.

"I'll let you handle the talking from now on, by the way," he then said.

"With Melody?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Okay," I agreed. Talk? With others? Women? Make friends?

Threaten me with a good time...

"Don't get too attached. They're hiding something," he warned.

I nodded, and knew my smile was still far too big. He was giving me an odd look. "I know," I said.

"You do, don't you? Yet you're still happy about it," He said and then shook his head and sighed.

"Just let me cry on your shoulder if it goes horribly," I offered.

He tried to hide his odd look with a bite of food, but it was still plainly visible.

I giggled at him, and decided to not tease him too much.

Although it wasn't really a joke.

Hopefully that's all it'd remain...

Hurrying to finish my meal, I excitedly looked forward to the upcoming trip.

I'm so glad I was here. I'm so glad Vim had allowed me to join him.

I hope I prove it was the right choice.

In more ways than one.

Chapter 73: Chapter Seventy Two – Vim – To Spice The Trip

Standing on top of the small log, I studied the encampment in the distant field.

"Knights," Melody said.

Rather than the small army in front of me, I was more surprised to hear the distaste in that single word she had spoken.

"Looks like it," I said.

She wasn't up on the log like I was, but I had only done so to play the part. To make it seem like I was doing my best to see them.

I didn't need to. My sight was obviously far better than she could ever know.

Stepping off the log, and standing next to Melody, I looked over to our little group. The wagon had been guided off the path a short distance, and the two horses that had done so were now being allowed to graze freely.

"Their flag is that of the northern lord. They're probably just on a scouting patrol," I said.

"The blue checkers?" Melody asked with a surprise.

I nodded.

She whistled as she squinted while covering her eyes, trying to block the high sun. "You have a strong pair of eyes," she said.

"If you disagree you may alter our path," I said.

"No. If it's the Knights of Willows then we have nothing to fear. They won't even ask us for a fee or donation," she said with a chuckle.

Typical merchant.

While Melody happily smiled at her situation, my eyes found Renn. She was with the youngest woman of their group, near the cart. They were both kneeled down next to a small box. Renn was watching her look for something.

"She's a gentle girl. I'm thankful for her. The rest of them are too worried my daughter will break at a mere glance, so have been kind of ignoring her," Melody said.

I nodded. Humans were like that. "Renn probably just knows what it's like to be with such a schmuck," I said.

Melody laughed and patted me on the back. "Right?" she happily laughed as she nodded.

"I'm going to check the boxes. Keep an eye on those knights for me will you?" Melody asked as she headed for the wagon. She chuckled as she left, seemingly more than happy to enjoy my comment for some time.

It was a little insulting for my little joke to be taken so seriously. Did I seem like that bad of a man to her?

Maybe I did.

Studying the other women, I wondered if the youngest near Renn was the only real daughter. Melody called them all daughters, but it was obvious only the youngest was an actual one. They looked like splitting images of each other.

Yet the oddest thing was...

"Mother I'll help!" a woman who Renn called Kathy hurried over to the wagon, once she noticed what Melody was doing.

Yes. That wasn't just the actions of an employee. She wanted to help, not just because it was her job... but because she worried for Melody. She was too old to be doing anything too strenuous. At least in their eyes.

The two near the horses nodded, pleased to see their sister helping their mother.

Something told me that this little band had a long history. More than just typical friends or family. Melody was their mother in more ways than one.

Still...

Looking back to the knight encampment in the distance, and the large tents that housed what was probably fifty odd soldiers... I tried to imagine how such a close-knit family had broken apart so easily.

I had expected the unfilial son to be a story. Or at least, not the whole truth... but after listening to Renn and the women talk for most the day, I now had no choice but completely accept it.

The man had married the young daughter, and had been something of a bastard ever since. Not only were none of them very surprised at his departure and abandonment of his wife, a few had even voiced happiness over it.

They were happy she was free now, of a stain.

Maybe that was why Renn was sticking with her so closely. Maybe she really did relate to her.

After all, Renn should have had at least a few relationships over her years. By her counts she was two-hundred or so? Yes. Plenty of time for more than a few. And enough time too, for a few of those to have been just as disappointing. Maybe she's had someone leave her in a similar way.

Or maybe I was just reading too much into it.

Walking away from the log, I headed for the woman in question. She was picking the box that the two had been picking through up, to put back onto the wagon.

Melody's daughter noticed my approach and went still for a moment. She looked quickly at me, and then to Renn, and back at me. As Renn handed the box to the woman helping Melody, the daughter made an odd noise and nodded a bow at me. Then she turned and hurried off, to the other two women near the horses.

"Palm did you see the—" Renn stopped talking as she turned around and found me and not the daughter.

She frowned and quickly looked around and found the girl, who had run away.

"Did you scare her away?" She accused me.

"No?" I defended myself with a frown.

"Hm..." Renn didn't seem to believe me, and I sighed.

I gestured for her to follow me, and she nodded. She glanced at Melody and the other woman, but neither noticed us walk away. They were engrossed in their work.

Ignoring the stares from the daughter, I took Renn back towards the path.

"We're not leaving are we?" she asked worriedly as we stepped onto it.

"No. Do you want to?" I asked, hopeful.

"Of course not. I finally got Palm to tell me the bastard's name," she said with a huff.

"Bastard?" I asked.

"Her husband. The man who broke her heart and ran away. His name is Jacob. I'm trying to find out his last name, or something I can use to find him. She thinks he went back to his family in the capital," Renn grumbled as she spoke about him... as if...

Staring at the woman who looked, and spoke, as if it had been her who had just been abandoned... I wondered what I was going to do with her.

Why was she so enthralled by them?

"So? What's wrong then?" Renn then asked, suddenly calming down.

"Nothing?"

She frowned. "Then why did we walk over here?" she asked as she glanced to the wagon. We were far enough now that none of them should be able to hear us.

"Just so I could get away for a moment," I said.

"Huh?"

"We're husband and wife. It'd be weird if I didn't try to get some alone time with you. Just play along for a moment," I said to her.

"Huh... oh... yeah," she nodded, suddenly not bothered anymore.

"What's her name again?" I asked. She had said it earlier, but I had forgotten it already.

"Palm. She said it's the name of a tree in the south," she said.

"A palm tree. Yes. She is scrawny," I said, that made sense.

"She lost a baby a few months ago," Renn whispered.

Ah... she did look sickly, or maybe as if she had just recovered from something distressful. I had assumed it was just from the lack of sleep and her emotions.

"Is that why he left?" I asked.

"He's the cause. He beat her," Renn said stiffly.

"Well..." Wish I hadn't asked.

Renn then suddenly smiled.

"Hm?" I looked around. Had something happened? No. The wagon and its owners were fine.

"Nothing's wrong. I just found your look pleasant," she said.

"My look?" I asked. What look had I worn?

"Melody. Palm. Kathy is the one helping Melody right now. The two near the horses are sisters, Tiffany and Criby," Renn said with a point at each as she spoke of them.

"I tasked you with talking with them so that I didn't need to bother with such things," I said.

"I know," she nodded, yet still smiled gently. She seemed to be enjoying this. Not just our current tasks... but this moment too.

She really did like humans. Maybe it was certain types.

Maybe it was just the women.

"We'll be passing those knights soon. I want you sitting on the wagon when we do," I said.

"Hm? Okay?" Renn didn't seem to argue, but she did seem to want to ask why.

"Just in case something happens," I answered her.

"Oh... okay," she nodded as her smile finally died down.

"Remember... they're only human," I said to her.

"Of course they are?"

Taking a small breath, I wondered what to do or say to her. I couldn't tell her what to think, or believe... but sometimes I really wished I could.

I didn't need to tell her that I'd slaughter them if they found out about her ears or tail. I didn't need to tell her that I'd abandon them to protect her in a heartbeat. She knew all that.

Yet still, she was more than happy to not only risk it... but also invest in them. To become friends with them.

"They really did buy the spices by the way. I overheard the sisters worrying over a debt. One they took to buy it all," Renn then said.

"I see," I said. I honestly didn't care much for such information.

"But they're oddly not upset we're taking a share. I think we're getting what Jacob was going to get, for being the guard," Renn said.

"We're taking the daughter's share?" I asked and glanced over at her. She was brushing one of the horses.

"Oh. No. I don't think so," Renn said.

Good.

Renn stepped closer, and I tilted my head at her as she gave me another smile. "You just thought that was a good thing, didn't you?" she asked.

"I had," I said honestly.

She chuckled and stepped away, to cover her mouth as she laughed.

Watching her giggle, I wondered why she was covering her mouth. Her smile looked great on her.

"I'll make sure we're not. For you," she said.

"Hmph."

Renn giggled some more, seemingly happy to see my discomfort.

Pointing at the tents in the distance, I decided to change the topic. I didn't like how she seemed to be so amused and happy over my contradictions. "Those are the knights of the northern lord of this nation. Melody had called them the Knights of Willows. Willow is probably the lord's name, I just don't remember it. I recognize their flag though, so it's been around for a long time," I said.

"Oh?" Renn glanced at it, her eyes focusing on the tents.

"As I mentioned before, these lands are safe. Patrolled. Controlled. But..." I glanced at the wagon. It was a small fortune. Most of the wagon was full. The boxes were about the size of Renn's waist, and stacked four tall. Each loaded with a spice that was worth its weight in gold.

"But there is definitely something else at play. Yes. I agree. Palm is more concerned over her... husband... but the rest are worried over something else. Criby keeps looking over her shoulder. And not at me, or you," Renn said.

I nodded. I didn't know her name, but I had noticed her actions. They all had done the same.

"It could be nothing. It could just be them worrying over this Jacob. Maybe he threatened to get revenge for something," I said.

"It's... possible... I don't think so though. As I said, they talk ill of him. Hated him. Even Palm hates him, obviously, even though she's depressed," Renn said.

"Hmph. See if you can figure it out. When you do let me know," I said, and took a single step back towards the wagon.

"I will... are we done already?" Renn asked.

I stopped and looked back at her.

"You complained I took you away from your new friends," I said to her.

She shrugged as she nodded. "I did. But... It'd be strange if a young wife didn't want to try and keep her husband ensorcelled, after learning that a man could just up and go all willy-nilly, wouldn't it?" she asked.

I blinked at her words, and wondered how much of that smile, and that tone she had spoken with, were her teasing... and her being serious.

"Willy-nilly," I said.

"Well, he didn't. It had obviously been a rough last few months for them. I just..." she shrugged; suddenly her face was a little red.

Smiling at her, I wondered how she could be so confident one moment than lose it all only a moment later. It made her... somehow, more human. More real. More adorable.

"Honestly any man who could abandon you like that, is no man at all," I said to her.

Renn froze, but I didn't wait to hear her response. I stepped away, for real this time.

Heading back to the wagon, to help them finish re-arrange whatever they were working on as to get us back on the road.

It was time. The horses had gotten enough rest. As had the women. And I knew Renn was far from exhausted yet, and not just because she was so jubilant. I was starting to recognize the signs of her growing tired. As hard as they were to notice, since she always seemed to try and hide them from me.

"Jeez!" Renn complained loudly behind me and I smiled as a few of the women glanced at her. Odds are they saw a very red face.

That'd solidify our own story.

Now they just needed to solidify theirs.

But honestly did I care if they did or not?

After all did it matter? Whether this trip was uneventful, or full of disaster...

It'd not matter.

Renn and I would survive. We'd reach the Cathedral in due time.

Yet...

"Mister Vim, would you move this box for me? It's a little heavy," Kathy asked as I approached the wagon.

I nodded, glad to be invited. It meant they too wanted to hurry it up.

Hopping up onto the wagon, I noticed the way it creaked. Hopefully my weight wouldn't break it. It was already carrying a lot, after all.

"Which one?" I asked her.

Kathy pointed at a box a little bigger than the rest. It was closed up, and looked...

Bending down to pick it up, I recognize both the smell it gave off and the sound of its contents clinking as I moved it.

Weapons. Swords probably.

And not one or two. Half a dozen at least.

Melody guided me to where she wanted it. Up near the front, behind the driver's seat.

"If something happens, that box has swords in it," she said as I put it in its new position.

I nodded, but didn't say anything about it.

After all I didn't need a sword. But they didn't need to know that.

"Alright girls, get the horses back into harness!" Melody shouted, and it seemed we were done. They had just been waiting for me to help them move that single box.

Odds are the entire re-arrangement of the boxes was simply for it.

Hopping off the wagon, I glanced at Renn. She was walking back, and was glaring at me.

Yet her glare was accompanied by a silly looking smirk.

I smiled at her and she hurriedly looked away, and mumbled something I couldn't hear thanks to the horses neighing next to me as they were attached to their harnesses.

With a sigh I nodded. It probably hadn't been very nice.

"Back on the road girls! Let's move it!" Melody shouted, taking command.

"Aye mother!" they all shouted.

Chapter 74: Chapter Seventy Three – Renn – A Knight's Demand

The wagon was dead silent as we stared at the two men.

Off in the distance, just nearly out of earshot even for me... were Vim and a man on a horse. Vim looked tiny next to the horse and its rider. Not only was the horse larger than usual... the knight wore armor which gleamed, even in the setting sun, and he looked big. Maybe even bigger than Vim.

"What do you think he's saying?" Palm asked her mother.

I sat next to Kathy on the wagon, and Palm and Melody were behind us. Criby and her sister Tiffany were on either side of the horses, holding their reins.

"Which one?" Kathy asked.

"Uh... both?" Palm asked, and I didn't need to glance behind me to know she had glanced at me.

As far as I could tell the knight was asking Vim who we were and what we were doing out this late in the day on the road.

"I'll be honest I didn't expect this. We passed that encampment without them even looking at us," Criby said as she glanced at us. Or rather at Melody.

"Same," Kathy agreed.

Yes. It was true. We had rounded that knight encampment, as they had called it, nearly half a day ago. Many had seemed to point and watch us pass, but none had come out to bother us. A few had even ridden out on horses, but... none had approached us. They had simply rode around in the distance, as if just to ride.

"Those knights had different colors, didn't they?" I asked. They had blue and white flags. This man had a red one on his horse's saddle.

"They did. But a knight's colors represent his rank, not always who claim his fealty," Melody said sternly.

Hm. I hadn't known that.

"Oh!" Kathy sat up as we watched Vim turn away and head back towards us.

At first I was glad. If their conversation was over we could return to traveling... but...

The knight didn't move from his spot.

"This isn't good, is it?" Kathy asked worriedly.

"Don't panic yet," Melody ordered, and then the wagon shook as she hopped off it.

Glancing at her as she walked past me on the left, I noticed her strange glare as she walked forward to meet Vim.

They met quickly, mostly because Melody had hurried. "What does he want?" Melody asked softly. Low enough she probably didn't want her daughters to hear her.

Kathy shifted next to me, and the two sisters on the ground stepped forward but were kept back by the horses. They didn't budge.

It seemed none could hear her.

"A toll, of course," Vim said, just as quietly.

"You must be joking," Melody's voice raised enough that the others could hear her now. They all startled.

"No. I'm not," Vim shifted and put his hand on his hip. He looked upset that she'd actually accuse him of doing such a thing.

Melody looked past Vim, at the knight on the horse. Odds were she was glaring daggers at him.

"How much?" she asked.

"Too much. A quarter of anything you have," Vim said.

Melody didn't even speak; she just put her face into her hand and groaned.

"How much did he say?" Palm asked loudly.

"I think he said a quarter!" Criby said.

"You're kidding!" Kathy groaned.

Melody raised her other hand, to shush her daughters. Surprisingly they went quiet.

"What do you think Vim?" Melody asked him softly. Back to whispering.

"What do you want me to think?" he asked her back.

"I can't give them a quarter. We have debts. If I give them a quarter, this will be our last trip. Ever," Melody said sternly.

For a moment Vim said nothing. He simply stared at the woman before him.

I was transfixed by his eyes. They looked... upset... yet... soft. Gentle. Worried.

Obviously not for himself. And by extension, me. But...

He was worried for her. For them. He felt for them.

Smiling softly at him, I watched as his eyes went upward. Leaving Melody, who slouched in front of him. His eyes met my own, and I smiled at him.

He smiled back, and held my gaze for a moment... then looked back at Melody.

"I think he's a brigand. He doesn't speak like a real knight. At least none that I've ever known," Vim then said.

Melody shot up straight, as to stare at the distant knight.

"Truthfully?" Melody asked harshly.

Vim nodded. "Yes. He's wobbly in the saddle. He's not used to the weight on his body. And he's uneducated. He didn't know what spikenard is used for," Vim said.

Melody seemed to find that information very important. "A fake," she said.

Vim nodded. "That's my assumption. Yet as fake as he might be, his threat is not. He speaks in plural, so he's definitely not alone. He's too confident to be alone. But I'm not sure how many there are... I think I see the gleam of metal to our right, but it could be weapons, could be scraps of metal from something long abandoned," Vim said with a gesture to his left. Our right.

Melody looked out that way, and I did too.

Yes. I could see it. A good distance away, past the large grass field, was something. Or rather someone. They were hiding right where a hill started, where the ground sunk a little as to hide from us.

"Mother...?" Kathy spoke up, and Melody looked at her.

Suddenly the woman looked as old as her daughters sometimes treated her.

"Mom..." Palm whispered sadly at the sight, and it pained my heart.

Especially since the old woman's worry was for naught.

After all...

Glancing at the knight, and then to his supposed allies... I wondered if it could be any more than ten or so men.

Ten men? Even if fully armored...

They were nothing to Vim.

Yet... would he do anything about it?

I was about to hop off the cart, but Vim's eyes caught me.

His glare held me in place, and I remembered our conversation from this morning.

Stay seated in the seat.

Yes. Okay. Sorry.

I mouthed the words and sat back down.

"Renn?" Kathy asked what was wrong, but I just shook my head.

"What do you want to do? Either give up a quarter or see if you can call his bluff. I doubt he'll wait much longer," Vim said.

"But... but he has no right! No claim! Especially if he's just a thief," Tiffany shouted.

Seemed she had better hearing than the others.

"A thief?" Criby asked, looking all around.

"Is he?" Kathy asked.

Vim seemed to ignore the commotion and focused on Melody.

"I'm one man, Melody. I'll fight, if I must, but I'm still just one man. If he has enough men, you'll lose more than a quarter of your stock. You'll lose things much more precious," Vim said to her. He spoke softly, so that the others couldn't hear him.

He wanted Melody to give up her goods. To pay the toll.

A little surprised he had chosen that option, I wondered if that was his personal belief... or because he didn't want to reveal how strong he was.

Melody said nothing, and the woman's daughters all became quiet as they stared at her. Waiting.

Looking away from Vim and Melody, I found the knight approaching slowly. His horse trotted towards us, and he looked... worried for some reason.

"Mother!" Kathy alerted her mother to his approach, and she startled. Vim however kept his back turned, and stayed focused on Melody.

"You can replace wealth Melody. You can't replace them," Vim said to her.

Melody looked away from the approaching knight, back at Vim.

My heart sunk as I realized she was going to give in. To accept.

This... this wasn't fair, was it?

Would Vim actually allow it to happen?

Even though he could stop it? So easily?

Would I let it happen...?

A sudden memory flashed into my head. The hallway. That day. In Ruvindale.

When I had chosen to act against their wishes. When I had lost my right to that home. When I had lost it. Nearly lost it all.

Would I do the same again?

If I said something... if I did something... would Vim banish me? Or at least, do it in his own way?

Closing my eyes as the knight drew close enough; I listened as he took a deep breath. "A quarter of your goods! Drop it there, now!" he shouted.

"What do we do?" Kathy asked worriedly.

"A quarter..." Palm groaned, and I heard her strain. She was in pain. And not just emotionally. The poor girl was still suffering from her miscarriage... and this stress wasn't helping.

"Your answer!" the knight shouted, and I heard a new sound.

Metal.

Opening my eyes, I flinched at the sight of men in the distance. Not all of them had armor, but a good portion did.

And there were more than just a few.

Quickly counting eleven men, I flinched.

What would Vim do if they simply attacked anyway?

Would he save them? Or...

Looking over at Vim, I glared at the man who looked far too calm. Too patient.

He was still staring at Melody. Waiting for her answer.

"You have a choice, Melody!" I shouted.

Melody startled, as did the girl I sat next to. Their startle was understandable, but the knight and his horse jolting wasn't.

"Ho!" The man quickly got his horse under control as I nodded to Melody. She stared at me with expectant eyes.

"Whatever you choose, do not regret it," I said to her.

After all, it was what I wanted to say to myself.

It was what Vim centered his whole being around. Free will. Choice. The right to choose even the wrong options.

Vim ignored me and my outburst, but at least he didn't glare at me. At least he didn't sigh or shake his head.

Melody looked at those near me. Her daughter. Those who she saw as daughters, even if they weren't.

"The toll is a quarter! Do not make me take it!" the knight shouted. He had raised his voice, either upset I had startled his horse or to tell his companions what was happening.

"There are a dozen men over there," Kathy whispered.

"They have spears, mother!" Palm shouted.

"Tiffany..." Criby moaned a strange sound.

Tiffany only shook her head, looking defeated already.

Melody looked away from us and back to Vim.

Vim's eyes narrowed and I realized she had probably made a decision. It was likely on her face already, even though she hadn't said it aloud.

Was she going to risk her children? Really?

"I'll give it."

The world suddenly got quiet as Melody nodded. "A quarter! Fine! No more!" she shouted.

All of her daughters wordlessly looked at each other, and I felt very out of place. I knew I should probably look as distraught and worried as they but...

"Good! Drop it there!" The knight sounded relieved as he shouted back.

I squeezed my pants tightly as I watched Melody turn around and head back towards us. To the wagon.

Her face was wrought with anger and adorned by tears.

"Mother..." Tiffany broke into a sob, and I realized that they all knew it too.

This was the end.

I didn't know what happened to people when they failed to pay off their debts. I didn't know how horrible it actually were... but based off their looks, and their tears...

It wasn't good.

Looking away from them, I stared at the man who had allowed those expressions to come into existence.

He held my gaze, unflinching.

The man on the horse trotted closer, but had his horse arch. Not drawing too close, yet acting as if he would. Rather than trying to be intimidating, I felt as if he was growing anxious. He couldn't contain himself.

"Are we really mother?" Kathy asked Melody as she reached us.

"Help me unload the boxes," Melody ordered, not meeting anyone's gaze.

I hopped off the wagon alongside Kathy, but not to go and help. Instead I hurried to Vim.

He finally frowned at me, and I knew it was simply because I had gotten off the wagon.

"Renn..." Vim sighed as I drew close.

"Vim what's happening?" I asked him.

"What does it look like? They're paying a toll," he said.

"They're being robbed," I corrected him.

"Better robbed than killed," he argued.

"You'd let them die?" I asked him.

Vim didn't answer right away. Instead he looked past me, to the wagon.

"Will you stop me if I stopped this?" I asked him.

My question got his full attention, and his eyes narrowed.

He would.

"Really...?" I asked.

Vim didn't even blink as he nodded.

"Then you're a hypocrite. You don't believe in free will at all," I said.

He sighed, and shook his head.

"You'd argue that? Vim! Look at them! I don't know what happens when you don't pay debts, but obviously it's horrible," I said as I pointed to the girls who had finally got the first box off the wagon. Only Melody and Tiffany were crying, but they were all distraught.

"Renn," he said my name but I shook my head. I didn't want to hear it.

"I'll... I'll do it without revealing who I am. What I am. Maybe..." I looked to the man on the horse.

Could I? That armor was real. Even if he wasn't a real knight, that metal didn't pretend.

And the dozen men in the distance wouldn't either.

I could kill a man. I've done it. But could I kill that many without getting hurt myself?
Without revealing what I was?

Stepping towards the knight, I came to a stop before I could rush him.

Vim held my arm, rather tightly.

"Let me go," I ordered.

"Renn."

I shook my head and tried to pull myself free. Not only did he not budge, neither did I.
My arm was locked in place.

Grabbing his shirt, I tugged it as I glared at him. "Please Vim! If I let this happen..." I
tried to think of how horrible the rest of the journey would be. How quiet. How sad. How
depressing.

People who were becoming friends would instead become distant. People that had
been depressed, but still lively, would become distraught and empty.

I'd seen it before.

Knew it well.

After all it had happened to me.

"Renn," Vim said my name again and I blinked watery eyes.

"Don't try anything stupid!" the horseman yelled. He was closer. I ignored him, and kept
my eyes on Vim.

"Renn, calm yourself for a moment and listen to me," Vim said.

I shook my head. I didn't want to hear whatever excuse he had. Especially since it might
make sense. Especially so since it'd be full of reason and...

And it'd only make me hate myself more.

"Get back to the wagon! Now!" The sound of the horse's hooves grew louder. I turned
and found he was close. Too close.

He really was big. The gauntlet that held the horse's reins was nearly as big as my head.

Was he that big, or was his armor just that big?

Vim ignored him, and pulled me closer.

He grabbed my other arm, and I felt oddly insulted as he held me in place. As if I was some child and he my parent getting ready to yell at me.

"Let me go Vim," I told him one last time.

"Not until you hear what I have to say," he said.

"Then say it and let me go!"

"Get back!" The knight shouted. I heard the sound of something metal clanging; his horse neighed as it got closer.

"You have no right to decide their fate," Vim then said.

I shook my head. "Them? You kill humans all the time!" I argued.

"Not them! Them!" he turned me, spinning me so I could look at the wagon.

They had five boxes off the wagon now. Palm was standing near the horses, staring at us with wide eyes. None of the others were looking this way.

My eyes grew blurry again as I realized what he meant.

"You let them choose," I said.

"They chose," he stated.

I nodded. They had. Melody had.

"If I kill these men... then I might have to kill them too. Since they'll see it. They'll think about it. They'll question how it was possible. Are you willing to watch me kill them Renn? Can you?" he asked me, speaking softly. Kindly. His hold on my arms softened, as he suddenly got a whole lot gentler with me.

Slowly shaking my head, I knew better than to answer.

No. I didn't want to see him kill them. Nor did I think I could stand by and let it happen.

Which meant he'd simply kill me. Since it was obvious I'd not be able to actually stop him.

Vim's hands squeezed my arms, but not roughly. Nor to keep me in his grip. Instead I felt as if he was trying to apologize for handling me roughly.

Lowering my head, I knew I'd not be able to do anything now.

After all if I did... he'd step in. Even if I was able to kill them, or deter them, it didn't matter. He'd step in to protect me without a moment's hesitation.

And then the end result would be the same.

They'd see him protect me, most likely violently, and then... then he'd have to kill them. To silence them. To stop the possibility of them finding out about us. About the society.

Which would only mean my own actions would have gotten them killed.

"But... that doesn't mean we have no options," Vim then said.

Looking up, I glanced at him as he sighed and released me. I wobbled in front of him, feeling weak. "Options...?" I asked.

He nodded with a sigh. "Really. Next time just wait, okay? Though I suppose I should praise you. You tried to interfere earlier, and held yourself back. That's progress at least, I guess," he said.

"That's it! Get back now or die!" the knight shouted, and I glanced at him. He had lifted a large black weapon. Not a sword, but some kind of mace. The thing was huge, and had spikes all over the top of it. The knight was brandishing it, but didn't seem intent on swinging it. He was trying to scare us away.

When had he procured it? I hadn't seen it before... maybe that was the sound I had heard earlier.

"Go on. Back to the wagon," Vim patted me as he ushered me to go.

I nodded and obeyed. Stepping away from him, I took one last glance to the horseman. He was kicking his horse, forcing it forward towards Vim. Even though it looked as if it didn't want to go near him. As if it could sense that something was off about him.

"Renn! Here!" I turned and found Palm ushering me towards her. She looked... terrified.

Then I heard metal crunch, and something heavy slapped the earth behind me.

Startling, I spun around... and found only Vim standing there.

The knight and his horse were gone.

Then I heard the loud crash.

Turning my head to the left, I found two forms in the distance. Probably several dozen leaps away, was the horse. It was rolling along the ground wildly, its legs flailing in unnatural directions. They were broken. Behind the horse, a little to the right, was another bundle of a mess. Pieces were flying all over, and they glimmered... and not just from their metallic nature.

The knight rolled away with a great force, and one of his arms actually popped off in the process. It and blood flew off in the air, landing in the grass and disappearing from sight.

Once the two stopped rolling, the world became deathly quiet. Fitting the sunset.

Staring at the horse and knight... I realized they were both dead. Neither was moving.

"Vim..." I whispered as I looked at him. He sighed and nodded, and then turned to look the other direction. To the group of men in the distance.

None of them had moved yet. Did they even realize what had just happened? Something told me they hadn't.

"This was inevitable Renn. Next time this happens, please remember that your job is to keep yourself safe. That's my entire purpose. To keep you safe. Please don't question it again," Vim said to me.

I gulped a dry mouth and nodded.

"Go tell them to load the boxes back onto the wagon, and hurry away. I don't think they're smart enough to realize that what just happened to their friend can happen to them," Vim said with a gesture to the men in the distance. They were all looking at each other, talking amongst themselves.

"Did they even see what you did?" I asked. I hadn't. My back had been turned... and only for a moment. It had happened that fast.

"Doubtful. Go on. Do your job, you're supposed to handle the talking remember?" Vim asked me.

I nodded. "Yeah..."

"C'mon!" a man shouted in the distance, and I realized Vim was right. They were getting ready to come.

Hurrying to the wagon, I finally realized what Vim meant all this time.

Not a single one of them were looking at me. They were staring at Vim. With looks of pure fear.

"Put the boxes back onto the wagon! Come on!" I shouted, trying to get Melody's attention.

She shook her head as if in disbelief... and then looked at me.

"Get them back on. Quick! Hurry!" I hurried over behind the wagon, to help them load them back on.

"O-okay..." Kathy stuttered as I bumped into her and bent down to grab hold of a box.

They went into motion, to help me... but I knew the truth. I knew that Vim had been right.

Of course he had.

After all... how many times has this happened to him? Over his many years?

Hundreds? Thousands of times?

Did they always end the same...?

"Oh god!" Criby cried out, and the sound forced me to find out what had happened. She sounded as if the end of the world was upon us.

But it wasn't the end. She was just watching Vim. Off in the distance killing men.

"Focus!" I shouted, hoping to get them all to stop watching.

It barely worked. Only Melody and Kathy returned to loading the boxes.

At least there were only a few left and...

"He killed them all..." Palm whispered as I loaded the second to last box.

Pushing it farther into the wagon, I groaned as I glanced up at Tiffany. She and Criby were the only ones on the wagon. They were both standing still, watching Vim. Or rather whatever Vim was doing.

I spared a glance at him, and saw he was alone. No others stood near him. But there were dark shadows all around him. The setting sun played with those shadows... making one think there were a lot more bodies out there than there actually were.

"Last box!" I shouted as I grabbed the last one from Melody. She was holding it, but only that. She had been transfixed, and couldn't look away.

Putting the last box onto the back of the wagon, I groaned as I realized this was it.

Would Vim kill them now?

No. Hopefully not. He had told me to load the boxes back on after all. Why make me do that if he was just going to kill them?

Yet...

Glancing at Vim, I found he was walking back towards us. He walked slowly, calmly, and it was obvious why. There was no reason to hurry anymore.

Looking to Melody, I flinched at the weird look on her face. It was more than just crying. More than just fear. It was an emotion I had actually never seen on a person before.

Which was weird... since nearly all of them had the same expression.

"Impossible..." Melody whispered.

Gulping, I looked to Vim. For guidance. What was I supposed to say? What could I say?

He didn't seem willing to give me any, and instead just kept walking towards us. He wasn't that far away now and...

"A...ah! No!" Criby stumbled over a box. The one I had just put onto the wagon behind her. She fell hard, causing the rest of them to jump in shock.

"Criby?" Tiffany hurried to help her sister, her fear mixing with concern and worry.

Criby rolled on her side, obviously hurt from the fall. She had landed on the edge of the box... yet she wasn't crying out in pain. No...

"No..." Criby groaned, and I recognized her eyes. The look. That look of pure disbelief.

Nory had that look right before she died.

Which meant...

Looking around one last time, to all of their faces... I realized the truth. I realized what needed to be done.

Hurriedly heading around the wagon, I clambered up onto its side. I used the wheel and its spokes to climb up and reach for my bag. I had laid it next to the big box that sat behind the driver seat.

Once I had it in my hand, I hopped back down to the ground.

Turning to go, to hurry to Vim... I hesitated to a stop as I came face to face with Palm.

"Goodbye," she whispered.

Blinking, I heaved a sob as I nodded. "Goodbye. Stay safe," I said to her.

She nodded, and stepped aside to let me go.

Hurrying away, I did my best to keep myself from stumbling as I cried.

This was why Vim had wanted her to simply pay the fee.

Because even if he didn't have to kill them... even if it didn't endanger me or the Society...

It still ended in heartbreak.

Chapter 75: Chapter Seventy Four – Vim – A Quiet Cost

She was learning. Fast.

Although a somewhat regrettable outcome... what had just happened was also in the end, positive.

A good lesson for one such as her.

Yet like always... such lessons were painful, and left scars.

We had left the wagon of spice and the five women behind. I was a little surprised to have seen Renn be the one to run away first. She probably had no idea how relieved I was to see her leave on her own accord. I had been rather... worried, on how I was going to get her to leave after the event.

It was now the middle of the night. A sliver of a moon loomed over us, illuminating the thin clouds that flowed quickly above us. There wasn't much wind down here on the ground, but up there seemed to be a windstorm based off the speed of the clouds.

Renn was walking next to me, and oddly... wasn't crying. She had wept for a few minutes directly after the event, but had calmed herself rather quickly.

It made me wonder if maybe she had cried because of something they had said or did. If that was the reason, it would also explain why she had been the first to run away.

Though... there was also a chance she had simply ran in hopes of keeping me from taking their lives.

Honestly no matter the reason... I was glad she was capable of understanding such things. I was glad she had been able to make the decision herself, without me having to force it.

It meant she really could adapt to our society.

It meant she was now a little more trustworthy. A little more valuable.

A frog croaked to my left, and I glanced at the little creek we were walking next to. It was barely as wide as my foot, but it was flowing a little fast. Either there was a larger river nearby, or water was seeping up from the ground somewhere.

"Think they'll be okay?" Renn asked.

"Yes. They'll be taking the same path we are now Renn, and we've only passed two people. Both were merchants themselves," I said.

She nodded, but didn't seem that happy to hear it.

"I feel... defeated. As if I had made a horrible mistake," Renn said.

"What mistake did you make?" I asked her carefully.

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. Did I... choose wrongly? Did I not say the right things back then? Did I misunderstand you?" She rambled some questions, but didn't seem to know which one to really ask.

Yet it wasn't my place to tell her which one she needed to ask. Nor did I plan to give answer to any of them either.

"Was giving up the boxes a better choice?" Renn asked, and did so with a glance at me. This was the first time she's actually looked at me in several hours.

Fitting that she did so when she asked the right one.

"I would have preferred that option," I said honestly.

Her face contorted into pain and she looked away. "I see."

"But... at the same time, bending over for scum is never pleasant," I said.

"But it wasn't our choice. It was theirs. We took it from them," Renn said.

"Who said we did? They made their choice Renn. They gave... or were willing to give the boxes. What happened afterward was not a result of their choice," I said. I didn't

mention that it was her fault. That knight would not have gotten anywhere near me if she hadn't acted so oddly in front of him.

He had been scared of me after all. He had even offered me a portion of the spoils.

It was probably best I kept such a thing from her, though.

"What would have happened? If they couldn't pay their debts?" Renn asked.

"Depends on what they put up as collateral for the credit. It could have been their horses and wagon, their house... maybe even they themselves, although such creditors are hard to find in this nation. The church outlawed such things," I said.

"Themselves? Their lives?" Renn paused, looking at me again.

"Their lives, yes. But they wouldn't have been killed. They would have simply become slaves. For women it's... not that pleasant. Yet as I said, I doubt it had been that. It was probably the wagon and the horses, based off what Melody had said. It would have put them out of business. However if it had also put them into debt then... well... it could have led to even worse results too," I said honestly.

I didn't want to hide the truth from someone who looked so devastated.

"Similar to that family we helped. The ones with the broken wagon," I reminded her.

She hesitated a moment, and then nodded. She remembered them now.

Honestly... that hadn't been that long ago. A month was all.

Renn seemed to calm down a little after my explanation, and she took a deep breath. "So we at least saved them from that," she said.

"At the risk of our people, yes," I said stiffly.

She flinched. "I..." she didn't continue, obviously unable to say anything.

"They live in the capital. Or at least have a place of business there. That means there's a chance they might see you or I there in the future. Maybe even years from now. Not a good predicament you put us in, Renn," I said to her.

She closed her eyes and nodded, seemingly fully aware.

"But don't feel too bad. I allowed it. They still live after all," I said, and returned to walking.

Renn stayed where she stood for a moment, and then hurried to follow after me. Her shoes sounded odd as she hastily came up next to me. "How bad is it? Really?" she asked.

"Very. They just watched me kill a dozen men, bandits or no, with my bare hands. They'll tell people. No one will believe them. Then they'll either keep it quiet forever, afraid to be blamed or labeled as some kind of crazy wacko, or will confess their sins to the church. Either rumors, or the church, learning of it can cause issues. After all... they knew our names," I said.

Renn covered her face as she groaned. "They do..."

"I know it upset you Renn, but I really wish you would have simply let it happen," I said honestly.

"Hm..." she walked next to me, still hiding her face. Was she crying? I didn't hear any sobs...

"I will always put you and the society over everything. And that's not limited to humans, Renn. I would have done the same, had they been inhuman," I told her.

"Even if they were a part of the society?" she asked.

"Oh. No. I'd not have even listened to his demands had it been our own people," I said.

"Then... why did you let them live?" she asked carefully.

"Is that why you ran?" I asked.

"From them? Well... no. Yes and no, actually. I ran because I saw how they were looking at you. I knew there would be no point trying to explain anything to them," Renn said softly.

I nodded, and was glad to hear her admit it aloud. "I'm glad you understood at least. The reason they're still alive Renn is for two reasons. I'll tell you only one of them," I said.

Renn slowed a little... and after she realized I had come to a stop, she did too.

"There is a very good chance they will not tell anyone what happened. After all he had claimed to be a knight. He very well could have been one, too. A bunch of women claiming the deaths of knights... would not be good. Especially when one takes into account in how those men had died," I said.

"Is that why you killed them like that?" she asked.

I nodded. "Brutality such as that is unnatural to them. After all, humans aren't strong enough to tear asunder their own kind like that," I said.

She studied me for a moment, and then nodded. "So you are betting they'll keep it a secret. To protect themselves," she concluded.

"It's a risk. They might still report it, but no one will believe them. Odds are they'll report it, but will say that they simply found the bodies on the side of the road as they traveled. They'll talk amongst themselves... and will decide that I was some kind of haunt. Either a monster in human guise or some kind of fairy. Whatever their religion calls demons, maybe," I said, and tried to remember which one this one called our kind. For some reason I didn't think it used demons as the term... something with a c...

"If they thought us demons, wouldn't that make it more reason to tell the church?" Renn asked.

"No. You'd think so, but the church in this land is very strict. There's a very good chance that they would be excommunicated, or even killed, just because they met a supposed demon," I said.

"That... doesn't sound like a good religion," Renn complained.

"I've actually always been fond of the stricter ones myself," I said.

Renn glared at me with an odd look, but I didn't shy away from it. After all why should I? I had been honest.

"Killing their own people for just seeing a demon is indeed crazy. But sometimes a strict law is better than a lax one. Go to a land where thieves get their hands cut off, and you'll find a place where you can carry your purse around openly without worry," I said.

"Because people are too scared to even think of it," Renn argued.

"Better to be terrified than to hurt others."

Renn's glare died a little, but didn't disappear completely. "I guess it's a good thing you're such a firm believer in free-will then," she said.

I nodded. "It is."

Another frog croaked, and it drew Renn's attention away from me. She smiled softly at it, and I knew it was because she had interpreted the noise as the world around us agreeing with her statement.

"It was fun, you know?" Renn then said.

"Traveling with them? I'm sure it was," I said. For you.

"Now we don't get paid either," she grumbled.

I flinched. "That does suck."

"How much would it have been by the way?" she asked.

"I'll not answer," I said. I didn't want to say it aloud.

"Oh? Is that the other reason?" she asked, intrigued.

"Reason? Oh. For letting them live? No. I hadn't let them live in hopes of getting paid. The reason I didn't want to answer is because of how much we would have gotten. That wagon was a fortune, and we would have gotten ten percent of it," I said.

Renn smirked at me, telling me she had known that wasn't the real reason... and instead had only been trying to get me to say it.

This girl...

"Spices are worth that much?" she asked.

"Most are. Yes. Your little coin pouch, in your bag, if filled with certain spices would be more valuable than if it were full of Penk instead," I explained.

"Huh..." Renn pondered my words as we began to descend a small hill.

The little creek we had been walking along diverted, leaving us. I'd miss the sounds of it and the creatures which lived by it.

"This land uses Scripts by the way," I said.

"Scripts?"

I nodded. "I have none to show you. I'll get some once we reach the capital. They're little squares instead of circular coins. They have gospels written on them. Here, there's no different type of coins. They're all made of silver, and they're all worth the same. Their value is manipulated and controlled by the church," I explained.

"Hm... aren't gospels long? How do they fit on the coins?" she asked.

"They print them very tiny-like," I showed her the distance the words filled by squeezing my finger and thumb closely together.

"Does this land have a king or queen then? Or is it just all ran by the church?" she asked.

Heading back up a hill, I nodded. "They do. They have royalty, and nobles and such. But their power is limited. Most agree the church rules the land."

"So... will it be a bunch of people like Rapti? If so that might not be too bad," Renn said.

"For you maybe," I said.

She giggled as we reached the top of the hill, and the mountains in the distance came into view. They were dark sillhouetes in the night, but even from here and during the night I could see the white peaks.

Renn must not be able to see them yet, since she looked around for a moment at the top of the hill. She didn't mention or ask about them, and instead focused on some animals to our right. "What are those?" she asked.

"Elk... don't you know what those are? You're from the north and a forest animal yourself..." I said, wondering if she was serious. She had sounded like it.

"Elk? But they're so small," she said.

"Different breeds," I said.

"Huh..." Renn stopped for a moment, to study them.

Watching her as she did, I wondered if...

"How much have you traveled Renn?" I asked her gently.

She didn't take her eyes off the herd. "My home forest was in the north. I left it and found a human village, and then the witch not too long after... I guess not far, now that I realize it. I had thought I was well traveled but..." Renn went quiet as she blinked a few times, probably thinking of memories.

"There's nothing wrong with it. There's not a whole lot different, no matter how far you go. Different animals. Different fruits and colors of grass... But in the end it's all the same. Same mountains. Same forests. Same deserts. Same seas," I said.

"Are they? Really?" she finally looked away from the herd, and I shivered for some reason. She was now studying me as harshly as she had been doing the deer.

"Well... no. They're the same, but there's no denying their differences," I said honestly.

She frowned, and I wondered if she thought I had lied to her on purpose.

"I meant in the grand scheme of things, Renn..." I said, worried she did indeed think so.

"I know. You speak like an old man," she said.

"Well... I am one..."

Renn giggled as she nodded, and returned to walking.

"Rather you just think like one! I swear, it's so hard to get you to laugh or smile... maybe there's a trick to it?" Renn asked herself as we headed down another small hill.

"Rather nothing. You're not some young kit either you know. Two hundred years... You could have over eighty children by now you know, that's how old you are," I teased her.

Renn's hat shifted thanks to her ears. "Eighty...?" she grumbled as she tried to think of it.

"At least," I nodded. If one really tried, it was probably possible for far more than that... but one always had to calculate with room for error.

"That's a lot of food," Renn said.

I chuckled and nodded. It would be.

"Ah! There... but that doesn't count, you're basically laughing at your own joke," Renn complained.

A bright line of light crossed the sky, drawing Renn's eyes to it. The falling star faded as quickly as it came, yet somehow the sky seemed... just a bit brighter now, thanks to it.

"Think they saw it too?" Renn asked softly.

"Hm?"

"Melody and them," she reminded me.

"Maybe. They should be asleep, humans don't do well without it," I said.

Renn nodded, but didn't smile. She kept staring upward, as if expecting more of a show in the sky.

"Let's go Renn. Telmik will come into view as the sun does, and I'd like to reach it before it sets again. They close their gates at sundown here," I said.

"Sundown...?"

Picking up our pace, I smiled softly at the woman who passed one of my many tests.

I'd not tell her that she had, of course. I never told anyone when they did or not.

But honestly... how long had it been since one had?

"What was the other reason, by the way?" she then asked.

"Did I not tell you that I'd say only one?" I asked her.

She smiled softly, and I realized she had hoped I had forgotten it amongst the conversation.

Sighing at her, I wondered if maybe I had passed her a little prematurely. But... no...

A woman was allowed to be a little mischievous.

And it was that very smile that kept my hand, after all.

It would have been lost to me. Maybe even forever... if I had killed them.

The risk those five women brought was worth the price to keep that smile alive.

A cost to earn her. A hefty one, in my eyes... yet a small one in other's.

A cost I was willing to pay.

At least... for now.

Chapter 76: Chapter Seventy Five – Renn - Telmik

We've lost.

It was impossible. There was no winning now. No chance.

Not even the man I was following through town could stop them. Not even he, with all his strength, could fight this many.

"You all right?" Vim glanced back at me, and I briskly nodded to let him know I was.

Or at least, I hoped I was.

His eyes studied me for a moment, and then he returned to facing forward. Ever forward, like always, Vim walked undaunted and with a straight back.

How could he walk amongst this... this place was...

Shivering as we rounded a street, and I saw even higher buildings than the last... I wondered what this could be called.

It was like a giant hive. Of humans. There were not hundreds, but thousands... maybe even more... and they were all out and about.

Some walked. Some rode carriages. A few were even riding little carriages that were decorated and were just big enough for two people to sit upon. Most of those weren't even being pulled by horses, but by other people.

Staying close to Vim, I hoped and prayed we'd reach our destination soon. It felt as if we had been walking amongst crowds for days, and the deeper we went into the city... the more I got lost.

I needed to make sure I didn't get lost. If I got lost here, I'd never find Vim again. Might not even be able to find the exit either. This place was so massive, so colossal, even if I climbed to the highest roof nearby I'd not find the gates. I'd most likely only see a sea of stone and wooden roofs, as far as the eye could see.

"Come one and all! The thirteenth annual play begins tonight!" A man loudly proclaimed on the other side of the road. He was standing up on a platform, and he had a nice sized crowd in front of him. He was talking about some kind of entertainment tonight... a play... but where? The building behind him? It looked like a house, not a place for shows.

Vim and I rounded the crowd, and I found it funny that anywhere else... his crowd would have been basically the whole town. Yet here it was just an annoyance. Just one more crowd to shove ourselves through.

"There are many plays. You'll not regret missing that one," Vim turned to both check on me, and talk to me, as we left that street and went into a large alleyway.

"Uh... sure..." I nodded, but didn't know what else to say. After all I had no intention of going to it, or wanting to see it. Had my expression looked as if I had wanted to? Surely not.

Right now I just wanted to hide.

To think I had thought Ruvindale had been massive.

This place could absorb Ruvindale's entire population and not even blink.

"How much farther?" I asked Vim. The alley we were now in wasn't a real one. It had places to sit and rest, benches and tables. Maybe the buildings that created this alley were businesses of some kind. Luckily though we were alone. No one else was here.

Yet the world was still loud. Just behind me, and coming from above, were loud enough noises that even beneath my hat I still wished I could cover my ears.

"Still a ways. Sure you're okay?" Vim asked. I noted the soft tone of his question... he most likely saw how bothered I felt.

"No. But I'm doing my best," I said.

"I can tell. Want to sit here for a moment?" Vim pointed at one of the benches. It was made of stone.

"I uh..." I quickly thought about it. A part of me did want to, but the rest of me wanted to escape this place as fast as possible.

Shaking my head, I decided to risk it. A small breather might just make it worse in the long run.

"Alright... just let me know if you need a moment. We can always sneak into an alley or sit at one of the cafes or something," Vim offered.

"I will," I said, and hoped I wouldn't need to abuse his kindness in such a way.

Here I was trying to earn my place next to him... what kind of scared weakling could earn her place next to the protector? Not one who hid from a crowd, that's for sure.

The worst part was he had warned me. Several times before entering the city.

I hadn't taken his warnings seriously. I would from now on.

"This way," Vim guided me to the end of the alleyway, and then to the right. We were now back on a main road, and once again the world got louder... and more crowded.

This time the crowds were working men. Several carts ran up and down the road, and were being loaded or unloaded. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to them, since each cart had different types of boxes or barrels being loaded into it, but it was obvious this road was being used for one singular purpose.

Keeping close to Vim, since men were crossing the street as to load their carts, I wondered if this was what every street behind the buildings that housed businesses looked like. Was this much product being sold? This much food being eaten? Goods being crafted?

Surely not...

"Make way!" A man shouted, and then he cracked the reins of the horse in front of his cart. It jolted away from the side of the road, and into the center. It was a ways ahead of

Vim and I, and he was heading away from us, so we didn't have to move... but a dozen other men had to hurriedly run off the street as to not get ran over.

Men cursed at the cart, but it ended there. Everyone quickly went back to work after.

Humans were scary.

"This way," Vim walked in-between two carts, and into another alleyway. Hurrying after him, since a pair of men had stared at me as I passed... I found us walking through a more familiar alley.

It was small. Cramped. Full of boxes and barrels, most that looked like they'd been here for years... and was a little dirty. Refuse and trash were piled up near some of the crates we passed.

Oddly, the sight of such trash and normalcy relaxed me. Even though usually I didn't like walking through it myself, here I found it soothing.

"This road is one of the main ones. It circles the entire district, basically circling all of Telmik," Vim paused at the alley's exit, and pointed at the road it opened to.

"Which district is this?" I asked as I stared at the waves of people.

Luckily there didn't seem to be any carts, but there were those little carriages that only one or two people rode at a time.

Across the road, instead of more buildings looked instead a fountain. A large one... with some kind of statue in the center. I couldn't tell what it was at this angle though.

"This is the merchant's road. Shopping. Food. Stuff like that is found on this road. Beyond this road, heading that way... which is where we're headed, is the holy district," Vim pointed to the right, to where large buildings loomed over the roofs of the ones across the street.

"The church," I nodded.

"That and more. This town has a whole district the size of Ruvindale just to house their relics and clergy. It's a pain, but useful," Vim said with a sigh.

"A tree amongst the forest," I nodded, understanding.

I really hadn't before. Yet now I did.

Anyone could hide here. You could go years without seeing a familiar face, it felt.

Following Vim out into the busy wave of humans, I felt sick. There was too much commotion. Too much noise. Too many voices, too many shoes stepping on the stone road. Too many bells being rung, from the opening and of doors to the shops. Too many products being sold. Too much, too often.

Focusing on Vim, I did my best to stay right behind him. Not just to keep up with him, but because it helped me ignore the world around me.

Usually I'd be more than happy to look around, to see all the new sights... but right now I didn't feel like seeing anything.

Honestly this was the first time I'd ever really felt like this. I wasn't just feeling out of place, I felt tiny. Alone.

"Three for two!" a woman shouted. A glance showed a younger woman lifting a basket... of some kind of bread.

"Not in a million years!" A man shouted to another and drew my eyes to the fountain nearby. They were arguing about something, and oddly enough seemed to be ignored by the crowds around them.

Walking towards the fountain, we passed a group of tables. They were... kind of out in the middle of the street. They weren't near any buildings, and in fact weren't very close to the fountain either. Why were they out here?

They were full. People stood around the tables, since there weren't enough chairs. Most of the people sitting there were men, wearing odd clothing.

One of the men hit the table, drawing eyes from everyone. He then shouted something in an odd language, something that sounded like a drunken slur. Yet he wasn't drunk at all it seemed, based off the hard glare in his eyes.

While we passed the tables, more men started to shout. They all spoke the same language, even the ones who looked and dressed like the people of this nation.

"Vim..." I grabbed his sleeve. He slowed his pace and looked at me, and then around. He thought something was wrong, or I had seen something.

Blushing a little, since I realized he had misinterpreted my call for him... I coughed and pointed to the nearby group. "What language is that?" I asked him.

He visibly calmed down a little, and then smiled. "One of the smarter ones," he said. He looked relieved, but didn't sound it.

"Smarter?" I asked. What did that mean?

"That language makes sense. Most others don't."

It made sense...?

Vim returned his attention elsewhere for a short while, and then looked back at me. We were farther away now, and I couldn't hear the voices of those men anymore. "That was the language of the isles. A peoples to the south-east, where there're hundreds of little islands all making up a singular nation," he explained.

"The isles..." I wondered if their language was because of growing up on islands. It sounded so different it was ridiculous.

"As I said, one of the smart ones. Makes it easy to learn, as long as you're not stupid," Vim said with a nod, as if proud of his little joke.

"I take it you speak it well then," I said.

He paused a moment, then turned and said a quick few words to me. They sounded like a mumbled mess, as if he had a mouth full of something thick... but it was obviously the language of those men. He smirked at me, and then returned to walking forward.

"What'd you say?" I asked him.

He said a single word, in that same language... but it was obvious what that one had meant.

"Nothing," I said with a huff.

He chuckled. "See? The smart ones learn it quick," he said.

Blinking at him, I couldn't help but giggle at him. "I see!"

Happy to focus on something other than the hundreds of humans around me, I kept my mind on our silly little conversation all the way until we reached the end of the road.

Passing under a strange gateway, I noticed that it was a building. Some kind of shop was inside the weird archway, which...

"A wall..." I asked Vim, but he didn't glance back at me or answer. We just kept walking.

It did seem like a wall. But we were so deep into the city that it made no sense. Why have a wall and gate here? Or did they do it to separate the church from the rest of the place?

As we passed through the gateway, for a small moment I saw the sky... and then it was gone.

There was now a roof. Lanterns hung from the stone above, and it looked...

Glancing around, I couldn't help but frown at the sudden display of religious motifs. Paintings hung on the walls. Statues were carved into the pillars. Even the doors and windows all around us, had designs upon them similar to things found in churches or bibles.

And as if to match the sudden change in environment... the people around us quickly began to change as well.

Fancy clothes and cloaks became mundane robes and garb. Bountiful colors started to blend into dark blacks or grays.

Every so often someone wearing colorful armor passed us by too.

Churchmen and women, and their knights.

We were in a church!

Hurriedly I reached up to check my hat, and as I made sure it was still in place... I felt my tail as I coiled it tighter around my right thigh. All was in place. Good.

When had we even entered this place? We were suddenly walking along statues and pretty glass of...

Slowing my pace, I became transfixed with one of the windows we were passing. It was a myriad of different colors, and was painted with a scene of some kind of army. People were marching, and some had wings and flew in the sky. Whoever had painted it, or made the glass that was painted on, had done so in a way that gave the illusion the army was actually marching. They moved as one looked at it from different angles.

It was beautiful.

Startling, I realized I had stopped walking. Hurriedly looking to see how far Vim had gotten from me, I blinked at the smiling man standing next to me.

"It is a little neat," Vim nodded in agreement.

Smiling softly at him, I nodded. "It is," I agreed.

But he was neater. He had actually waited for me, and said nothing.

I knew that time meant nothing to those like him... to even those like me... but...

Vim nodded and turned to keep walking. I followed him, and hoped that one day I could be given a chance to be as kind and gentle with him as he was with me sometimes.

I wasn't sure how it would be possible... since he never seemed to need any real help or kindness in general... but...

Rounding a stone pillar, I shivered as the air began to vibrate.

A familiar sound begun to fill the air, and as Vim and I walked deeper into an ever growing hallway, I recognized a familiar song.

Hymns.

Of course I didn't recognize whatever chant was being done, but it had a similar tone and cadence to those I had heard before. Although the noise was loud and somewhat buzzed in my ears... I found myself liking the way it made me shiver.

We rounded a corner, and for a tiny moment we were back outside. I saw a brief glimpse of trees and grass, but they faded away quickly as we entered another stone hallway.

The ringing of song slowly died down, and I realized we were alone now.

Passing doors and other hallways, I wondered if Vim actually knew where we were. How deep were we? How big was this church? It felt as if it was one giant building, but it was probably hundreds of smaller ones all connected by these stone hallways...

"Are we supposed to be back here Vim? That door had a red circle on it," I whispered. That circle was obvious in its meaning.

"I've never been good at being told where I can and can't go," Vim said, a bit above a whisper.

"Isn't that the truth," I mumbled. Odds were Vim did anything he wanted, whenever he wanted.

Vim didn't seem bothered, but it bothered me. Somehow the lack of other people here made it feel as if... I didn't belong here. As if we'd get yelled at the moment someone else saw us.

I stopped counting the hallways we entered and left, and instead chose to focus on the neat windows and paintings. They were all... a little different than the last. Some fancy, others not.

This place was a lot better than outside. Here I felt okay. Here I felt somewhat safe.

Was... was it maybe because it was a church? Surely not... after all, I had no idea if this place believed in the same thing Nory had. Nor was I foolish enough to think that just because I was hiding my ears and tail, that I was actually safe here...

Then maybe it was simply the lack of people. Maybe I liked being alone or...

Following Vim around a circular hallway, I realized we'd been walking around it for some time and... Rounding a massive stone pillar, I wondered what it was for. Was there a door somewhere? Stairs? Maybe it was a tower? Yet as we rounded it, I saw no door or stairs... only more hallways heading outward.

It was huge. Nearly a building all on its own. Maybe it was a giant tower, and there was something above us.

Before I could find or see a door that led into the circular section, Vim took us down a new hallway. This one was a little dark, thanks to a lack of windows. Only a few small lanterns lit it up, and several of them were about to go out thanks to being nearly empty.

"Here we are," Vim pointed to a very large wooden door. It looked... thick and it had metal plates covering half of it. Had it broken before and they had just fixed it by fastening metal onto it? Or was it made this way on purpose?

"Why don't you go in first?" Vim offered, and opened the door.

The large wooden door didn't make a single sound. Not a creak or whine, as he opened it enough for me to see somewhat inside. It looked like there were shelves. Books. And... I could see the flickering of shadows, most likely casted by open flame. Maybe a fireplace. It wasn't that cold, which told me that it was probably a large room. So much stone was probably hard to heat up sometimes.

Glancing at him, Vim nodded and gestured for me to go in.

"Hm..." I nodded and entered. He obviously wanted me to do so, even if it was silly.

Entering the room, my eyes quickly adjusted to the dimly lit place. Then I noticed an odd... tinge in the air. Something similar to the smell of dried leaves.

"See you soon," Vim then said. Before I could look around, for the source of the smell or to study the room... the door suddenly closed behind me.

I jumped a little, since Vim had not entered with me.

Glancing at the door, I groaned as I realized now why Vim had told me to enter first. He hadn't meant for me to enter before him, but rather for me to simply enter alone.

He could have just told me...

Hurriedly sizing up the room, I felt my heartbeat quicken a little. It was a large room... but it was full of shelves and books. It was clean, no book was out of place or not on a shelf, but there were shelves stacked near more shelving. A few were so close to each other, it made me wonder if this room was actually a few times larger than it seemed, and the shelves were just that many and that full.

There were thick wool rugs on the floor, and the somewhat cool room was doing its best to not get cold thanks to the fireplace opposing the door. I didn't spend much time examining the fireplace, or any of the shelves, since an old woman sat at a large desk in front of the fireplace.

She was a little... larger than most women her age. She wore a white church gown, that had blue lines at the seams... and her somewhat droopy face reminded me of...

"Sit."

The old woman who wasn't human gave me an order. With that order, I realized there was indeed a chair before her desk. A tall one with a back that almost reached the ceiling.

It looked ridiculous, but made me very aware of it.

Although weary... I knew better than to believe I was in danger. Even if this very old woman could hurt me, I sincerely doubted Vim would have let me in here alone if that was a possible outcome to this meeting.

Why bring me all the way here to hurt or kill me, after all? That man could have done it from the moment he met me, and not only could he have done it without anyone knowing... even if he had done it in front of someone from the Society, they'd not question him or doubt him.

They'd just assume I was too dangerous for my own good.

Walking deeper into the room, I realized the rugs beneath me were... very soft. I sunk into them, enough that it made walking feel a little uncomfortable. Should I take my shoes off? These rugs seemed rather expensive.

Reaching the tall chair, I hesitated.

There was a small animal sleeping upon it.

"Just shoo her off, a light tap will do," the old woman nonchalantly told me how to handle it.

What even was it? It looked... like a ferret, or mink, but it had two tails... Had it somehow gotten its tail injured and it had simply healed up that way?

Reaching down to gently wake the small thing, I flinched when it simply kept snoring away.

After a few pats, I realized the thing wouldn't wake at all... so I decided to just pick it up.

Being gentle with the small thing, I realized it probably was some kind of weasel or mink. Its long slender body felt like it had no spine, since it became floppy in my hands. Even as I picked it up, it remained asleep... so I just quickly sat down, and put the small thing onto my lap.

Once in the chair, I spent a few moments studying the small animal. It was warm, and it curled up a little as I petted it on the head.

Cute.

"Hm..."

Looking up, I flinched. I had somewhat forgotten about her.

The old woman sat forward, resting her arms on her desk. It was hard to tell, thanks to her church gown, but it looked like her arms were thin... which was a surprise considering the rest of her wasn't.

"Let us see..." She mumbled as she stared at me... and I realized she had white eyes.

Not white because of an old injury, or because she was blind... her eyeballs were completely white. She didn't even seem to have pupils. It unnerved me a little to be stared at by them.

"You my dear are a jaguar," the woman then said.

"Huh?" I tilted my head, and remembered my hat was still on my head. I was about to reach up and take it off, but decided against it.

I had a very good feeling about her being one of our kind... but I wasn't going to risk it yet, until it was confirmed.

After all, the weird smell in the air might not be her but incense or something else... maybe even the rugs, or this weird animal on my lap.

Although...

Glancing around at the books, I felt my eyes drift to the desk. Upon it was a massive book. So big, that I doubted the old woman had the strength to move it more than a few pages at a time. Chances were she couldn't close it even if she wanted to, based off the number of pages and its size.

"The Chronicler," I said.

The old woman smiled, confirming my assumption. "You're definitely a jaguar. Proud and true. Or... maybe not? Did you stain your hands with the blood of your own, child?" the chronicler asked me.

The cool room suddenly got very hot.

A tiny yelp drew my eyes away from the woman, and I flinched as the little creature bounded off my lap. It jumped to the nearby desk, and with tiny little pitter-patters of its feet it ran to the woman. Hopping over the large book the animal then rushed up one of her sleeves and disappeared.

"Hm... I see... poor girl. But worry not child, you shall not suffer the same fate. Come here, let me see your eyes," she gestured for me to get up and draw closer to her.

I remained seated.

A long moment passed, and then the woman tilted her head.

She hadn't blinked once since I entered the room.

"I'll tell you how I know, but first I need to finish my evaluation of you, dear. Please," the woman gave me a kind smile... but honestly it didn't make me feel any better about this.

With a dry mouth I slowly stood. How had she known? Was it just a guess? Did I misunderstand it?

Maybe she meant the blood of our kind, and not my own family.

She spoke of me killing that snake who had tried to eat me.

Yes.

Surely.

Hopefully.

With an unsteady foot, I stepped forward. Then another, a little more steady this time, and I stood before her desk. Leaning forward a little, I did my best to not look directly into her white eyes. Not only did they bother me a little... I was honestly not liking her very much at the moment.

"A little closer please," she leaned forward herself, and as she did... I realized I had nothing to fear from her.

She'd not let herself get this close to me, within reach of my claws and teeth, if she actually meant me ill will.

Plus...

Glancing behind me, I barely made out the large wooden door. The tall chair blocked most of it from my sight.

"Vim can't hear us, child. I promise you that. I had that door specially made just for that purpose," the woman then said.

Quickly looking back at her, I went still as we came eye-to-eye all of a sudden. She was closer somehow...

"My name is Renn," I said to her.

"Rennalee, yes."

The hot room became cold again.

"How..." I whispered.

Keeping my eyes on hers, I wondered how this was possible. Did I know her? There was no way. I'd remember this smell. Those eyes. And if someone I had known in the past had known her, they would have known of the Society... and would have thus told me of it and...

"I'm cursed, child. At the cost of my sight, I'm allowed to know things I should not... Please dear, keep your eyes clear of tears and fear for but a moment. I'll not harm you, I swear it. To be honest, I'd not survive even if I tried," she said with a chuckle. Her chunky face jiggled as she laughed.

The sight calmed me, since it made her seem more... human, somehow.

"I'd not hurt you," I told her.

"I know that. Your angered claws aren't that which I spoke of, dear," she said with a smirk.

I frowned, and wondered what she meant. Was she scared of my teeth then? They were a little pointed... but I never liked biting people. Blood tasted horrible and...

The chronicler giggled and then reached out, she cupped my cheek with one of her cold hands and a shiver went down my spine. She was as cold as stone. "Nor your teeth. I suppose I should have said it isn't—your claws, that I fear," she said.

Blinking at her, I slowly absorbed her words and...

"Vim has claws...?" I asked her, wondering if that was what she meant.

She chuckled and withdrew her hand. "Quite a statement. He must be gentle with you. Look upward will you? To the ceiling, please," the woman then asked.

I blinked a few times, but decided to oblige. I wasn't really sure what she was searching for... or was finding, but maybe she'd tell me afterwards.

"You're not as young as you look. Good. Although maybe a little young of the heart, but who can hate such a thing? Hm... Good, good," she chuckled as she studied me.

Why is she saying the same things Vim does? Why do I seem young, yet not while also young of the heart? Funny, considering Nory had always said my heart was cold and old...

"Can I ask what you see?" I asked her.

"I see a woman who desperately desires, yet fears it all the same," she said.

"Desires what...?" I asked.

"The one outside, of course," she said with a huff.

I leaned back, away from her... and felt the cold room get warm again... although mostly around my face.

After a few moments of staring into those white eyes, and the happy smile beneath them... I leaned back closer to her. "Is it that obvious...?" I asked with a whisper.

The chronicler giggled and nodded. As she did, the neck of her gown opened just a tad... and a little head popped out of it. The small animal from earlier peeked out, its small ears turning every which way as it stared at me from the safety of her gown.

"Sorry," I apologized to it.

"To me it is obvious. To me. But, maybe, to others as well? It is him who we must wonder if can see," the chronicler said as she reached up to pet the little creature.

Shifting, I rested my arms on the desk. "He... sometimes does act like he knows.... Sometimes..." I said.

"Hm. He's burdened. His burdens deny him certain sights and pleasures. Makes him as blind as me for things like this. You have a rough journey ahead of you, but your blood

is used to such strife. I dare say you will fare well," the woman nodded as she spoke, as if seeing it all play out before her eyes right here and now.

Glad to have leaned against the desk, I now did so because my legs suddenly felt weak. "I see..." I said as I soaked up her words.

"Hm! I shall allow your name to be joined into the archive. Welcome, Rennalee, to the Non-Human Society," the old woman said happily.

The little creature she was petting also squeaked out, as if to welcome me as well.

I beamed at them, and tears welled in my eyes.

The door opened as I lowered my head in thanks, and Vim walked in to join us.

Chapter 77: Chapter Seventy Six – Vim – The Chronicler

Closing the door behind me, I studied the woman who was standing before the chronicler's desk.

Renn still had her hat on, and her tail was still hidden in her pants... which was a little surprising. Maybe she was simply used to wearing and hiding them, to the point of not even noticing anymore. When she had first joined me, she seemed to try and pull them out the first chance she got.

The little stoat noticed me and released a happy sound. It hopped away from the chronicler and onto the desk.

Walking to the desk, I watched Renn as she turned and studied the little animal. It had stood up at the desk's edge, making little chirps at me.

Holding my hand out, I let the stoat leap onto me. It hurriedly climbed up my arm and started to nuzzle my neck. "Well? Do I get to kill her?" I asked.

Renn, who had been happily smiling while watching the little stoat, instantly lost her smile and started glaring at me.

"Renn is a fine addition. I look forward to what she accomplishes," the Chronicler said.

"Hmph," I smirked at the woman who looked scorned, and after a moment she smiled back. She realized I had just been teasing.

I had known that answer already after all.

Not because I could hear into this room, at least not when that door was shut... but because I had already known what kind of person she was.

Young in certain ways. Confident and brazen in some... meek in others. Yet her heart was in the right place. There was still a few... lessons she needed to learn, but that was for her to do on her own, later. Over the course of years... without me.

"Welcome back Vim," the chronicler chose to change the conversation into a more normal one.

I nodded as I reached up to pet the little stoat. It made little purrs into my ear as I scratched its stomach. "Sit," I told Renn.

She blinked at me, but then nodded. She sat back down dutifully, and I turned to look at the nearby shelf. The one right behind the desk near the fireplace.

I didn't see any new books or letters upon it.

"I have a few things to tell you," I told her.

"A village lost. A painting burned... and a dead god," the old woman smirked as she spoke. She wasn't amused to see my reaction, but the girl's in the seat. Renn's hat had moved violently enough to make noise as she looked at her.

"The foxen village near Snowfall is no more. A bishop gave the order, though I'm not sure which one," I told her.

The Chronicler took a deep breath, it sounded labored and painful. The little stoat instantly stopped purring and focused on her, going still.

"Such a waste," she said softly.

"Hm. Ruvindale's incident was... not necessarily related to our Society. At least I don't believe it was. Lughes had failed to make tax payments. I don't know who survived or who didn't," I said honestly.

Renn shifted in her seat, but I ignored her. I watched as the chronicler turned a few pages in her massive book, and then reached for the quill that sat in a fist sized glass bottle of ink. She picked the quill up, tapped it on the glass, and then went to writing my news.

"And the survivor of the fox village?" the chronicler asked.

"Lomi. A young girl... I don't remember her parent's names. Her sister had been Pronda," I said.

"Priscella and Keither," Renn said.

The chronicler nodded. "A young couple themselves. How disastrous," the chronicler spoke slowly as she wrote just as carefully.

"I took her to Porka in Twin Hills. They accepted her," I said.

Renn nodded with a happy smile, excitedly agreeing with me.

Giving the old woman time to write what she's been told so far, I tried to think of the rest of my journey. After leaving her last time I headed northward, along the center path. I had originally planned to head eastward from the fox village, and then farther north and back down the coastline. Events had changed that path.

"After leaving here last time I had also met with Oplar. After that is when the Monarch happened," I said.

"Oplar told me of that," the chronicler said, letting me know I didn't need to go into detail about it.

Renn glanced at me, but I ignored her.

The stoat chirped in my ear and rounded my neck, to my other shoulder. I went still, and positioned my left arm to let it easily clamber down it and to the chair. Renn sat up straight, and smiled in glee as the little animal went to nuzzling into her hands.

"Everyone else I met along the north-eastern path was fine. As much as they can be, at least," I said.

I wouldn't mention that I worried over Kaley, or that Bordu near Twin Hills had become so proselytized. It'd only get marked into the archive as me being a complainer, after all.

Even if my warnings and complaints always ended up proving true.

"Hard news, but not all bad. A survivor. The Sleepy Artist isn't lost just yet, at least not officially... A dead Monarch... and a new member. All things considered, a good few years," the chronicler said.

Renn's petting of the stoat slowed as she glanced at me, but I ignored her. The artist wasn't lost yet, she said... that meant she saw someone.

But who? My money was on Shelldon, but...

But no one liked him. The coward was hated by most the society... even her... so maybe...

Choosing to let it be, since she hadn't told me, I nodded. "If you wish to look at it that way, sure," I said.

"I look at everything exactly the way I should," she said with a huff as she put one last dot on whatever she had written. She signed it, and then put the quill back into the ink.

"Who did you hold, child? In Ruvindale?" the chronicle then asked her.

"Hold...?" Renn hesitated, and I could tell by her glance at me that she had interpreted her words as something a little risqué.

"In their last moments," the chronicler clarified, unperturbed by Renn's misunderstanding.

"Oh. Amber..." Renn whispered her answer.

"So, so, so sad..." the chronicler shook her head, and I knew it was because she was seeing the emotions Renn held. Not just here and now, but in that very moment.

If her eyes still worked, she'd probably be crying.

"It was," Renn agreed.

Studying Renn, I was surprised to see she didn't break down and start crying too. But she was staring into the chronicler's eyes, as if transfixed.

Had the chronicler already explained her condition? Her abilities?

No... maybe not...

After all Renn seemed to believe in magic.

Maybe she thought that was what this was. What she was.

It would explain her being seemingly comfortable with talking to someone who knew things she shouldn't know. Though... there was also a chance that these two had a very serious conversation before I had entered. Who knows what had been said then.

Looking away from Renn, I found the chronicler staring at me.

I held her gaze, and for the tiniest moment saw the blue eyes that used to be there. Those beautiful jewels that used to shine as they listened to my stories were gone, but she remained.

"You look well Vim," she said.

"Do I? I've felt tired recently," I admitted.

Ignoring Renn's glance, I nodded as I shifted a shoulder. It felt stiff... even though it wasn't. My body never hurt anymore. Even when it should.

"You should rest," the chronicler said.

"Funny," I feigned a single brisk laugh... it sounded stupid.

"I can be, sometimes," the chronicler said.

"Hm... Any requests for me?" I asked. None were there on the shelf, but you never knew.

"None as of late. Maybe a good thing, considering the war," she said.

"Is it getting bad?" I asked.

"You'll need to talk to Link about that," the chronicler waved my question away.

I nodded, I had expected that. She knew everything about the Society, but cared nothing for the events of humans.

"Has anyone showed up since I left?" I asked her.

"The typical suspects... the most interesting, other than Oplar's story of course, were the geese," the chronicler said.

"Them? I met them in Trimme not too long ago," I said. Why was their visit interesting? That meeting had been uneventful. No one had gotten hurt... no one had any requests of me...

"They said you were a very upset man, they did," the chronicler said.

"Had I been?" I asked everyone in the room.

Only the little stoat answered, with a small chirp.

"He gets grouchy sometimes," Renn nodded to the little stoat as she squeezed its face.

It didn't complain, and instead purred louder... but I knew that was because it was simply agreeing with her statement, not because it enjoyed the petting that much.

"Grouchy," I stated, and wondered if I should get so. I mean if it happened sometimes... this was a time. And it would be for some time.

The chronicler chuckled as she sat back, resting against her chair. It creaked in complaint. "She should meet Hands," she then said.

"She can do so. I plan on leaving shortly," I said.

Renn startled, causing the stoat to startle as well... and even the chronicler looked at me with a sudden intensity.

"What...?" I asked them all. What had I said? If there was no one here to see me, and no requests or letters... then I should get back to my path... right?

"Stay for the new year's festival," the chronicler then said, right before Renn could say something.

I glanced at Renn, who shut her mouth shut with the sound of teeth. She looked away from me, and it was obvious she was upset.

Was it the new year already...? I suppose it were.

"I should be on my way, I'm already behind schedule a little," I said.

"You will stay."

The chronicler's matter of fact tone told me I would neither win, nor wanted to.

Maybe something was going to happen.

"So be it," I said.

"And you will go meet hands," the chronicler said with a point to Renn.

"Hands...?" Renn looked at me again, this time a little more confident with herself.

"The clock-maker. I'll take you to him later," I said. Maybe that was the reason the chronicler wanted me to stay. Maybe he'd say something to her that I needed to hear.

"Okay..." Renn nodded, but I could tell she still had many questions. I didn't blame her, I had some too.

"Anyone staying at the house?" I asked the old woman.

"Just you two," she said plainly.

I nodded and sighed. Sometimes I hated how definite her words were. It made me want to defy them, since they bordered on the divine.

The little stoat made a sound, and then jumped off Renn's lap. It ran around the chair about half-way, and then darted under one of the nearby shelves.

Renn tilted her head at it, and I knew she was worried she had done something to annoy it... but she hadn't. It had simply run off to be where it needed to be.

"Now go. We shall talk after mass tomorrow, I must prepare myself," the chronicler then decided to end our conversation.

Shaking my head at her, I gestured for Renn to get up and follow me.

Renn looked from me, to the old woman behind the desk... then to the little animal that had disappeared under the shelf. "Um... it was a pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Renn said.

"You may call me The Chronicler. We'll speak again tomorrow," the chronicler stated flatly.

Renn nodded with a flinch. I'd have to tell her later that she meant no ill-will with her curt words... she was just... old. Too old to be anything else.

"Let's go," I told her.

Stepping away, I headed for the door. Renn followed quickly, but not before bowing her head one last time to the old woman.

Leaving the archive, I made sure to shut the door right after Renn stepped out... so she'd not see the old woman begin to grieve and sob.

She couldn't cry anymore. But her heart still wept.

And I knew no matter how old she got... she'd always still be that little girl. That little orphan who'd cry over the death of a sick plant, let alone people. Let alone those she loved and called family. Let alone friends she had written letters to for over half a millennia.

I guided Renn away from the door, and pointed down the hallway. Towards the other end of the Cathedral. "This way," I said.

"She was... one of us right?" Renn asked softly.

"Of course," I said.

"Hm... she sounded like she was going to cry. At the end," she said, even softer.

"Your ears work a little too well, I think," I said.

She tilted her head, and I knew it was because she was moving her ears under her hat. "I'm sorry," she apologized.

"I meant that as a compliment."

"Oh."

Rounding a corner, I pointed at a new hallway. One that had open windows, with large iron bars on them.

Renn followed dutifully, and I wondered if this really was going to be the place she'd call home.

A part of me had hoped she would just... stay here... but...

She had not liked Telmik. I didn't know if it was the number of people, or something else... but she had looked rather frail while walking through the city. As if she was suddenly stressed.

If not for the fact that I knew without a doubt she'd never been here before, I'd have worried that she had feared meeting someone here. Or had seen someone she had recognized... but she had calmed down and grew happy again once we entered the Cathedral.

Maybe she was just... a little more religious than I had thought.

"You feeling better?" I asked her. Dared to.

"Hm? Yes. I'm sorry... I had uh... not liked all the noise," she looked away for a moment, as if embarrassed.

Oh...? Was that the reason? Because it had been loud?

Telmik was loud. It was the capital. A major trade hub. People came from thousands of leagues away to come here, for business and pleasure. For religious reasons alone half a million visited a year on pilgrimages. And that number grew each year.

"I see," I said as I looked away from her. I didn't want to stare at that weird shameful smile on her face. It made me want to take her somewhere else, out of concern.

I couldn't afford that.

I had a whole society to worry about... I couldn't waste my pity and concern on just one single member.

"So... we'll be able to see this festival right? Is it a big one?" Renn asked, and I noted she sounded a little excited. Too excited for someone who had nearly fainted from the crowds earlier.

"It's the new year. I hadn't realized it. This festival is one of giving. A religious type of festival, after the winter harvest," I explained.

"Hm..."

"You may not like it. It will make the town very... busy... and in fact is probably why it's as busy as it is," I said, realizing it. It had been a little too crowded.

"Oh was that why?" she asked.

I nodded as we rounded a corner, and I saw the entrance to our destination.

"This is one of the mansions that belong to the Society. The north you'd call them a way station. Here mansio, and in the east you'd call them a half-way point. There's a map here, one of only two that I know exist, that tells you where they all are," I explained to her.

"Mansio?" Renn asked, picking up her pace as we neared the exit of this hallway.

I nodded as we approached the large gate. It wasn't locked, like most doors in Cathedral, but it was heavy. Heavy enough that most humans would struggle with it. I opened it, and noticed the layer of dirt on the bars as I did so.

It hadn't been used in a while.

Opening the gate, leading into the courtyard, I stepped back to let Renn through first.

She didn't enter. She stood at the doorway, staring at the small house.

"How... how neat," Renn whispered as she studied the two-story building.

Glancing at it, I nodded. It was.

"An old home, that's been rebuilt many times. Last time I helped out it was... well, only thirty or so years ago I think," I said as I tried to remember.

It had broken down, since the main support beam had eroded thanks to time.

"You mean anyone can stay at it? Our members, I mean," she said as she finally entered the small courtyard.

I nodded as I closed the gate behind her. It latched solidly. "Yes. Humans sometimes use it too, but most of the time it's a place any of us can stay at here and not be bothered. This section of the Cathedral is under our control. The Chronicler's," I explained.

Renn studied the courtyard as I stood behind her, waiting for her to finish.

She looked at the old trees. The stone walls, surrounding the courtyard on all sides, and the reflective gleam of the copper roof of the building.

"It's... nice," she decided to call it.

"Only when it's empty," I said and stepped forward. Luckily she took the hint and followed after me.

"You never sleep anyway," she teased me.

I shrugged, and wondered if that was my problem. Maybe I needed to sleep more.

Entering the Cathedral's House, I hoped whatever the Chronicler had in mind for my staying here showed itself soon. I didn't mind this place... it was better than a few other establishments our society owned... but...

"Wow!" Renn happily ran into the building, giggling happily as she entered the very obviously lived in home.

Sometimes I needed to relieve myself of burdens, not add to them.

And staying too long here always gave me more, never less.

Chapter 78: Chapter Seventy Seven – Renn - Mansio

This house was empty... but only of people. The building was actually full of furniture, and decorated. There were rugs, paintings, chests and shelves... all full and looking as if a large family lived here. There was a strange scent in the air, but it didn't bother me too much and... and honestly, it was a little cold. I needed to start a fire.

Heading down the only hallway, I found the stairs. Then I found the kitchen, and the bathroom just beyond that. The bathroom had another large door, which looked to exit to the backyard. Or whatever one would call the small square type place around it.

Although I wanted to hurry upstairs and look around, I chose to return to Vim. He was standing before a small table near the door.

Stepping up to him, I studied the little open book that lay upon the table. There was an ink pot next to it, with a pen.

"What is it?" I asked him. I recognized most of the letters written on it, but there were some I didn't.

It almost looked like it was just a list of names and dates...

"A log. The last one to stay here were was Oplar. Seems we missed her by only a few weeks," Vim said, pointing at the bottom of the right page.

"Oh?" I found that interesting. It felt almost like we were following her steps, somehow.

"Want to sign for us?" Vim asked me as he picked up the pen.

"Can I?" I asked, and I felt my tail wiggle beneath my pants.

"Hm," he offered me the pen and I happily took it.

I couldn't help but smile as I carefully dipped the pen into the ink pot, and found the spot where I could write our names in.

Before I went to writing I scanned the two open pages.

Vim's name was often written... and usually, except for only a couple times, was written alone. Oplar's name was also one that came and went.

I wasn't too surprised that I didn't recognize any of the other names... but I tried to memorize them. I stopped trying, and decided I'd just do so later.

I'd need to write carefully, since I knew people... other society members especially, would read it...

"Is it safe to write this stuff?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" he asked as I wrote his name first.

Trying to copy his own writing, I realized it was nearly impossible. He kind of just scratched it; his name wasn't very long as it was...

After his I wrote my own... and once done, I felt an immeasurable joy at seeing the two names together.

"I uh... don't know the date. Just put before the new year," Vim said as he stepped away, no longer interested.

Although a little disappointing to see him not care much for what was happening, I decided to let just let it be. I was happy over it, and for now that was all that mattered.

Putting the date, I smiled and nodded at my handiwork.

It almost looked like it belonged there.

I placed the pen back down, and went to ask Vim a question.

He was kneeling near a box, and pulling out wood pieces. He was going to start a fire.

"Truthfully this is a little weird. I feel like we're stealing someone's home," I said as I studied the nearby shelf. There were books and trinkets upon it.

"For as long as we're here, it's our home. So don't feel weird about it," Vim said as he carried the wood to the nearby fireplace.

It wasn't that big, but it looked made of marble. Based off the location of it, something told me it ran up to the second floor and into the bedroom.

Bedroom...

While Vim started the fire I went upstairs. Walking up a well made stairwell, I found a small hallway upstairs. One with only three doors.

The first door on the right was the only door on that wall. It was double-door and... sure enough was the main bedroom.

Before stepping in to examine it, I checked the other two doors. Likewise they were also bedrooms, although smaller in size. One of them had three beds within it.

Since the smaller bedrooms were rather bare, except for a few chests and dressers, I went back to the main bedroom.

There was a single bed in the large room, which was a little odd. I had expected this place to have as many beds as possible... but maybe there was never an instance where more beds were needed.

The room smelled a little... like a scented candle. As if someone had lit one here not too long ago. Maybe someone came in and cleaned this place occasionally.

The large bed was big enough for two, and there was a table with two chairs. There was a balcony, which had a large bench, and in one corner of the room there was...

Standing before the large wall mirror, I gulped at my own reflection.

I'd seen mirrors before. But only small ones. Things that fit into one's hand. And even then they hadn't been very...

Raising my hand, I grabbed my hat and slowly removed it. The few pins that held it in place latched away rather easily, and my ears were revealed.

A strange sound filled the empty air as I took a deep breath.

My ears were that big?

Tossing my hat onto the bed, alongside my bag, I hurriedly returned to the mirror. Touching my ears, I studied the way they moved and twitched.

I'd seen myself before. I've seen myself reflected in water. On certain plates and metal... but...

Usually when the images were blurry, or without detail. This mirror was pristine... and looked almost perfect. I could just barely make out a slight alteration near the edges, if I stood too far away from the front my body started morphing in shape. Becoming longer, and taller.

My frowning face distracted me as I glared at my huge ears. Why were they so big? They were basically as big as my head! No wonder people always looked at me funny...

Lomi's hadn't been half the size... nor had Porka's...

The smell of burning wood filled the air, and for some reason it made my nose itch.

Realizing something important, I hurriedly pulled my tail out too.

The moment it slipped free of my pants, I groaned as I realized that was huge too.

Stepping back a step, to try and see my whole frame and the tail as well... I realized it was impossible.

My tail was as long as me...

For a long moment I stood there, staring at myself.

I could ignore the dirt and grime. Vim and I have been on the road for weeks now. Months, if we included even the few baths I've had... like at Rapti's place or with Kaley. I could also ignore the... worn down clothes. Although new, purchased by the man who was downstairs... it seemed I had already worn them down. My pants had rips in a few places, my shirt faded.

Going closer to the mirror, I groaned at the sight of my pupils. They were a little... too unshapely. A little too wide in the middle, and thin at the top.

Not human looking at all...

Opening my mouth, I quickly closed it. Putting a finger into my mouth, I felt the familiar teeth and wondered if they were really as sharp as they looked.

"I'm a beast," I whispered.

As I whispered, I realized my fingernails were also very long too.

I'd cut them here.

Other than them... there was nothing I could change, however.

"Renn," Vim called me from below, and I noted how gently he had done so... maybe he thought I had laid down to sleep.

"Coming!" I called back so he knew I hadn't fallen asleep.

Stepping away from the mirror, I spared one last glare at myself.

I hadn't realized how... un-comely I looked.

Porka had been beautiful. Lilly had impressed me too. Rapti, also was pretty in my head.

Kaley had been the most attractive of them all... but I had thought maybe, just maybe, I was the same. Maybe not to her level, but...

"Fool," I chastised myself for thinking I was special, just because I wasn't human.

Hurrying out of the room, I made sure to grab my hat just in case Vim wanted to leave.

Maybe we were going to get food.

I was in the mood to eat now. Maybe a good meal would make me forgive myself for looking so...

Finding Vim sitting at the table, I hesitated as he crossed his arms and looked at me oddly.

"What...?" I asked, and looked around. Did something happen?

The fire was going strong... but nothing else seemed different.

"First thing you do is stare at yourself in the mirror. You really are a cat," he said.

My blood rushed to my face and I stepped back, as if I could actually run away from him. "I couldn't help it! It's... that was the first one I've ever seen like that!" I said, defending myself.

"I'm sure."

Had he actually seen me, or did he just hear me? His hearing was as good as mine, if not better, after all.

I grumbled as I walked to the table and sat down across from him. With a huff I crossed my arms, mimicking him.

"Do I get to meet Hands now?" I asked.

"Tomorrow. I want to go listen to the nightly sermon first," he said.

"Sermon?" I asked. Really? Vim did?

He nodded.

"You're suddenly religious?" I asked. He hadn't been before.

"No. I want to see if they've changed the way they preach yet," he said with a small frown.

Changed... "Why would they change it?" I asked him.

For the first time in a long while, I realized I had asked a question Vim didn't want to answer. He suddenly frowned a little harder, and his crossed arms tightened a little.

"Okay. Can I come with you? I like listening to them," I said quickly.

He blinked and relaxed... and his soft smile as he nodded told me he was thankful for me allowing him to avoid answering that question. "You can. But you'll need to change... upstairs in the dresser should be a clergy outfit, for nuns or something. Find one that fits you," he said.

"Oh! Sure," I nodded, that sounded neat. I hadn't been able to wear Nory's. Not only had it not fit me at all, she would have ripped it off me had I tried to put it on.

"Wait... am I allowed to wear it though?" I asked, hesitating.

"Why couldn't you?" he asked.

"I'm not a nun," I said, obviously.

"You wore robes in Nevi didn't you? You didn't say anything then," Vim said with a tilt of his head.

"That was just a headdress. This would be an entire outfit," I gestured with my arms to get him to understand, but he simply shook his head in indifference. He didn't seem to care, which told me I probably shouldn't either.

Yet... I did. For some reason. Why was that?

I decided to ponder it as I got changed. I stood from my seat, and was about to head upstairs.

"It's not right now. It'll start in a few hours. Afterward we'll get something to eat too," Vim said, stopping me from hurrying upstairs.

"Oh... okay. Is it close?" I asked.

"Near the chronicler," he nodded.

Not far at all... that meant a lot of humans would be nearby soon, which was odd.

My tail tapped the ground, and I glanced at it. It was swaying a little... too much. I got it under control, and wondered if I was simply happy or if I was upset.

Happy, for sure.

Still, I did my best to get it under control.

No matter how happy I was... I didn't want Vim getting upset with me. I didn't want him to have to tell me to control myself.

I may look beastly, but that didn't mean I was one.

"It's okay to be happy, Renn."

For a small moment, I didn't really understand what he had just said.

Looking away from my tail, I studied the man who had uncrossed his arms and placed them onto the table, holding his hands together calmly. He nodded at me, "It's okay. Especially here. That's the entire point of this house. Of this place," he said further.

Clenching my jaw, I wondered what to say. How did I respond to this?

"Did you think I'd yell at you for being happy...?" Vim asked softly.

"Well... for good reason..." I answered, just as softly.

Vim shifted in his seat, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

A little ashamed at making him feel so, I realized he probably... didn't realize what I thought of him.

Not just my feelings, but what I expected from him. What I expected him to be like.

But... maybe that was my fault. No... it was...

"I figured you'd tell me to keep it contained, as to not endanger us once we left," I said.

"Ah... I can see that. I'm many things Renn, but I'd never tell someone not to be happy. That's kind of the entire point of my existence you know? To protect such emotions," he said gently.

The odd tone in his voice told me he was being completely genuine. He was hurt. Hurt that I had even implied that he would do such a thing. Not just to me, but to anyone. To any of our members.

Now that I thought about it... he had always let Lomi do whatever she wished. No matter how loud she had gotten. No matter how silly it had been...

That hadn't been just because she was a child after all.

"I am happy. This is... wonderful. Everything I hoped for, in a way... and I look forward to meeting all the other members. I counted seventeen names I didn't recognize on that book," I said and glanced at the logbook near the door. Vim's eyes didn't leave me, but I did look around at the house as I continued. "This place is neat. I look forward to staying here for awhile. I look forward to spending time with you... and I hope I can get used to the crowds and noises by the time the festival starts, so I can enjoy it." He kept silent as I continued even further, "And that mirror was neat. I can't believe I've gone almost two hundred years without ever actually seeing what I looked like. It's... astonishing. I want to sit in front of that thing for days. Yet, sitting here with you right now is more important I think. Let alone everything out there," I said with a gesture to the door.

"It is a big town, and bigger world, out there," Vim said.

I nodded. "I want to see it all, if I can," I said.

I hadn't before. With Nory... I had been so happy to just stay with her, hidden away...

Now though...

"To be honest... I was a little upset, too," I said to him.

He blinked twice, and then tilted his head. He wanted me to explain.

"I'm... a little ugly," I said, and immediately regretted it.

For the smallest moment I saw Vim's expression change... but I looked away before his thought could be read on his face. I didn't want to see him thinking how stupid I was... Even if it was true, I didn't want to know he thought so. Him of all people especially.

"What makes you say that? What'd you see in the mirror?" he asked.

I gulped, but kept my eyes on the table. Slowly sitting back down in the chair I had been sitting in, I decided to focus even harder on the table. In fact there was a nice little spot, near the center... which had a small gouge in the wood, probably from a knife or something long ago. It was perfect to study.

"I'm uh... rather inhuman, if you look closely. My ears and teeth. My eyes too, and my tail is real big," I rambled off the small list I had noticed already. Each thing I spoke of however only made me even more embarrassed.

I needed to change the conversation, and fast... before I started to cry.

"Hm..."

After a moment of silence I dared a look up at him. He had rested his head on a curled fist, and was smiling softly at me.

"This is where you tell me I'm stupid, and I'm actually very beautiful," I said, trying to make the air a little less heavy.

Vim held my gaze, and every moment that passed with him remaining silent... made me more and more anxious.

Vim didn't lie.

Which meant...

Tears welled up, and I realized I had dug my own grave. I had willingly put him on the spot, and now...

"Did the chronicler tell you what you are?" Vim then asked.

My breath caught for a moment, and a tiny little crack erupted in my heart. He was going to ignore my statement. He was going to change the conversation for me.

Maybe it was for the best...

"A... a uh..." I had to blink, and I felt ridiculous as I wracked my brain. What had she called me? I had heard it clearly. It had been... "A jaguar," I remembered.

"I figured. Do you know what that is?" Vim asked.

I shook my head as my heart started to hurt. Each time it thumped, and it was thumping quickly, a pain shot through my chest and up my neck.

"They're very beautiful. One of the prettiest cats to walk the planet," Vim said.

My breath caught, and I stared into the man's eyes as he nodded.

"You have spots. Next time you're in front of the mirror, when it's high noon, open the shutters for the sun and look at your ears and tail in the light. You ever notice them?" he asked me.

I nodded. "My parent's spots were... very visible." It was theirs that I remembered the most. Mine were faded and only visible at certain angles.

"Your ears work great. I don't mind your teeth, and I didn't mind it when you rested your tail on me either. Though I do suppose I'd like you to be a tad shorter. With your ears you're nearly my height, which would be fine if you didn't look so young. Makes it hard for me to pretend to be your father, which means I have to be your husband."

"What's wrong with pretending to be my husband?" I asked. A little too quickly.

Vim smirked, and it made me almost forget the tone I had just used. Almost. "You're too pretty to be my wife. It makes it hard for people to believe the story," he then said.

My tail twisted around the leg of the chair I sat on, and I squirmed a little.

Vim broke out into a laugh, obviously from seeing the blush that was quickly forming on my face... yet I refused to hide it.

After a few moments of squirming in embarrassment... I started to laugh too.

His laughter died down, but the moment I began he started to chuckle again.

Laughing at him, who was chuckling at me, I couldn't help but admit once again that I loved him.

For a small moment life was perfect.

Which really made me happy... but also frightened me.

Since at any moment this could end.

And I wasn't sure if my heart was going to be able to survive the day it did.

It was so terrifyingly fragile, after all.

Chapter 79: Chapter Seventy Eight – Vim – The Walking Pig

The church was slow to empty. Not a surprise, considering the many hundreds who had packed in here... but it was a little upsetting.

I was in the mood to leave now, yet there was no point. Not when Renn was with me.

After all she disliked crowds... and she was still happily sitting next to me, watching the people below.

"That was..." Renn paused as she searched for the word to use.

"Unsettling?"

She glanced at me, and after staring at me for a moment finally leaned back away from the balustrade. Thanks to the height of the banister, she had to sit on her legs most of the sermon as to have a clear line of sight.

Sitting back in her seat, Renn smiled wildly at me. "It wasn't bad. I liked all the singing," she said.

"I'm sure," I said.

She giggled as she uncoiled her legs from beneath her, sending her feet to the ground. At first I thought maybe she finally had enough, and was willing to leave... but she remained seated.

"Did... did anything about that sound strange to you? I'm going to admit there were a lot of words I didn't understand Vim, but it seemed very normal to me. The same as most I've heard, although a lot more singing here," Renn said.

I nodded. "You're right. It's pretty standard. The only odd thing I found was the amount of donations they gave," I said.

Renn tilted her head, and her nun's headdress shifted a tad. It was a little too big for her. "The donations were odd. Usually it's the people who donate to the church, not the other way around," she said.

"That's because you've only seen the poor churches. This one's... very powerful. Plus the festival is about to start. During the New Year festival, this church hands out not only food and money but even land. Today seemed to be only food," I said. Renn and I had watched them hand out a large basket full of food to each person here. It was part of the reason that the sermon had taken so long. Even with an obedient populace, that stood in line and didn't dawdle.

"What's so wrong with that though? I think it's a good thing," Renn asked.

"Nothing. It is a good thing. I'm just... surprised at the level and amount. It means someone at the top has been replaced. Someone new is in control. The previous Archbishop here was a kind man, but not generous. He must be gone," I said.

"I thought we controlled this place?" Renn asked.

"We control a few sections, not the whole Cathedral. And if our people got an order from an archbishop, it'd be very difficult to deny or fight it," I explained.

"Hm..." Renn glanced at the banister, and I knew she probably couldn't see much at the angle she sat at now.

It was my fault. I had brought us here, to one of the higher boxes. It was busy, thanks to the upcoming festival, and I hadn't wanted to sit in the pews below, or the noble mezzanine. Although this box allowed us to be alone, and talk privately... I knew I had done a disservice to her. The sounds up here were a little muddled, thanks to being so high up.

"Were any of them one of us? The ones who sang and gave sermons?" Renn asked.

"Two were. You'll meet them soon," I said.

"Oh?" She looked at me, and grew excited.

I nodded. "Come on, by the time we get downstairs it should be cleared out enough," I said as I stood from my seat.

Renn nodded happily as she stood alongside me.

"Do they have this every night?" she asked as we left the box.

Entering the bland hallway, I noticed a few people off in the distance. It seemed we hadn't been the only ones up here... which was either because the lower boxes had been full, or someone else was like my companion who hated crowds.

"Only during festivals. Usually they only have sermons a few times a week, and they're usually in the morning and afternoon not this late," I said.

"Huh..." Renn followed me as we headed to the nearby stairwell.

"You can come tomorrow if you wish, just come up here," I told her.

"Really?" Renn smiled at me, and then looked away. "You mean without you," she realized.

"Well... yes?" What was wrong with that?

Heading downstairs, I heard the sound of conversations below. Seemed the nobles and wealthy were still around.

"Hm..." Renn went quiet as we reached the next floor, and I paused a moment before heading down to the next.

There were a few dozen people in this hall, and most of them looked at home here. Their clothes blended well with the fancy rugs and tapestries hanging on the walls. There was only one churchman here. A priest, in gray robes. He was collecting their tithes.

The poor got alms, the rich paid. Although I didn't agree with the church, I did agree with that part of it.

I didn't recognize any of the people here, so I decided to head down to the next.

"Aren't we supposed to donate too?" Renn asked.

"Why would I?" I asked her as we entered a new floor. This one was a little busier than the one above, but not enough to be crowded. Instead of heading down the stairs again, I guided Renn into the hallway and headed eastward. Towards where the eastern exit was.

"Hm... I guess you don't believe in it, so you wouldn't," Renn whispered as we walked.

While passing people, I noticed the way the common folk glanced at Renn. Some smiled and waved, others looked... questionably uncertain. As if unsure as to what to say or do in front of her.

Usually a nun was left alone. Especially one wearing the dark blue hues as she was.

Maybe the colors meaning had been changed... or maybe it was just because she was young and beautiful. Usually those like her were old.

"Stay close," I told her, and wondered if maybe I shouldn't let her come alone.

Or rather, maybe instead of coming as a church girl, I should have her dress as a lower noble. Her appearance did change things. Sometimes being attractive made it difficult to pretend to be certain things.

I'd ask Link later. He knew this town well.

"Where are we headed now? Can I meet Hands now?" Renn asked as we walked towards the large open stairwell that led to the east exit.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked her.

"Huh? Oh... a little. Yes," she nodded as we headed downstairs.

As we descended to the floor level, the crowds became a little more dense. We had to stop walking next to each other. Renn quietly went to walking behind me, following closely as I led her out of the main section and to a breezeway. Upon leaving, I wasn't too surprised to feel the cold wind. It was late, but this coldness wasn't just because of the hour. Was a storm approaching?

"May the lord bless you!" A churchwoman bowed as we walked past, and I wondered if she had only done so because of Renn. She must have thought she was a sister.

The eastern exit was easier to use as I had thought. It led out towards the nearby marketplace, which normally would have been a destination for the congregation... either to go to work, or to buy food and items... but they had just given everyone a large basket of food. Most would be headed home to put it away.

Leaving the breezeway, we passed under a large archway. It had an iron gate, but it was lifted up and was open. Chances were it hadn't been closed in years. Once out of the church, we headed along a side road towards my destination.

"We could have gotten one of those baskets," Renn noted.

"I'm in the mood for something a little nicer," I said.

"Have you ever begged for anything?" she asked.

"I beg you to stop snoring so loud every night."

Crossing the street, I side glanced Renn who grumbled. Her headdress made noises as her ears danced beneath it.

It was night, and a little windy, so I didn't bother chastising her for it. Especially since it was my fault anyway.

"Is it that bad? You've mentioned it before..." she asked worriedly.

Feeling a little bad about the teasing, I shrugged. "Not really," I said. Usually she only snored after we went many days without rest. In other words, only when I pushed her past her limits.

"Which means it is..." she groaned.

"For your information I... It's not that I'm too prideful to beg... but I don't like the idea of taking what others could use. I can afford to pay for a meal. I can survive without food for months. So taking from those without is..." I changed topics, since I had not liked the sound of her groan at all. It had been actual pain.

"Oh...? Hm... that's a form of pride all on its own, is what I'd think Nory would say," Renn said as we rounded a large garden. One with a single tree in the center.

"What's wrong with pride?" I asked her.

"Half that sermon was stories on why pride is so dangerous," she reminded me.

"Had they been?" I asked. I hadn't paid much attention to the hymns or allegories, just the phrases they used to instill doctrine and order.

Renn sighed as we reached a new road, one that was a little smaller than normal. A little less pretty. A little older.

One of the first roads ever made in this city.

I liked how familiar it was.

"That's where we'll eat," I told her with a point.

"The Walking Pig?" she asked.

I'd ask how she had read the unfamiliar letters, but the large painted pig on the sign made it obvious.

I nodded. "They've had great food for years."

"Don't all pigs walk?" she asked.

"Used to be a cart that was pulled by pigs" I said.

"Oh?" Renn seemed to find that interesting as we walked into the restaurant.

The old building looked recently renovated. A fresh coat of paint was on the main sign, and the tables were now square instead of circular. Their designs on the tables told me they were new. That crest was only a few years old.

"Oh welcome sister! A table for two?" a young woman hurried to greet us, smiling happily at Renn.

"Please," I nodded.

I didn't recognize the girl. She didn't have the red flocks that the family who owned this place were known for, which meant she was probably just an employee. She guided us to a table in the corner, one that was alone and gave us a little privacy.

Probably thought Renn was a sister on a date when she shouldn't be, and was being kind.

"What kind of drinks?" the girl asked as we sat down.

"Your strongest slop for me, and something with fruit for her," I ordered.

The girl raised an eyebrow but nodded, and then hurried off.

"We don't get to order our food?" Renn asked as she watched her run away.

"They only serve one kind of meal here," I said.

"Oh... really? What is it?" she asked.

"What do you think?" I asked. Hadn't she seen the other tables?

"A whole pig. Really?" Renn glanced at the closest table. It was five away, and their pig was mostly gone. Four grown men had made short work of it.

"Complain later," I said to her as the girl returned.

"Thank you!" Renn happily accepted a large mug from the girl as I dug out the remaining Penk coins I had.

"Thanks," I thanked her as well as she put a large cup of alcohol in front of me.

Handing them to her, she paused a moment to stare at the two coins. "This is too much sir, even if I brought out two pigs," she said worriedly.

"Just one please. Keep the rest," I told her.

The girl looked from me, to Renn, and then beamed a happy smile. "Thank you so much! I'll be right out with the pig!"

She darted off quickly, a little more gusto in her steps this time.

"Hm... why'd you do that?" Renn asked.

"It wasn't as big of a tip as you think. Plus I like this place, I want it to be around for when I come back next time," I said.

"Oh? Is that why you seemed so excited to get here?" she asked with a smirk.

Studying her smirk as I took a drink, I wondered what gave her that idea.

Had I been acting any different than usual? If anything, any excitement she had seen was me simply wishing to get out of that church.

Renn hummed happily as she went to take a drink too. After she did, she licked her lips and stared at her mug with an odd look.

"What?" Was it nasty?

"It's not wine," she said.

"Did you want wine? You're dressed like a priestess; you'll need to ask for something like that. Don't blame me when they give you weird looks when you do, though," I said.

"No, it's good. It just kind of smelled like it was wine, so I was surprised to find it wasn't."

Smelled like wine? Probably something they let marinate in a large pitcher or barrel, then.

"Tomorrow I'll introduce you to Hands and whoever else is here," I said.

Renn ignored me as she took another drink, this time a little slower. She must like it.

Her headdress shifted as she drank, and I noticed where her ears were. Once she was done she sighed and put the cup down. "I could drink a whole barrel of this," she said.

"Lucky for you they probably would let you," I said.

She gave me a toothy smile, and I was reminded of her earlier words. The ones she had said before we left the mansio, and headed for the church.

She thought she was ugly.

I had known many women who had similar beliefs... but honestly it was weird hearing it from her.

Not only had I thought her beyond such a thing, thanks to her age, I had thought it was obvious why she'd not think such a thing.

I mean... her? Ugly? Said who? Where? When?

She was no Kaley but there was a reason I always needed to be conscious when I took her somewhere. She drew eyes; she was doing so even now while covered in robes and a headdress. Her face alone drew the eyes of men and women alike.

So it had been a shock to hear her say something like that... and... the source of it was something I couldn't really wrap my head around.

The only thing that I could think of, that explained why she'd think such a thought... was well...

Blaming myself, I took a drink to keep myself from admitting that I was the cause.

Some things were better not said, or even thought.

A steaming pig appeared from around a wall. I sat back and watched as the young girl that had just taken our orders hurried over with our food.

"It's hot still, so be careful," she laid it down onto the table with a light drop. The pig was a little larger than most of the others I had seen upon entering, and had a shiny gleam to it.

"I'll be right back with the plates and silverware," she hurriedly said as she ran off.

"Oh my..." Renn stared wide-eyed at the meal before her.

"She must be excited. Usually we get the knives and stuff first," I said.

"Hmm..." Renn nodded in agreement, but was too focused on the pig.

The waitress returned quickly, happily humming a tune only she knew as she put several plates onto the table and laid down a handful of silverware. Knives and forks alike.

"Thank you!" Renn happily thanked the girl, who beamed her a huge smile back in return.

"I'll be back to check up on you two! Enjoy!" the happy girl bounced away, and I heard the sound of coins in her pocket as she did.

Her share of the tip, it seemed. Sounded like quite a few coins.

Renn stared wide-eyed at the large pig, and I grabbed the sharp knives as to begin cutting it up.

"I apologize for complaining earlier. This smells wonderful," Renn said as she focused on my movements as I went to cutting into the flank.

"Well I don't blame you. This is one of the honey roasted ones. A perk of giving a big tip," I said.

Odds were this had been the pig the owners had planned to eat for dinner. Judging by the thickness of it and the glistening of the skin it was something that someone had spent a great deal of effort on throughout the day.

"Sometimes your lack of haggling is a good thing, it seems," Renn said.

Renn gulped as I laid the first slice on her plate. It was a large, juicy piece.

"Go ahead," I gestured with the knife, and went back to cutting more.

While I cut more I watched as she actually drooled while picking the piece up. She hadn't even used the fork, but had simply grabbed it.

Renn took a big bite, and instantly closed her eyes to relish in the taste.

"Hmhm," she made a noise as she chewed and swallowed. I wasn't even able to put the next slice on her plate for her, she simply took it off the knife before I could.

She ate that piece almost too fast. "Don't eat too quickly, you won't be able to enjoy it," I warned her.

"It'd be a sin to not enjoy it, right," she nodded quickly as she slowed her chewing.

I scoffed as I put another piece onto her plate. Was she going to be focused on religion and sin for the rest of the night? Maybe I shouldn't of taken her to that sermon.

"This is sinful too. I can't believe something so delicious exists. To feast so lavishly..." Renn grumbled a groan as she took another bite.

"You're free to get up and leave if you want. You can wait for me to finish," I teased her.

Renn groaned as she shook her head, and I heard her tail move under her robe. It must want to sway in joy and bliss.

"You do speak like a demon would sometimes," she said.

"Huh?" I paused in my carving and wondered what the heck that meant.

"Sometimes you talk in riddles. Or you say things that are very..." She went silent as she blushed, probably remembering something I had said as a joke.

"Hmph," I went back to carving as I wondered if maybe to her I was demonic. Did she think my morals and ethics were that bad? Surely not...

"Delicious..." Renn made an odd noise as she took a bite of one of the pieces I had cut off for her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she chewed. She was really enjoying it, and to think she had been skeptical.

"Maybe you should have asked for two..." Renn mumbled as she stuffed her face.

I smiled at her and decided I'd order one to take back with us too.

That happy smile was so much better than that contorted frown from earlier.

If anyone was a demon, it was her.

That kind of face would make any man want to sin.

And her wearing those robes only made it even more sinful.

Cutting another piece for her, I felt ridiculous as the young waitress girl gave me a huge smile from across the room. I ignored her, and realized that feeding Renn was probably a sin too, in a way.

I kept such a thought to myself, especially since I knew she'd only use it as proof of her earlier comment.

Didn't need her thinking things like that, even as a joke, after all.

Chapter 80: Chapter Seventy Nine – Renn – A Cold Night's Warm Back

No!

Sitting up quickly, I heaved a wordless cry... and realized it had all just been a dream.

Yet my heart still thumped. My body still ached, as if I had just ran for my life.

The blanket had slid off as I sat up, and the cool air felt a lot colder as it touched my sweat covered skin.

Breathing heavily, I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead. It was slimy, and felt hot.

Was I sick? Hurt? How long had it been since I had a nightmare like that?

After a few moments of calming myself, I realized I wasn't doing it very well. My heartbeat was still far too fast... my head was throbbing, and...

Had I woken Nory?

Looking to my left, as to look across the cabin... I froze at the sight of a balcony.

There was a large curtain covering it, but a brightly lit full moon was illuminating it strongly enough to see through it. I could see a bench... and an unfamiliar... wall? What was that beyond the balcony?

No... forget that, where was Nory and...

Looking around, I realized I wasn't in our cabin. I was in a strange room, which was far too big... far too clean... and...

Blinking wildly, I frowned as I remembered where I was.

In bed. In Telmik.

With...

The bed shifted, and I felt the man next to me roll over. In the dark I saw his eye reflect a little as he checked on me.

Shaking a little as my hot sweat quickly cooled off, and made me cold, I wordlessly apologized to the man I had just woken up.

Without a word back Vim reached over and put his hand on my back. His calloused hand firmly patted me, as if to reassure me.

"Sorry..." I whispered. Had I screamed? I didn't remember doing so, but that didn't mean I hadn't...

Gulping, I slowly laid back down. Although I had done so slowly, Vim still hadn't moved his arm in time. It ended up underneath my pillow, below my head.

He shifted, to both free his arm and to pull the blanket back over us. I felt horribly embarrassed as he put the blanket back over me, and with a small huff he rolled back over. Putting his back to me, Vim laid back down.

My heart slowed its quick pace, yet beat just as hard. This time at least it wasn't in fear.

Wiping my face, I held my hand up above me and stared at the glimmering on it. Sweat and tears.

With a small huff of my own, I let my arm fall. I squeezed the blanket a little as I tried to remember what my dream had been about.

I could still feel the urgency. The terror... it was clawing at me from inside... Yet I couldn't remember anymore what exactly had happened.

Had it been one about my family?

Nory?

The Sleepy Artist?

Shivering a little, I ignored the feeling of new tears as they slid down the side of my face.

Why? I'd been doing so well. Even in the beginning, when I had been staying at the Sleepy Artist... I hadn't had any nightmares there either.

I had thought I was finally over them.

Yet...

Glancing to my right, at Vim's back, I felt horrible. It had been a miracle he had even laid in bed with me, and I just had to go and do this.

He'd never sleep with me again.

Feeling horrible, I felt my tail twitch heavily under the thick blanket. Luckily the blanket was thick enough that it couldn't cause too much noise, or movement. It was also still in-between my legs, luckily, so I didn't need to worry over it bothering him.

I knew that Vim really didn't need much sleep... but...

Squeezing my eyes shut, I silently cursed myself. Come on Renn, keep it together.

It was going so well. I had been accepted by the Society. I had a place now. A purpose. There was so much to learn, so much to do...

I couldn't afford to break here. Not now.

He'd never accept me as his partner if I couldn't even sleep in peace. What kind of protector was scared of her own memories?

Memories...

Opening my eyes, I looked to the nearby balcony window. Now that I was a little calmer, I realized how pretty it was. The drape that covered it was a light blue color, and only emphasized the white luminosity of the moon. It made the whole room a calming azure blue in color.

While staring at it, I remembered I had thought I was in the cabin again. I had looked for Nory at her bed.

Did that mean my nightmare was about her?

Something told me it hadn't been. Which only made it worse to me, somehow.

"Some nights are long."

My ears perked up and I rolled my head over to look at his back.

He shifted a little, but remained facing away from me. "I have nightmares about listening to church sermons too, don't feel bad," Vim said.

Smiling at his weird attempt at making me feel better, I wished he hadn't rolled over. I bet he had one of his funny looking smirks right now.

"I don't remember my dream," I told him.

He was quiet for a moment, and then shrugged. "For the best, isn't it?"

"No. I like to remember what hurts me," I said.

"Hm... very predator of you."

The room got darker. A quick glance to a nearby window showed that dark clouds had gone in front of the moon. Although my eyes adjusted quickly, and I still saw just as well... for some reason I suddenly worried over the dark.

Looking back at Vim, since it was reassuring to see him so close, I wondered what time it was.

I couldn't hear or smell the fireplace. It had probably died out, which meant it was late. Yet the moon was still so high and bright...

"Do you really have nightmares too?" I asked him.

"I do."

"Really...?" I whispered my question.

"Every time I sleep," he said gently.

Gulping at his answer, I wondered what to say to that.

Vim didn't lie. And he had been so genuine in that statement that...

"Is that why you don't sleep often?" I asked.

"No. I just don't need as much sleep as you or the others," he said.

"Oh..." that made more sense. Something told me even if he had a horrible nightmare, he'd not even flinch at it. He probably wasn't even bothered by them.

"Did I wake you?" I asked, worried.

"No."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Yes. You uh..." He sighed, "You were tossing and turning for awhile now."

"I'm sorry," I said.

He shrugged.

A window shutter downstairs made noise as the wind picked up. I focused on it, since it sounded a little odd.

If I had been alone I would have worried someone was trying to get in. Yet since Vim continued to lie still, I knew it was nothing.

Smiling at him, I reached out and put my hand on his back.

He had worn a shirt to bed. It was loose on him, and... warm.

Vim didn't say anything as I touched him, and relished in his warmth. He was a little hotter than I would have expected.

I could feel his coiled muscles beneath the loose shirt. Unlike me, who was still a little wet thanks to my sweat, his shirt didn't stick to his skin.

Granted the shirt I wore was a little different. The satin clung to me, thanks to my sweat.

"Is a storm coming?" I asked him.

"Yes, it will be here tomorrow," he said.

As he spoke, I felt his voice reverberate through him. It felt odd, but made me smile.

"Sorry for waking you Vim," I apologized.

"You didn't. All's well, go back to sleep," he said.

I nodded, and kept my hand on his back.

The house became a little noisy as the wind increased in strength. Window shutters creaked. There was a light whistle from down the hall, maybe there was a hole or crevice the wind got in from. I could hear the rustling of the trees and bushes from outside.

Yet through all that noise, Vim remained steadily silent. I couldn't even hear him breathe, even though I knew he was doing so. I could feel his deep breaths through back.

This back was a constant, wasn't it?

Firm. Unyielding. It most likely had never, and would never, break. He'd never slouch. Never run.

The perfect back of a protector.

Running my hand along it for a moment, I wondered what it'd take to become like him. Did I need to train? Experience horrible hardship?

Was it even possible?

I hoped it was.

But even if it wasn't...

All I needed to do was find a way to support it.

If I couldn't become as strong or firm, I needed only to become something that such a back could lean on.

But... what kind of person fit such a task?

The room became colder so I scooted a little closer to him. He was warm after all.

Keeping my hand on his back, I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of the world around me.

It was hectic. Noisy. Distracting... and far inside, deep in my heart, I still heard the cries and screams from my nightmare. I still felt the tension, and the fear.

Yet Vim's warmth kept it all at bay. His solid frame allowed me to not spare a moment of thought to worry about any of it, and instead enjoy it.

Falling back to sleep, I faced my nightmare this time with a friend.

A protector, in more ways than one.