

# **The Non-Human Society #Chapter 81 - Eighty – Vim – Prophecies Among Them - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 81 - Eighty – Vim – Prophecies Among Them**

*Chapter 81: Chapter Eighty – Vim – Prophecies Among Them*

"You trust her," the Chronicler said as she put her tea cup down.

"I shouldn't," I said.

"She'll earn it," she said with a nod full of confidence.

Wanting to groan at her statement, I chose instead to put the book down on to the armrest of my chair. I hadn't read a single word let alone a page in several minutes, and I was tired of pretending to try. "What do you want from me? Do you want me to take her somewhere?" I asked her accusingly.

"What do you want from her, Vim?" the chronicler asked me.

Shaking my head at her, I wondered why I even bothered talking to her sometimes. And Renn said that I spoke in riddles.

The person in question wasn't here. Renn had wanted to go and watch the blessing prayer for the new year. Although a little worried about her... I knew I couldn't keep an eye on her forever. I wanted her to choose this place as her home, which meant she needed to be able to live here alone without me. Plus I had asked Jelti to keep an eye on her.

"Don't avoid my question," the chronicler chided me.

"I wasn't. I was thinking about it. I want her to stay here, and work with you and the rest. I think she'll be a good fit. She seems to like your stupid faith," I said.

The chronicler moved her head, and I knew she was glaring at me... even if it didn't show in her eyes or on her face.

"So I want her to stay here. To become one of you or something like it. She's smart enough to be able to, plus although she's not as in love with humans as I had first assumed she's more than fine with living amongst them," I explained.

"I see. So you want her here so you can see her as often as you can, is it?" she asked me.

The book that I had put down fell to my lap, and I did my best to not cough or growl as I picked it back up. "Don't be ridiculous," I told her.

For a long moment the chronicler stared at me, or at least at whatever she thought she saw while looking at me.

I stood and walked over to the small shelf. I put the book back in its place as I tried to make sense of this conversation.

We weren't in her usual room. We were in the small loft that could be found above it. The room was a little bigger than her office, but only because her office had rows of shelves and this one didn't.

"The war you fear is coming," she said.

"I don't need your eyes to see that," I said, and although I hated this topic too I found it more favorable than the last.

"Yet you want to hear it all the same, don't you?" she asked with a chuckle.

Did I?

I tapped one of the oldest books in the world with a gentle finger. The binding of the spine felt rigid, as if as hard as a rock.

"Renn wishes to be like you," the chronicler said.

My tapping came to an abrupt stop. "I thought we were talking about the war," I said.

"You hate talking about that. Plus she's much more important," she said.

"Is she now?" I asked her. Maybe there was a reason she was being so weird about her. Usually the chronicler was more like me—indifferent to those who no longer needed help. Maybe she wasn't just teasing me through her, but knew something about Renn that I didn't... or knew what was going to happen because of her.

"The harder you try to push her away, the stronger your grip will become," she warned.

I turned away from the small bookshelf and frowned at the woman who could see things even I couldn't. "Do explain," I ordered.

She frowned but nodded. "Haven't you tried already? Or do my eyes deceive me?" she asked.

Hesitating, I wondered if I should nod or not.

Had I tried?

For a small moment I thought of my recent months. Meeting her. Helping Lomi. The burning of the paintings. The trip here.

Yes. There were a few times I tried to ignore her, but other than the moments at Twin Hills and our return to Ruvindale I had never actually wished her gone...

"You wanted to kill her originally, didn't you?" the chronicler asked.

"I did. But that was before I had read the letters, or found out the truth. It had simply been a moment of anger," I said. I stepped back towards my chair as I spoke.

"Funny, since I saw you kill her several times," she said.

Pausing before the chair, I hesitated. "You did?" I asked.

She nodded, and I hoped that she had only seen what could have been and not was to be.

I'd kill her if I needed to... but now...

"Do not worry; her blood will not stain your hands. At least not for as long as I can see," she said.

I hid my relief as I sat back down. "I'm beginning to dislike you," I told her.

The chronicler laughed, her old body jiggled in glee. "Good!" she said.

While I shook my head, I felt as if my head should be hurting. It didn't of course, but it felt like it should.

"Will you teach her?" I asked her.

"To earn your hatred? I don't think I could even if I tried," she said, still enjoying the moment.

"I'm being serious," I complained.

"As am I!"

Taking a deep breath I sat back and did my best to not get upset. I really wasn't in the mood for this. I didn't even want to be here as it was, I wanted to leave.

"And no. I will not," the chronicler then annoyed me even more by denying my request.

"And why not?" I asked.

"Because I'll not have the time? You two will be leaving soon after the festival, after all," she said as if it was a matter of fact.

For a small moment I glared at her, and then sighed as I decided to just drop it.

She wasn't going to give me a straight answer. Which meant she saw something. Something that she feared if she spoke about, even to me, it might change the result of fate.

Which meant there was no point in continuing to either worry about it, or complain.

"Don't look so defeated, protector," she teased me.

"Why not? It's what I am," I said.

She scoffed at me and shook her head. "With the war, another prophecy," she said.

I raised an eyebrow and wondered which one she spoke of. "The war in the south or...?"

"No. The one to come."

"Wonderful. At least something is progressing, if not my own," I said.

"This one will reach even here. I worry for our weaker members," the chronicler said.

"All of our members are weak."

She smiled and nodded, agreeing with me full-heartedly.

"Disease is coming as well. It's already appeared in the west," she warned.

"What kind?" I asked.

"The kind that kills even the strong. I fear it will kill many before it passes," she said with a pained voice.

I frowned and wondered if it was a plague. If so, then...

"It's time the humans died off a little," I said as I thought about it.

"Heaven forgive him," the chronicler made a small prayer as she brushed away my comment.

"Speaking of your heaven, has someone new appeared in this church? Your clergy has suddenly become very generous," I asked.

"Nay. A disciple of mine, a woman I've raised, has simply gained her rightful position. We will be safer for some time yet thanks to her efforts," she said proudly.

I noted she didn't tell me her name, or her position. Probably afraid I'd scare her away.

"Will I get to meet this one?" I asked her. She hadn't let me meet the last two.

"Not willingly," she said simply.

"I don't hate all churchmen you know," I admitted.

"You don't. But all of them hate you," she also admitted.

"Hmph."

"You're part of that prophecy, by the way," she changed topics, most likely on purpose.

"That's nice," I said.

"Don't you want to hear it?" she asked.

"No."

She sighed, and I knew I had upset her. Although she had brought it up to keep me away from her new disciple, she had also been serious in wanting to tell me it.

"Fine. I'll just tell it to your new companion," she then said.

"That's impossible... she's not part of any of them," I said.

"Neither were you in the beginning," she rebutted.

"Well..." I paused and realized she was right.

She giggled, pleased with herself.

"I'll be useless if she breaks me," I whispered.

"Then don't let her break you," she said plainly.

"Easy to say," I said.

"I know no man stronger than you, Vim."

I shook my head. "I've met countless."

"Stronger of arms, maybe. But not of what is found deeper," she said.

Standing from my seat, I felt anxious as I went to pacing. The chronicler didn't even look at me as I glanced at the nearby window. The one that overlooked the mansio Renn and I were staying at.

"Our society will be fine, Vim. We lose some, and then gain others. Have you not ever wondered how they just... simply appear? Like your new companion. Out of nowhere, yet she appears," the chronicler said with a voice of awe. I knew she was alluding to her deity.

"Droplets amongst a storm," I said as I stepped away from the window, and paced back towards her.

"She's a fair more than a simple drop of rain," she teased me.

I couldn't help it, I smiled at that.

"You know she thinks she's ugly?" I asked her.

The chronicler shifted in her seat, and had obviously not expected such a thing. "Renn?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Hm... something tells me that's your fault. Has she tried crawling in your bed and you've kicked her out of it, or something?" she asked.

My feet came to a stop. How the hell had she come to the same conclusion as me so quickly?

The chronicler laughed. "Indeed!" she saw the truth.

"She hasn't... not like that. To that level. At least not yet," I said, and hated how easily I could see it happening. Even last night... though...

I was glad I had lain down with her last night. The poor woman had an actual panic attack last night.

I wasn't sure what had happened with her brother, but whatever had happened must have left quite a traumatic scar within her.

"At least you admit she has affection for you," the chronicler said with a nod.

"That will pass in time. I'm... amusing, to our kind. Upon our first meeting," I reasoned.

"Really Vim..." she sighed and shook her head.

I didn't try to argue with her. I knew this for a fact, after all. How many of our kind did she think I knew? How many women? Had she any idea how many I had saved? From not just death, but fates much worse?

It was a miracle I wasn't a philanderer.

I turned around and returned to the window. I didn't like how antsy I felt.

Reaching the window, I studied the house again. It looked the same as it had for years.

"This prophecy... does it relate to the disease?" I asked her.

"Time will tell," she answered.

That was a maybe. A hard maybe.

Great. Although I didn't need to fear disease or pestilence, many of our members did. In fact, most of our members who were basically immortal had only such things as those to fear.

Disease and swords. Fire and iron.

"And the..." I started to ask my next question, but noticed something near the house.

Barely visible at this angle, was a plain clothed Renn. She was hurrying to the house, carrying a wooden box.

Most likely the gift given out during today's sermon.

Studying her as she went to the house, she had to put the box down as to open the door. Once the door was open she turned to look around, and I was able to make out the happy smile on her face.

She was enjoying life.

"Ah... look at that," the chronicler's voice pierced my ears, even though she had whispered them.

Turning around to look at her, I studied the white orbs. They were piercing into me even farther than her words had done.

"Where's the pigeon?" I asked her, before she could say anything about me.

"He is on a boat. He'll be back in a few weeks, after you leave," she said.

"Where'd he go?" I asked. A boat? That far? Maybe the lake beds to the south?

"On a date."

"Date...?" I stepped towards her and wondered what the heck she was talking about. That man? On a date? That far away?

"He's fallen for a young sailor," she told me.

I sighed and shook my head. "Of course he has."

"Seems everyone has been falling lately," she happily said.

"Falling into insanity, maybe," I agreed.

Stepping towards the door, I decided it was time I left. And not just because Renn was back. Definitely not.

"Dinner." Stopping before the door, I glanced back at the chronicler. She nodded. "Tonight. Bring her," she said... or more like, ordered.

"If I can suffer it."

#### *Chapter 82: Chapter Eighty One – Renn - Hands*

Studying the finer details on one of the largest clocks here, I wondered how long it took him to build these things.

Even the smaller ones which could fit in my hands were very detailed. Not just the wood or metal that housed them either. The hands and faces were so detailed I had to get up close to really appreciate their intricate designs.

"Why is this one ticking backwards?" I asked Hands as I watched the longest hand on what he had called his grandfather's clock go the opposite way.

"That one's a simple toy. I built it for me," Hands said.

A toy...?

Stepping back a little to take the whole thing in, I wondered if maybe he was older than me.

This thing was taller than me. Maybe even taller than Vim. It was extremely fancy, even the little grooves of wood that made up the sides had entire scenes of carved into them. The front was a giant display of squirrels and acorns, and there were probably hundreds of them crafted into the thing.

Such a thing could have taken years to build on its own.

And it was only one of...

While looking around, I shivered as my ears trembled. This room was not pleasant for me. Too many sounds, and they were all weird and unnatural. The ticking was like an itch I couldn't find.

I was in a large storeroom near the house Vim and I was staying at. Hands, the man moving boxes in search of something to show me, was a member of the Society.

Before Vim had left, to go handle something, he had introduced Hands to me and me him... It turned out Hands was a raccoon.

"Did your grandfather build this one?" I asked him as I looked back at the tall one. That would explain the level of detail upon it.

"Huh?" Hands peered his head out from behind the pillar nearby. He frowned at me and shook his head, which made his little glasses bobble. "No, no. That is a grandfather clock, not my grandfather's clock. I built it. To be honest I don't know why they're called such things. The shorter ones are grandmother clocks," Hands explained to me.

"Oh..." So it was the name of them.

Grandfather and grandmother...

I frowned as I tried to imagine why they had such monikers. Maybe it had something to do with time and the keeping of it, and I simply didn't understand.

"Vim was the one who told me their names," Hands said as he stepped around the pillar and waved me over.

Walking over to him, I tried once again to imagine how many clocks were here.

I gave up within a few steps, since there had to be hundreds if not thousands.

"Why... why do you make so many?" I asked Hands as I walked over to the counter where he had took a seat at.

"Why? Well... to keep time of course?" Hands said as he fidgeted with a circular golden plate. Upon it was a large set of gears, which he had told me were the inner-workings of most clocks.

Keep time...

Reaching the counter, I glanced around at the many clocks... and especially so the ones that weren't accurate.

More than half weren't even clicking properly. The whole room had endless ticks and tocks, but only a small handful seemed to be anywhere near accurate in their timekeeping.

A part of me wanted to ask why he didn't fix them, but another part of me knew I shouldn't.

"Here, here. Look, look," Hands turned one of the smaller gears on the little device he was messing with, and as he did the whole mechanism went into motion. The gears began to spin, little cylinders started moving, and the three black hands that hung a few inches above the mechanism went to moving. There was no face plate on it, so I couldn't really tell what time it was supposed to represent, but I knew he was only showing me how they operated.

"See here? This little gear is the heart. Its beat is what gives it time," Hands spoke quickly, and stared at his little device with a strange fascination. He had dark circles under his eyes, but seemed lively and rested... if a little fidgety.

"How do you make the gears?" I asked him.

"Carefully. Very carefully. These are wheels, these are pinions," he pointed at one of the larger gears, and then pointed at one of the smaller ones.

"I see," I said. I couldn't tell the difference between the two, other than the obvious fact one was bigger than the other... but he did seem excited to tell me about them.

"For the longest time I couldn't get the hour to properly register. It was always a few seconds off. It wasn't until Vim helped me re-calculate the necessary teeth," Hands explained.

"A few seconds off isn't bad is it?" I asked him.

Hands looked up away from his device to me with such speed his glasses nearly flew off his nose. "Not bad! A few seconds an hour, lost forever! Only three seconds lost per hour equates to a minute and twelve seconds lost a day! That's seven hours and twenty minutes a year lost for us all!" Hands spoke loudly as he waved his hands in front of him, as if I was some kind of freak and he couldn't comprehend what I was saying.

"Oh... that is a lot," I agreed, and not just because he was acting so aghast.

"It is! Over my life that would be... A hundred and forty seven days, lost from my life! Oh the time..." he groaned, and seemed genuinely upset over the idea.

Wait... a hundred and forty? Based off that earlier calculation?

I should have paid more attention; it would have let me know how old he was.

"So... each swing of these pendulums is a second?" I asked as I pointed to the little circular pendulum on the device. Thanks to being on the table, it wasn't really swaying like it would normally do, thanks to it being laid on its back.

"Yes, for the grandfather clocks. The smaller ones are half-seconds, and thirds and quarters," Hands quickly went to teaching me as he stepped to the right as to point at one of the larger, thinner, clocks. It hung from the wall behind him.

"How... how are they working? I mean... what makes them move?" I asked.

"Most use a weight, like this one. The chain is connected to a little wound spring, which you tighten by winding with this little tool!" Hands grew excited as he opened a drawer and produced a small golden key... or well, maybe not a key. It looked like one, but had a weird butterfly looking design on it.

Hands stepped around the counter, and came up next to me. He handed me the little key and then guided me to a nearby clock. One that was no longer moving.

"Here," he pointed to a little hole on the side, and I nodded and put the key in.

Feeling it click, I went to turning it gently... just in case. It felt fragile, somehow.

After a few turns of the key, the clock made a click and then begun to move again. It didn't have an open section beneath the face, so I couldn't see any of the internal mechanisms... but the seconds hand began moving in unison with the others.

It joined the chorus of ticks, and I somewhat regretted adding to it. I was going to have a headache before the day was through.

"Wow..." I stared in awe as it came to life, and I wondered just how doing such a thing could actually make it work.

"Fascinating, yes," Hands clapped his hands softly, as if seeing it for the first time himself.

While watching the newly moving clock... I realized this was probably why so many of them were out of sync with the rest. They... stopped working, and by the time Hands or someone else re-wound them, it was already too late.

Somehow that made me feel a lot better. I had worried there was a grander reason to having so many of them being wrong.

"How do we know what a second is?" I asked him after thinking about it.

"A man much smarter than I figured it out. Vim gave me a journal that told how to calculate it based off the stars and sun," Hands said proudly, as if he himself had figured it out.

"A journal?" I asked.

He nodded quickly. "From Vim."

I wanted to ask more, but I could tell he wouldn't... or couldn't tell me more. He knew it was from Vim, and to him that was all that mattered.

He seemed to respect Vim greatly.

"The calculation was divine, almost. To be perfectly honest I am incapable of crafting anything precise enough to accurately measure it. My best attempt is hanging in the lower..." Hands went quiet, and then glanced at me. He coughed and hurried away, mumbling something.

I didn't press him, nor follow him. I had already long realized that Hands was... a little odd... but he was harmless. And I also felt he was similar to Lughes, in a way.

"Vim gave you that journal?" I asked him, changing topics in a slight way. Since he seemed to not want to tell me more.

Rather he didn't seem to mind telling me about clocks, or time, but he didn't want to tell me where certain ones were. Odds were it was hanging in some other Society location. A place that I could know, and might someday go to, but he didn't know yet if I was trust worthy enough for that information.

"He did! Amongst others, yes. Precious, lovely treasures," Hands said quickly as he headed back to the counter.

"I see," I said as I walked back to the counter as well. I put the little key down onto the counter, since Hands seemed preoccupied.

"Vim is a phenomenal teacher. Wise. Wisdom beyond cunning. Yet, terrifying," Hands said as he paused, and tapped his belly with his hands while going into thought.

While watching him, I couldn't help but smile at him. He really did remind me of Lughes.

It made me wonder how many of my members were like them.

Vim wasn't... but he was undoubtedly an outlier.

"No... no, no, no," Hands mumbled to himself as I poked at one of the little gears of the naked clock on the counter.

After touching it I had to pull my hand back and I saw the little red nick on my fingertip.

"Sharp..." I whispered in awe. I hadn't realized it was.

"Sharp! Yes! Come, let me show you!" Hands then turned on a heel and hurried away.

He ran off, disappearing behind a large pillar covered in clocks.

"Huh...?" I worriedly tried to make sense of what just happened. Did... did he want me to follow him? He had basically ran off...

After a moment he reappeared, waving for me to follow him. "Come, come little kitty. Quickly now, before he returns!" Hands said with a hush. He kept looking at the door nearby, as if in worry.

A little bothered, I went to follow him... but did so carefully. I wasn't too worried over him hurting me, or doing anything strange... but he was definitely an odd one. Maybe he needed to get out of this room more often.

While I followed him behind the pillar, he led me into a hallway. One that had at one time been large and open... but now was cramped and untidy, thanks to all the clocks and parts everywhere.

"Hurry, hurry, before he's back," Hands ushered me as he quickly hurried down the hall. Following him, I studied the multitude of clocks I passed. There were far more here than I had thought. Maybe their incessant ticking had made him insane.

Reaching the end of the hallway, Hands hurriedly looked around... even though there was nothing to look at. Except all the clocks. The only thing was a large door, but it was blocked by boxes and clocks. At first I thought he was going to go about moving them, so we could enter that room, but instead he focused on a cloth in the corner. He grabbed it, and then went still.

I went still too as he looked at me, and then behind me. "Is he still gone?" he asked with a whisper.

Looking behind me, I frowned and wondered what he'd do or say if Vim really had been there. "He's still gone," I said.

"Good. Good. Look, come closer, and look upon a marvel!" Hands pulled back the drape, revealing...

Stepping forward, I frowned at the sight of the circular orb. It sat inside what seemed to be some kind of metallic cage, and...

"A painting?" I asked. It looked kind of interesting, especially since they had painted it on an orb instead of a flat surface. I hadn't even ever thought of someone painting in such a way. It was interesting.

"No! It's more! So much more!" Hands shivered as he raised his hands as if to touch it, but he didn't. The man stood there with trembling hands as he stared wide-eyed at the thing.

"What is it?" I asked as I got closer. Now I could see words on it. I couldn't recognize any of the letters, but...

"The world," he whispered in awe.

Before I could ask him to clarify what he meant, Hands bent down to his knees... and actually clasped his hands before it. As if praying to it, like an idol.

The sight made me hesitate, since it seemed... so out of character, even for this odd man.

"See? See his wisdom? Ohh... it's flawless..." Hands spoke quietly, as if to himself.

Yes. This man needed to get out more.

"The world...?" I asked him as I stepped up next to him. I guess I could see it, maybe. I didn't recognize it, of course... but maybe it was some kind of map? But then why was it on an orb?

"A map. Of every corner, yet no corners," Hands said, and then as if to prove a point he carefully reached out. With a single fingertip he touched the orb, and then spun it.

I stood up straighter as it did indeed spin somehow, slowly revolving as if it floated on water.

"Huh..." I had to admit it was neat. Not only was it detailed, and very unique... the way it was spinning was also interesting. How did it float inside the mechanism? I didn't see anywhere where it was connected to it or...

Then the orb came to an abrupt stop, and Hands pointed with a wavering finger. To a spot not too far from a vast swath of blue. "See? We are here. Right now, that is us," Hands said.

Really...? I bent forward to try and read the words painted before his finger.

The area was on a large... bumpy shape of green and brown. Maybe it was supposed to represent the nearby forests and mountains?

"I can't read that language," I told Hands. They weren't even familiar like some of the signs and books I'd seen lately.

"No. None can. No one but him," Hands said.

"You mean...?" I started to ask why he couldn't read it either, but Hands suddenly stood up. I nearly tripped as I stepped back and away from him as he hurriedly went to cover the orb back up with the cloth.

"Secret! Secret... no one can know!" he spoke quickly as he did his best to wrap the cloth back around the ball.

Although startled, I nodded all the same to him. I may not really understand his strangeness, but I knew he was in his own way trying to show me something important. Something precious... and not just to him.

"Come! Another!" Hands then turned, hurrying past me so quickly he almost bumped into me.

Watching him go, I gulped as I hurried to follow him. This time a little more genuinely than the last time.

Heading back down the hallway we had come from, Hands led me around another pillar. This time this hallway wasn't as cluttered, and the door at the end wasn't blocked.

He dug into a pocket, and a black key appeared as he fumbled with the door. He unlocked it with a loud click, and then froze. He looked around, worried.

"He's not back yet," I told him. I hadn't heard the main door open yet.

"Good, yes. Hurry," Hands nodded as he opened the door and hurried into the room.

Following him into a rather dark room, I hesitated a moment as I watched Hands clamber over boxes and junk to reach a window. He barely got hold of one of the shutters, and threw it open. The sunlight pierced into the dark room, and thanks to it I was able to see the sea of dust that Hands had kicked up during his ruckus.

This place hadn't been cleaned in years.

"Here, here... quickly!" Hands hurried back towards the other side of the room, to a wall that was free of boxes and shelves and...

No. Not free. There were massive drapes covering the wall. Nearly a dozen of them. They were dark and thick looking.

Hands hurried over to one near me. I stepped aside as I watched him reach up and carefully tug on the edge of the huge drape. Something unfastened, and the drape fell free. As it slid down the wall, revealing a... painting... I realized that there were probably a dozen paintings lined up on the wall.

This one was large. Nearly as big as I was tall and thrice as wide as Hands was. It was actually far more interesting than the orb he had just shown me, especially since it reminded me of...

My heart felt a small stab of pain as I stared up at a large painting.

For a tiny moment I thought of the Sleepy Artist. I took a small breath and smelled the paint and wood, even though this place smelled like sawdust and dirt.

Then I blinked... and suddenly the world got quiet.

"What...?" I didn't know what to say, as I stared up at Vim.

"See? See! Knight! Brave and wonderful, wise and strong!" Hands clapped his hands, a little louder than usual but still softly and without force... as I stared up at a painting of Vim, in armor.

No armor I recognized, however. It was silver, but adorned with spikes and weird... were those blades? Knives, on the actual armor pieces? It was weird looking. Unnatural. Unusual. It wasn't armor, it was something else... but I wasn't sure what to call it.

Yet as weird as the armor were, it was obvious it was Vim who was wearing it. And he was something that deserved far more of my attention than the armor's strange spikes and...

He stood firmly, staring out to the left of the painting. To something far off in the distance. He had a spear in his right hand, and his left was curled into an angry fist. He was glaring at something, and there was a hint of actual hate on his expression.

He wasn't just in armor, he was facing an enemy.

As was the army behind him.

Countless people, all wearing similar armor, stood behind Vim. Of the few faces I could make out, since most looked far off in the distance, I recognized none of them... and the most surprising thing wasn't the army but...

They looked human. All of them. Not a single one looked like one of us.

There were huge mountains in the distance, and it looked like they were standing on rocky plains... but I didn't recognize the scene at all. Neither the location, nor the purpose.

Surely this wasn't just some artistic representation... this had to have been something the painter had seen. With their own eyes. It looked too real... too strange.

"Vim..." I whispered and stepped closer. To study it better.

"Terrible secret, yes. Vim the protector," Hands spoke quickly, with brisk whispers. He kept looking at the door, as if expecting Vim to be standing there.

I gulped as I studied Vim's face. It looked like there was a helmet hanging behind his suit, attached by threads of silk. He looked... dirty. Sweat. Grime. Dried blood marred his left ear, but I didn't see any injury.

This wasn't a scene set before a battle, but during it.

I couldn't see any other parts of his body. The armor covered everything. The spear he held looked to be made of the same metal his armor was, and it had a red ribbon dangling in the wind near the tip. It was frayed and worn, as if old.

A Vim I didn't know stood before me, yet somehow...

Somehow I felt that this was the real Vim, and not the one I knew.

"Oh no!" Hands then startled me as he hurried forward. I tried to stop him, but he quickly got the drape back in front of the painting. One moment Vim was there, the next he was gone.

"Hands...!" I wanted to complain, but wasn't sure what to do or say. Hands immediately spun around after securing the cloth, and began ushering me out of the room.

"Secrets! Keep them, for all time!" Hands pushed me out of the room, and my heart thumped loudly as I worriedly glanced at the nearby wall.

There were dozens more of those paintings. I needed to see them.

"Hurry. Hush. Quietly," Hands pushed me out into the small hall, and then closed the door behind him with a soft thump. He quickly locked it, and then spun back around to keep ushering me out.

"Hands, really!" I complained as he hurried me down the hallway.

He was going to kick me out!

"Shush! Secrets! Too secret for any one!" Hands pushed me, and I wanted to spin around and slap his hands away. Not because he was touching me, but because I wanted to ask more questions. To study that painting closer, and see what kinds of paintings had been hidden behind the other drapes!

But before I could, I got pushed to the door. I steeled myself, thinking that Hands was actually going to push me into the door... but he didn't. He stopped immediately, and hurried around me as to open the door.

"Hands!" I tried to get his attention, but he was focused. He kept his head down, and eyes to the ground as he returned to pushing me out.

Although upset, I didn't fight him. It was very obvious he was not going to stop trying, and wouldn't listen to me... maybe I just needed to come back later.

Getting pushed out into the hallway, I sighed as Hands nodded quickly and retreated back into his office. "Shush!" he whispered loudly, putting his fingers to his mouth.

I nodded. "Alright," I said to the very obvious panicked man. His dark circles under his eyes made their wide white pupils even more noticeable.

He nodded back, and then grabbed the door. He looked left and right down the hallway, in a panic, and even though saw no one else... he still jumped and hurried to shut the door as if he had.

The door shut solidly behind me, and I found myself standing alone in the quiet and dimly lit stone hallway.

Looking left and right, I groaned as I realized I had just been kicked out.

Stepping away from the door, just in case he opened it again in one of his strange episodes, I sighed as I tried to make sense of what had just happened.

Hopefully by the time Vim came back and found me, I'd find some sense of understanding... since I'd probably ask him if I couldn't.

And something told me I shouldn't ask Vim about that painting... and not just because of how Hands had acted.

Amber had told me how he had destroyed paintings of him... and those had been simple sketches. Of the mundane.

That one had been anything but.

Shivering a little I stepped to the right, to head to the little sitting area nearby that I had seen on the way here. I couldn't really remember where I was, but I was sure I could find my way back to the house from here... but I didn't want to.

I wanted to wait for Vim. He had said he'd be back soon, after all.

For now I'd just sit...

Sit and ponder.

And maybe if I'm lucky, also get those incessant tick-tocks out of my head too.

*Chapter 83: Chapter Eighty Two – Vim – A Drunk Dunk*

Renn's footfalls echoed in the silent hallway as we walked.

"That was fun," she happily said.

"It was fun watching you scare a blind woman. She's never seen anyone eat as much as you," I said.

Renn glanced at me, but didn't take offense. She only grinned at me as she laughed.

Her laugh joined the echoes of her steps, and I felt... oddly out of place. As if I suddenly needed to go somewhere, and fast. Yet I knew I had nowhere to go, and the feeling was just a mask for something else.

"Chronicler is very nice. I thought she was a little... bristly, but she's just old. She's lovely," Renn said.

"Bristly," I repeated the word she used to describe the woman who used to cry at the slightest worry or fear.

Renn nodded. "I enjoyed learning about her religion too. It's actually very similar to Nory's, although I'm not entirely sure what to think of the idea of sins being..." she paused and raised her hands, to try and find the right word as to describe it. She turned to me, and opened her palms as to raise and lower her hands... like a scale.

"They believe some sins can be paid for, yes. A little odd, but their hearts in the right place," I said.

She shifted on her heels as she shrugged. She wore a commoner dress. A simple white and blue, without any frills or designs. It somehow suited her better than it should. She was the type of adorable that made the wealthy merchants and lower nobles fall without any grace.

If she had been born a human, she most likely would have ended up married to someone powerful... just because of how adorable she was.

"Says the man who doesn't believe it," she said with a small smirk.

I shrugged. "Even one who doesn't believe can still see the reasoning behind it."

"Still... for some reason I don't like it," she said as she returned to walking.

We weren't far from the mansion, but we were walking slowly. Mostly because of her. She seemed to enjoy our conversations. Or... maybe she was afraid of getting back, and having to go to sleep.

Which was probably my fault. Per usual.

But what was I to do? I didn't feel comfortable laying in the same bed with her anymore.

Even if it seemed to break her heart...

No... for that very reason.

"What bothers you about it?" I asked her, trying to understand her a little better.

"Well... it means some things can be written off, right? Pay a price. Do a deed. Sweat or bleed a little, and that evil you just committed is forgotten? I don't like it."

"There's a price for everything. Why not sin as well?" I asked her.

She glanced at me, and I knew it was because she knew full well I didn't believe in it either. Yet she humored me all the same, "A man had tortured Nory. A churchman. If I found out he got into his heaven, and forgiven by everyone else too... just because he put some stupid metal coins into a hat I'd be... well, I'd not be very happy, at all," she said simply.

I nodded. "I agree. But remember they're looking at it from a true spiritual perspective. One where they're not supposed to be judging anyone, for anything. To them, judging someone... even a sinner, is a sin itself," I told her.

"I know... but that doesn't mean I can see it the same way. Doesn't mean I agree with it," she said.

"Didn't say you had to," I said.

She huffed and nodded, and I wondered if she realized how rare she was.

Our kind either despised the church... or loved it entirely.

She was a mix of both.

Very rare. Preciously rare.

It worried me to what degree she loved it... but I knew better than to try and reason her away from that attraction. After all, it was her right to believe what she wanted to. And out of all the things to believe in, to become a devotee to... such religions were the best of them. The safest. The purest. They had faults, but not enough to spoil them as a person.

"You could stay here, Renn. And become one of them. The chronicler would help you. She'd let you," I said gently.

We were about to round a corner, but Renn stopped. She turned to look at me, and I almost flinched at the look she gave me.

Once again I had hurt her.

We stood in a strange silence for a moment as she rubbed her hands together, as if cold. "I... Um..." she looked down, and then back up at me, "Is that what you want me to do, Vim?" she asked softly.

I gulped and hesitated. Me?

I wanted many things. But I never told anyone what I wanted. I wasn't supposed to.

"I was just suggesting it, Renn. After all... the entire point of your journey is to find a home, isn't it?" I asked her.

Her eyebrows knotted as she stared at me for a moment, and I knew what she really wanted to say.

She didn't want a home. At least not right now.

She wanted to stay with me.

At first I had hoped that desire was just because she wanted to be of service. To help the Society, if not to pay the debts she owed... at least simply just out of principle.

But lately...

"It was," she whispered.

Her hands separated, and she ran them upward along her forearms. Until she held her elbows, hugging herself.

It reminded me of the woman I had seen in Ruvindale. When we had set fire to the Sleepy Artist. And the one I had seen before that, when she had found me at Twin Hills.

This was the same woman who woke up screaming from nightmares.

I needed to tread carefully here, for both our sakes.

"You have a few days to decide. We'll be heading eastward, to a pond after," I told her.

She blinked a few times, and her eyes focused a little. On me. I could see her mind whirling as her heart steadied itself. "A... a pond?" she asked.

I nodded. "The maps call them lakes, but they're a little too small for that I think," I said.

A small smile snuck its way onto her face as she nodded. "A few days. Alright. I'll think about it, I promise," she said.

"Promises hold weight here, Renn," I warned her.

She nodded. "I know. It's a good thing I can't get drunk," she said.

I nodded. I'd been testing it, a little, ever since she had told me she couldn't. As far as I was aware... she really wasn't able to. It was my belief that she had yet to simply drink anything that worked for her, though.

If she continued alongside me, I planned to test her tolerance in the east. There were a few drinks there that were... special.

"I'm glad you enjoyed the dinner by the way. I'll not be doing that again, so I hope you got your fill," I told her.

Renn giggled. "I figured. You always look so... annoyed, when we have to sit with other people," she said as I stepped forward and gestured for her to follow me.

She wasn't holding herself anymore, and was smiling and laughing again. I had somehow gotten through that little... moment, without any real stress.

Go me?

"I don't mind eating with our members... But I've known most of them for hundreds of years. There's little I wish to speak with them about anymore," I said.

"Hm... does that mean you'd get bored of me too?" Renn asked as she stepped closer to me.

"Who said I'm not already?" I asked her.

"Your face. You glare at me sometimes, but never when we're just talking or alone," Renn said.

I glared at her to make up for the obvious lack of it.

She laughed at me and drew closer, happily wrapping her arms around one of my own.

Slowing my pace, we both came to a stop as I stared down at her. She had an odd look on her face, and she quickly un-wrapped her arms and stepped away. She coughed, and... went red in the face, as if embarrassed.

"You clung to me the whole night the other night, yet that was enough to make you blush?" I asked her.

Honestly I was glad she had released me. It had been... a little odd, for her to have done that. Especially when we were alone and there was no point in her pretending to be something she wasn't.

"Oh shush... it's not the same!" she said as she turned and hurried away.

Following after her as we neared the mansion, I smiled at the sight of her dress. It was fluttering, thanks to her tail.

Renn hurried to the gate, and with ease pulled it open. Seeing her do so reminded me she was strong.

Closing the gate behind me as I followed her, I watched as Renn hurried to the front door. She paused in front of it and turned to wait for me, patiently.

Sometimes she was like a child.

She grinned at me as I walked calmly up to the porch and front door. "If anyone was watching they'd think you actually were drunk," I told her.

"I can pretend to be, if you'd like," she offered.

"You're already drunk on me, there's no need to pretend," I said as I went to open the door.

As I opened the front door, I noticed the weird silence that followed. Glancing at her as I stepped back, to let her in first... I hesitated as I found her giving me an odd look.

She stared at me for a moment... and then blinked and looked away. She stepped past me and entered the house without a word, and I noticed her tail had stopped moving.

Had I upset her? I had thought it had been a rather light-hearted joke.

Closing the door behind us, I watched as she slowly came to a stop. Right before the open foyer, where the log book sat waiting for its next entry.

"I enjoy our time together, Vim," she then said.

Glancing at the door, for the tiniest moment... I debated locking it. I never did, usually. In fact I usually never locked any door anywhere. After all, I never needed to. There was nothing in this world that could enter without me knowing first and then nothing that I couldn't handle.

Yet here before me was a moment where even I didn't want to be bothered.

"Can I be honest as well?" I asked her.

She turned briskly and nodded.

Stepping up to her I reached up and carefully undid the two pins that held her hat onto her head. I was careful to not tug free any hairs, especially since she always seemed to latch them onto the hair of her ears and not her head. Surely that hurt?

"I've enjoyed traveling with you too," I told her as I handed her the hat.

Renn gulped, and I knew I shouldn't allow it to go any further. Especially when I considered the gleam in her eyes.

"Maybe I am drunk..." she whispered, as if in disbelief.

"Ever had a hairball?" I asked her.

She blinked, and that beautifully dangerous gleam in her eyes disappeared. "Hairball...?" she asked, stepping back a step. She hadn't expected my question at all.

I nodded.

After a few moments she then scoffed, and then she broke out into a huge smile. "A hairball!" she shouted, and started to laugh at me.

Smiling at her burst of laughter I turned and headed for the fireplace. It was a little chilly, it wasn't as windy as it had been yesterday but that was only because the storm was just about to arrive. Here in a few hours the wind would be loud and strong, and the world cold and damp.

"Hairball... haha," Renn snickered and giggled as I went to arranging a few logs into the fireplace.

"They're dangerous you know," I said.

"I'm sure! Though... now that I think about it, no, I never have had one. Probably a good thing... it'd probably be gross," she said.

"Well... you don't lick yourself clean, so of course you wouldn't," I said.

"Then why'd you ask?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Seemed the right time to do so, I've been thinking about it for awhile," I said. Not a real lie, but it felt like one.

Renn stepped around the table, and bent down next to me as I went to striking a match. I glanced at her as I went to starting a fire.

She smiled as she watched the flame, and I wondered if maybe she was cold. Maybe she wanted to sit before the fire for awhile.

"I talked to Hands," she then said.

I nodded. "I know... I took you to him, remember?"

Although I had not found her with him, but instead sitting outside of his office. Near it, actually, in one of the sitting areas of the cathedral.

"He... he's a little odd, huh?" Renn wondered.

"He's eccentric, but he's harmless. He's smart where it counts, though," I said.

"Hm... Eccentric..." she pondered the word for a moment as the fire grew stronger, crackling and popping as it encompassed the untouched logs.

"Peculiar," I added.

"He showed me the world, I guess. It was a big painted ball, he said it was the world," she then said.

I paused as I reached for another piece of wood, to help feed the new fire. "He did?" I asked her.

She nodded as she held her hands out, to both warm them and showcase the shape of the ball. "It spun," she said.

So he had...

Maybe that was why the chronicler had wanted her to meet him. Maybe she was supposed to have seen that. Or learn about it.

Still it wasn't every day that Hands showed someone he really didn't know stuff like that. Those were what he considered treasures.

They were treasures, of course, but he valued them in a little different way than purely monetary.

For him to have shown her on their first meeting...

What had he seen in her? What had she said?

"What else did he show you...?" I asked her, realizing that he very well might have.

"Lots of clocks?" she said with a shrug.

Tossing another piece of wood into the fire, I used the movement to hide my relief. Thank goodness.

Last thing I needed was for this woman to see those diagrams and maps in that attic of his.

"I'm surprised he didn't give you one," I said.

"One of the clocks...?" she clapped her hands together, and I knew she was mimicking what Hands usually did. "He treasures them too much," she decided.

"That is true," I said.

I'd not tell her that he gave clocks to those he knew he'd never see again. It was his way of saying goodbye, forever.

For him not to have done so meant he was not only okay with seeing her again, but planned to do so.

Putting one last log onto the fire, I decided it would now be fine for awhile. But before I could stand up, Renn shifted a little and rested against me.

Glancing at her, I stared at the way the fire reflected in her eyes.

For such a normal color, they were pretty.

"Cold?" I asked her.

"A little. I think I feel the storm coming too, I feel as if my body is aching but I know it's not," she said.

"Hm... Come on then, I'll heat up a bath for you," I said.

Her ears perked up as we both stood and I stepped around her as to head to the kitchen.

"Together?" she asked, sounding far too hopeful.

"You are more than welcome to help me prepare the bath together, yes," I said as I headed down the hallway.

She giggled at me, and I relaxed a little. She had expected such a response.

Hopefully I'd be able to give such responses long enough before giving in.

"Who do I get to meet tomorrow?" Renn asked as I went into the bathroom.

It was dark, thanks to the thick clouds outside. But I had no plans to light any of the candles or lamps in here. The fire would light it up well enough for us.

"I'm going to meet Link, if you'd like to join me," I said.

"Oh? The one who knows about the wars?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Neat. I don't know war at all," she said.

"Few do," I said as I checked the little cubby beneath the stone bathtub. It was big enough for a few pieces of wood, but not entire logs.

"Here." Renn had found the wood box and offered one to me. Seemed she had taken my earlier comment seriously.

Taking it from her, she seemed content watching me as I quickly started a fire.

This one popped and crackled more often, and was louder, than the fireplace out in the front. The wood was a little too dry.

But it was fine.

"Keep it fed, I'll get the water," I told her as I grabbed the two large buckets.

"Okay," she nodded obediently as I headed out the large door to the backyard.

It didn't take long to fill the two buckets, thanks to the well nearby. It was much fuller than usual, which told me it had probably stormed before we had gotten here.

Carrying the buckets back into the bathroom, I went to filling up the bathtub. Renn was kneeled in front of the fire, slowly feeding it.

On the third trip, Renn had reached in to splash the water. "Oh, it's warming up fast," she noted.

"Why wouldn't it?" I asked her as I poured more in. It was about half way full now.

"It was freezing when you first started," she said.

"Why wouldn't it be?" I asked again and went to get another batch.

Upon returning I found her already in the bath. Her clothes and shoes were bundled up near the other door, the one that led to the hallway.

"Your... you're going to get cold when I pour these in, you know?" I warned her.

"Go for it," she grinned at me.

I sighed but obliged her. I made sure to pour them as far away from her as I could. Even though I did, she still squirmed a little.

Shaking my head at her, I wondered if she'd be fine. It wasn't quite full yet, but....

"You can get it in too, there's enough room," she said with a gesture to the space across from her.

Glancing at it, I envisioned myself in there with her. "Yea... no there isn't," I said. Even while sitting her feet almost touched the other end, her tail did easily.

She giggled as I put the buckets away and closed the door. Before leaving though I grabbed some more wood and tossed them into the fire.

"You really can get in Vim. I promise not to do anything too weird," she said as she watched me tender the fire.

"I believe you."

She tilted her ears at me, then her head. "Then...?"

"It's not you I worry about," I said, and then with one last piece of wood I brushed my hands off and stepped away.

Bending down, I picked up her clothes, and then her shoes and hat. I tidied them up and put them on the counter near the door. Once done I nodded and left.

Renn stared at me as I left the bathroom, and after a few steps... once out of her line of sight, I heard her make an irritated noise and splash the water. By the sounds of it with both her fists and her tail.

I flinched and nodded.

Yea.

Me too, Renn.

Me too.

*Chapter 84: Chapter Eighty Three – Renn – A War for a Daughter*

Link was a tall man.

Even while slouched over the table, pointing at the large map that spread out across it, he was still several heads taller than me.

He wasn't just tall either.

"Is she still alive?" Vim asked as he studied the map with an odd gaze. He seemed very interested.

"As far as I'm aware, yes. But... who knows her condition, the poor girl," Link said with a sigh.

Link slowly stood up, yet couldn't do so all the way. This room had low beams, and lanterns hung from them. He had to slouch or risk hitting his head on them. He crossed his massive arms, and he glanced at me.

I sat up straighter, feeling a little ridiculous. How was he so big? I had never met a man as big as him before...

"You're not planning on taking her into the canyons are you?" Link asked Vim.

"I have no plans to take anyone anywhere at the moment," Vim said.

Link sighed, and I knew it was because he knew full well what Vim meant. Although it seemed to bother Link, it made me smile.

Vim really did seem to be willing to let me stay with him. How wonderful.

"You are a predator, lady Renn," Link said to me.

I once again made my back straight as I nodded. "I am," I said.

"Then please, don't be foolish. You're needed alive. Do not follow him into war," Link said.

I gulped, and wondered what he was. Surely a predator? The man's arms were as thick as my waist! "Do you plan to go to war Vim? Do you know this, uh... Princess?" I asked, I tried to remember her name but couldn't. They had just said it a few minutes ago too...

"She's not a real princess. Genni is the daughter of a mercenary. A hero. I'm actually very surprised the Northmen are willing to be known as those who kidnapped such a person's daughter," Vim said as he rubbed his jaw. He was still staring at the map. I didn't blame him for his intense interest... it was neat. There were lots of little flags all over the map, poked into the table by sharp metal nails. Some of the little flags on the nails were rather detailed and pretty to look at.

"Do you know her?" Link asked again, seemingly as interested as I was.

"No. But I know her father," Vim said lightly.

Link looked at me, and somehow I understood his expression. For such a large man, with such a large face, you'd think it was always easy... but he was usually rather placid. Like Vim. "Probably fought him once, and now likes him," Link said.

Smiling at the thought, I wondered if maybe that was what I needed to do. Maybe I needed to fight Vim to get him to actually consider me and...

"I didn't fight him. We simply negotiated. He was very respectful. I'd rather him be in control than the north," Vim said.

"So... are you going to do something about it?" Link asked as he put his hand down onto the table. It was ridiculous to see his outstretched arm. It was nearly as long as most of Vim's upper body.

"No. Odds are the poor girl's dead, or wants to be. Although saving her would earn me his loyalty, he's got to be old by now. Too old to be useful," Vim said.

"So callous," Link teased him.

"What of the pirates? In the whirlpools?" Vim changed topics, pointing to a set of blue flags near the edge of the map and table.

"As far as I'm aware, they've split. I don't know if it's a civil war or not, but they're definitely no longer all under the same banner. At least two flags I've been told have been seen sailing the whirlpools," Link said.

"Great. Wonder who died," Vim sighed.

"She was old Vim. Nearly sixty," Link said.

Vim nodded and seemed sad. "Who?" I asked.

"A pirate queen. Vim liked her," Link said with a smirk.

"She was interesting," Vim defended himself, again.

Link smirked and got my attention. He held out his hands before him, in a cupping motion. At first I didn't understand what he was implying, but then it became rather clear.

Looking away from him quickly, I ignored the huge man's chuckles. They were deep and reverberated in this small room. "Fool," I whispered. More so at Vim than him.

"Still, like always the world keeps on changing. Why can't it just be... still for a few hundred years?" Vim asked the room.

"Probably just so it can annoy you," Link said.

I didn't like how Vim sighed. It was the kind that told me that maybe Link hadn't been joking, and it was the truth.

"A war for a daughter. A plague to the south, unsafe waters to the west, an emerging church power in the north..." Vim shook his head as he rambled the state of the world.

Which one did he find the most troublesome I wonder?

"Lady Renn, have you ever seen the sea?" Link asked.

"Yes, I have," I said.

Why did he call me Lady?

"Ah... I'm jealous. I've never been blessed to see it with my own eyes. I hear it is cold, but that makes no sense. How could a lot of water be cold?" Link asked.

"Uh..." I wasn't sure what to say. Was he being serious? Something told me he wasn't, but at the same time...

"The sea is less than a month away. Take a trip someday Link," vim said.

Link shivered at the thought, and I realized something very important.

He was not a predator, was he?

I really wanted to ask, but knew better than to do so. Not only would Link probably find it insulting, I knew Vim would chastise me as well.

Some people kept their true nature a secret. I shouldn't pry.

But... it was so obvious now that I thought about it. The man was huge, and imposing yes, but... he was more like Windle or Crane than Vim or myself.

Yes. Windle. That was who he reminded me of. Even if they looked so different.

"Have you heard of the Silken Band Link?" Vim then asked.

"Hm...? Ah yes. In the north. Here, two months ago they were seen in the hills of Tripalli," Link said as he used a giant finger to point at a smaller white flag.

Vim nodded and studied it for a moment, and the flags around it.

"That's where Lilly's son is right?" I asked.

Vim and Link looked at me, and I worried I had made a mistake. But Vim calmly nodded. "He is. Or at least, last she had heard," Vim said.

"Lilly's son is a mercenary?" Link asked, suddenly worried.

"He is indeed," Vim sounded proud as he nodded.

"Ah poor Windle..." Link groaned. As he rubbed his temple, I smiled at the man. He really was like Windle!

"And where is our friendly bear then?" Vim asked.

"Oplar headed for the Summit. She's still looking for a mate," Link said.

Oplar? I perked up at the sudden mention of someone I knew... if only by name.

"Of course she is. At least she's staying away from the wars," Vim said.

"For now, at least," Link sighed.

A part of me wanted to stand and ask them to point out this supposed summit on the map for me... but I knew it was better not to. After all, not only would Vim not take me there most likely but most didn't seem to like telling others other Society locations.

I couldn't blame them for it though.

And I knew someday I'd meet this Oplar anyway.

Though...

A bear was she?

Interesting. That was a legitimate predator, like myself...

Vim had mentioned bears before. He had told of a village of them that had gone to war and perished. With our own kind. With boars.

She was looking for a mate Link had said...

"Is that what you're searching for Renn? A mate?" Link then asked me.

Looking at him for a moment, I was a little surprised I didn't grow embarrassed because of his question. In fact I felt rather...

"Don't give her any ideas," Vim said before I could find my own answer. Link glanced at him, and Vim huffed at him. "She's enough trouble as she is. I don't need more of her running around, especially not even little ones," he added.

A huge smile planted itself on Link's face and he guffawed, laughing loudly.

I couldn't help it, I smiled too.

While watching and listening to Link laugh... I couldn't help but think about it though.

Children.

Children...

Could I even bring such precious things into this world? Into a world that hated us? Hunted us? Where there were none of us left?

"Speaking of mates, Jelti has found hers you know?" Link said.

Jelti?

"I know. I met her already," Vim said.

"Oh? That's boring. I wanted to tease you about it being a woman," Link said with a sigh.

A woman...? Why was that something to tease Vim about?

Vim noticed my thoughts and smiled at me. "Jelti's a woman, Renn," Vim said.

My ears perked up and I glanced at Link, who nodded. "Yep."

"Huh..." I hadn't known our kind would be willing to do that. Humans sure, but we all seemed a little more... instinctual in our desires.

And those instincts would be counter effective in that way, I'd think.

"She's not bothered by it at all," Link noticed.

"Well..." I shrugged.

"Why would she be? She's not like the other blind sheep," Vim said.

Glancing at him, I wondered if he meant those of us who were devout.

Link snickered but nodded.

"You met Jelti already Vim?" I asked him.

"I have."

I hummed and wanted to ask why I hadn't been there, but didn't want to say that in front of Link. Maybe there was a reason for it.

"He won't let you meet her, Lady Renn. You're too beautiful," Link said.

"Huh?" I frowned at that, and frowned even harder when Vim seemed to clench his jaw.

Really!?

"I need not worry about her. She's a predator. Jelti would tremble too much in her arms, and piss the bed in fear," Vim said.

I sighed at Vim's words and wondered how much of it was a joke and how much wasn't. Something told me not enough of it.

"Isn't that the truth!" Link laughed.

While watching him laugh, I wondered if that meant he really was a predator. I mean, it felt obvious but...

"He's a lizard, Renn," Vim then said.

"An iguana to be exact," Link said proudly, boasting with a huge smile.

"I... I don't know what that is," I said honestly.

"Not a surprise. We're giant, powerful and deadly creatures! We're toxic, can swallow things whole, and with a single lick I can bring down an army," Link declared.

My eyes widened as I tried to envision what kind of creature he was. Between all that and his size he was probably quite a fearsome man!

"He's teasing you Renn. He's never won a fight in his life," Vim said as he tapped one of the small flags.

Link flinched and brought his massive hands around to theatrically make himself appear hurt and offended. "How dare you slander me Vim! Before such a beauty as well!"

"I'll happily let you throw the first punch, or swing your sword first, if you'd like to punish me for it," Vim said as he studied a small corner of the map. One that had dozens of little flags all bunched together.

"Hmph, you're lucky my sword is being sharpened right now or else I would!" Link nodded, yet...

Glancing to the left, at the sword hanging on the wall...

Link coughed, and his eyes darted between me and the table... embarrassed.

Huh... a massive man, acting meek.

What was the world coming to?

"You don't like to fight Link?" I asked.

Link shifted, and then glanced at Vim. He seemed unsure of himself, but after a moment lightly smiled and scratched the back of his head. "No. I don't," he said.

"Then... why do you like war?" I asked with a gesture to the table before me.

Vim smirked but I ignored him, as did Link. "Don't you find yourself attracted to things you're scared of?" Link asked me.

Opening my mouth to tell him no, I instead chose to ponder his words.

Was I?

Right now the only thing I was really attracted to was the man playing with the little flags. And although I probably should fear him, in a way, I honestly didn't.

"Can't say I do," I said after a moment.

Link sighed and shook his head. "How come predators don't get it? You should you know, being what you are," he said.

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

"Ignore him Renn," Vim said lightly.

"Hard to, Vim. He takes up half the room by himself," I said.

Link coughed and the whole table jolted upward as he hit it with his knee.

I shot up off my chair and Vim sighed as we all watched dozens of little flags fly up.

"Shoot!" Link groaned as the flags dislodged themselves, and landed in a mess all over the place. On the table and not.

"Link..." Vim sighed, and I hurriedly stepped forward to go to help him pick them up.

"I'm so sorry!" I cried. It was all my fault!

Right before I started to grab some of the small flags, I realized that maybe I shouldn't touch them. Maybe it'd be easier to put them all back in place one by one, and by leaving them be where they landed it'd be easier to find out which went where and...

"Oh..." Link's low moan stopped me from doing anything as I looked up at him.

He had his head in his massive hands, and was staring with huge wide eyes at the mess in front of him.

"I'm..." I started to apologize again, but before I could... the huge man fell to his knees.

Although he knelt, he was still taller than Vim... but he didn't just kneel down. He fell down. The impact was strong enough that the whole table shook again. Although only three flags dislodged this time, most of the flags that had fallen out the first time bounced around because of it. Most fell to the floor, clattering as they did.

"Ah!" I flinched as it happened.

The huge man slowly lowered his hands, to beneath the table. I thought he was going to pick some of the flags up but instead... instead...

A huge sniff made me flinch.

Vim sighed and shook his head slowly.

And then the man sobbed.

The giant man was crying.

Staring in awe, I wondered what to say. What to do.

Being blamed for ruining the map was... regretful, but I'd survive it.

But making him cry? To sob? To...

"Renn," Vim drew my attention with a wave.

Looking at him, and back to Link, I felt horrible as Vim gestured for me to follow him around the table.

Hurriedly going to him, my stomach turned and knotted as Vim led me to the door.

"Wait, Vim..." I whispered as my eyes begun to water as Vim opened the door.

Expecting Vim to toss me out, instead he stepped out with me.

Vim slammed the door shut behind him with a huff, and then nodded. "Let's go get something to eat," he said.

"Vim!" I pointed at the door in shock. I couldn't believe what he was saying!

"What?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"He's crying...!" I whispered.

"He's a baby. Let him be, he'll be fine," Vim said simply.

"You can't be serious..."

Vim nodded. "I am. Come on, he'll only cry more and longer if we stick around. He gets all... emotional. He'll be back to normal in a few hours," Vim said as he turned to leave.

Watching him walk away... I felt so far out of my depth it was ridiculous.

"We're just leaving him?" I asked. I could still hear his sobs from behind the door.

"I am. You can wipe his snot if you'd like, but there's no point," Vim said without turning around.

I groaned and could tell by his voice that Vim was being serious. He wasn't just being an ass.

"I'm so sorry Link!" I shouted... and then after a moment stepped away.

"You're sorry? What about your sorry for me?" Vim asked as I went to join him.

"What do I need to apologize to you for?" I asked.

"You make me want to cry all the time too. Maybe it's your gift," he said with a sigh.

"Oh please..." I groaned, and right before we turned a corner I looked back to the door that hid Link.

"He'll be fine Renn, I promise. If you'd like we can come back later and check on him," Vim offered.

"I'd like that, yes," I said.

"Hm. Come on, I'm in the mood for some peaches now," he said.

"Peaches...?"

"The pirate queen used to give them to me..." he said softly.

"Now I'm going to cry!" I complained.