

The Non-Human Society #Chapter 85 - Eighty Four – Vim – A Small Present - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 85 - Eighty Four – Vim – A Small Present

Chapter 85: Chapter Eighty Four – Vim – A Small Present

The small bag felt heavy. Yet it made no sense. The leather was thin and cheap. The contents of the bag were few and light.

Maybe something was wrong with me. Lately I've been noticing things I shouldn't. Aches, that didn't exist. Weariness that shouldn't.

"Maybe I'm finally dying," I said, somewhat hopeful.

"What's with that?" Jelti asked with a snicker.

Glancing at the short woman, I frowned and wondered why she was still here.

"Oh look at that. You want me to leave. Such a surprise," Jelti sighed and shook her head, but of course didn't oblige me.

"I did agree to let you meet her in exchange," I admitted.

Jelti nodded. "You did..." then she smiled and laughed, as if remembering the conversation brought her joy.

Entering the Cathedral, Jelti and I went quiet for a moment as we passed a small crowd. They were reading a newly posted notice on one of the town's bulletin boards. A brief glance at it told me it was the notice for tomorrow's alms.

"Clothes," I said.

"They've given out a lot this year. I heard one of the clerks mention they've already spent a year's taxes so far," Jelti commented.

"You still tasting the clerks even though married?" I asked.

Jelti paused a moment, and then laughed. "Not at all! My girl's a clerk, you see, so I kind of get to hear all the gossip," Jelti said.

"Ah... that makes sense," I said. It was a surprise but... not... Jelti loved women. She was as bad as Kaley. Yet like Kaley she had her own tastes... and for whatever reason that was women who worked with numbers.

What was actually surprising was she went and married one. A human one at that.

"I'm sure she's a good woman," I said as I thought about it.

"She is," she said.

"Where's she now?" I asked her.

"At home," she said proudly. She suddenly grew a huge smile, and I knew it was because she actually enjoyed saying it.

"Why didn't you bring her?" I asked.

"You don't introduce your new wife to your crazy uncle the first few months you're married, Vim, really!" Jelti laughed at me as we headed for a wooden door that would lead us to the back end of the Cathedral.

"I met her the other day..." I said, offended.

"A hello! But that was it! You're not allowed to scare her away!" Jelti said with a serious smirk.

Opening the door for her, I couldn't help but smile at the giggling woman as she entered. "I might have," I admitted.

"Right?" Jelti laughed.

Closing the door behind us, we headed down a well lit hallway. Off in the distance I could hear conversations, and the howling wind from the storm outside.

"Did you actually have a wedding?" I asked.

"No. You really think the Chronicler would allow that?" Jelti said.

"Well... don't invite her?" I asked.

"Easy for you to say. You're not scared of her," she said.

Well that wasn't entirely true. I didn't like her eyes. Or rather, what they let her see sometimes.

We walked in silence for a moment as we passed a pair of priests. They ignored us, both of them deep in conversation about some brother of theirs that was so sick he couldn't get out of bed.

That disease the chronicler spoke of maybe? Or just from the cold of the storm?

As we headed deeper into the Cathedral, I let my thoughts drift back to the woman next to me.

Jelti looked mostly human, but underneath her thick dress was a small tail. A puff of a ball fur about the size of her head. She was a type of rabbit, although I had never heard exactly which species.

Although a rabbit... and although, like Kaley, enjoyed the more sensual arts... it wasn't common for her to actually fall in love. I had known her for almost three hundred years and this was the first I had heard of her actually declaring someone a wife. Or husband.

But for it to have been a human...

While we rounded a small pillar, and began walking along an open courtyard, I studied the small framed woman next to me.

Was this her last years then?

Although Jelti wasn't my favorite person, she's always been trustworthy. I've had her help me a few times throughout the years. Mostly with delivering items for me, or news and messages... but...

"Don't be sad Vim," Jelti then said.

I blinked and came to a stop as she scratched the back of her head. Her short hair sounded dry, and she gave me a sad smile. "I'll be fine. I love her... so I want to enjoy every moment while I can. You understand, right?" she asked me.

Standing still, I realized my thoughts had been on my face. Another uncommon mistake for me to make. Something really was wrong with me.

"If you ever need me for anything, just ask," I told her.

Jelti blinked, and her blue eyes became a little... blurry. "Thank you Vim," she whispered.

I nodded, and hoped she'd never have to ask... but if she did need me, I hoped I was nearby when she did.

"I wish you and her a happy marriage. What was her name?" I asked her.

"Caroline... you forgot already?" Jelti pretended to be offended.

"No last name?" I asked. That was what I had meant to ask for.

"Oh. No. She had been an orphan. Raised here in the Cathedral," Jelti said.

Returning to walking, I frowned. "You didn't..."

"No! Jeez. I met her for the first time only two years ago. It was actually a rather unique meeting too, you know? She hated me at first," Jelti said, proud of it.

"Oh? Let me guess, caught you in bed with one of her sisters or something," I said as we neared the mansio.

"How'd you know?" Jelti seemed genuinely shocked, and I shook my head at her.

While we walked down the hallway that led to the mansio and its little garden, I noticed a figure in the distance. Down the hallway, near where the hallways converged and separated into four.

"Hm... one of the cleaning girls, based off the robe," Jelti said.

"Get rid of her," I said with a nod.

"Sure, sure. I'll meet you at the house," Jelti picked up her pace, bounding with a little hop as she hurried down the hallway.

I studied the young girl down the hall, and knew she was not a real threat. She was cleaning, she had a feather duster and was trying to reach one of the smaller paintings hanging in the wall.

Yet, she was human.

Opening the heavy gate, I glanced one last time to the girl. Jelti was waving her down, and I could just make out the echoes of their voices as they spoke.

Entering the garden, I sighed and wondered why I had given that order so swiftly.

Usually I'd not have bothered. After all this was their Cathedral before it was ours. Plus she was only cleaning. Probably one of those very orphans Jelti had just spoken of a few moments ago.

But...

Glancing at the house, I noticed the white smoke only existed for a few moments before the strong winds scattered it.

Renn was already back. I had expected it, but it was still comforting to know.

Even though there should be no reason for me to worry about her. She's proven she was fine on her own... hadn't she?

Yet I worried about it all the same.

By the time I reached the front door, the heavy metal gate that led to the garden made noise. A small glance showed it was Jelti. She was using both arms to push the gate open with all her might. After a huff she went around the gate and pushed to close it.

I should have waited for her.

Jelti hurried along the stone path to me and gave me a smile. "She's almost done. She has that section and the one near the kitchens today," Jelti said as she approached.

"Hm," I nodded and went to open the door.

But before I could, it opened on its own.

"Welcome!" Renn happily greeted... not me, but Jelti.

"Oh my!" Jelti broke out into a huge grin, and I instantly regretted bringing her here.

"This is Jelti," I introduced the fool as I stepped between the two and headed into the house.

"Vim didn't tell me you were beautiful!" Jelti greeted Renn in her typical fashion as I noticed the book on the table near the fireplace. She had been reading.

Putting the little leather bag I had been carrying onto the table, I walked over to check on our wood supply.

There wasn't much left. Two logs.

Bending down to pick them up, as to toss them into the fire, I glanced at the two women who still stood at the doorway.

Jelti had closed the door, but they had stayed at the entrance. They were whispering to each other, which was a little odd of them since I could hear everything they were saying.

"I'm a bunny," Jelti told her.

"Oh! Oh... I'm a cat. A jaguar, the chronicler said," Renn responded in kind.

"A predator!" Jelti made a noise and pretended to step back in shock.

Putting one of the logs into the fire, I sighed as I heard Renn's own shock. "She's teasing you Renn," I said lightly.

"Huh? Oh..." Renn's relief was very audible as Jelti giggled.

"Still, a cat? Wow! Do you got ears under there then?" Jelti asked.

Renn must have obliged in showing her ears, for Jelti whistled.

"All I got's a giant fuzz ball," Jelti said with a sigh.

While I put the other log into the fire, I heard the sound of ruffling clothes.

Jelti was showing Renn her tail.

"It's cute!" Renn said.

"It's a pain. My butt gets hot all the time," Jelti complained.

Her rear was actually rather nice...

"Vim just thought something rude," Jelti whispered.

"I did," I admitted as I brushed my hands off and stood away from the fire.

Jelti had already put her clothes back in place, but Renn was now the one who was messing with her clothes. After a few grunts she finally got her tail free of her pants, and it popped out with a whip.

"Well look at that!" Jelti smiled at the sight as Renn showed it off.

"Does your ass get sweaty too Renn?" I asked her as I went to sit at the table.

"Sometimes," Renn nodded.

"See? None of them believe me, you know?" Jelti laughed.

Sitting down, I lifted the cover of the open book she had been reading.

It was this region's bible.

I sighed and let it fall back to the table, and felt like I needed to wipe my hands.

"Would you like something to drink Jelti?" Renn asked. A glance at her told me she had seen what I had just done, she was smiling softly at me.

"Got any tea? If not, a tall glass of you will be just fine," Jelti teased as she headed for the opposite side of the table.

"Uhm..." Renn didn't seem to know what to say to that, but had a smile all the same.

"She's married, don't panic," I said.

"Ah... but it's true. I'm sorry Renn, but it just won't work out between us, I'm sorry," Jelti sat down with a very exaggerated heave, as if she had just accomplished some kind of herculean task.

"I see. That's too bad, I've always liked bunnies," Renn had collected herself in time to play along.

"Ha! I like her Vim, please leave her here," Jelti said as Renn went to head for the kitchen.

I hadn't shown her where the tea supplies were, but it was obvious she already knew.

"That had been the plan, originally," I said.

"Oh...?" Jelti frowned, a real one. She wasn't teasing and making light of the conversation anymore. She looked to my right, to the woman headed for the kitchen. After a few moments she leaned forward and covered her mouth with an open hand.

"Not going to give her the present?" Jelti asked with a whisper.

Before I could tell her there was no point in whispering, we both heard a skidding foot as Renn came to an abrupt stop.

Jelti raised an eyebrow and smiled at me. "Woops," she said.

"Did you think her ears were for show?" I asked her.

"No... well... maybe. Sorry..." Jelti sat back, as if worried I was going to smack her.

"Present?" Renn turned around, and had a weird grin on her face.

"Aww, here I'll give it to her," Jelti reached for the bag.

I didn't stop her from taking it, but noticed Renn's grin die a little as Jelti happily dug into the bag.

"Vim was going to get you one for wood," Jelti taunted me as she dug out the little box.

"Wood...?" Renn glanced at me but I ignored her as she stepped up to the table again.

Jelti got the box out of the leather bag and put it on the table. The small circular box was finely sanded and painted a deep blue.

Renn's face told me she had no idea what it was, which wasn't too surprising... but it told me she might also not appreciate it.

For a small moment no one moved, and then Jelti patted the table with an expectant happiness. "Open it, open it," she hurried her.

Renn's ears twitched as she nodded and reached out to pop open the small lid.

She carefully opened it, and once she did her tail went still, hanging a little oddly in the air. It was a tad too higher than normal.

"For your nails!" Jelti said happily.

Renn gently picked up one of the items in the set, a small stone of pumice. There was a set of small scissors, a silk rag, and beneath it all some clay paste that Jelti said was the current trend of the women in this town. It gave the nails a shine.

While Renn studied the small nail cutting set, I looked at her longer nails that were shaking a little. Hopefully she didn't get too offended by the gesture.

"Want me to teach you how to use them?" Jelti asked. Somehow she had done so without sounding rude or pushy.

Renn looked up and away from the box. She blinked at Jelti and then looked at me.

Her lips quivered for a small moment, and then she smiled and nodded to Jelti. "Please. I assume this is a filer but..." she spoke evenly, which was a surprise... but she was blinking quickly in an effort to hide her watery eyes.

I slowly stood from the table and nodded in thanks to Jelti as Renn went to sit down next to her.

While the two got engrossed in talking and messing with the gift, I headed for the backyard to restock the wood.

Seemed it was the right choice to get Jelti to help me out. I hadn't even known that they had such things already.

The humans were advancing oddly quick... in odd ways, too.

The shop had even had paints for the nails. Although not an entirely new invention, it was definitely surprising to see so many colors available already.

Jelti had wanted me to get those too, but...

Too much was too much sometimes. Only the wealthy could afford such things right now. And it was best to not be seen as wealthy while traveling.

That little box was already a stretch as it was.

The damn thing had been more expensive than I had anticipated. I had to have Jelti write an I-O-U for me since I hadn't taken enough money. A simple manner, since she could just get the Society to pay for her, but...

Leaving the mansio, I directed my thoughts to hauling wood and only that.

The world seemed to agree with me as it began to grow noisy. Thunder roared and the sound of the storm followed.

I was looking forward to this storm. I wasn't sure why... but I was excited for its arrival. Several days in the making, it was time.

The little shed that held the cut wood was only half full, but there was far more than enough for the rest of our visit. I filled one of the smaller wooden boxes with a dozen little logs and then headed back to the house.

Entering the house, I heard happy giggling amongst their conversation.

Pausing a moment at the back door, before heading for the hallway... I spent a moment to study Renn's laugh.

It was a happy one. Like usual, a real one too.

Jelti sounded happy as well, but that wasn't too much of a surprise. Renn was her type. I felt bad for her supposed wife.

And...

"He did!" Renn said with a happy laugh.

Jelti laughed alongside her and then went to telling her a story about me. The one where she had seen me fall off a cliff.

It was the kind of story she told her friends.

Heading into the hallway, I decided to get them their tea after I handled the wood. Since they had obviously forgotten all about it.

I was ignored as I worked, but there was nothing wrong with that. The two were becoming fast friends.

Maybe between that little present, and Jelti... she'd realize coming with me was a mistake.

Hopefully she'd realize this place was far better than by my side.

"He fell on a donkey!" Jelti was barely able to say between her laughs, as she both recalled and told her story.

Smiling at the two, I hoped their sudden friendship lasted forever.

I hoped Jelti and her love remained happy for a long time.

I hoped Renn found a place to call home.

I hoped she found friends and made a family.

I hoped I'd be able to see her for hundreds if not thousands of years.

And at the very least, I hoped when her time came... it didn't have to end at my hands.

I was tired of killing friends.

Tired of killing those I loved.

Especially since I was so damned good at it.

Chapter 86: Chapter Eighty Five – Renn – A Sparrow's Respite and Dance

The little birds chirped at me, and I slowly backed away.

It hadn't been too hard to close the window, thanks to the storm's heavy winds... but it had made a mess. I wasn't that wet, but the windowsill and the floor near it definitely were.

"You got wet," Vim said with a sigh.

"Hm. I did," I nodded, but didn't regret it.

The two little sparrows fluttered next to each other, drying off their feathers and chirping.

"Birds can survive storms you know," Vim said.

"They wanted in," I said plainly.

Vim shrugged, but I knew that was because he couldn't argue. After all, that'd be lying.

They had been tapping on the window, rather furiously... it meant that chances are they usually came in here, and simply hadn't lately thanks to us being here.

"Think they have a nest in here somewhere?" I asked Vim as I looked up at the ceiling. There were rafter beams, but there were only a few and it was open. I didn't see any, nor did I see any tell traces of birds or animals making this place their den.

"More like Oplar probably fed them when she was here last," Vim complained.

I looked away from the two small birds to glare at the man relaxed on the bed. He was lying on his side, watching me.

He held my gaze, but he wasn't glaring like I was... in fact he looked tired.

The window rattled thanks to a gust of wind and the birds chirped because of it. Looking at them, I found that they had huddled together up near the side of the window frame, as far away from the window as possible.

"Let them be. They're fragile things," Vim said gently.

"Hm..." I nodded. I hadn't planned on touching them or going near them... but maybe he had thought I would.

"The garden will flood. Always does when it storms like this," Vim said.

"Oh? Is it bad?" I asked.

"No. It never floods deeply... it's just annoying."

Annoying... maybe he planned to clean up after the storm. Knowing him, he would. He had spent most of day earlier, after returning with Jelti, cleaning up the house. A part of me thought he had done it so Jelti and I could be alone, as much as we could be, but another part of me knew he just... didn't like being bored.

Which was probably why he looked so tired right now. He himself wasn't tired, but thanks to the storm he had nothing to do.

Stepping quietly over to the bed, I glanced at the nearby lamp. It hung over my side of the bed, right above a small end table. It was recently filled, since I remembered it being almost empty the first night we got here... but I didn't remember seeing Vim fill it.

"Tired?" Vim asked me.

"Oh? No... I was thinking of putting it out for you," I said.

"Me?" he raised an eyebrow at me... which looked a little funny since he was pretty much laying down on his side. His head was angled oddly, since it rested on his hand.

"You look like you need a nap," I said.

Vim frowned and blinked slowly... as if about to fall asleep. "Probably because I had to deal with fools the last few days..." he grumbled.

"Do you really need to include me in that statement?" I asked him.

"I do. But I'll admit you're not as foolish as some of the others," he said.

"Some," I noted.

He smiled but didn't clarify.

A tiny chirp drew my eyes to the window again. The birds were fine; they were still nestled together on the frame. But the storm had picked up even more. The rain that pelted the window sounded loud, especially to my ears.

The window shook, making an odd sound as a gust of wind buffeted it. Some of the wind must have gotten in, for the lamp flickered a little.

As the lamp flickered, I remembered my book. I had put it on the table near the bed, under the lamp, once I had heard the birds pecking at the window.

I had brought the book of scripture that the chronicler had given me up here. Honestly I hadn't expected Vim to follow me to the bedroom after Jelti had left. He had been rather focused on cleaning up the house...

Not too long after I had lain down on the bed and went to reading the book, he had come into the room and laid down as well. He had chosen to not get under the covers though, which somewhat upset me. I had wanted to get cozy under them during the storm.

Yet I hadn't said anything... mostly because he had not said anything either. He had come in, laid down, and said nothing for nearly an hour. Something told me it was because of what I was reading.

Would he get upset if I went back to reading it next to him? When I had put it down he had actually started talking to me again.

Running my finger along the book's spine, I smiled at the feeling of my freshly cut nail as it scraped it.

It's been a long time since I had such clean nails.

Opening my hand, I placed it on top of the book to make it look as if I was studying the book and not my nails.

It was going to take... time to be as efficient as Jelti had been, but I knew I'd get the hang of it.

My gaze drifted over to the small table near the mirror. On it was a hairbrush, and the little blue box that Vim had gotten me.

Odds were he had done so just to get the point across, but I didn't care.

I'd treasure that thing for my whole life.

"They're not even big enough for a bite, you know," Vim said.

Turning to him, I found his eyes were closed. He had probably heard me turn around to look near that area of the room, and had assumed I had been staring at the birds again.

"Why do you think I'm going to mess with them?" I asked him as I knelt down next to the bed.

Vim opened his eyes and then narrowed them as he watched me kneel next to the bed, putting my arms on it and resting my head on them as I stared at him. "You're a cat," he said simply.

For a long moment we stared at each other as the storm rumbled outside... and then I laughed.

Putting my face into the comfy blankets, I laughed away at his ridiculous face. He had been so serious!

After a few moments I got myself under control and then looked up at him. He had a small smirk on his face, which told me he had been somewhat teasing me. Maybe even entirely.

"I used to have a bird as a pet," I told him.

"Oh?"

I nodded and sighed with relief as I finally stopped giggling too. "A big one. It stood up to my knee, and when it opened its wings it could block out the sun when it was on my shoulder," I said.

"Hm," Vim nodded, interested.

"I had to kill it. It attacked a young girl," I said as I remembered the memory.

Vim frowned as I laid my head back onto the bed. I kept Vim in my sight as I took a deep breath, taking in the scent of the blanket.

It smelled like me.

"I know that feeling," Vim said softly.

I studied his eyes, and realized he knew exactly what I had felt. But...

For a small moment I thought of the thing he had given that wolf. That blue orb, which he had said was the heart of a monster. Of a Monarch.

A Monarch he had said was one of us. One of our ancestors.

Not to mention...

"Jelti was nice," I said softly.

"I'm sure you've noticed a pattern of oddness amongst our people," he said.

I nodded. I had.

"Was she uh... serious about her jokes?" I asked him.

"You mean her flirting? I'd say they were until you didn't want them to be jokes anymore," he said with a smirk.

"I see..." I didn't really know what to feel about that.

"That book says she should be put to death," Vim said lightly.

"It does," I said. The room lit up for a moment as lightning flashed. I waited until the thunder rolled away before shifting upward, sitting up as to look Vim in the eyes.

"Because of that book she can't openly declare her affection. She's too scared to even have a wedding, or any kind of ceremony because of it," Vim said.

"Hm..." I nodded. Jelti had mentioned somewhat that her and Caroline were... together, but not. Not openly.

Vim sighed and rolled over onto his back. He shifted his shoulders as he got comfortable. He was still lying on top of the blanket though.

"You don't like that I..." I wasn't sure how to phrase it.

"I have no problem with you believing in anything. I'd be upset if you didn't just because you thought I wouldn't appreciate it," Vim said solidly.

I gulped as I nodded. Yes. That was his belief. Yet...

Slowly standing, I glanced at the book. It looked... dark in this dim room. Even though the book itself was a bright blue in color.

Actually it was a similar color as the little box he had gotten me.

"I like the ideas," I told him.

"The ideas?"

"The... rules? The morals. I like the idea of being kind and honest. Of being good and steady, especially..." I stopped talking as I realized I was about to say the real reason I liked the idea of the human's religions.

"Steady... you mean the idea of faith itself, don't you?" Vim asked.

Shifting a little, I felt stupid. There... really wasn't any shame in it was there? Vim has made it very clear he believed that everyone had free choice, right? So... so why was I so ashamed to say it in front of him?

I swallowed my shame and nodded. "I like their perception of love, I guess," I said.

Vim tilted his head at me, and then frowned. "Love? That's what you like about it?" he asked.

"Well, amongst other things. Like I said before, I don't like their idea that sins can be forgiven... especially so easily... but I do like how they're told to value love over anything else," I said.

"Hm..." Vim didn't say anything, but I could tell he did want to... but I also knew the reason he didn't, was the very same reason he'd not admonish me.

If he said certain things it would be the same as him trying to instill his own beliefs upon me. And he wouldn't do that.

"I'm not going to go join some convent or become a nun Vim, I promise... I just want to learn more about it, that's all," I said honestly.

After all if I did, he'd not let me stay with him.

"You could stay here and do that. You'd be amongst like-minded people you know," Vim said gently.

I hesitated, since it hurt to hear him say that. Had he said it out of kindness, or desire? Maybe he now wanted me gone, after hearing what I had said.

"Just a suggestion Renn, not an order. To be honest I had wanted you to stay here originally, but now I fear leaving you here would turn you into another chronicler," Vim said with a sigh.

Blinking at him, I slowly sat down onto the bed. I rested upon it, sitting upward as I stared at the man who had so obviously voiced something I hadn't expected from him. At least not aloud, nor on purpose.

"Would you hate me if I did?" I asked him.

"Hate? No. But I'd be..." he glanced past me, probably to the window. I didn't look at it though, and stayed focused on his eyes. They were oddly gentle right now. "I'd be disappointed, I guess," he finished.

"Disappointed," I repeated.

"I don't hate the human religions, Renn... I just don't like anything that tries to tell someone what they can or can't do, that's all," Vim then said.

Ah...

That was true.

Rubbing my forearm, I tried to imagine it from his perspective. He was such a believer in free-will... it probably bugged him in an unexplainable way when he heard or saw someone or something claim that a godly being was giving an order. To tell people what they could or couldn't do.

For him that was probably evil all in itself.

"You're a peculiar man, Vim," I said softly.

"Sometimes," he agreed.

The storm shot forth more lightning, and for a long moment I sat in silence. I watched as the noisy world illuminated the room, and thus Vim, several times over.

He was lying there with closed eyes and... honestly looked asleep. But I knew he wasn't.

Looking down at my hands as one last flash lit up the room, I stared at my now short fingernails.

I couldn't remember the last time they had been this short... nor this clean. Usually they broke or chipped, and felt rigid or sharp even when shorter... now though they were smooth. So smooth I wished I had an itch to scratch, just to enjoy the feeling.

"Did you cut yourself?" Vim then asked as the thunder also died off.

"Huh...? No... I just... they feel smooth," I said, and then held out my fingers for him to touch.

Vim reached over, touching my fingertip with his own. "Hmph," he smiled at me.

Smiling back at him, I felt oddly childish as I kept my finger on his.

"Tomorrow's the main festival right?" I asked him.

"It is. Then we can finally leave," he said.

I nodded. He really did seem to want to leave. I wondered if maybe it wasn't just the fact that this was a giant church that he disliked it here. Maybe there was more to it than that alone.

"Storms dying down a little," Vim noticed.

"Already...?" I asked with a glance to the window.

Sure enough, although it was still dark... and seemingly growing darker, the window wasn't rattling as much as it had been. Nor were the raindrops splashing up against it as violently.

"Do I get to meet anyone else before we leave?" I asked him.

"There are four others you haven't met. They're... weary of newcomers. I can't introduce them to you, they need to be the ones to come and say hi to you first," Vim said. He pushed on my finger a little with his, forcing my hand upwards.

"Oh... Am I that scary Vim? I had scared Link too," I asked as I pushed back.

"Scary...?" He sat up a little to study me.

I gulped, and wondered if maybe I really was.

After a moment Vim scoffed. "You're terrifying," he said, and then laid back down. Our fingers almost separated as he did so.

Opening my mouth to argue, I realized he was probably teasing me. Or at least, not saying it with the intention that I had interpreted it as.

"I see," I said softly.

"You're a predator, Renn. And you're a woman. That makes a lot of them nervous around you. Remember Silkie?" Vim asked.

"Of course I do," I stated.

He shrugged, uncaring about my unhappy tone. "Some will be like Jelti. Happy to meet you. Others will be like Link, or Silkie. It's just a part of our life. The way we are. I hope you get used to it soon, because if you don't you're going to be in trouble. Most of the places we'll be visiting for awhile will be purely prey. The more especially weak willed ones," Vim said.

"Great..." I groaned.

"Want to give up?" he asked.

"No!"

He nodded, but I blushed as he did. I had yelled a little loudly. One of the birds chirped, as if in annoyance at my outburst.

Our fingers had separated a little, but I quickly put mine back against his. It was such a silly thing, but I suddenly didn't want to be the one to cause us to separate.

Before I could say anything, or even decide what I wanted to say... Vim gave me a weird smirk.

"Want to dance tomorrow?" Vim asked.

"Dance?"

He nodded, and slowly pulled his finger away. I blinked and wanted to complain, but knew better than to do so. He'd find it weird that I wanted to keep touching him. "We'll do it here; they'd find it weird if you wore a hat while doing so... So we'll go watch them, long enough for you to see it, then we'll come back here," he said.

"Wait, you mean actual dancing?" I asked him.

He nodded with a frown.

Smiling at the idea I nodded. "Yes!"

"Figured," he said with a chuckle.

My tail made noises as it swayed along the edge of the bed. "We could dance now," I offered. It was too dark for me to read now anyway.

Vim stared at me for a moment, and I smiled happily at him.

"I'll only do it once. Do you want to do it now or tomorrow?" he asked me.

Hesitating, I wondered why he'd... "Well... I mean..." I groaned as I thought about it.

I really wanted to do it now. I myself had never danced with a man before, but I had seen it many times before throughout the years. Nory and I had sometimes danced around together too, but she hadn't really liked doing it so we had only done it a few times...

Yet...

"If you do it now and watch it all tomorrow during the festival you might regret it," Vim warned.

"I know..." I groaned as I tried to decide.

He was right. If I saw a bunch of people, hundreds possibly, dancing around happily tomorrow... I'd want to join in. I always did, after all.

"Though maybe you could dance with someone else. Believe it or not but Hands is a good dancer, he has rhythm," Vim offered.

"No! We'll dance now, come on," I hurriedly reached out and grabbed him by the arm before he could tease me or change his mind.

I leapt off the bed, pulling him along.

Vim sighed, but obliged... until he realized I was taking him out of the room.

"Where are we going Renn?" Vim asked, but I could tell he already knew the answer.

Giggling happily, I ignored his worried look as I headed for the front door.

The storm was still going, but it had died down a little. The rain wasn't falling as hard as it had been... and the lightning and thunder now sounded far off in the distance, away from us.

A shower, but with little wind, and the air smelled clean. Yet thanks to the dark clouds, the world was dark. Too dark for anyone to see us. To see me.

It was the perfect moment.

Pulling Vim out into the rain, I laughed at him as he willingly accepted his fate.

Chapter 87: Chapter Eighty Six – Vim – Telmik's Festival

Humans enjoyed their festivities.

But sometimes too much was too much.

Sitting on a bench, Renn and I were hidden away on the second floor of one of the many ramparts in the Cathedral. Loud crowds hustled and bustled all around the city, but here they were only a distant noise in the distance. The floor we were on had a partly open ceiling. The bench we sat on was under a canopy, that was connected to the third floor.

"Feeling better?" I asked the woman who looked like she was about to throw up.

"Hmhm," she made a half-hearted response, and I couldn't help but smile at her. To think she had been so excited last night and this morning. She hadn't even gotten a wink of sleep thanks to the expectations of what very decisively put her on the bench.

"Wonder why crowds are too much for you. Is it the noise?" I asked her.

"Hughm..." she made another odd sound as she shrugged.

Sitting back, I crossed my leg onto my knee and tried to think what to do for her.

She had only lasted two hours inside the crowds. We had gone to watch the parade, and then lunch. That was it. At this rate she was going to miss the dancing, the plays, and all the stalls that lined the streets in the merchant district.

I was honestly a little surprised by her inability to handle the noise and crowds. Although there were plenty of our kind that couldn't live in a human city, or handle humans at all... usually those who could were just as fine with crowds as the humans who made them. For her to not only be so... human, and like humans in general, yet be unable to handle them was...

The chronicler had said she was a jaguar... maybe it wasn't just a personality trait, but something to do with her bloodline.

Of course there was a chance it was because she had spent so long by herself, or because she had only lived in small villages.

Come to think of it she had mentioned Ruvindale had been very crowded to her. And in my perspective, although growing, Ruvindale was just a simple city.

Renn groaned as she leaned forward, hugging her stomach as if in actual pain.

Maybe she was.

Studying her, I smiled at the look of utter defeat on her face. She wasn't just upset and distressed at the crowds and noises, but herself. She had genuinely wanted to enjoy the festival, yet was now hiding away during the peak of it. Odds were she was mentally screaming at herself in anger.

I had even planned to let her dance a little, yet now that was obviously out of the question. Maybe that was why she had pulled me out into the storm last night; maybe she had known this was going to happen.

Renn rubbed her forehead, and I tried to imagine getting so... weak and unwell, just because of crowds. I understood how it happened of course, ones senses got overloaded, but...

"I'm sorry..." Renn finally was able to voice normal words, and I smiled at her.

"You think I'd complain about getting to get out of being in those crowds? Please," I said.

A tiny smile squirmed its way on her pained face. "I knew you hated festivals," she said.

"I never even went to the festival for me, that's how much I hate them," I said.

While Renn's strained face contorted into thought, I flinched and realized what I had just said.

I coughed, just once, and patted the bench we sat on. "Take your time Renn, if you pass out and I have to carry you back at least do so in a drunken way so no one thinks I'm kidnapping you or something," I teased her.

She glanced at me, and I noticed the weird look in her eyes. She had noticed what I had said.

Instead of pressing me on it she looked away and sighed, one that told me she was slowly feeling better.

"It's probably a good thing you fell ill, anyway. My poor feet are still reeling from the shock of last night," I commented with a light sigh myself.

Renn chuckled, and then groaned. The laugh must have bothered her upset stomach.

"Sorry," I apologized.

She shook her head. "I'm getting better, I think," she said softly.

"Hope so," I said.

The jaguar rubbed her eyes, and I noticed her hat shift wildly on her head. Wonder how uncomfortable having to wear a heavy leather hat on your head was with such ears.

With a deep breath Renn nodded and sat back, and now looked a lot better. Color had returned to her face, and she no longer looked in pain.

"I've never been bothered by crowds, but heights used to scare me," I told her.

"Heights...?"

Hesitating, I tried to quickly think how best to explain it without saying anything unnecessary.

"Like bridges. Tall ones. Or high up, on a mountain or cliff and looking down. When I was younger that bothered me. It wasn't until a uh... certain moment, that I overcame it. So don't feel bad Renn, you just need to slowly get yourself used to it. Honestly, even if you don't I wouldn't let it bother you. Who wants to like being surrounded by nasty humans anyway?" I said.

Renn smiled and nodded. "I like heights. But... I'd like to get used to crowds. What if you needed me to do something in one? Or give a speech?" she shivered.

Oh...?

She waved her hands in front of her, as if suddenly giving a sermon. "I'd tremble and throw up on stage, and then you'd disown me!"

I smiled at her dramatic example, and knew she was only partly joking. "Yeah, you better not ever embarrass yourself. Immediate exile if you do," I teased.

She smiled back and nodded. "Exactly!"

A nearby bang echoed through the air, and I wondered what had made it. It sounded like an explosion... but they wouldn't have done something with anything explosive in the city. They didn't even know how to make fireworks yet, and unlike some of the pagan festivals they weren't burning their parade floats or displays. Or at least they shouldn't be.

Staring out at the sky, since I couldn't look up thanks to the canopy, I wondered if it would rain again soon. Most the storm had dissipated or left but the remnants were still there and looked like they would for some time.

"We uh... are leaving tomorrow right?" Renn then asked.

"I plan on it, unless something happens," I said. Honestly I had been expecting something to happen, thanks to the chronicler telling me to stick around. Yet nothing had. Or well, maybe it had and I hadn't realized it. Maybe whatever I had meant to do had already happened, and I just hadn't noticed.

"Will I get to say goodbye to everyone before we do? Should I do it today?" she asked.

"Everyone will be busy today. The church is very active today, and those who aren't involved in the church have their own on-goings," I said.

"Oh..." Renn didn't really like that.

"As mentioned, you can stay here Renn. I have no doubt you'd find it... or well, I bet it'd become a real home for you. One you could proudly claim," I offered to her again.

She nodded. "I think you're right. After all I can just avoid the crowds... but..." she shrugged. "Maybe next time," she said as she glanced at me.

I sighed and nodded. That was my last chance. I'd not mention it again.

Just how long was I going to be stuck with her? Something told me my odds were quickly dwindling.

"You'll be able to say goodbye to the chronicler at least. We'll see her in the morning," I said.

"Oh? Good," she happily nodded.

She really was better now. She had a large smile and was staring at the sky in the distance. She had her hands on her knees, and was rocking a little... most likely to the far off beat of music from the festival.

Maybe...

Maybe I should put her to use.

She had her own faults, and had a lot to learn... but was more than willing to learn when and what she could. She also seemed to be rather cordial with everyone, predator or prey. Plus she liked the human's faith, which although would make a good portion of our society upset with her... it also meant I could entrust her to certain details.

But how to use her? There were a few places I could send her, but... like here in Telmik, she wasn't ready to settle down yet. Which meant she'd not willingly go somewhere alone to fulfill a task.

Yet there other ways to use her. Plus eventually she'd find somewhere she wanted to stay. Someone she wanted to be with. Her current attraction to me would end, or be directed elsewhere. All it took was one fateful meeting. I'd seen it before, many times.

Plus... if I really wasn't going to be relieved of her, and she was going to stick with me... then there was absolutely no reason not to utilize her where and when I could. Especially since she so obviously wanted the same thing.

Renn noticed my staring, and I realized she could actually be a little useful.

"Hmm..." I thought of the ways she could help. Her ears and tail would make it nearly impossible for her to have any association with nobles or royals, at least in any real manner, but for the rest of the human society she'd do fine. She had the wit to keep herself hidden and safe, and was actually very adapted to humans and their cultures. Plus thanks to her youthful appearance, and generally happy demeanor... she and I could blend easily as family.

Not to mention her penchant for the faiths would let me use her when it came to the churches.

"Hmmm...?" Renn tilted her head and hummed back at me.

Yes. Her strange fondness of the human's religion was... upsetting, but in reality it made her even more useful. Although many members of our society hated the human church and all it stood for, there was an even bigger portion that either liked it or was adapted to it. Plus, her morals and ethics fit well with someone who would in turn be responsible with lives. I could trust her with another member, because of the way she was.

Slowly a plan formulated. I'd not be able to leave her with anyone, to learn skills or information... thanks to her weird desire to travel and see the world, but that didn't mean I couldn't circumvent that. I could simply plan my own route and actions around her training, and then of course also train her on the road.

I'd need to be careful, of course. Too much dedication from me, and I'd get distracted. If I focused too much on her, or spent too much time somewhere just so she could learn something then all that would do is be counter-productive. It'd result in deaths. And I'd not, could not, allow that.

"Vim...?" Renn shifted as an odd smile planted itself on her face. My staring was starting to bother her.

Yes. I'll spend time thinking about it later, but for now...

"You really want to help the Society Renn?" I asked her.

Her odd smile became a firm one as she nodded. "I do."

Slowly nodding, I accepted her. "Okay."

"O...okay?" Renn didn't seem to like my answer, but that was just because she had expected something more. But there wasn't more.

One either did or didn't.

"After here we'll head to the ponds. Then... a little south. To one of the smiths," I said.

"Smiths?" she asked.

I nodded and made a fist, pretending to hammer something. "A family of... well, monkeys, I guess, live in a small village near a mine. They're some of the best smiths in the world currently," I said. Plus they could teach her a thing or two for me.

"Huh... monkeys?" she asked. She said the word oddly.

"Primates. They're actually smaller ones. Ones you'd find in the forests far to the south, in islands. The family is a kind one, but very transfixed on their craft," I said.

"Oh..." she seemed to want to ask more but held it in.

Before we leave I should show her one of the maps. Maybe we should stick around for another day...

Another loud bang drew my attention to the sky, and the large city that sat beneath it.

I saw nothing, nor any signs of smoke or fire.

Maybe the sound was just diluted thanks to where we were, and it sounded different than what it was.

While staring at the cityscape, I wondered what I was willingly getting myself into.

How long has it been since I had decided to handle someone myself? At least a hundred or two years.

Usually I left it to others. The chronicler for example. Lilly and Windle were useful for such things too, when it came to predators.

Yet...

Although I kept offering it to her, I really didn't want her to stay here and become a saint. It'd taint her, in a bad way... even if she would be useful that way.

And Lilly, for as much as I could trust her... would only ruin her as well. Lilly would only make Renn someone else. Someone without that happy smile, and she'd end up with a heart full of hate.

Honestly giving her to Lilly would probably only make us lose her entirely. If she found the human's faith that attractive, forcing her down the path of war would only make her hate us. It'd just make another enemy.

I've been down that road before. Never again.

"What are you thinking about Vim?" Renn asked softly.

I frowned and turned to look at the woman who was making me so troubled.

"Our future," I said simply.

She blinked, and then went red in the face.

Woops, I shouldn't have phrased it that way...

That was going to be difficult for me too. Was I really up for this? I'd rather go to war than deal with this... how was I so willing to accept this so quickly? I was already making plans...

"Hope it's a happy future," Renn whispered.

"For now," I said.

She shifted as she glared at me with a sidelong glance.

"Feeling up to go back to the festival? You're looking better," I said, choosing to end both that conversation and my thoughts.

Renn blinked and then shook her head.

"I uh... I think I'm ready to go back home," she said.

"To the mansio?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Alright... you sure? I don't mind waiting here until you're up for more. There's a lot you haven't seen yet," I offered.

She shook her head. "I saw the parade... and lunch was fun... Thank you, Vim. For putting up with me and letting me enjoy myself," she said.

"Hm..."

"Oh, but I'd like to make a small stop before we go home," Renn said.

Home. She kept calling that house home. Yet didn't want to make it one.

Maybe she simply saw wherever she rested her head at night as home.

Wish I could do that.

"Where?" I asked.

Renn smiled at me. "Snacks, of course!"

Of course.

Chapter 88: Chapter Eighty Seven – Renn – Maps and Plans

The small map was drawn a little haphazardly, and had more notes than actual details of the geography upon it.

Running my finger along the crossed out name of the location of Ruvindale, I felt horrible.

I could just barely read the Sleepy Artist beneath the scribbles. I couldn't make out the number next to the name thanks to the scrawl, but I knew better than to ask why it had been notched out like so.

"Do your best to remember, Renn," Vim said again.

I nodded. I knew. I knew...

Taking a deep breath I glanced around at the map again. Although small, about the size of a normal book... it was heavily detailed in information if not artistic representation.

The center of the map was here, Telmik. It had the name, and the number nine next to it. But that was it. None of them had the names of the individuals who lived there, or any description of the Societies purpose. Based off the map there was no visible difference between any of the locations.

For instance Telmik, although a giant capital... was the same little dot in size as Kaley's little inlet village near the coast. What was odd was it had a two next to that inlet, and not a one. I had thought Vim had said she was alone there?

The north of the map was surprisingly not exactly what I had already known. Rapti's location in Nevi, the Owl's Nest and Twin Hills were near each other. To the north of them were several more spots... And about half of them were scratched out.

Almost a dozen locations were north of Ruvindale. A shock, to be honest... and especially so since most of them had double digit members at their locations.

"Where was Lomi's village?" I asked. There were several scratched out locations near Ruvindale.

"Here," Vim pointed at a spot near another. A place with five people. The scratched out spot that had been Lomi's village still had a readable number.

The number next to the scratches made me sick.

Looking away from it, I tried to count the scratched out locations first.

It was a daunting number... and my stomach got even more twisted as I also added up the numbers that were legible near the crossed out locations.

"How old is this map?" I asked softly.

"We draw a new one every ten years," the chronicler said.

Ten years...?

"Do... do we erase the ones we lost when we do?" I asked as tears slid down my face.

"Yes," Vim said.

Closing my eyes, I heaved as I realized how bad it actually was.

And here I had been so happy. I had been enjoying myself, beyond measure.

How dare I.

After a few moments I opened my eyes. I expected to see Vim glaring at me, but he wasn't. He seemed calm, and understanding.

Somehow that made me want to cry harder... but I kept it in as I took a deep breath and went back to the map.

I started to count the locations left. The ones not crossed out. The ones not lost to us in the last ten years.

Although many, and although some had far more members than I had thought was possible... the number was shockingly low.

"I count six hundred and fifty two," I said.

"Least she can do math," Vim said.

"That map is only those who are willing to let their locations and numbers be known Renn. We have twice that throughout the lands," the chronicler said gently.

"Oh?" I looked away from the map and to the chronicler. She nodded with a soft smile.

"Remember I mentioned many of our members don't... really wish to participate in the Society. They're a part of it, yet not," Vim said.

"I see," I said. I couldn't... really understand it, but I did. There were probably many of us who hated each other just as much as they hated the humans.

"If anything ever happened and we got separated Renn, make your way back here. Or go here," Vim pointed out another location. One to the northeast. A location called the Keep. It had only three people there.

"Is it a city?" I asked.

"No. It's like the Owl's Nest, where Lilly is. It's safe," Vim said.

"The Keep? Hm..." the chronicler realized what Vim was talking about, and didn't seem to agree.

"You don't agree?" I asked her. Not that I doubted Vim, but I'd like to know why she had a face that looked troubled.

"It is safe. But..." she tilted her head, as if to look at Vim.

"She doesn't like who is there. Don't mind her. You can find it by traveling along a large river that runs this way," Vim showcased the river's direction for me, since it wasn't really detailed on the map.

"Best way to get there is to head for the lake of springs. It's a collection of springs that form a massive lake," the chronicler explained.

"I see," I said. I knew that if the time ever came I needed to follow their instructions it'd probably prove difficult, but it was probably all they could give me. I knew from their perspectives markers and guide points faded over time. Only the major landmarks, like mountains and lakes seemed constant.

"If you're elsewhere just head to the nearest location. The main goal is to get back here of course," Vim said.

"Of course."

"If you're somewhere and need help but for some reason can't leave just send a letter. Later I'll show you the code-words we use," Vim said.

"They're not cheap. Which is why..." the chronicler then stood from her seat. I felt almost obligated to get up with her, but stayed seated.

She was old but not human. I shouldn't look at her like I did the elderly of the humans. She was far from feeble.

Vim also ignored her, and kept his eyes on the map. He stood next to my chair, and was a little close... If I tried using the chair's left armrest, I'd be touching him.

"Who left the dye house?" Vim asked.

Dye house? I quickly looked around the map for what he was speaking of.

"A son died not too long ago," the chronicler said as she grabbed something off a nearby desk. The moment she did I perked up at the sound of metal clinking.

Coins.

"She recognizes that sound," Vim noticed.

"I did..." I sighed, how embarrassing.

The chronicler chuckled as I returned to searching for the location Vim had spoken of.

"How'd the son die?" Vim asked as the chronicler walked back over to our table.

"It was the infirm one. The one who couldn't walk," the chronicler said, as if that was explanation enough.

"I see..." Vim sighed.

I couldn't find the place they were talking about. Maybe it wasn't called the dye house at all...

"Here," Vim pointed at a spot to our south, almost at the edge of the map.

Oh. It was called Secca.

"And here," the chronicler put the small pouch onto the table... and also a small tablet.

"Sign it with a mark you will always remember. I'll put it in the records so that you can withdraw from our banks," the chronicler said with a point to the tablet.

Vim reached out to grab the tablet for me, since she had put it a little too far away for me. He moved the map aside and put the tablet in front of me.

It wasn't of paper, but something hard. Clay maybe...

Vim held out a metal pencil. I took it and noticed it was pointed at the end.

I see. I was supposed to scrape it into the tablet.

"Can I just use my name?" I asked.

"No. Use a word, and make it something that can't be connected to you or the Society," Vim said.

"What do you use?" I asked. What was I suppose to use?

"I'm not telling you," he said with a smile.

Oh. Right. This was supposed to be something secret...

"Then don't look," I said to him as I leaned forward to write on the tablet.

He frowned but obliged. He looked away to the chronicler. "See that?" he told her.

"You're lucky she doesn't rip your heart apart, she has the tone to do so," the chronicler said.

I smirked as I wrote a single word onto the tablet. It wasn't as difficult as I had thought it was going to be. The strange clay it was made of was soft and easily pushed into.

Putting the metal pencil down, I stood and reached the tablet over the table to the chronicler.

The blind woman took it from me, and then studied the word.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Someone who was important to me," I said. Did I pick a bad word?

"I see. That'll do," she nodded and took the tablet back over to the desk.

"There are three banks, and several merchant unions that you can get money from. I'll point them out to you as we travel," Vim said.

I nodded, excited. Reaching out for the pouch, I hefted it and realized it was very heavy and very full. Peeking into it, I found hundreds of coins of various colors and designs. Some I recognized, some I didn't.

There was a fortune in there.

"So... who makes the money?" I asked.

"There are several sources of money. Over the years Vim has set up most of them," the chronicler said.

I noted she didn't really specify in her answer. Maybe she didn't trust me with that information yet.

"I'll introduce you to the bookkeeper some day," Vim said.

"Bookkeeper?" I asked.

"The one who manages the Society's finances. She's actually headed to Lumen, and will be there for a year or so," the chronicler told Vim.

"Then we shall meet her there," Vim said.

Looking to the map, I quickly found the place they spoke of. It was a small dot near the right edge of the map, in the center. It had the number thirteen next to it.

Vim stepped away from the table as I pulled the map closer. I traced the path from Lumen to here and found there were several possible paths. There were nine different possible locations between Telmik and Lumen.

Yet oddly none of the spots near Telmik had a single member, and none were called ponds either...

I could have sworn Vim said our next destination was a pond or lake, and that only a single individual lived there...

Maybe they were one of the members that didn't want their locations known.

"Here. Read this tonight instead of that stupid book," Vim dropped a small white book onto the table next to me.

Frowning at him, I glanced at the chronicler as I reached for the small white book. She didn't show any sign of caring about what he had said. Surely she knew what he meant by stupid? Maybe she was used to his aversion to religion.

"What's this?" I asked as I glanced at the small book. There were no words sewn or etched onto the cover or spine.

"A brief history of our Society. It includes an old rule-book as well, though we don't necessarily follow it anymore," the chronicler said.

"Oh?" I grew excited, and was about to open it as to start reading it but Vim tapped the desk with a heavy finger.

"Read it later," he said.

"Oh..." I wanted to argue, but could tell he meant it. Maybe there was a reason for it.

"There's a lot more you must learn and see, but time will fix that. For now, welcome Renn. I look forward to writing of your exploits," the chronicler then said.

She stood up straighter and nodded, and I suddenly realized why Vim hadn't wanted me to start reading just yet. It wasn't that he wasn't willing to let me, but simply because it was time for us to go.

"I... I look forward to it as well. Thank you chronicler," I said as I slowly stood from my seat.

"We will leave first thing in the morning," Vim said.

"Always coming and going. But that is your fate," the old woman said with a smile.

Vim tapped me lightly on the arm and gesture for me to follow him out the room.

"Goodbye," I told her.

"May the gods bless you on your journey Renn. Since he won't accept their blessing, maybe with you next to him we can finally start to do so," the chronicler said as I stepped away.

Pausing for a moment as Vim opened the door and headed outside, I hesitated. I wanted to talk to her more, especially now.

The chronicler must have realized my hesitation for she smiled at me and nodded. "We'll meet again, Renn. Go on. Enjoy your new purpose," she said gently.

I nodded gently and stepped away. Holding the little white book close, I spared one last glance to the map on the table and did my best to memorize it again. It wasn't too difficult, thanks to its simplicity.

Stepping out of the room, Vim closed the door behind me and sighed. "Don't get emotional," he warned.

"How could I not?" I asked.

"Easily?" he asked back.

"For you maybe. How many times have you said goodbye to her and returned again? This is the first time I've ever said goodbye," I said.

"I don't remember saying goodbye," Vim said with a frown.

Thinking about it, I realized he hadn't. "Well, you are a little rude sometimes," I said.

"Sometimes," he nodded.

While Vim led me away from the chronicler's office, I studied the little white book in my hands. The leather that made up its binding was... oddly soft.

"How old is this book?" I asked him.

"Older than you," he said.

Precious. Yet...

"I'm getting used to your method of lying," I said.

"I hadn't lied," Vim said sternly.

"You didn't, but you didn't want to tell me the truth so you told me that. Rather than a lie... I guess I should say I'm growing used to how you hide the truth," I said as I thought about it.

"That book is four hundred and odd years old. The woman who wrote it is dead, I killed her," Vim then said.

The world shivered as I stopped walking. I blinked and wasn't too surprised to see the blurry eyes as I looked at the man who had walked a few steps away from me before stopping.

He didn't turn to look at me, but he did shift a little... seemingly bothered.

I gulped and wondered if he had said such a thing to make a point. Maybe it was his way of telling me that when he hid a truth, or subverted a conversation.... It was because he simply didn't want to speak of the truth, not because he didn't wish me to know.

"When I'm done with it are you going to take it back to her?" I asked, choosing to not actually make him angry by pursuing that conversation.

"No. I'll leave it in the mansio," he said, and finally turned to look at me.

"Is that safe?" I asked.

"Within an hour of us leaving Jelti will come to clean and prepare it for the next guest. That's one of her jobs," Vim said.

I stepped forward and returned to walking, Vim joined me.

"Oh? Really?" I asked. What an interesting job.

"She's also responsible for most of the caretaking in the Cathedral. She runs that department here. Gives orders to the maids, workers and stuff," Vim said.

That was a little surprising. Although Jelti was... an interesting person, I had not expected her to have such responsibilities.

But...

"What are Link's?" I asked.

"Information. Particularly the political kind," Vim said.

"Hands's?"

"Hands is a tinkerer. He spends most his time messing with clocks, but he has many duties. The Society uses him to build stuff, occasionally. Beneath the Cathedral are aqueducts, which he hid an escape route for the chronicler and the rest in. He's actually pretty handy," Vim said.

"Is that why we call him that?" I asked.

"No, it's because he's always clapping or fidgeting with his hands," Vim said.

Ah, that was true.

"The few members who chose to not introduce themselves to you have duties as well. If you had stayed here you would have been given one eventually, if you hadn't simply taken up the mantle yourself," Vim said.

"Hm..."

"The map had said nine... Does that include you?" I asked as we rounded a corner.

"No. I'm not included in any census," he said.

Was it because he didn't stay anywhere, or because he didn't want to be?

Still...

That meant there were five others here who had chosen to not meet me. And if I had understood Vim and Jelti's conversation the other day, the only reason Jelti had met me was because Vim had asked her to help choose a present.

She had met me not because she had wanted to, but because she had found it interesting that Vim was requesting her aid for such a thing.

"Did they choose not to meet me because I'm a predator?" I asked. Jelti, although not a predator, hadn't seemed too bothered by me. We had spent several hours in conversation and not once had she startled or acted oddly around me... other than her odd personality, at least.

"That's most of it. The rest is simple fear. Many of our members don't take risks, Renn. Not even to meet a fellow of their own kind. Even if you had been something less... dangerous, several would have still avoided you. Most of them even avoid each other, even though they've known one another for hundreds of years. Link hasn't seen Hands in nearly ten years he said," Vim said.

I... really didn't like that. After all the whole point of me joining the Society, at least originally, was to make friends. To find family. If they all avoided me and we only saw one another a few times a decade...

Reaching the hallway that led to the house Vim and I were staying at; I noticed that the gate was open. Vim had closed it when we left. He always did.

Vim paused before the gate and stared through it. I peered around him to see what he was glaring at.

"Speak of the devil," Vim said as we both saw a lone figure sitting on the porch.

Vim opened the gate, and I realized he meant she was one of us... and that she was most likely one of the ones who had previously chosen to not meet me.

Stepping into the garden behind Vim, I grew excited as I realized my assumption was correct. I couldn't see anything... too strange about her, but somehow I knew. Maybe it was the structure of her body, or bones, but it was obvious she wasn't human. At least to my eyes.

Vim shut the gate behind me, and I waited for him to walk ahead first. I wanted to hurry and meet her, of course, but I didn't want to scare her away by rushing towards her. After all, she might be more like Link than Jelti. Someone who would run away if I acted too rashly.

"Mommy! They're here!" I went still as someone jumped out from behind a nearby tree. A young child laughed as she ran up to us.

Staying still I focused on the young girl as she skidded to a stop right before Vim and I. "Long time no see!" the girl saluted Vim.

"About five hours, I think. Such a long time," Vim said as he kept walking forward. He patted the girl on the head as he passed her.

She giggled, and then turned to face me. "Greetings!" she saluted me too.

"Greetings," I repeated her greeting, since it was so odd... but I didn't salute her back. Instead I held out my hand.

The girl happily took my hand, shaking it wildly. "My name's Renn," I introduced myself.

"I know! I heard about you! The silly cat who thinks she can protect us!" the girl said with a laugh.

My stomach knotted as I dryly smiled. "Yep. That's me," I said.

"My name's Fizz! What's that?" she unhooked her hand and pointed to the little white book I carried.

"Something precious," I said and glanced past her, and saw Vim and this girl's mother talking on the porch. She was still sitting though, which made her look small compared to Vim.

"Come meet mommy!" Fizz grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the two.

My dry smile became a warm one as I forgave the girl for her comment. She had probably just repeated what her mother, or maybe even Vim himself, had said.

After all it was true. I was just a fool... and I knew there was a chance I'd fail at it, but that was the entire point. To see if I could.

Being tugged along by the young girl, I noticed that her dress was a little tight around her stomach. Yet she wasn't fat at all... in fact she was rather skinny.

Odds were it was something related to her non-human side. But what would be at the stomach?

"You said you were going to test her Fizz, that didn't look very much like a test to me," her mother said as we approached.

Fizz went still, her fingers squeezing my hand a little tighter. It didn't hurt, but it did tell me she had either forgotten it entirely or...

The young girl glanced at me, and then gave me a sad little smile. "Um... haha," she giggled and then released my hand, and then hurried to the steps of the porch. She ran up the steps, and then skidded around to stand next to her mother in-between her and Vim. She took a deep breath and then pointed at me.

"You pass!" she shouted.

"I didn't do anything," I said back.

The girl hesitated, and she made a weird noise as she looked up at Vim.

"What? Don't look at me," Vim said to her.

"He's no examiner, he's the executioner dear," her mother giggled as she waved her hand at her.

"Mom...!" Fizz complained, and I wondered what she had been planning to do originally. Attack me maybe? She had been hiding behind the tree earlier...

Vim reached out and grabbed the girl by the head. She squirmed, but he didn't let her go. Her hair flew and tangled as she tried to get herself free.

Although the action would have probably hurt or disturbed a human child, it only made the young girl smile and laugh as she continued trying to free herself.

"It's nice to meet you Renn. I'm her mother, Henrietta," Henrietta said as she finally stood from the steps.

Once she did, I hesitated.

She was tiny. Much smaller than myself even excluding my ears.

"It's a pleasure Henrietta," I greeted her, but noticed she didn't hold her hand out. At least she didn't salute me oddly as her daughter had done.

"I've prepared a meal, are you hungry Vim?" Henrietta asked as she turned to look at him.

The way she did so made me wonder if the daughter's antics were because of her. Did she just dismiss me?

"I suppose I got enough room for a whole child... especially such a tiny one," Vim teased the girl whose head he was squeezing. She made a small yelp, and then she was lifted up off the ground.

Watching Vim lift her by her head, I hoped she wasn't in pain as she started to panic. "Mom?" Fizz sounded worried as Vim turned and headed inside.

Henrietta giggled and then turned back to me. "Come, I've made pastries," she invited me.

"Sure..." I nodded quickly, doing my best to hide my relief. So she hadn't dismissed me.

Following her into the house, I immediately smelled the scent of something baked. Something warm and fresh. Apples of some kind?

On the table was a small spread of food. Half a dozen plates of breads and desserts, some were even steaming. Had she made them here? The kitchen was out of sight, but I couldn't smell the remnants of cooking. Maybe they lived nearby.

It felt odd being able to see over Henrietta's head as I examined the table. She was right in front of me, yet was too short to block my sight.

I wasn't that tall, at all, but usually the only people who were shorter were children themselves. For her to not only be shorter, but that much shorter...

Maybe it had something to do with what they were.

Vim pulled back a chair, and dropped the young girl onto it. She huffed as she sat down and quickly went to fixing her hair. "So rude! Mom, I think we should file a complaint!"

"One for each dent, I'm sure," Vim teased the girl as he went to sit next to her.

Fizz stuck her tongue out at him as her mother headed past them and into the hallway, most likely to the kitchen. Maybe she had made some here.

Closing the front door, I slowly entered and wondered where I should sit. The table had four chairs, but only two on each side. Why had Vim sat there?

I chose to sit across from Vim, closest to the fireplace. So that the girl could sit across from her mother.

"I hear you have ears!" Fizz said as I sat down. She giggled at herself after a moment, as if realizing what she had just said.

Reaching up I took off my hat to show her. Lomi had been interested in my ears too.

"Oh...!" Fizz went wide-eyed as she stared at them. Suddenly it seemed she was more interested in me.

The girl squirmed and glanced to Vim, and then behind him to the hallway where her mother had gone. She obviously wanted to say something, but...

"Want to touch them?" I asked her, knowing full well what that look was.

"I do!" She instantly jumped off the chair and ran around the table.

Lowering my head so she could touch them, I took a small breath and prepared for the uncanny itching and pain that usually followed.

"Be gentle with them, they're not yours," Vim warned the girl right before she touched them.

Fizz hesitated, but I smiled at her and she nodded. "They're big... Can you hear bugs talking?" Fizz asked.

Talking...? Did she mean their noises? "I can hear better than most, yes," I said.

The young girl was gentle. She only touched with a few fingers, and very kindly.

"What the..."

Fizz flinched as we both looked to the hallway and found her mother glaring at us. She had a large plate with several cups upon it. "She has ears mommy!" Fizz said happily.

"And why are you touching them? Leave her be," Henrietta chastised her daughter as she sighed and put the plate of drinks down onto the table.

"Aww..." Fizz immediately stopped and then hurried back to the chair... but instead of going to the one next to Vim, she sat next to me.

She climbed up onto the chair, and then gave me a smile.

Giving her a smile back, I realized I had just made a friend. My ears were now itching like mad, but that was a small price to pay.

"What do I get to eat?" Vim asked as he reached for one of the cups.

"The snacks of course!" Fizz said with a gesture to the array of different foods before him.

"Oh? Where's your share then?" Vim asked as he took a drink of whatever Henrietta had made.

It smelled kind of like tea, but it looked a little...

Reaching out for my own cup as she went to take a seat, I hesitated a moment as I smelled milk inside the cup along tea. Milk and tea? I didn't think I'd had such a thing before.

Handing a cup to Fizz, she thanked me and reached out for one of the smaller pastries. It had a red coating of some kind of fruit on it. "That joke doesn't work from you Vim, you don't ever eat anything," Fizz said right before stuffing her mouth.

Glancing at Vim as he shrugged, I wondered what she meant. I had seen Vim eat often... sometimes even more than me, which was saying something. I usually ate more than anyone else.

In fact right now, a few plates away... looked something utterly delicious looking.

"Still, touching her ears... that's rude Fizz," Henrietta said with a huff as she sat down.

Once she did, I had to keep my smile from growing too large as I studied her. She looked nearly as much a child as her daughter did when sitting next to Vim.

"She said it was okay!" Fizz defended herself with a mouthful.

"It's not okay to talk with your mouth full!" her mother didn't care as she chastised her some more.

She might not look old enough to be her mother, but she definitely was one all the same.

Vim grabbed one of the larger pastries, and as he did I reached over to grab the one I had been eyeballing. It was a little heavier than I had thought it'd be.

"Oh my, look at you. Actually eating my cooking, if my husband knew he'd be jealous," Henrietta said with a smirk as she glanced at Vim.

Vim ignored her completely as he took a bite.

Fizz stared at the two with wide-eyes, and I wondered if maybe there was something deeper to her joke. She was looking at him rather deeply...

Taking a bite for myself, I couldn't help but forget all about the people in front of me for a moment. The thing was delicious.

"I made that one," Fizz whispered to me.

"Here try this one," Henrietta pushed a plate towards Vim, seemingly also having forgotten other people were at the table too.

"It's great. Are you a chef?" I asked the girl.

"My daddy is," Fizz said with a proud smile.

"Oh...?" I wondered if he was human or not.

"This one. Here," Henrietta tapped the plate she had pushed towards Vim, but Vim ignored her. He kept his eyes on me... which made me feel a little strange. It was obvious he was just trying to ignore her, but was he really doing so as a joke?

Fizz sighed as she reached for another pastry.

While her mother pestered Vim, and he ignored her, I smiled and realized how I could probably solidify the young girl's friendship.

With a few quick adjustments, I pulled out my tail.

Fizz went wide-eyed, and actually dropped her pastry onto the table as she stared at it.

Showing her my tail, I laid it on her lap to let her touch it too. She tried to hide her excited smile, but it was obvious what was happening. She was snorting as she tried to hide her giggles.

"Just one bite Vim, here," Henrietta ignored her daughter and me, which I found rather amusing.

Especially Vim's face as he took a drink and sighed.

Vim looked uncomfortable.

The young girl was giggling away as she messed with my tail.

I was stuffing my face with the remainder of the pastry, and...

Henrietta was smiling stiffly as she tried to get Vim's attention.

"This is so strange," I said with a laugh.

"It is!" Fizz agreed.

Vim closed his eyes, but said nothing.

Chapter 89: Chapter Eighty Eight – Vim – To Retreat Without Running

I wasn't running away, nor was I fleeing in shame.

This was just... me trying to help Renn make a few more friends in the Society.

Stepping out of the house and onto the porch, I sighed and felt the faint throb of a headache. The kind that didn't really exist, but my mind thought it should.

Renn's voice, alongside the happy shouting of Fizz, could be heard behind me. They were talking about some kind of food they had just eaten recently. Something new they hadn't tasted before.

They sounded happy. Excited.

The sounds were good. Genuine. It warmed the soul, and healed wounds.

Yet right now I didn't want to hear any of it.

I took my time stepping off the porch, and took even longer to reach the metal gate.

It was hard to be upset or bothered by Henrietta... since she was actually a very good person. She and her husband were the steady types. The ones I could rely on if I needed to.

Yet Henrietta's misplaced fascination with me had long grown old. I was tired of having to pretend to ignore her advances, and odd statements. And I was especially tired of having her daughter stare at me with odd eyes, as she watched her mother act the fool.

Fizz at least knew I was no threat. She had once thought me so, and had even attacked me once with the intent to kill me.

Honestly that should have been Henrietta's wake up call, to stop being so weird... yet after that incident, she only seemed to double down on the efforts...

Opening the gate, I slowly shut it behind me. It clanked loudly, thanks to its weight.

It was heavy. Renn was able to open it. I had seen her do so, but...

Henrietta wasn't able to. There had been many times I had found her outside the gate waiting for me. And she wasn't the kind to be doing so just because she thought it

improper not to. I had once found her in my bed, asleep. She had no shame when it came to stuff like that.

Which meant it was probably her daughter, Fizz, who had opened it for them earlier.

Interesting.

Tapping the gate, I pondered that fact as I turned away and headed for the nearby hallway. The one that had a few benches littering its halls.

They'd probably sit and talk for hours, so I might as well find somewhere to sit and wait.

I wasn't going to risk leaving them alone completely. Henrietta shouldn't do anything too weird... And Renn shouldn't either... but...

Actually Renn seemed rather gentle with children. That wasn't the first time I had seen her act like that to the young. She had let Fizz touch her ears and tail. Most of our kind would never let such a thing happen, even to those they deemed family.

It was why Fizz had so happily accepted, and immediately saw her as a friend afterward. In Fizz's eyes she had just earned her respect and then some, with a single action.

Our people were simple sometimes. But I couldn't blame them. Odds were Henrietta and John had never let Fizz touch their non-human traits, at least not willingly. It was just...

"Maybe it's because she's so calm-natured," I thought to myself.

Renn had been willing to let me touch them too, without hesitation. At first I had thought that was just because she was simply trying to earn my trust, in any way or shape she could.

Rounding a corner, I was glad to find that the hallway was empty. The half dozen benches were all available, so I went and sat in one.

While I sat down, I groaned at myself.

"This journey will be a hard one," I admitted.

I had already agreed, at least internally to myself, to start teaching her. To start training her to become something useful for the Society. I wasn't sure yet what to use her for, or where to eventually place her, but...

If this continued I was going to get a little too comfortable with her. A little too used to her presence.

I needed to put walls up, draw lines in the sand, set boundaries and make rules...

Rubbing my eyes, I sighed as I realized I hadn't even realized how close I was letting myself get to her.

Why was I letting it happen? Because I was glad that for the first time in decades someone was willing to help? Because I pitied her?

What was there to pity? She was alone. So were most of our people. The few who weren't always ended up alone, eventually. I also wouldn't pity her just because she was a woman. Although I felt as if I should protect children and women more carefully than the men, I knew better than to see her as simply what she appeared to be.

She was strong enough to not need my protection, to a certain degree. Nothing like the others, at least.

Sitting back against the cold stone of the Cathedral walls, I took a small breath and tried to think of something else.

The Cathedral was fine. It was the same as always. I was glad there were no letters here, asking for help. It meant the world was... at least for now, calm.

Or that whoever had needed my help simply hadn't had the ability to ask for it. But there was nothing I could do about that.

No drama. No chaos. No death.

"There is, I just can't see it," I whispered as I thought of the people lost recently.

There was always chaos. There was always danger, always something worse lurking around the corner.

Always more failures to be had.

Hopefully Renn wouldn't be another.

A footfall echoed down the hallway. It didn't surprise me, nor shock me. This was the Cathedral. There were always hundreds of people all over. Humans especially.

Yet the footfall turned into footsteps. Hurried ones.

Looking down the hall, away from the hallway I had come from, I waited patiently to see who was running.

The hurried footsteps rounded the corner, and upon seeing Henrietta's husband I found myself relaxing in relief.

Shame on me.

"Oh!" John perked up at the sight of me... and quickly looked around. Upon not seeing his wife or daughter, he actually got even happier as he hurried to me.

I stayed seated as John slowed his pace. He smiled and bowed once he was in front of me.

"How have you been John?" I asked him as he bowed to me.

"Very well, protector. It's a pleasure to see you again," John said with his head lowered.

I no longer tried to tell him, and others, to stop bowing. They wouldn't stop, and I was tired of repeating myself.

"Your wife and daughter are at the mansio, hanging out with Renn," I said.

"Oh? Renn... the cat, right?" John stood back up and glanced down the hallway, looking eager to go.

"A forest cat, yes. She's a good person, you don't need to worry. Your daughter seems to like her," I said.

Hopefully Fizz didn't inherit Henrietta's penchant for fascination of the unique.

"Oh... good, good. I uh..." John smiled sheepishly as he looked back at me.

I gave him a knowing smile as I nodded. I understood.

He was far more happy to hear that it was someone else than me that they were spending time with.

"How's the kitchens been?" I asked.

"Wonderful. A lot of work, as usual, but we've had more and more helpers lately. Nearly twice as many this festival than the last time," John said with a quick nod, happy to tell me.

"That's good," I said. I'd blame the extra volunteers on the population boom, but I knew that wasn't the truth. The humans were just becoming more and more ingrained into their faiths.

"It is! It really is..." John glanced again down the hallway, to the garden.

He was getting anxious. He wanted to go to his family.

John was a good man, and one didn't need to question it. He spent more time cooking food for the poor and destitute than he did not. Most of his, and possibly Henrietta's, stipend from the Society went to such ventures.

Although not wearing the clothes of the church, nor having allegiance to them... he was the epitome of their beliefs. Of the ones which represented charity and goodwill, at least.

Henrietta was honestly the same. She and John did more for the needy than most churches do... at least...

Until she stood in front of me, at least.

"Oh, uhm..." John looked back at me, and shifted on his feet as he tried to gather his courage.

I patiently waited for him to find his words. It didn't take him too long, and he coughed as he nodded.

"Are you staying long, Vim?" he finally asked.

"No. We leave tomorrow," I said.

Looking away from his vast relief, I wondered how he worried so much over me.

By now he should know I'd never take his wife from him. How long has she been acting like that? A hundred years at least.

"How old's Fizz?" I asked him as I tried to remember.

"Huh? Oh... well, after the new year she'll be twenty three. She is a little small for her age still, isn't she? Should I be worried? What if she's sickly... but she's so active? She runs around all day long sometimes, you know, and," John rambled as he misinterpreted my question. He had thought I had asked because she was still so small.

"Her blood is thicker than yours, John. Her still being young isn't a surprise. Plus her mother is small too," I said, calming him down.

John hesitated but nodded.

Still... twenty three...?

Then it has been over a hundred years since I've known them. Although only fifty or so since Henrietta started acting so strange.

Ever since I had saved her that day, in that swamp.

If I had known she would have gotten so weird, I'd have let that thing eat her.

But if I had...

"Go to your women, John. I'm glad they're becoming friends, but Renn will need some rest before we leave," I said, using her as an excuse.

"Oh! Yes. Of course. Thank you so much Vim, I hope your journey is both safe and enlightening," John gave me one last nod before hurrying away.

Watching him go, I sighed softly.

Good people, but strange.

Maybe I was too, in their eyes.

John's hurried footsteps filled the hallway. I didn't have to worry over having to spend time saying goodbye to the two women, since I knew John would lead them home on a different path.

He'd not willingly bring his wife in front of me, unless it was a life or death situation after all.

"Vim!"

My name drew my attention down the hall. John was pointing at the gate.

Oh. Right.

Slowly standing I wondered how Fizz had been born with strength yet both her parents lacked it.

If not for Fizz having John's hair and features, I'd doubt he was the father.

"The gate," John shouted lightly, and then hesitated. He looked around quickly, as if he had heard his own echo and it had scared him.

A dog scared of its own shadow.

A wife fascinated by the unnatural.

A daughter of a lost age.

Just a normal family, in our Society.

Chapter 90: Chapter Eighty Nine – Renn – A Book For A Protector

Waving goodbye to the family, I slowly closed the gate behind them.

"She was not mean like you thought!" Fizz told her parents. I smiled as I turned away, as to not hear any of their private conversations.

No one else realized how good my hearing could be, and I didn't want to betray their friendship by snooping.

Hurrying back to the house, I slowed my approach once I noticed Vim. He was standing away from the porch, on the grass. He was looking down at something.

There didn't seem to be anything in front of him, so I slowly approached... just in case it was something that I could scare away by not being quiet or careful.

Vim ignored me as I stepped up behind him and peered around him.

It was a small mouse, busy cleaning its fur.

"They were happy. You did well," Vim said softly.

"Hm? Fizz and her mother are nice," I said. I hadn't spent much time with John, her husband, but he seemed gentle. A little meek, he had bowed to me as a greeting and on goodbye.

"They are. Gentle souls who pity the world around them," Vim said.

The mouse looked up, but not at us. It looked to the sky, and then after a moment returned to cleaning itself. Why was it sitting out in the open like this? Usually they hid away.

"A typical field mouse. Found everywhere, in abundance. A pest to most," Vim said with a gesture.

"Hm... they are everywhere," I agreed.

"Yet, not usually here," Vim said after a moment.

"Oh?" was that why he was staring at it? "Is that because there're no fields here?" I asked.

"Rather because of what's hidden in the stones. But it is of no importance. Probably just got carried in somewhere. The storage rooms aren't too far from here, after all," Vim said as he stepped away.

I studied the little mouse a little longer, and wondered what he was thinking. Was he trying to decide if its presence was worth noting? Did he simply notice it and find it odd? Or was he worried about it, or the possibility of it being here?

Joining Vim, I too stepped away and we went back into the house. I closed the door behind us, and for a tiny moment the house felt cold. Empty.

It had been so lively a few moments ago.

A single plate of pastries remained, stacked on a small silver plate on the table. We hadn't eaten so much as that was all that were left, they had taken a plate or two back home with them.

Vim paused before the table, and then after a moment reached out to grab one of them. I smiled as I watched him eat the pastry calmly.

I see. So he felt comfortable eating in front of me, yet not everyone else.

Why was that? Maybe I was reading too much into it.

Maybe he just didn't like eating in front of Henrietta. Maybe it wasn't that I was special, but that she was... in a certain way.

"Did... did Henrietta act strange to you, or was that just me?" I asked him carefully.

Vim paused in his chewing. He turned to me and smiled. He then swallowed and nodded. "She acts odd around me, yes. I'm assuming she became more natural after I left?" he asked.

"She did," I nodded. That was the entire reason I had noticed it. She had become almost a different person, becoming much more talkative and happy. Where before she had all but ignored me, once Vim left she actually acknowledged my presence and did so in a good way.

"Did you notice anything odd about Fizz?" Vim asked, changing the memories I was examining.

"Not really...? She seems... normal? A happy, healthy child," I said as I walked over to the table. I didn't sit down, but instead put my hands on the back of the chair, the one that Fizz had been seating upon.

"Good. I'm glad."

Maybe something had happened to her. Or maybe she wasn't as fine as she had seemed.

"Should I worry for her?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "No. I simply noticed once again that she has inherited the strength of our kind, and not her parents," he said.

"Oh. Yes. I noticed that too. She had been very careful in her touching and playing with me, to the point that I realized it was something ingrained in her. As if she was afraid to touch me too harshly," I said.

"Your ears and tail?"

I nodded. So he had noticed too.

"She's a good girl," he noted.

"She is."

Vim swallowed the last bite of the pastry, and I noticed him eyeballing another. I couldn't blame him, they were delicious.

"Fizz said her mother acted oddly around you because you're her first love," I said.

"First love," Vim sighed as he took another pastry from the table. One of the smaller ones. It looked rather funny in his hand, I expected it to be nothing but a single bite... and quickly my expectations were shown true. He barely chewed it.

"Were they some of the ones who didn't want to meet me? Originally?" I asked, changing the topic a little. He hadn't grown upset with me, but I noticed he hadn't actually responded to it.

"Yes. But don't feel bad... they're dogs. You and them don't usually get along, you know?" he said with a smile.

"Huh?" I perked up at that and wondered if that was why they had been so...

"Hm? Were you off-put by them?" Vim asked, amused.

"Honestly yes. At first I did feel a little... odd. I for some reason had felt on alert from the moment I saw them. I had even felt as if Henrietta was ignoring me at first," I said.

"Well... she probably was," Vim said softly as he pulled a chair back as to sit in it.

A little excited to hear he was willing to talk about it openly, I pulled the chair I held back as well. I sat down in the seat Fizz had been in; while Vim sat down in the same chair he had last time.

He really was a man of consistence. He rarely deviated didn't he? Something told me he sat in that chair whenever he was here, and had done so for years.

"Because I'm a cat," I said. That made a lot more sense than her being antagonistic just because I was with Vim. Even if she was fond of him, it couldn't be that bad.

"Amongst other things," Vim said as he reached out for another pastry. He took the biggest off the plate this time.

A little amused, I watched him slowly eat it. He was staring at the plate, as if planning on which one he'd eat next.

"Aren't dogs a kind of predator? Why did they act as if they weren't?" I asked.

"Note I called them dogs and not wolves. Dogs can be hunters, but most of that instinct has been diluted from them. They're not prey, yet are... I guess they're something that can be either or. Personally I expect Fizz to be a predator, based off her personality and her strength. She had planned to attack you I think, earlier," Vim said.

"I think she meant to as well!" I nodded; glad I hadn't been the only one to think so.

"She gave up at the sight of you. I wonder if it was instinct, or that weird smile you had at the time?" Vim asked himself.

"I had a weird smile?" I asked as I touched my face. Was it anything like the one I had on right now?

"Not as weird as that one, but yes," Vim said as he took the last bite of his pastry.

He licked his lips, and I found myself transfixed as I watched him study the plate. It was like watching a cat getting ready to pounce, he looked wound up.

Yet he didn't reach for another one.

"We leave in the morning. I suggest you read that book while you can," Vim then said.

I startled, since he was now looking at me. Book... yes... that little white book...

It was still sitting on the counter to my right, near the fireplace. I had put it there since we had been eating, and I didn't want to get it dirty.

Vim stood from the table. He grabbed the book off the counter and studied it for a moment.

"Smaller than I remember," Vim said softly to himself.

I blinked as he turned and then put the book down onto the table, in front of me.

He had said it was older than me.

"How's it feel Renn?" Vim asked as he went to sit back down.

"Right now I'm happy. I made more friends. Good people. Makes me forget about a lot of the bad stuff," I said honestly as I reached for the book.

"Cherish those emotions. It'll help you through the tough moments," he said.

I nodded as I opened the book. It was small; it only had a few dozen pages it seemed. The pages were thicker than I had assumed they were.

There was no title. And the writing had begun not on the first page, but on the back of the cover. The handwriting was... a little too clean. As if...

"How did she write this?" I asked him. I didn't know the name of the author, since Vim had only said he had killed her... but...

"Carefully."

Carefully indeed... there weren't any ink splotches, or remnants of what usually came with writing with ink.

And the letters were very... pristine. Flawless. And each was a mirror copy of the last. Whoever this woman was, she had probably written a lot in her years to have earned this level of skill.

Reading the first few sentences, I hesitated.

"She wrote this for you," I said as I read the rest of the first page quickly.

Vim said nothing as I took in the information. She had written it for the man who was destined to kill her. This was for the one who would have to endure an eternity, and all those who followed.

Flipping the page I quickly became transfixed. Engrossed in a woman's words who had written not for a collective but for an individual.

For Vim... and only him.

"Protect them. The ones too weak. Those too cowardly. Them who you'd pity," I spoke aloud as I read.

Looking up at Vim, I stared at the man who this book had been written for.

"This isn't a book of the Societies rules at all," I said to him.

"No. It's not," he said.

I gulped as I looked back to the book, the one that listed all the rules for the protector. For Vim. For the man sitting across the table.

This did not tell at all how a member of the Society was supposed to live. Nor act. It made no mention of what was expected of a member, or their duties.

This was a book for the protector.

Slowly closing the book, even though I longed to read the rest... I didn't know what to say or do.

"Does the chronicler know?" I asked.

"If she does she's never mentioned it," Vim said.

"You killed her," I said. She had known he would, and loved him for it all the same.

"I did."

Then why did she write this? As if she had entrusted him with everything. As if she had loved him because of the fact that he was going to take her life.

"Why did you give me this one?" I whispered.

"Do you want to be a member of the Society, or do you want to protect the ones who are?" Vim then asked.

My tail went stiff. My ears perked up. My eyes hardened.

I squeezed the book, but not so hard that it'd damage it. It was precious after all.

Not only was it the rules for a protector... it was also something of a last will. A final letter. The last words of someone precious, for one whom she had considered precious.

Vim nodded as he pointed to the book in my hands. "Read that and decide by the time we leave. If you think you can follow those guidelines... if you can live without breaking those rules... then I'll let you try. I'll let you have the chance. As will the rest," Vim said.

My answer was to open the book and return to reading.