

# **The Non-Human Society**

## **#Chapter 91 - Ninety – Vim – To Settle a Mind - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 91 - Ninety – Vim – To Settle a Mind**

*Chapter 91: Chapter Ninety – Vim – To Settle a Mind*

She was still reading. Or rather, re-reading.

Lying in bed, the setting sun was starting to become too weak to light up the room. I knew her eyesight was good, far better than most, but I knew eventually she'd need to light the lamp next to the bed.

I was lying on the bed alongside her, but had lost one of the pillows that were mine. It was now stacked beneath Renn's head, helping support her up so she could read comfortably.

Renn flipped another page, slowly and carefully. It was the second to last.

It was a little odd. I hadn't read that book in over a hundred years, yet I could guess the exact word she was reading.

I could recite that book word for word, couldn't I?

The chronicler hadn't noticed which book I had laid in front of her. I knew she would after we left, or had by now, but she had not noticed this morning. It helped that her book used the same white leather as the others. Though she should have noticed that it was much smaller than usual. The one they occasionally gave to new members had thrice as many pages.

Jelti will also notice, when she comes in to clean up after we leave. Odds are she'd read it too, since she's probably never even seen such a thing.

A stupid worry, but one that bothered me all the same.

Maybe I should toss it into the fire before we leave, instead.

It was time that book got burnt anyway.

Renn turned another page, and I glanced at her.

I had to give her some kudos. She hadn't shed a single tear. Maybe the book wasn't as emotional as I remembered it.

"What's an oblation?" Renn suddenly asked.

Raising an eyebrow at her, I wondered why it had taken her this long to ask if she hadn't known. She's re-read that thing nearly a dozen times already.

"A sacrifice. To a god, basically," I said.

"Oh..." her ears drooped as she realized something dreadful.

"Yea, your god loves those things," I said with a tone that made even me flinch. I shouldn't say such things, or act in such a way. Why did I become so snippy around her? Usually I kept it in control.

Renn though didn't seem bothered as she slowly closed the book, finishing it. She let the book slowly down onto her chest, and held it there as if it was something too precious to part with.

"Usually an oblation is food or money. It's what you'd call most of the donations that happened during the festival," I said, trying my best to redeem myself for my previous comment.

"Yet for her it was something far more," was all Renn said.

I nodded. It had been.

Her tail danced near our feet, and if she was more cat than human I would have assumed she was upset. Maybe she was. Her tail even thumped into my feet occasionally.

"I feel as if you have a history beyond imagination," Renn then said.

"Just seems that way," I said.

She shook her head, and I knew she didn't believe me. None of them ever did.

"You were there when she wrote this?" Renn asked.

"No. But I was around. Most of them I agreed to long before she wrote that," I said.

"Some are... a little odd," she opened the book, and pointed to the middle of one of the pages. "Why do you have to oblige those who long for death?" she asked.

"Back then there were many who couldn't die. At least not from age," I said gently.

Renn's eyes finally became watery as she took a deep breath.

Would this be it? Would that be enough to deter her?

"I killed my grandmother. She was in pain. Horrible pain yet couldn't die," she then whispered.

Damn. It wouldn't be.

"A mercy," I whispered back.

She slowly nodded. "Yet a burden I..." she gulped and then looked at me. I hesitated as two beautiful eyes focused on me. They were full of emotion, and not just tears. "I once wished you had been there. To do the deed for me, so I'd not have to bear the shame," she quickly said.

I understood her meaning quickly, and wasn't entirely sure on what to say. She had hoped I had been the one to kill her grandmother, for her.

"If you choose to join me, Renn, you will eventually have to endure such shame again," I warned.

"But not of my own family," she argued.

"Who says they're not?" I argued back.

She hesitated, and I knew it was because she fully understood what I meant. They might not be blood, or family in the true sense... but they were in the end people I cherished. Even the ones who bothered me, like Henrietta, would leave scars in my heart if I had to kill them.

Renn scowled and looked back to the book. She turned the page back once, and pointed at another rule.

"To venture into the mist and seal it?" she asked.

"That's no longer a thing. There was a mist to the north a long time ago; I killed the creature that was making it. You can ignore it," I said.

"Oh..." she sniffed, and I had to look away. Hopefully she'd not start bawling right here and now.

A crying woman in the same bed as me was not something I found very enjoyable.

"How many of these have you fulfilled?" she asked.

"A good portion..." I said, and wondered if maybe I shouldn't have shown her that book.

"This one? To seal the goliath monarch in the sands?" she asked.

"Yea, I actually did that before she died," I said.

Renn huffed and slowly turned the pages to find another.

"What about children? She asks you to let your children decide their own fate?" Renn asked next.

"Oh... yea none from me yet, sorry," I said.

Renn's tail twitched as she flipped a page. "Did you find her daughter?" she finally asked.

"No," I whispered.

I slowly sat up, which caused Renn to go still. Even her tail stopped mid-twitch. It hung in the air as I glanced at the nearby balcony. It was growing dark rather quickly.

"Other... other than those, the rules seem pretty normal Vim. Protect any member. Keep them safe. Help them find homes, if you can. Stay your hatred of the church and those who wronged you, out of mercy," Renn sounded a little odd as she hurriedly went to the next topic.

"I was ready and willing to answer about her just then you know?" I said to her.

Renn's tail twitched just once, and she too finally sat up a little. Renn put the book down next to her as she crossed her legs under her and she grabbed her tail with both her hands. "I could tell," she whispered.

"Don't want to know?" I asked.

"I do," she nodded honestly.

"Celine was a Saint. One who saw prophecies. Her daughter was kidnapped not too long after I met her the first time. I never found her. Nor any trace of her, either," I said. I'd not insult Celine by telling any more.

"Prophecies?" Renn asked.

"Some people have dreams. Ones that supposedly tell the future. I've never put any stock into them," I said.

Judging by the look Renn was suddenly giving me, she suddenly put one and two together.

Someone must have mentioned one of the prophecies, or something about them. Had the chronicler said anything about them in front of her? I didn't remember her doing so while I was there.

"You don't believe in magic, after all," Renn said with a sudden nod of understanding.

"Right?" I nodded. I didn't.

"What were the prophecies about?" she asked.

"Stupid stuff. Wars. Certain historic moments. The end of the world, which never happened by the way," I said.

Renn frowned, and then glanced at the book. "Something tells me that's because of you," she said softly.

I pointed at the book, to get us off the prophecies. Those were worthless and a waste of breath to speak about. "The main promise that I haven't fulfilled yet is found a nation for our people. It was one she desperately desired," I said.

"A nation..." Renn kept her eyes on the book.

"A fool's errand. Not only are there not enough of us anymore, there're not enough willing to live together. It'd only result in failure," I said.

"Have you actually tried?" she asked.

"Of course I have. Over the years many have tried to fulfill that supposed prophecy. When they do I give them my full support. As I said, it results only in failure."

Terrible failure.

"I see..." she whispered as she looked to the balcony. The world had become dark. Probably not dark enough that she couldn't read if she strained her eyes, but it'd not comfortable.

Although a single tear had yet to fall, she looked distraught. Yet every moment that passed she seemed to gain control over her emotions. It made her seem...

I had to look away from her since I found her beautiful.

"Were... were you our enemy?" Renn then asked.

"At one time," I said softly.

"Which is why you had to agree to abandon your hate," she said as she held up the small book.

"It was how she chose to phrase it," I said.

"Why were you our enemy? You're one of us," she asked.

"It was a different world back then. There were more of us. Enough to justify building a nation, in fact. At that time there were several... factions, I suppose you could call them. The Society wasn't united. Wasn't a thing. There were large portions of our kind that wanted to slaughter the humans. They wanted a perpetual war," I said.

"A war..." she seemed to understand.

"A war they lost, by the way," I added.

Renn studied me for a moment, and then smiled. "Which side were you on?" she asked.

"I always lose," I said with a shrug.

She smirked in a way that told me she had parsed my real answer. It made me feel as readable as that book she held.

"What are you, Vim?" she asked softly.

"The Societies protector. Nothing more," I answered.

Renn's smirk died a little, and she looked away from me as if she didn't like what she had seen. "Did you know Amber hated how the Society treated you?" she asked.

She hadn't brought up Amber in quite some time. "Did she?" I asked.

Amber's letter, the one she had written some time before she died had mentioned something similar.

"I thought it was very kind of her to worry about you. Even though she hated you in a way," Renn said.

"Hm."

For a few moments we sat in silence as the room grew even darker.

"Thank you Vim," Renn said softly. She lifted the book a little, to tell me what she meant.

"Don't thank me yet."

She shook her head. "No matter what happens. No matter what... Thank you. For giving me a chance," she said.

A chance...

Yes. That was all I was giving her.

An opportunity. Nothing more.

"Celine loved you too, didn't she?" Renn asked as she ran her finger along the books spine.

"She loved what she thought I'd become," I said.

"The protector," she said softly with a smile, as if she had understood Celine completely.

Renn's tail danced in the dark. She looked a little too comfortably happy sitting on the bed with me.

"Don't worry about the history too much. Just pay attention to the future," I told her.

"Sounds like something you tell yourself," she said softly.

"I do. Is there a problem with that?" I asked her.

Renn quickly shook her head. Her ears danced a little as she did so.

"Good. Now can I have my pillow back so I can sleep or are you going to keep it?" I asked.

Although dark, I still saw Renn's strange smirk as she went to grab it for me. "There's a lamp right next to my bed, not going to let me light it?" she asked.

"You read that thing nearly a dozen times," I said as she handed me my pillow.

"What if I missed something?" Renn asked with a playful tone.

"Please do," I offered.

Laying back down, this time with a pillow, I waited for her to light the lamp... but she didn't. She put the book down and laid down herself.

"You can read, Renn," I said, hoping she didn't think I actually would be upset if she did.

"We're leaving in the morning right?"

"We are."

"If I don't sleep now I'll not get any sleep. I need a few hours to settle my mind, at the least," she said.

"Settle your mind then," I said as I rolled over, to face away from her.

Closing my eyes, I couldn't help but hear her huff as she got comfortable. She had probably wanted me to keep answering questions. To stay up and talk with her in depth about Celine, her prophecies, and the Society.

There'd be time enough for that later on our trip.

Maybe.

If I felt like it.

"Goodnight Vim," Renn said softly. I heard her tail brush against the bed.

"Goodnight Renn."

*Chapter 92: Chapter Ninety One – Renn – A Venture for the Future*

Telmik was now a small speck in the horizon. Lit up brightly by the morning sun rays.

We were about to round a large set of hills, which would have blocked the city from sight anyway... but...

"You can always go back you know," Vim offered again. This would be the fifth time he's said something like it since we had left this morning.

I huffed at him, but I wasn't really that angry. I knew he was just...

Vim did seem to hope I'd change my mind... but I also knew he genuinely wanted me to do what I wanted. He also seemed to worry that I was making a mistake, and didn't really realize it.

It was possible but...

As much as staying in that city for the rest of my life, building a home... making friends with everyone...

I still felt this was the better use of my life.

Just being someone who does odd jobs... cleaning a church, or updating maps, didn't sit with me. I wasn't sure if I could do anything more, but I wanted to see if I could.



"That city will be there forever. I can always go back," I said to Vim and myself.

"Forever," Vim scoffed at the word, and I knew he didn't believe it would be.

We were walking a large stone road. One that was... a little empty, strangely.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

"Sleeping off their hangovers," Vim said.

"Oh... because of the festival. I had figured the roads would be busier since it was now over," I said.

"They will be. By midday this road will be packed," Vim said.

I carried my little backpack, but it was a little lighter than I was used to. I had left some of the stuff I had acquired on the way here. Vim had me put them in one of the small drawers near the front entrance of the house we had stayed at. He had said Jelti would put them in a secured storage for me, to return to when I wanted them. The little white book had been a part of the stash.

Honestly I hadn't really wanted to part with the letters or the painting that Vim had saved from the fires... but... I knew it was for the best. Such things could easily get lost or ruined while on the road. To weather, or accidents.

"It is a little chilly this morning," I said as I noticed the glistening dew on the grass we walked past. Most of it was frosted and frozen.

"Hm. Cold?" Vim asked, suddenly looking at me.

"No... I just notice it," I said.

He studied me for a moment, and I realized he was worried I was ill-prepared. He was probably worried my attire wasn't good enough.

I patted my hips. "I'm fine! I have two layers now; do I look cold to you?" I asked, worried he'd buy me more. I was worried I'd get hot and stuffy as it was!

"We are headed to the mountains. High mountains and marshlands. Places that get cold. We need to dress the part," Vim said.

I nodded, it was the only reason I had been willing to let him dress me so heavily. Usually I'd never wear such thick leather and furs.

"Plus winter isn't over just yet. It's about to be though," he said.

"Not for another few months Vim," I said.

"Months," he said the word in a way that told me he saw it the same way he had the earlier statement about time.

To him months and forever were equal in their value.

It made me wonder how much of his personality was warped by his inability to notice the change of the immediate time. He probably didn't notice days as they went by, but seasons. My grandmother had been that way. I had left for a year and returned, and she hadn't even realized I had gone.

Though that might have just been her age and condition...

"And all you did was add a thick cloak... aren't you going to be the one standing out?" I asked him.

The man glanced down at his new cloak. It was a dark gray, and had white fur on the inside lining. Some kind of sheep. It stunk a little, honestly. But it was heavy, so heavy that it looked like it'd make him too hot even during a storm.

"I never stand out," Vim said plainly.

"You are a little average looking," I agreed.

"I am," he nodded, seemingly pleased to hear me say so.

Smiling at the man who seemed happy to have been insulted, I wondered if such a perspective was sourced from the way some of our members treated him.

Though I suppose so far Henrietta had been the only one actually trying to flirt with him... Kaley had done so, but odds were she had just been teasing.

"I can tell you're thinking something rude, you know," Vim said with a smirk.

"It wasn't that rude," I said honestly.

"Sure it wasn't."

Off in the distance a pair of silhouettes appeared. They were hard to see, thanks to the morning sun being right in front of us... but it looked like a pair of horses.

We walked in silence for a moment as I tried to envision the map of the society I had seen. By that map it'd only take a few days for us to reach our next destination on foot... but if we had horses...

"Why don't we ride horses?" I asked Vim.

"We do sometimes," he said.

"Why not now?"

"Because you need to start remembering the paths. If you get there too quickly, it will fade from memory," Vim said.

I slowed my pace for a moment, but Vim didn't. He seemed to ignore me as he studied something to our left, near some trees. I didn't see anything there, however.

Picking my pace back up I returned to walking by Vim's side. "I see. So it's on purpose," I said.

"Everything I do has a purpose. Even when I don't know what it is," Vim said in his light tone.

"That's a very... male thing to say," I teased him.

"Well I am one," he said.

"You are."

Vim glanced at me and did so with an odd raise of an eyebrow. He looked as if he was expecting me to make some kind of joke, but I wouldn't.

After all it was the truth. Sometimes he did speak a little... well, arrogantly. But maybe out of anyone, he earned that smugness.

He was the strongest, after all. Plus he didn't abuse his strength; at least not in any detrimental way so far I had seen.

If anyone needed proof to his trustworthiness... one only needed to look at how our members acted around him.

They feared me. A stranger. A woman. Because I was a predator. Yet in terms of danger, I couldn't come close to Vim. He wasn't just stronger than me... he knew how to use that strength.

Yet not a single one of them feared him. Not a single one of them shied away from him.

"What will I do about the places I can't go into? Like Tor's village," I asked him.

Vim looked back at that cluster of trees again. "You stay out of them until you earn the right to enter."

"And uh... how would I go about earning that right?" I asked.

"By proving yourself," he said simply.

Great. That meant he knew, or at least had an idea, but wouldn't outright tell me. Maybe it was just something that took time to earn.

The sounds of birds began to fill the air as we neared more trees. Was a forest nearby?

"Along this route there might be a few places that you'll be denied entry. Just... accept it," Vim said as he finally looked away from the cluster of trees he had been focused on. We were leaving them behind, and I still couldn't see anything special about them. Some birds maybe, but nothing else.

"What did you see in those trees?" I asked.

"The two men," Vim said.

"Two men?" I glanced back and tried to find them. I could see nearly through the cluster completely from here. They weren't that big of trees, and there wasn't much foliage... I didn't see anyone.

"They're in the trees. On the branches. They have bows. They're hunting, but I'm not sure what they're hunting," Vim said.

"Oh...?" I studied the top of the trees a little, and finally found one of them. He looked like he had intentionally moved some of the branches to hide him better from our sight. I could just make out the bundles of arrows that he had laid down on a part of the branch he sat on.

"They're really too far from the road to be hunting humans. But they might be hunting those who hunt them. Who knows," Vim said with a sigh.

"I see..." I hadn't realized he meant hunting in that sense. But it was true... other than small birds and small animals, like bunnies and mice; I hadn't seen any large game around here.

"Whoever they are, they're taking a big risk. If any of the local knights or militia notices them they'll probably be thrown in prison," Vim said.

"Oh!" I looked forward, and sure enough could see the gleam on the horses approaching us. "Those are knights huh," I said.

"They are."

I kind of wanted to stick around a little, to see if they would notice them. To see what would happen. But I knew Vim wouldn't like that idea.

"Speaking of knights... do you think Melody and the rest ever got back safely?" I asked.

"They did," Vim said.

I paused a moment. His tone when he had answered...

"I didn't tell you?" Vim looked at me as he too stopped walking.

"Tell me what?" I asked and hurried to go back next to him.

"Melody and her daughter had made a donation, thanking the saint of protection. One of our members heard their confession," Vim said.

"One of our members did?" I asked, and I had to calm myself down after I realized how loudly I had spoken.

Vim nodded slowly as he studied me, as if weary of me now thanks to my outburst. "A priest. Randle. He works beneath the chronicler. He took their confession and donation. Randle thought they took what happened as a blessing, a miracle. In reality they probably just got so terrified that they resorted to their faith as a crutch," Vim said.

I closed my eyes and took a small breath.

Thank goodness.

Returning to walking, I felt a new spring in my step. How I wish I had heard this information earlier!

"I told you they'd be fine," Vim said after a moment.

"You did... but I wasn't just worrying over their safe arrival to town, Vim," I said.

For a few moments I slowed down again, since Vim had done so first.

"Oh," Vim realized what I actually meant.

"Oh," I realized what I had just said as well.

There was an awkward silence, and then Vim gave me a smirk. "I see. You thought I'd hunt them down? Really?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked a little too quickly.

"Because it means you doubt my ability to stand by my decisions. I left them alive, why would I not have just killed them then if I was going to hunt them down later?" he asked with a smile.

That smile was the only reason I wasn't ashamed at myself. "Because you put the Society over everything! I was worried about it! It was why I waited until now to ask... I mean..." I coughed, a little embarrassed.

"You waited until we left to make sure I'd not remember them and go searching for them. I see. You know it's been a while since someone has tried to manipulate me so brazenly," Vim said with a nod as if in complete understanding.

"Manip... No! I just... didn't want you to kill them or..." I hesitated. The horses were getting a little close. Too close to talk about this stuff.

"Well that is my fault. I heard of their confession only a day after we arrived. I... thought I had told you. Maybe I got distracted, I apologize," Vim said gently.

"Hmghmh," I made an odd noise, since I wasn't able to voice my emotions at the moment.

Vim chuckled, and his strange amusement over my fumbling over this conversation just made my own mind whirl even more wildly. What did I say to this? What could I say?

It was true... I had worried Vim would have killed them; if he had found out they had reported us. Our names, especially. But... at the same time I honestly hadn't thought he would. It had just been a worry. A fear. A stupid one, but one nonetheless.

"Sorry," I grumbled.

"Apology accepted. As long as you accept mine for failing to tell you until now."

I nodded. "Mhm."

"You didn't lose sleep over it did you? Is that why you tossed and turned those first few nights?" he asked.

"Well..." I didn't answer, and not just because the three horsemen were now within range to hear us.

Two of them wore armor. One of them had armor even on his horse. It sounded... exhausted as it slowly trotted on by.

"Good day," Vim greeted the two men and the woman as they passed.

"Fair travels!" the woman smiled at us, and I waved at her in thanks.

They weren't trotting very quickly, but the distance between us grew quickly. And not just because I had picked up my pace so I could return to the conversation with Vim quicker.

"If you must know some of the coins in that bag you carry are from their donation. Not all of it, but a good portion," Vim said with a point to my backpack.

"Huh?"

He nodded. "It's only fair. You're the one who had the most... uh... distress? From the event. So you earned it," he said.

"Wait... the coins the chronicler gave me?" I asked. I could feel the weight of that bag. It was the heaviest thing I'd carried in a long while.

Vim nodded. "It's not a tenth, but it's close. They probably donated about a fifth of their profits. I do believe your gospel says eleven? Not very religious of them, no indeed," Vim tsked with his tongue as he smiled.

"Oh shush..." I couldn't help but laugh at him.

"I also found out the name of their business. They have a shop in the marketplace. No, you can't meet them. I'd have taken you there otherwise," Vim said.

"What was it?" I asked.

"The Singing Deliveries. Probably a play on her name," Vim said.

"That's... cute..." I took a small breath as I tried to imagine the building. The shop, where Melody and her daughters all worked.

"I'd warn you against going there again... but by the time we return to the Cathedral they'll probably all be too old to work, or..." Vim stopped talking, and I didn't even need to glare at him to make him do so.

"Thank you Vim, for telling me," I said, ignoring his last comment.

"Hm."

"Really, thank you," I reached out and grabbed his hand. He seemed to hesitate, as he came to a stop and stared at me.

I squeezed his hand with both of mine. I held it firmly, and closed my eyes as I bowed my head to him.

"Thank you," I said.

Vim said nothing, but I heard his unease. I felt it, in my hands.

He was uncomfortable, but... but...

I couldn't help it.

I had no other way to display such emotion, after all. I didn't know how else to thank him.

He had no idea how much I had worried about it. He had no clue to how much I had expected the opposite to have happened. After all, it would have been... not only easy for him to have killed them, but accepted. No one in the Society would have found it odd, or wrong. For he would have done so for us. To protect us.

Even I, for as much as it would have broken my heart... could have done nothing but accept it. If he had sought out and killed Melody and her daughters... I would have had to of simply accepted it. It would have simply been a fact of life I would have had to live with.

Yet he hadn't. He had given them a chance. An opportunity.

It meant no matter how little he thought of humans, or their lives, he still respected them. Still saw them as people, and things with worth.

After a moment I released his hand, and Vim let it fall to his side. He had an odd look on his face, but it at least wasn't one of anger or disgust. If anything it kind of looked...

"Let's go, Renn. We have a long day ahead," Vim said as he turned and returned to walking.

Nodding, I followed him closely.

I knew this had been the right choice. He had proven it once again.

Walking side by side with Vim, the Societies Protector... I was more than happy with my decision to join him.

This journey was going to be a long one, and most likely arduous... but with him... With Vim I felt confident that I could not only survive it, but enjoy it.

And that single fact made me have hope for the future.

And that was precious. Precious enough to devote my whole self to it.

I wanted to cherish it. To protect it...



So I needed to learn how. And he was the best to learn from. Even if he didn't realize it.

Which was why I chose him, and none of the other locations.

To learn from him.

To walk beside him.

To thank him, for ending up the man I had hoped he'd be.

*Chapter 93: Chapter Ninety Two – Vim - Nory*

The midday sun was... a little cold. Maybe Renn was right, I should have dressed a little warmer.

But I knew the cold would pass. It always did. It got cold, then wet, then warm, then hot. It always did, and always would.

Until it didn't.

"So he's a duck?" Renn asked.

She was walking on my left, instead of my right. An unusual change. I had never said anything, but she always walked on my right when we walked together. Especially on the open roads out here in the wild. I'd blame the lake we were walking along, but it was next to me on my right. Maybe she didn't want to walk near it.

"A waterfowl yes. I don't know the exact species but..." I shrugged. There was no point to know.

"Why does he like the lake he's at so much?" she asked. She stared at the lake we were walking along, most likely thinking the one he lived upon would be as big as this one were.

"I don't know his whole story. Something to do with his family," I said.

"You don't know his story?" Renn asked, and I could tell she found that ridiculous.

"I'm not all knowing. And unlike you, I don't pry. In fact I prefer it when people keep their secrets," I said.

Renn's cheeks puffed a little as she frowned at me. "I don't pry! I just... inquire," she said as she tried to find the right word.

"Inquire lightly with him. If he'll even talk to you, he usually doesn't," I said.

"Oh... will he hate me because of what I am?" Renn asked.

"No... he's just a quiet man," I said. That made him one of the good ones in my opinion.

"You like that. Maybe you'd like me more if I was more quiet," she said with a smirk.

"I might," I said as a fish jumped out of the lake. It, like most of them, was trying to eat the little bugs floating on the top of the water's surface.

Renn watched it as it plunked back into the lake. Its splashing caused most of the water-bugs to dance away, most headed deeper out into the lake.

"These lakes are pretty. This place is... flatter than I'm used to. Usually you can't see the whole lake like this, at least not from the ground," Renn said as she studied the large lake.

"Enjoy it while you can. We'll be entering rather large mountains soon," I said.

"Hm," she nodded.

"And you'll find not everyone has a wonderful reason for staying, Renn. Remember Kaley? Her home is nothing but a former shell of itself. A hamlet at best. Yet she'll never leave it," I reminded her.

"Hm... but I understand her reason. Her family had been there," she said softly.

"So to end your short career as a society's protector, I must only have you get a family and then lose them?" I asked her.

Renn's ears beneath her hat shifted harshly as she turned her head to glare at me.  
"That's a rather rude statement."

"But a real one. If that is all it would take to put you out of commission, I suggest you hang your hat up now," I told her.

A part of me hoped she'd actually get upset. Real anger from her might just convince her to change her mind and...

But no. She ended up smiling after a few moments of glaring at me.

"How about you, Vim?" she then asked.

"What about me?"

"Do you not long for somewhere? An old home maybe? Surely there's somewhere you like to go, or wish you could go back to?" she asked.

For a few minutes I walked in silence. Not just to ponder her question, but to find somewhere I could pretend to use as an answer.

I failed to do so.

"No. There's not," I said.

Renn's smile didn't disappear thanks to my answer, but it sure did become small. "I see," was all she said.

"Most of our kind is bound to somewhere. Land. An idea. A person. It's a little melancholic to admit, but it's the truth. Either our members are stuck where they are because of their loved ones, or the idea of them. The few who don't live in the same location their whole lives still always return to a certain location. Like the twins, who bought a boat to be merchants? They'll always return to the Cathedral, no matter what happens," I explained.

"Hm... Lughes would paint the mountaintops of his home. Why did he leave them?" Renn asked.

I blinked a few times, and not because of a fly buzzing around my face. "That place was his home, but it became his hell. He not only ran from it, it ran from his mind," I said. I hadn't thought of Lughes's home in a long time.

"Where is it?" she asked softly.

I waved the fly away, and tried to think which direction it would be from here. After a moment I pointed over the lake, to the other side. "To the north that way. It would take us months at our pace on foot. Maybe even years," I said.

"Oh... so that's why you said I'd never see him again, if he lived," she said.

I nodded. "If he went back there, well..." He probably wouldn't be worth meeting again anyway. Odds are if he went back to his home, he was no longer the man either of us knew. But I didn't want to say that. Not aloud anyway. Just in case.

"You said he had a daughter, before," Renn whispered.

"I don't want to talk about that, Renn. Pick something else," I said.

The fly returned. This time I grabbed it out of the air.

Tossing it aside into the lake, I sighed and wondered why it had bothered me. I was usually never bothered by bugs. It landed in the lake with a plunk. It slowly floated back to the surface, but was still. I had killed it either with the grab or the toss into the water.

It also hadn't been a fly, but some kind of hornet.

"Back to the duck then. What's his name?" she asked smoothly, completely unbothered.

"Trek. It's a shortened name for something else, but I don't know his full name," I said, thankful for her willing to not only allow the change of topics but to not grow angry or sad over it.

"Trek..." she said the name slowly, as if to memorize it.

We walked in silence for a moment, and I wondered if she actually had gotten a little upset over me forcing the change in topics. It didn't show, not even on her ears, but...

"Our kind live a long time, Renn. If you consider our long lifetimes... it's not a surprise that our kind put value into emotions in such a way. It's not the land itself, it's what happened there. Who lived there. The memories, and such," I said.

Renn nodded quickly, obviously agreeing. "I get it completely Vim. When Nory had died I was going to leave the very next day... I ended up staying weeks after. Maybe even months now that I think about it. Who knows how long I could have stayed," she said.

Nory. The human woman she had lived with before finding the Sleepy Artist. She seemed to have loved her... and based a lot of her thoughts around her, even still to this day.

Maybe that was her anchor. Maybe this Nory was what kept her sane, or at least the memory of her.

"But I also wanted to leave. The place made me feel sick, since it was... lifeless, without her. So I honestly don't think I would have stayed there forever like some of the rest of us do," Renn added as she pointed at me, as if I was somehow in trouble.

"Death does that," I said.

"Hm... The witch, the first human I ever met... She was bound to a single place too. Humans do it too, don't they?" Renn asked.

"Of course they do. Most humans don't even leave the town their born in their whole lives."

"Are the reasons the same though?" she asked.

"Do the reasons matter?" I asked back.

"Well..." another fish jumped out from the lake. It splashed loudly after flailing in the air a moment. "I think they do," she finished as she watched the ripples and droplets scatter the lake's surface.

"This Nory, you lived with her a long time?" I asked.

"Decades. She was a young woman when we met, and she died... She was weathered and old, unable to even get out of bed," Renn answered, but had done so a little softly. Her voice became low, and weak.

"Did you two live at the same place the whole time?" I asked.

"Oh... no. We traveled for a few years, and ended up in the mountains near Ruvindale. Once we made the cabin we stayed there though, yes. We only went to the town a few times, and only for short periods. For instance one time Nory got very sick, I had carried her there to get help," she said. She sounded a little happier now, as if happy to remember that memory.

"I see," I said.

Did she know the kind of face she wore when she spoke about this Nory? She looked her age, for once. She looked as if she had gone through countless years of grief and loss, and had accepted it all and endured.

It made her look good.

"She had her reasons to stay there, didn't she? Humans and our kind aren't so different," I said, getting back to my point.

Renn slowly nodded. "I suppose."

Granted I didn't know what reasons this Nory had to live secluded, but it was obvious they had history. A story. Something had happened, that made her precious to Renn.

Which meant if she compared those emotions to what those of our kind felt... like Trixalla or Kaley, she'd be more understanding. Or at least, she'd be able to accept it.

"Nory was... my friend. I miss her," Renn then said softly.

We were starting to leave the lake behind. The path we were on met at a crossroads, and I guided Renn to take the one that went deeper into the forest instead of around the lake.

"Want to tell me about her?" I asked her. It would tell me a lot of Renn, to hear about this Nory.

Renn paused a moment, and stood next to me with an odd stance... as if afraid all of a sudden.

Waiting for her answer, I held her strong gaze. She was staring into my eyes, but wasn't looking at me.

After a few moments... I opened my mouth, to ask a different question. To give her an easy way to deny me, without actually doing so. Yet before I could say anything she spoke up.

"She was a knight. She had been raised to be one, from an orphanage and," Renn quickly went to talking about this Nory. Someone who she very obviously cherished. Someone who, even after all this time, she could talk about with full confidence and with a smile.

Renn told me how Nory had struggled in the church. How she had been abused. How she ran away, or at least tried to.

She told me how they met. How they became fast friends. And then how Nory got captured and tortured, because of Renn.

How she saved her.

How they escaped.

How they spent their years after, in hiding.

Renn told me how her friend's mind slowly went because of age.

And near the end, as she told me how Nory had died... Renn reached out and grabbed my hand.

I allowed it, since her sad yet happy face was wrought with tears... as she told me of her dear Nory's last moments, and all the thoughts and emotions Renn had at the time.

This was also something a protector had to do, sometimes.

Plus...

"She was a wonderful person. You would have liked her," Renn whispered softly as her tears slowly stopped falling.

"I'm sure I would have," I told the woman who just proved that she too could become a protector.

After all you have to love and care for what you protected.

Even when it hurts.

*Chapter 94: Chapter Ninety Three – Renn – A Pond's Quiet Ripple*

Sometimes I felt... young. As if I was but a child, and had so much still to learn that it seemed impossible to do so.

That old witch had made me feel this way often. She had spoken about sciences, religion, and all the things that I had no knowledge about at the time. She had taught me to read, and that had felt like such a monumental achievement... yet all it did was make me realize how much more I had to learn.

Yet here now, before me, it wasn't a book that was making me feel this way.

It was instead two men working on a small dock, without saying a word to one another.

Vim and Trek were hammering freshly cut boards. Vim was waist high in the water, standing a few feet out into the pond... which honestly was a little too big to be a pond. It'd take me half an hour to run around it, at least so it seemed.

But most of the pond was covered in flora. Large cattails covered nearly all of the pond's edges, with only a few sections free of them. Other than them, there were also other plants. There were large blades of grass, flowers, and stuff that almost looked like vines were also mixed in.

It was a nice pond, honestly... but not so unique that I could completely understand the man's fixation upon it.

A small cabin had been built not too far from the pond, and it was undoubtedly Trek's home... yet it looked a little worn down. A little old. A little... drafty. One of the windows looked missing.

When Vim and I had arrived this morning, Trek had been cutting wood and preparing it.

Without even saying hello, Vim had immediately joined Trek in repairing the dock. I wasn't sure how it had happened, but half the dock had broken and sunk into the pond. One of the first things Vim had done was pull all the broken wood out of the pond, it was now stacked in the distance. It was glistening from the water, and covered in enough gunk that it was clear it had been submerged for some time. Maybe months.

Had Trek been working this long, or had he simply started around the time he expected Vim to show up?

Something told me it was the latter. Especially since he seemed as able and skilled with the hammer as Vim was.

I sat on a large fallen log. One that undoubtedly would eventually be chopped up and used as well. It had been sitting here for some time, based off the way the log looked. It had already been stripped and cleaned, there was no bark or limbs upon it. It felt... a little too smooth. A little too dry. Odds were it had been sitting here for months as well.

Trek really had been preparing for this moment.

A loud clunk drew my eyes back to the pond. I watched as Trek and Vim set one of the boards down and went to nailing it to the pier. They worked swiftly and easily... as if they had done this before. And not just once or twice either.

The sight of the two men working was one that kept the eyes. And it wasn't because both of them were nearly naked, since they were working in the water, but...

What was such a relationship like?

Vim shows up, without notice or request, and then without a word goes to help. I knew no matter what Trek would have been working on, or doing, Vim would have aided him. Without question.

What was it like to have someone like that? To rely on them so easily?

Even if Vim would help me like that, I'd... I'd honestly find it uncomfortable.

I'd feel silly. It'd make me feel very conscious of myself and him, and would make me want to thank him somehow.

I'd feel indebted. As if the scales weren't balanced. Yet it wasn't like that with Vim and the rest of the Society.

He arrived. He helped. He left.

To them it was as natural as the sun and stars.

Which honestly probably meant I hadn't properly adjusted yet to being in the Society.

I sighed as I stood from my seat. I had no intention of helping the two, mostly since they seemed to be working at a pace that was beyond me. I'd just get in the way, and slow them down... so instead I supposed I could find something else to do.

Surely he wouldn't mind if I cleaned up his house or something? Cooking, maybe. Would Trek or Vim get upset if I went into his house without asking? Vim had gone in and out a few times, to get supplies...

Slowly walking to the house, I made sure to keep an eye on Vim as I did so. He glanced at me, but just once. He looked away after a moment, which told me that I was fine.



Vim wasn't afraid to make it a point that I was making a mistake, after all.

"Still, how big of a dock does he need?" I asked quietly as I walked up to the pile of freshly cut lumber. The stack of wood was nearly as tall as me.

It was hard to tell how big the dock had been originally, thanks to it having been so broken... but surely it hadn't been that big?

What was the dock for anyway? I didn't see any kind of boat anywhere, not even a small one. And even if there had been one... although the pond wasn't too tiny, was it big enough for such a thing?

Walking around the pile of lumber, and then the area that was now full of sawdust and shavings of wood, I walked up to the house. It didn't have a porch, but it did have something of a canopy. Although I doubted its effectiveness, since it looked like it'd fall off the house at any moment. Some of the nails that held it up were sticking out and looked as if they were barely hanging in.

"Maybe Vim should help him rebuild the house too," I said as I peered into the broken window.

It was indeed broken, or rather simply missing. There was no glass anywhere, not even fragments could be found on the ground around it.

The inside of the house looked somewhat normal. A bed, a table with a few chairs. A small kitchen area in the corner, near a large open fireplace.

Glancing back to the pond, I saw the same thing I could hear. They were still hammering the boards together.

"Hmph."

Was it Vim that was the odd one, or Trek, I wonder? Were they not going to say a single word to each other the whole time?

Entering the house was easy. The door had been propped open. As I entered, I noticed... an odd lack of smell.

Did he ever even come in here? It smelled devoid of life. Especially for one of our kind, who usually had a more distinct smell than humans did.

Once inside, I went to cleaning up a little. I didn't try fixing anything, which was difficult for me. Just like the frame of the house, the stuff inside were worn down too. Dressers were leaning; the bed had a broken leg and was held up by a box. The table was somehow the only thing that didn't seem needing repairs.

I spent an hour or so cleaning, and eventually ended up lighting a fire as to cook something. The man obviously did live here, since there were stores of food. Dried meat, pickled vegetables... even spices lined one of the shelves.

While I cooked I occasionally glanced out the missing window. Sometimes Vim and Trek were together, hammering away at the dock... other times they were separated. Vim spent a good hour on the large log I had been sitting on earlier. Every so often Vim or Trek would return to the house, either to grab something or cut and shape the wood nearby.

By the time most of the food was done cooking, that log I had been sitting at had disappeared.

Putting the plates of food onto the table, I felt myself smile at the sight.

It had been a long time since I had cooked anything. Lately Vim had been the one to cook, or he and I had gone elsewhere to eat. He seemed to enjoy eating at taverns.

"Smells good at least," I said. Better than the smell of cut wood that was stinking up the place.

Putting the fire out, I hesitated as I listened to the last crackles and pops of the fire... and nothing else.

No more hammering. No more sawing.

Standing up, I peered around the window and saw the two men on the dock.

They were done.

Already?

Hurrying out of the house, I felt... a little silly as I stared at the two men.

They were standing near the end of the newly built dock. It was a little wider and went deeper than I had thought it would have. It went well out past the foliage and cattails.

For a few moments Vim and Trek stood there, staring out at the pond... appreciating their handiwork. And then, with gentle slowness... Trek sat down.

I blinked as Trek sat down at the edge of the dock, hanging his legs over the edge. I watched as his broad shoulders rose upward as he took a deep breath... and then he slowly released it.

A content sigh.

Gulping, I stepped forward and strained my ears. I no longer wore my hat, and they weren't that far... yet I heard nothing. But surely they were saying something? Surely they were talking?

Yet they weren't. They were as silent as they had been since we got here.

For a few solid minutes, I studied Vim who studied the pond. Then he glanced down at Trek... and simply nodded.

Vim then turned, stepping away from the duck and dock and headed towards me.

My eyes grew watery as I realized that was it. This was it.

He was going to tell me we were going to leave.

"Vim..." I whispered his name, afraid to break the silence the two had so willingly created.

"Did you cook something?" he asked once he was in front of me.

I nodded.

"Good. That was nice of you. Get your stuff. Your hat too," Vim gestured to my head.

I nodded, even though it hurt to do so.

"We're... we're leaving...?" I asked softly.

"We are."

"But..." I looked out to the pond. To the man who still sat there, at the end of the dock. "You didn't talk yet," I whispered.

"We spoke enough," Vim said calmly.

They hadn't said a word.

Hesitating, I shuffled my hands around as Vim went to gather his clothes. He seemed dry already.

While Vim got dressed, I grumbled and didn't know what to say. "Are... are you sure?" I asked. What about his house? It was about to fall apart.

Vim chuckled as he slipped on his shirt. "He's fine Renn. Trek is content. That man could die tonight, and will now do so with a smile on his face. He needs nothing else. You should be jealous of him, not concerned," Vim said lightly.

I sighed and realized he was completely serious. We were leaving, and doing so now.

Hurrying into the house, I quickly gathered up my stuff. My backpack, my hat... my jacket...

Pausing before the small table that was now littered with steaming food... I groaned as I took one of the small strips of meat.

Putting it into my mouth, I hurried out of the house and found Vim was already walking away, heading back to the path we had used to come here.

"Vim..." I groaned with a mouthful as I went to follow him.

Vim ignored me as I looked back to the pond. To the man who sat there, alone.

With a sigh I mentally said goodbye to him.

This was going to take a lot of getting used to.

*Chapter 95: Chapter Ninety Four – Vim – To Kill Those Who Would*

Renn looked far too happy as she licked her fingers. If she had been born a human she would have probably been far larger than she were, based off how much she enjoyed food. Honestly how was she so scrawny as it was? I'd never really noticed but she was, or at least looked, thin. It was one of the reasons she fit the church garb so well when she wore it. They usually were scrawny.

It was a good thing I had dressed her as a common traveling merchant and not of the devout. Although it would have fit her, it wouldn't have right now. Not with that crazy smile as she stuffed her face of food.

And it wasn't even delicious food either...

Staring at the cooked goose, or at least the remnants of what had been of one, I wondered why she found it so tasty. It had tasted rather bland and dry to me.

"Want another one?" I asked her.

"Hm... I think I'm fine," she said as she turned her plate a little, to start eating the bread that had been served along with the goose.

"You think," I noted.

She smiled at me as she took another bite.

The tavern we sat in was a little busy. It was full of fishermen and those who worked in the village. Renn and I were dressed the nicest, yet not so nice that we stood out. Odds were this tavern got many travelers, although right now it seemed we were the only ones here.

"Two ducks as always, Bram!" A large man teased one of his regular customers as he put a pair of large platters onto a nearby table.

"Two ducks and three beers, you mean!" the man laughed back.

The loud patrons made it easy for Renn and I to ignore them, and be ignored. We had gotten a few looks when we had ordered a whole goose for ourselves, but those looks had only been gentle envy, nothing more.

"Ducks..." Renn groaned at the word.

"They're tasty," I teased her.

"Think he ever eats any? He had meat in his house," she said as she slowly took another bite.

"Why wouldn't he?" I asked her.

"Crane didn't eat meat."

"Crane was weird," I said.

"Rude," she reached over to take one of my bread pieces.

Taking a drink, I watched as Renn happily ate. At moments like this she seemed to be as old as she looked. A young girl who had just entered womanhood, and was enjoying life and all its pleasures.

Which meant people saw me as the lucky guy who caught her eye, or maybe the weird one who she'd leave in the dust the moment she could.

Either worked.

Renn coughed as she swallowed. She quickly went to take a drink, and seemed to focus on her drinking for a moment. The bread must have gone down harshly.

"Bread, the mighty cat killer," I said lightly.

"Almost," she smirked at me as she went to take another bite.

"Worse ways to go," I admitted as I reached out to take a bite of the stuff myself.

Sure enough the bread was rather dry. It had been left to sit in the hot pan a little too long.

"Can I ask something weird, Vim?" Renn then said.

"Half your questions are weird Renn," I said.

She blinked, and then smiled at me. "Only half?" she asked.

"Give or take," I said with a shrug. Honestly most of her questions weren't weird at all. They were normal... and understandable. The few she asked that I didn't wish to answer were more on me than her, honestly.

"Hm..." She brushed off her hands and then nodded. "Okay. Why didn't you fix anything in Trek's house? A lot of it could have used a little work," she then asked.

"He doesn't want me to mess with the house. That dock is really all he cares about," I said.

"Oh... but you helped fix some of Kaley's stuff," she said.

"She's... different. I can't help her as an individual so I help in what little ways I'm allowed to. Trek would just tell me to stop and leave if I started working on his house. Kaley won't notice what I did, but she'd say thank you if she saw me doing it," I explained.

"Do you treat everyone that way?" she asked.

"I help where and when I can Renn, but I'm not a god. I can't fix everything," I said. Although lately it did seem like I was more of a common laborer than an actual protector.

"How do you know when to stop? How do you know when to choose to help and not? Is it just based off the individual's personality?" she asked.

I shifted a little, and realized where the conversation was going. Although I knew this topic not only was inevitable... I knew it was needed. Yet I really didn't feel like talking about it just yet.

"You learn and adapt. You'll help until you realize you can't anymore, for one reason or another. Then others you'll stop helping, only later to learn you should have helped just a tad bit more. That's something only time will answer," I told her.

Renn blinked a few times at me as she soaked up my words. She didn't like them very much, based off the way she frowned unhappily. "That's a sad way to learn," she finally said after a moment.

"A painful way, too," I agreed.

The sound of a table being knocked over made Renn startle, she leaned to the left to see past me and stared at the commotion behind me.

"No! Stop him!"

"Shit, Johnny!"

The tavern quickly became loud, this time with cries of anger and shock. The familiar sound of two men fighting filled the room shortly after. I heard tables being moved, chairs skidding and falling to the ground. Plates smashing, bottles and cups clanking as they bounced on the floor. I heard people running out of the tavern, and others hurrying to stand from their chairs.

With a sigh I ignored Renn's very obvious look of concern as I slowly turned around. Not too far from us, about two table lengths away, were two men rolling on the ground. One was trying to strangle the other; the one being strangled kept punching the other.

"Get'em off him!" the tavern owner shouted as he pointed at the two. It was a funny sight, considering he was more than big enough to do the deed himself.

"Vim...?" Renn asked softly, but didn't sound too worried.

For a small moment I studied the tavern and the occupants. Most were the same ones I had seen... but I didn't recognize the two men on the ground that were fighting. Had either of them been in here? I didn't remember the red haired one, or the broad shoulder man on top of him. Maybe one had run in here as to escape the other, and thus the scene now.

Either way, judging by how fiercely both the men were fighting... this wasn't going to end well. Even if they stopped, there'd be more chaos. There'd be shouting, accusations, drama.

None of which I felt wanting to be a part of.

"Let's go," I told Renn. I drained the last bit of my cup as I stood.

"Ughh..." Renn made an odd noise as she nodded. She quickly stuffed her face with the rest of her bread and even reached over to grab the few pieces left on my plate.

I grabbed her cup for her, since it was still somewhat full. She stepped around the table, right as the two men rolled into the table near us. Plates clanged, and two cups fell. Luckily for them neither had been very full, and nothing had splashed Renn or I.

"By the Gods stop them already!" a woman shouted.

"Johnny, please!" a younger boy stepped forward and shouted. He tried to get close to the two men, but only ended up getting hit by a stray foot. The boy shrunk back into the crowd, pulled back by some of the onlookers.

"Idiots!" another shouted.

"You stole her!" one of the men on the ground finally got on top of the other. He shouted wordless anger, and then began to punch the man in the face. Repeatedly.

"This way," I guided Renn to the back of the crowd. We were being ignored by everyone, so it made it easy.

Renn studied the two men for a moment, until the situation changed.

Pulling Renn back, to get behind me, I watched as the man who had been on top of the other fell in front of us. The crowd gasped as he fell onto a table. It held up well, the table only moved a few inches as he rolled on it, moaning as he held his chest.

The man he had been punching had kicked him off, rather brutally.

And was now...

"Don't do it Rob!" a woman cried out. A familiar voice, one I had heard shout before.

The man who had been getting pummeled had found his feet... and also a knife. One meant to cut meat from bone. One that most likely had just been used to serve someone's dinner. Now it was pointed at his fellow man.

He held it with both hands, and stepped towards us. The man on the table was moaning as he rolled over a little, nearly falling off the table. He wasn't very aware of what was about to happen.

"Vim...!" Renn stepped forward, stepping into my arm and side. I glared at her as I kept her in place. What was she thinking?

The man rushed forward, landing rather haphazardly on the man on the table. They both promptly fell off the table, rolling to the floor. The man with the knife ended up on top, and without any hesitation went to stabbing.

"Gods!" a woman screamed and a man hurried forward, but hesitated. The man was stabbing wildly, and the man being stabbed barely seemed to register what was happening to him. He only raised his hands and stared wildly up at his attacker. Either in complete shock or the earlier kick had done more damage than I had assumed.

Looking away from the carnage, I grabbed Renn's arm and pulled her away. She resisted for a moment, but not because she was as stunned as the crowd around us.



"Leave it be," I told her.

"But!" she frowned in worry, and then flinched. A woman screamed, and I looked away from Renn and found why she had been acting so.

A woman was getting in-between the two men. She had wrapped her arms around the one who was stabbing wildly, and was screaming for him to stop. The man was blinded by bloodlust, and didn't notice her nor was his stabbing impeded. His arms were a bloody mess as he continued to stab the now still man beneath him.

The woman holding onto him was screaming, and the crowd had started to change. A few were hurrying away, in fear or shock... others were stepping forward, but were unsure of themselves. Too scared to intervene, even though they knew they should.

"Johnny!" the woman screamed as she tried once more to tug the man off the other, she still failed in the effort... but it succeeded in getting the man's full attention.

He raised the knife again, this time towards her.

I sighed and stepped forward. Handing Renn her cup, I was thankful she had the keen awareness as to grab it without question.

Rounding a fallen chair, I stepped right up to the mess. Blood was splattered all over the floorboards, as was food and drink. Most the crowd didn't even register my presence, until I kicked the man with the knife in the back.

My blow connected right before he brought the knife down on her head. The knife flew out of his hands, clattering to the floor.

The man flew off the... soon to be dead one, and tumbled forward wildly. His body crumpled against chairs and tables, causing the whole crowd to shout out in shock as they hurriedly moved to avoid his body.

He came to a stop halfway across the tavern, laying in a mangled mess of broken chairs and tables. His arms and legs were contorted oddly, implying they had all broken from the impact... and he was no longer moving.

A heavy silence filled the tavern as I studied the crowd. Most weren't even looking at me, but the man who I had kicked. Their eyes were wide in shock, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

Taking one last glance to the woman, and the bloody man on the floor... I knew he would not make it. He had dozens of stab wounds, most on his chest and face. One solid deep one had seeping black blood, coming from the side of his neck.

I knew not who had been the instigator, but it had ended with both of their deaths.

At least the woman was fine... even if she was looking at me as if I was some kind of ghost.

Turning around, I found Renn already near the entrance. She nodded to me, implying she understood.

Stepping away, the crowd separated themselves to let me pass. No one said a word as Renn and I left the tavern.

*Chapter 96: Chapter Ninety Five – Renn – A Fish and a Smirk*

The river nearby was flowing a little fast, even for as small as it were.

It was probably for that reason that Vim had us set up camp a little farther from it than we usually would. We were on the other side of the road this time, closer to a large hill that was rocky.

Vim stood across from the fire from me, and held a stick that had a large fish pierced upon it.

Our dinner. Or well, the last of it. He and I had already eaten three other fish of similar size.

"Would you have acted the same if they hadn't been human Vim?" I asked him.

"I'd have found out more information, yes. But I would have probably kicked the man all the same... though maybe not as hard," Vim said with a frown.

It had been a whole day, nearly on the moment, from yesterday's events in that tavern. Yet it wasn't until now that Vim was finally answering some of my questions about it.

I was starting to understand him a little more. Vim didn't mind answering questions, even ones that bothered him... you just needed to ask them at the right time, in the right place.

Almost as if he was fickle. But I knew that he wasn't. After all... he was as steadfast and solid as they came. I knew hundreds of years from now, Vim would be the same man as he was now.

"You waited until that woman got involved though, why?" I asked.

"Those men knew what they were doing. They chose that path, she didn't," he said.

"Ah, because of your free will then. Do you think it would have stolen her ability to choose if he had killed her?" I asked him.

Vim turned the fish a little, and it begun to sizzle a little. "You're reading into my actions a little too deeply," he said.

"Am I?" I asked.

"Can't you just accept the fact that I had done what I did as to save her? A man saving a woman in distress is usually seen as a good thing, and not investigated like this," he said with a glance at me.

"I'm just trying to understand you better," I defended myself.

Vim sighed as he turned the fish again. It sizzled louder, and I wondered if he was going to let it get burnt.

"Most of our kind wouldn't question me so much. Though granted some would also ask why I hadn't just killed them all while I was at it," Vim said lightly.

"Who would say that?" I asked, worried.

"Lilly for one," he said.

Ah. Yes... she probably would have.

"Then there are those like Jelti, or Henrietta and her family, who live amongst them. Love them, even," I said.

"Everyone is entitled to their beliefs, Renn. If you wish to be like me you'll learn to live amongst all of them, caring for them all as equally as the next," he said.

"It looks like it's burning, Vim," I warned. Some smoke was starting to come from the fish too.

"Just the tail, the rest needs a little more," he said.

"I like the tail," I teased him.

"You would," he said as he slowly spun the fish.

"Nory hated humans. She despised them," I told him.

"You mentioned that," Vim said.

"You act like you hate them sometimes... then other times, you act like you love them," I said.

"When have I acted in either way?" he asked as he finally took the fish off the fire. It sizzled loudly, and it and the stick it was stuck on smoked.

"You kill them without a thought you know," I said as he walked over to hand me the stick.

I took it, even though it was silly to do so. It wasn't too hot for me to eat, being who I was, but I kept myself from taking a bite as it cooled down.

"Once I decide someone needs to die, what more is there to think about?" he asked me.

"The person themselves?" I asked.

"The odds of someone changing within a few moments to stay my hand... I won't deny it hasn't happened, but I can't even remember the last time it had," Vim said as he thought about it.

"Then what about the repercussions?" I asked.

"What kind?" he asked as he sat down next to me. Although he sat gently, I had felt him through the earth. He was heavier than he looked.

"Well..." I hesitated, since I knew he probably didn't worry over such things at all.

"If you mean human law, then I'm sorry Renn but I've never feared it. Even if I feared such a thing how would I get caught? It takes me nearly a decade to return to places I go to, and humans can't remember things that long. Those people in that tavern, ten years from now, even if they recognized me wouldn't know what to do about it," Vim said.

"What about the ones you help? Like the cart you helped fix for that family near Nevi?" I asked.

Vim was silent for a moment, and I knew it was because he was searching his memories. "The broken wheel, yes," he said as he remembered.

"Kealla, and her parents Karl and Mary," I reminded him.

Vim shifted a little and gave me an odd look. One that made me hesitate right as I was about to take a bite.

Lowering the stick, I gulped an empty mouth as Vim stared at me. "What?" I asked.

"You remember their names?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I?" I asked. Him not remembering, I kind of understood... but really?

Vim shifted, turning himself so he faced me instead of the fire. I sat up straighter, suddenly a little conscious of how close he was. He had sat down next to me, when usually he'd have sat a little farther. It wasn't that cold, so it wasn't because of the weather.

"What was on their cart?" he asked me.

"Furs. Some kind of pelts, I think Karl said they had moose pelts," I said.

"What was the name of the guild he belonged to?" he asked me, suddenly very interested.

"Um..." I thought of that for a moment. I remembered what they looked like, their cart, and the pelts... the little flowers Kealla had given to me as thanks for our help... I remembered their smell too; they had stunk like the pelts. "Fellish guild, in the north of town," I said after I thought about it.

Vim sat silently, and I wondered if I had gotten it wrong. Surely that had been it?

"Oh, he said their building was red. A big red building," I said quickly.

An odd silence filled the air between us, only bothered by the campfire as it popped and crackled. I shifted, feeling a little odd. Maybe I had answered wrongly.

After a moment, my nose reminded me I held a stick with a cooked fish. Taking a bite out of it, I did my best to ignore the odd stare of the man sitting next to me.

"Who did Lomi hug first when we first met?" Vim then asked me.

I stopped chewing for a moment, and realized Vim was being rather serious.

Quickly swallowing, I nodded. "I came down the stairs when she was hugging Crane," I said easily.

"Who did she hug next?" he asked.

"You teased Crane about Lomi. How she was going to nibble her if she didn't let her go. Then she hugged Amber and..." I went quiet as Vim's eyes narrowed at me.

Looking around, to make sure there was nothing weird around us... or especially any humans, in case that was why he was glaring at me like he was, I wasn't too relieved to find we were still alone and there was nothing odd around us.

"What is it Vim? What'd I do?" I asked him.

"Nothing. I'm just surprised you remember such things in such detail," he said after a moment.

"Really...? Vim those moments were special to me. I'll remember them my whole life," I said.

"Special," he finally looked away from me, and at the nearby fire. His eyes looked focused but I knew he wasn't actually looking at the flames.

"They might not have been to you, Vim, but they were to me," I said honestly.

"All moments are special, Renn. I didn't mean that," he said.

"Then uh... why is it so weird? You obviously remembered them, right? I mean you have to, since you used asked about them," I said.

Vim nodded, and then gestured at the fish. "Eat before it gets cold, Renn," he warned.

Ah. Right. I quickly took a bite.

"Do you remember what I was wearing when we met?" I asked him.

He blinked, and then looked away from the fire. "When we met?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Worn down rags. You wore pants from an era forgotten by humans, from a kingdom that no longer exists," he said.

I smiled and nodded. "See? You remember too. So why do you find it so strange?" I asked him.

"You haven't noticed Renn?" Vim asked.

"What?" I looked around again. Maybe there really was something weird nearby.

"Our people. They're old, Renn," he said.

"Oh... Well, I mean..." I hesitated as I tried to understand his real meaning. Was he actually saying that most of our members wouldn't, or couldn't, remember such details?

"Those your age, or mine, can't remember the mundane anymore. There are a few who can, but most are... well... Like how Lughes was," Vim said as he chose his words carefully.

"But... I mean..." I quickly tried to think of most of our members. Most of them had seemed...

"Though maybe that's my fault. You haven't really met many yet. Twenty or so?" Vim asked himself.

"If you count you, and Shelldon who I honestly never got to actually meet, then I've met twenty seven," I told him.

"That many already?" he asked, a little too shocked.

"Twenty seven wonderful people," I said for him.

"Hm... well, yes. My point still stands. Most of our kind barely notices the little things, Renn. They'll remember things like, meeting you. Your name. Maybe something important. For instance Rapti will always remember the game you played with her. But she'd forget what we were wearing. Or what we ate while we were there," he told me.

"I see. And you blame our age," I said.

Vim shrugged as I took another bite. The fish was still warm, but I knew soon it'd get cold. Maybe I should offer it to him once it was.

"It's the only reasonable assumption," he said.

"You seem to remember stuff just fine," I said as I took another bite.

"I'm more active. I'm always doing something, focused on tasks. It helps I'm sure," he said.

"I'm sure," I smiled as he nodded, seemingly proud of himself.

"And not everyone is... as bad. Where we're headed right now for instance, is one of our oldest members. He's rather sharp even today," Vim said.

"Oh?" I picked at the fish as I glanced at Vim. It seemed most of the fish left was bones.

Vim nodded. "We're headed to the smithy. Nebl is the head of the family. A good man."

As I picked some meat from the fish, I studied Vim. He had a soft smile on his face. He seemed to enjoy the thought of us meeting this Nebl.

"Will they be scared of me? You said they were..." I remembered the word, but didn't know what it meant.

"Monkeys. Primates."

"Right," I nodded, that was it.

"We'll stay there for a month or two. Let the rest of winter pass us by before we try to cross the passes," Vim said.

"I don't mind snow," I said as I found there wasn't much fish left to eat.

Slowly turning the fish around, I figured there were only a few bites left. A few more if I was willing to really pick the bones out.

"Neither do I. But the villages along our path will find it odd if we arrive while the passes are still blocked. Since we're not in a hurry, we'll just spend it with the smiths," Vim said.

"Why do we stay in some places but not others?" I asked as I handed him the leftovers.

Vim took it, but glanced at me when he realized how little was left.

"I stay where I need to, and for as long as I'm needed," he said as he took a bite. I couldn't help but stare when he actually bit into the fish, ignoring the bones. He had taken a bite right where I had been picking at the meat.

"So there's... a need for us there? At this smithy?" I asked.

"Obviously? And you're the reason, mostly," he said.

"I am?" I asked, growing excited. Why was I the reason?

He nodded as he chewed, and I heard him chewing even the bones.

Although I could do it as well, I had never desired to do such a thing. Maybe he was some kind of animal that ate bones.

"They're a nice family, I expect you to enjoy it quite a bit," he said.

"I don't know what monkeys are," I said.

"You know what a human is?" he asked.

"Uh..." I wasn't sure what to say to that.

"There's your answer," he said with a smirk.

Vim's smirk remained even as he took another big bite out of the boney fish. And as he chewed the bones, I realized he wasn't going to specify what he really meant.

Oh well. I'd meet them soon and learn for myself.



And if he said they were a nice a family... then I was sure to think the same.

*Chapter 97: Chapter Ninety Six – Vim – The Smithy*

The smithy was about to gain a member... yet had also lost one.

Young Lellip stood with me in front of Nebl's grave. She had been the only one willing to show me where his grave was.

"Did they find the body?" I asked the young girl. Why did the grave look so...

Lellip shook her head. "The entire shaft got buried Vim... a whole floor almost," she said softly.

I took a small breath as I studied the untouched grass before me. They had smelted a gravestone for him, and had carved loving words into it. They had put his favorite phrase onto it, along with a note on how he had helped build the greatest society in all of history.

Slowly moving my foot in front of me, I watched the way the grass shifted thanks to my movement. The grass was firm, and didn't shift. Which meant the dirt beneath wasn't just settled but had been for years.

So just a gravestone, since no body laid beneath. That explained why it didn't smell like a grave, and also why her parents hadn't really wished to show me it. Either because of shame or because they hadn't believed it to be his grave at all.

"Did I do okay, Vim? He used to say that phrase often," Lellip asked softly.

Ah... that made a lot of sense.

I reached over to pat the young girl on the head. She stared up at me with an oddly concerned look as I smiled and nodded to her. "It fits him well, thank you," I said to her.

Lellip didn't smile, but her concern died a little. She nodded as I tried to think of what to say. She wasn't as young as I thought her, she was... Thirty? Almost forty maybe?

"Why was he in the mines?" I asked.

"Someone got lost. A young miner, from a family who just arrived a few months ago. They were..." Lellip shrugged softly.

"They were what?" I asked. I already somewhat knew what her answer would be, but I needed to hear it.

"Inexperienced," she said softly, as if embarrassed to say so.

"I see. Nebl did favor the greenhorns," I said.

Lellip nodded, agreeing with me. And why wouldn't she? It was part of the reason I had planned to stick around here for some time. I had planned to have him teach Renn what he could while we were here.

"Is... Is that girl special, Vim?" Lellip then asked as she turned around a little.

Glancing behind us, to the large house in the distance... I wondered if Renn seemed that way. We couldn't see her of course, nor could I hear her... but I knew she was inside the house with Lellip's parents. Probably telling them her story in full, without hiding anything.

"I'm finding that out still," I said honestly.

"Oh...? Anything I can do to help?" Lellip asked.

"I plan to stick around for a little while. Until the passes clear at least. Think you could teach her your craft while we're here?" I asked her.

Lellip beamed me a smile as she nodded quickly. "Oh yes! I can! Grandpa always said I needed to teach someone first before I could actually be considered a master!" she said happily.

"Good. Thank you. I'm sure she'll learn well, if not we'll just... bury her next to your grandfather," I said lightly.

Lellip's smile wavered a moment, until she realized I was mostly kidding around. Mostly.

"I offered to get his body, Vim... mom and dad won't let me go near the mines," Lellip said softly.

"Which is wise. Did the young miner ever get rescued or had he been lost too?" I asked.

"Three other miners died with him. One went in with Nebl, the other was with Kline, the young boy originally," Lellip explained.

"How are their families taking it?" I asked.

"Not as well as us, honestly. Half the mine hasn't returned to work, they're a superstitious lot," Lellip said.

"So are we sometimes," I said.

Lellip nodded, and I knew it was because her parents were the same way. It was probably why they didn't help her with this grave.

For a long moment we stood in silence, and I glanced up at the setting sun. I knew some of the smoke coming from the smithy's house was now not only the furnaces, but the kitchens too.

"When's your mother due?" I asked.

"Later this year she thinks," Lellip said.

"Good. That's good," I said.

"I hope it's a sister," Lellip said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Men are stupid," she said in a way that told me one of them had recently decided that fact for her.

Smiling at her, I was about to say something... but...

"The young man...?" I asked gently.

Lellip took a deep breath and then nodded, but said nothing more.

Reaching out to her, I pulled her closer to me instead of patting her head this time. She accepted the hug gracefully, and wrapped her arms around my waist. She gave me a tight squeeze, one that would have hurt a normal man.

"It's not your fault, Lellip. Nebl was wise and strong. If even he couldn't do it, then no one could have," I said softly.

She nodded, yet still didn't speak. Most likely because she was crying.

So...

Looking back to the gravestone, I sighed as I now understood.

The young man, a human, that Lellip had feelings for had gotten in trouble. Lost or stuck in the mines.

Nebl went in to save him. For her.

The results were the worst outcome, obviously... and now Lellip most likely blamed herself.

"I'm going to go help make dinner," Lellip then said after a moment.

Patting her back as she separated from me, I nodded to her. She was strong. Like her grandfather.

"Make Renn help you and your mother out. Your mother needs to stay off her feet," I told her.

Lellip smiled and nodded as she wiped her face off. I noticed the gleam of snot and tears on her hands and arms as she did.

While staring at the young girl... I realized something rather important.

Renn had gone through something similar recently. The Sleepy Artist had gone just as... wrong. Just as painful.

The two would get along well.

"I'll be in shortly," I told her.

Lellip swallowed some emotions as she nodded. "Okay. Don't be long Vim," she said as she turned to go.

I watched her go. She hurried down the small hill to the large open dirt land that surrounded the smithy. Years of using horses to stomp the area around the buildings had been effective, it kept the possibility of the furnaces exploding and burning down the whole forest to a minimum.

Lellip paused before the large house, and glanced back at me. I didn't wave back at her as she entered, even though I knew I probably should have.

Looking back to the grave, I sighed.

"Death always comes unexpectedly, old friend," I said softly.

The house behind me was a little noisy. And not just because the smithy was always noisy. Lellip's voice echoed a little as she shouted something. It was a happy shout however, so I didn't worry over it.

"Sacrificing your life for humans... I honestly never expected it," I said.

Though it had probably been more so for Lellip than not. I could see how it had happened.

She heard of him getting stuck in the mine. Her running to her grandfather, the strong and all knowing man who always had answers. And then Nebl running into the mines, knowing full well the danger... for his precious granddaughter. The only one of his

descendants to not only have survived the Monarch that hunted his family, but also the only one to inherit his passion of the forge.

"I can't fault you, old friend... but I really wish you hadn't," I said.

Yet how could I be angry? How could I blame him?

The man had been tired of burying his children. Tired of failing them.

But to be buried alive...?

I tried to imagine how long it would have taken. Although Nebl had been old... far older than most of our people, he had been also more like me than not. A being that was strong beyond belief, and thrice as stubborn.

The poor man must have spent weeks buried beneath a mountain. Unable to move. Unable to breath. All alone, until his whole body was eventually crushed and his brain died from a lack of nutrients.

Not a slow death at all.

Stepping away from the grave, I took a deep breath and decided to walk around the property for a while. I was angry now, and I didn't want to intrude into what sounded like a happy atmosphere inside the house.

That house needed happiness. When Renn and I had arrived a few hours ago, it had been...

Pram had been in bed. Her husband, Drandle, had told me that this was the first time she's been out of bed since her father died.

"What a curse," I said. Why couldn't death just ever take the one? Why did it always have to make the rest suffer too?

Death was the end of the suffering for the individual, but the beginning for the group.

Hopefully the short time Renn and I were here, they'd be able to heal a little. Not entirely of course, but enough that it'll make it all worth it.

Walking along the edge of the dirt, I studied the forest that surrounded the three large buildings. It was just as thick and quiet as it always was.

The smithy was a little higher than the village at the base of the mountains. But it was close enough to be considered part of the village itself. From certain parts of the village, you could see the typical smoke coming from the smithy furnaces. About half way in-

between the village and here, was the mines. A large one too, that I knew would eventually... if it didn't all completely collapse upon itself, make this place a boomtown.

There were diamonds in this mountain. Not just the coal, copper, tin, hematite and other alloys they were currently pulling out. Not that today's society could do much with diamonds just yet. Jewelry and certain tools were the limit.

Renn and I had circumvented the mining village. Usually I didn't pass through there when I came here, since Nebl would be able to fill me in on the state of the village. I was able to trust his insight and judgment of the village's condition.

Now I was going to have to go there myself. Which was a pain here. There weren't many people here, so everyone knew everyone. Which meant I'd stick out. A visiting family member worked, until some old folks recognized me from one of my last visits. Lellip had said some new families had come, maybe I'll get lucky and most the village is relatively new.

Rounding the smithy building, I noted the large section of black earth entrenching into the green of the forest. The dozens of years of soot and refuse was staining the land. It wasn't killing it though, based off the grass growing all over it.

Once I made a full circle of the property... I slowly approached the small hill where Nebl's grave stood.

It was a little too close, in retrospect. It'd need to be moved a little one day. Maybe to the outer layer of the forest that surrounded this area. But one couldn't blame young Lellip for it... she had done her best.

Staring at his little gravestone, I sighed as I read the words she had carved into it.

"If it breaks just hammer it again. And Again," Nebl, a man who lived for his family and sacrificed it all to build the greatest society known.

"Sorry Nebl... Nothing to hammer this time."

*Chapter 98: Chapter Ninety Seven – Renn – Master and Friend*

"After grinding these ores, we mix them into the batch that gets thrown into the furnace," Lellip handed me a fist sized chunk of silver looking metal.

"What's this?" I asked as I followed her to the next giant barrel.

"That becomes tin, eventually. This becomes iron. Or well, pig iron," Lellip said as she then handed me a darker colored stone, from the next barrel.

The iron felt a little lighter than the tin, oddly. But it was half the size.

"We use this to grind them all up. It has giant rocks inside that help, which Vim and my grandfather made. I never learned how to make them, so hopefully they never break..." Lellip said as she pointed to the large device at the end of the hall.

I quickly put the two stones she had given me back into their respected barrels, and hurried to follow her. She was talking and walking quickly, not really giving me a lot of time to process everything... and there was a lot.

The large device was circular, and had large wooden poles sticking out of the sides. Lellip walked over to one and patted it. "We push on these, after pouring the rocks and stuff into the top, up there," she pointed to a large opening that had a small staircase leading to it.

"Push..." I tried to imagine how hard it was. The device was nearly as big as the whole building. In fact it looked as if it had been built first, and then the building around it. The thing itself was made of heavy looking stone, and had lots of metal and wood all over it...

"Grandpa said humans use water to grind their ores. We don't have anything more than a few wells and small creeks here. It's a good thing we're strong, I guess," Lellip said.

"Can I push on it a little right now?" I asked.

"Hm? Sure. There's already a batch inside but it's ground up already... So it will be a little easier than usual, but I guess it'll let you find out if you can do it or not," Lellip said as she stepped away from the one she had patted.

I nodded as I approached the wooden handle. Running my hand along it for a moment, I realize it was smooth and...

Pausing my fingers along a pair of ridges, I realized what they were.

"Grandpa. He was strong," Lellip said softly.

I nodded. He must have been. And his hands must have been huge... nearly thrice or more the size of mine.

Finding a good position I took a deep breath and slowly started to push on the wooden bar. For a brief moment, the thing wouldn't move at all. For half a second, a horrible sinking feeling filled my stomach. Was I that weak? Lellip could do it and she looked younger than I did!

But no. The thing started moving after a moment.

"Oh wow," Lellip lightly clapped as I took a few steps, judging my strength as I pushed the wheel along. As it rolled, I heard the loud sound of...

"Is that sand?" I asked as I stopped pushing it, just in case I was going to ruin something.

"Yes. Basically. There's another smaller tumbler too, that we use for other material. I'm surprised at how easily you did that... how hard were you pushing you think?" Lellip asked.

"Uhm..." I stared at the thing and tried to think how much more I could have pushed it. "I could have done that even if it was a few times more harder, I think," I said.

"Really...?" Lellip sounded a little surprised.

"Am I weak?" I asked, worried. She was looking at me oddly.

"Far from it, Renn. Grandpa usually pushed for me, since it's a little hard for me still. I can push it but it's a struggle, it wears me out for the rest of the day," she said.

"Wears you out..." I tried to think for a moment. "How long do you usually have to push it?" I asked. I hadn't taken that into account.

"A few hours usually," she said.

"Oh... then yes I think I'd get exhausted too," I said. I wasn't entirely sure how long I'd last of course, but I could see how it'd become extremely tiring.

"Well we'll find out, trust me," Lellip said with a smirk.

Great.

"After grinding the ores, we either go straight to smelting or we mix with other materials... depending on what we're making. I'll go over all of that with you later. Let's look at the furnaces next," Lellip said as she pointed to our right.

A heavy wooden door led us to another section of a building. One with a long hallway, that was a little... "Soot?" I asked.

"Yeah, I usually sweep it out every few days but lately... Hm..." Lellip's tone told me the reason why she had been slacking in her duties.

"I'll help you later," I offered.

She nodded with a small humming sound as we rounded a corner and entered a... very hot and noisy room.



The large room had a huge door on one end, that was as big as the building itself. The doors looked as hard to move as the grinding wheel earlier. Across from those doors were three large ovens, and one of them was blazing loudly.

"These are the furnaces. That one's a blast furnace; it sucks in air from the bellows there, three times a day we need to pump the billows a dozen times or so to keep the fire going," Lellip said as she pointed to nearby levers.

This room was hot. The type of hot that made even breathing uncomfortable. Which was strange since there were a few large windows, and all were open.

"Bellows?" I asked.

"They blow air into the furnace. They're outside, but we pump them here. I'll show you later," Lellip said.

Lellip then pointed to the ceiling, I followed her point and I found a large metal looking crate that hung on a metal chain. It looked kind of like a carriage, and was actually pretty big. There looked to be something dark inside it at the moment.

"We pour the ore and flux in there. The other furnaces are used normally, you light them and put the metal in the front latches like so," Lellip opened one of the smaller furnaces front openings to show me. Inside was dark, and full of white sand looking stuff.

"What exactly do you make here Lellip?" I asked her.

"Everything. Anything. Sometimes the society sends us requests. A few months ago they wanted us to make iron beams. For boats, Grandpa thought," Lellip said.

"Boats...? Wait, they don't tell you what the stuff you make are for?" I asked.

"Not always," she said, and did so in a way that told me she didn't care if she knew or not.

Lellip guided me to the large door, the one that took up the whole wall. With odd ease, she naturally pushed it open a few feet to let us pass through.

Walking along the building alongside her, we went to the other side of the building and she pointed at what looked to be a huge box... yet it had ridges and...

"The bellows. Or one of them at least. We need to make sure no animals ever bother them, since they like to chew the leather," Lellip said.

"Oh? When I spend a long time somewhere forest animals usually stop coming around," I said.

"You stink? I hope so, I hate them. Deer always eat our farms, foxes steal our chickens, and bears try to get into the forge all the time. Think if we put you to work and make you sweat it'll work faster?" Lellip asked.

"I'd laugh but you sound rather serious," I said.

"Well... yeah? I'd pick stink over the annoying animals any day," she said seriously.

"I can tell. Well I don't know if sweating will help, but maybe..." I wasn't too excited over the idea of actually making myself smell but if it'd help...

"It's probably not really your sweat, but you yourself. You're a predator. A real one. Vim said a forest one too, which is probably why," she said.

Lellip guided me to the third and final building, and it was the biggest. A huge two story building that had no windows, and a flat roof.

"Here's the workshop. And storehouse. And where Grandpa used to sleep when he got tired of my parents," Lellip said as she opened the door to it.

Walking in with her, I wondered if I should comment on that last part or not. She sure did mention her grandfather a lot.

She seemed to have been very close to him. Her parents last night, when Lellip and Vim had been out of the house, had made it rather clear that I was to be careful in mentioning him around her. That she was still not entirely adjusted yet.

Which I found a little odd, since it had been clear that Pram had been bedridden before our arrival. She was pregnant, but didn't look sickly or weak. It had to have been because her father had passed away, just like Lellip she was feeling grief.

I understood grief.

The workshop was a little dark, until Lellip pulled on a long leather strap. Several rows of window shutters flipped open as she tugged on it, and I had to blink a few times to let my eyes adjust to the sudden brightness.

Somehow the windows were amplifying the sunlight... They glared to look at, similar to the way the sun would shine off something metallic in the distance.

"That parts the warehouse. It's full of junk, be careful if you go into it. It's easy to get hurt, lots of sharp stuff," Lellip warned with a point to the right. There was a huge metal fence surrounding dozens of tall shelves and crates.

"Here's our lathes, and other stuff. I'll teach you what I can about most this stuff, I'm honestly not sure how much Vim wants you to learn yet... but we'll figure it out, I guess," Lellip said as she slowly walked past workbench after workbench.

There were dozens of large tables, and twice as many shelves. There were rows of tools lined on all of them, and some were very... big. Too big, honestly. I walked up to one of the bigger hammers, and tried to imagine a purpose for it. The thing's handle alone was as big as my waist.

"A lot of the tools were stuff Grandpa used. You won't need to learn how to use stuff like that, I think," Lellip said softly.

"Ah... okay," I nodded, and glad for it. I didn't know how I'd use such a thing anyway.

Just how big had that man been?

"Here's the metalwork stuff. Over there's where we do leather work... Here's my favorite, a clay bench," Lellip smiled as she pointed to one of the corners, where there were two tables and... something weird sitting between them. An upside down wheel?

"What is that?" I asked.

"A wheel for pottery. Not very blacksmith, I know, but... I like it," Lellip said gently.

"Oh? Neat," I hoped I'd get to learn about this too.

Lellip hummed softly as she walked over to one of the larger workbenches. It had a black leather mat lying on its surface, and it looked old. It was so worn there were parts that had holes from wear.

"There used to be several more smiths. Guess we're not as steady as we thought," Lellip said as she stared at a small chisel.

So her grandfather had been only the latest loss then. Wonder who else they had lost recently. No one had mentioned it, not even Vim.

Walking along the tables and benches, I realized how much more was entailed into crafting than I had thought possible. There were hundreds of different types of tools. Not just hammers and blades, but pointed needles and things with strangely shaped hooks.

Was a month enough to learn whatever Vim expected of me? It looked as if it'd take many months just to be told the different names and purposes of these tools alone, let alone how to use them properly.

Pausing before a table that had something being worked on, I studied the small leather strap. It had other leather sewn into it, and had little holes... to attach something to it.

Maybe some kind of saddle piece for horses? Or straps? Whatever it was, it had been given a small design. Little flowers and trees were etched into the leather work, and they kind of looked out of place here.

Glancing at Lellip, I wondered how old she was. Vim had called her a child, but it was obvious she wasn't. She was no Lomi. She was probably closer to my age than she was Lomi's, based off her appearance. She looked a lot like her mother, but her arms were thicker. She had muscles, real ones. Ones that couldn't be hidden by her sleeves.

She's been working here from the moment she could walk, by the looks of it. It was probably why she also kept her hair short. It gave her a boyish appearance. But she seemed to have a girly side, based off the little designs on her clothes. She had sewn in little flowers and other things into her clothes, and usually in the same color as the clothes themselves. As if to hide them from obvious sight.

"Do you think Vim is angry with me?" Lellip suddenly asked me.

"Angry...?" I wasn't sure what to answer. Vim had seemed... bothered to learn of Nebl's death, but angry? Let alone at her?

Lellip took a deep breath and slowly released it, but only nodded.

"I don't think so, Lellip. If you promise not to tell him I told you, he actually told me to be your friend this morning," I said to her.

Lellip looked away from the bench in front of her and to me. She frowned as she studied me; she looked as if she hadn't believed what she had just heard.

I nodded and stepped forward, to make it clear. "Really. But don't think my friendship is just because he told me to, please. I thought you a friend since the moment we greeted each other yesterday," I said.

The girl smiled at me, seemingly amused. "He told me to not make you angry, since you'd just get angry at him," she said.

"Which makes no sense at all, I'm always angry at him for one reason or another," I said.

Lellip chuckled as she stepped away from the workbench finally. She put down the weird chisel looking tool, and nodded at me. "I look forward to our time together, Renn. No matter how long or short it is," she said as she extended her open hand.

Taking it I nodded. "Likewise. An old witch I once knew wanted me to call her teacher, so teacher Lellip, what will be my first lesson?" I asked as I took her hand.

"First lesson is we're called masters, not teachers, here in the forge. Second is, unlike what Vim thinks, it's okay to decorate!" Lellip said happily as we shook hands.

I blinked at the sudden mention of Vim, and nodded quickly. "Not entirely sure what that means... but I agree, Master!" I said happily.

Lellip smiled broadly, and I noticed the small gleam of tears in her eyes. Thankfully though, they faded quickly as she went to teaching me the different types of craftsmanship her family knew and used.

#### *Chapter 99: Chapter Ninety Eight – Vim – To Smelt*

Striking the hot steel, I took a deep breath as I watched the sparks fly and the metal bend.

I had struck too hard.

Typical. The sad part was I couldn't even blame the fact I hadn't forged anything in years... it was simply because I was annoyed. Perturbed, maybe, was a better name for my current emotional state.

"Yes. Perturbed," I told myself as I struck the steel ingot again.

This time I had struck it perfectly. It morphed at just the right amount, in just the right way. I turned the billet over and struck it again.

Another perfect motion. And then another. And another.

Although glad I had re-found my skill, and wouldn't waste the ingot I had spent two whole days making... I was also a little upset. A part of me always wished to forget how to do this, so I could learn again.

But I never forgot how to do anything.

"Even when I want to," I complained as I continued to strike the steel out into the form I wished. A long and thin tube would soon be forming.

I was the only one in the furnace building, at least for now. Renn and Lellip had helped me earlier; or rather Lellip had watched as to study, as I made the steel ingot. Her grandfather had taught her how before he passed, but had only done so a few times in front of her. She wanted to make sure she remembered it all properly.

Usually I'd never have allowed such a technique to be seen by anyone, but I didn't need to worry over Lellip.

She was made of the same stuff her grandfather had been. She'd die a long, horrid, death before telling or teaching anyone without my permission.

And Renn... well...

Even if she was able to actually remember the process, step by step, I highly doubted the need to doubt her either.

She was going to be right next to me for the foreseeable future after all. Who was she going to tell while next to me? How would she betray me, or the Society, while right within my grasp?

"And it feels good to trust people," I whispered as I performed one last strike onto the steel billet. It was starting to get too cold. I stepped over towards the medium sized furnace, and popped it open as to put the steel into the fire.

I didn't need to actually watch the steel as it heated up. I could feel the heat, and the billet itself, through the rod I held it with. A perk of being who I was, I didn't need to wear thick gloves like most did. And the metal rod I held was the kind that heated evenly, letting me know the exact temperature the steel was at.

It was hot. I could feel my skin sizzle, giving myself slight burns.

Even if I could remember how to do this without fail, my calluses always needed to be re-earned.

Glancing around the forge, I noticed the blast furnace's flames beneath its hearth. It was a strong yellow, but not as strong as it was earlier when I had entered.

I'll need to use the bellows in a bit.

A good ten minutes or so later I pulled the steel out of the fire. It was bright, and just right for me to take it to the anvil and return to forging it.

As I struck it, shaping it into the long pole I had in my mind... I wondered how long it had been since I had made something like this.

The last time had been with Nebl. He had helped me make it, too. Although he had complained the entire time. Something to do with the shape of the point... what had he not liked about it? Had it been too thick? Too wide?

"He had always been a perfectionist," I said. But that was my fault. He had a foolish teacher after all.

After enough strikes, I had to stick the steel back into the fire. This time I did stare at the steel, but not to gauge its temperature but to make sure the ever longer rod didn't touch

the back of the furnace. I didn't want the tip to get too cold by touching the firebricks in the back, nor too hot by touching the bricks on the sides.

Taking a deep breath of hot air, I noticed the smell of the steel. It was hidden behind the smell of the fires, and the soot and grime... but it was there. Hot steel smelled familiar. Reminded me of days forgotten, not just by me but the whole world.

A door opened, and I quickly moved to close the furnace's doors a little more. To keep the airflow properly tendered.

Whoever entered was wise enough to close the door behind them, and I kept my eyes on the fire as whoever it was approach.

After I was sure the fire was fine, and my steel didn't get ruined, I glanced behind me. At first I was going to chastise the one who entered after I had told them not to, since I had expected Renn, but I kept my tongue in check as I nodded to Pram and her large belly.

She said nothing. She chose to stand a few feet away, just far enough away to not be in reach of the hot flames or to bother the air that was returning to its previously still nature.

Pulling the steel out after a few moments more, I went quickly to the anvil and once again hefted the hammer.

"Making weapons Vim?" Pram asked after staring at what I was forging for a moment.

Could she tell already? Granted it was obvious, once you took into account who I was... but Pram shouldn't know a whole lot about me or my history. Though maybe she did. Although she hadn't inherited Nebl's love for the forge, she was still his daughter. His favorite one too.

"I am," I said plainly.

Although Pram didn't move, nor did she take in a deep breath... the air still shifted oddly. Somehow going a few degrees colder.

I quickly turned the steel around, to let it evenly adjust to the change in the air.

"What are you forging, Vim?" Pram asked again. This time her tone was cold enough to freeze the blast furnace. At least it sounded as if it could.

Glancing at the pregnant woman, I realized what she was actually speaking about.

"I'm not sure yet. I'm still finding out exactly what she's made of... this is one of those tempers, one of many. Once I know what she has within, then I will decide what to make of her," I said to her.

Pram shifted as I re-adjusted the billet once more. It was starting to look like the spear I had in my mind. A little longer than I was tall. Thin enough that I could hold it with just my thumb and palm, but thick enough that no one else could.

"Please don't make her into a warrior Vim... She's a kind girl," Pram said as I went to move it back into the furnace.

I took a small breath as the steel went into the flames. I felt a few arm hairs singe and burn off as I put it in. "Are we still talking about Renn, or are we talking about Lellip now?" I asked her.

"The woman you brought here, Vim. You already promised to never make Lellip into a warrior," she said.

I nodded. I had. To her grandfather. "Never a warrior, nor to make weapons. Yes. That is why I'm doing this, and not her," I said.

"For that I thank you... but..." Pram stepped forward, but just a single step. As if she was afraid to step into the heat. Maybe she worried for her baby.

"You need not worry Pram. I'll be making these blunt."

"Blunt...?" I could hear in her voice that she didn't understand.

I nodded as I glanced at her. "Blunt. They're for training, not for war," I said.

Pram quickly understood, but also didn't seem too relieved over it either.

"That's how you start isn't it? To make a warrior?" Pram asked, accusing me.

"I make no one. You know that," I said to her.

"I do know that. We all do. But you can also alter a person's fate with but a single word. A single word," Pram repeated as if to make it a point. She didn't need to, I fully understood her meaning. "Please Vim, don't make her another Lilly or Yangli. It's not fair. It's not kind nor does it bring anything but death and despair and..." Pram stopped talking for a moment, sounding a little too emotional over it.

As I took the steel out and walked over to the anvil, I wondered if her father's recent death had brought forth this torrent of emotion. That mixed with her pregnancy was probably the source. Pram had always been vocal against her father's involvement with me, at least in terms of certain aspects of the Society... but she hadn't ever actually tried to stop him or me as we did what we had to.

And this wasn't even her worrying over her children, or the unborn.... This was her worrying over a woman she had only known for a few days. Less than a week.



"She grew on you that much, Pram?" I asked her as I went back to hammering out the last bit of the spear.

"She has. She's made Lellip laugh and smile. She hasn't done that since the mine's collapse," Pram said sternly.

The mine's collapse, I noted. Not her father's death.

Did she not accept his death yet?

"Renn is pretty good at making friends," I said.

"I can't force you, of course... nor can I change your mind. I know better. You're too much like my father. But if my words have any value at all, Vim... please, I beg you... don't make her into a warrior. Don't make that woman suffer. Let her be happy. Let her be," Pram said to me.

"She will become what she wishes. And if you must know... I'm not making these to see if she's destined to be a warrior, Pram. Rather the opposite," I said.

"The opposite...?" Pram's voice was soft and small, and not because I was hammering more quickly.

I nodded as the sound of someone coming down the nearby hall drew Pram's attention. A squeaky wheelbarrow was pushed into the room, full of charcoal.

"Oh no! I missed it!" Lellip cried out as she hurriedly pushed the wheelbarrow towards us. I heard Renn's hurried footsteps coming from the hallway behind her, probably carrying other supplies that Lellip thought I might have needed.

Lellip put the wheelbarrow near the furnace, and quickly checked the fuel. It must have been fine for she didn't even toss in a handful of coals. She abandoned the furnace and wheelbarrow, and hurried over to me and the anvil. She kept enough of a distance to not necessitate a yell from me, but yet close enough she could watch intently.

"Dang it," she groaned as she realized I was nearly done.

"You don't need to learn how to make spears," Pram said sternly as Renn entered the room. She was indeed carrying a box... of what looked to be towels made out of some kind of leather. Maybe Lellip thought I was going to need something to clean the steel as I forged.

I hadn't. I hadn't burnt my steel in over a hundred years. What little scale there was fell off as I hammered.

"But mom look! Ahh... he hammers like how grandpa did," Lellip complained as Renn stepped up alongside the two women. She was staring at me oddly.

"Of course he does, who do you think taught your grandfather? Really Lelli," Pram sighed at her daughter.

I smiled at that as I focused on my work as the women went to talking to one another. Their appearance saved me. Pram might not have actually been happy with my answers, but she'd not show it or say anything in front of the person in question.

As I hammered out the last bit of the first spear... I couldn't help but smile as I blocked out the female voices around me.

How familiar.

This is how it used to sound. This forge.

Nebl and I as we worked. His six daughters in the background, being noisy about one thing or another...

Between the hammer strikes, and the girls talking... I heard him in the distance. The grumpy Nebl as he complained and struggled to keep up with me. Trying his best to match my rhythm... never realizing he couldn't, not because he didn't have the strength or skill, but simply because his arms were just too thick. Too short.

"Ah look! The last strike!" Lellip shouted loudly as I brought the hammer down one last time... and finished the spear.

Or well...

"More a stick than a spear," Renn said as I and the rest studied it.

"It's for practice," Pram said proudly.

I nodded. "Yes. Not for killing," I said. I probably didn't need to say aloud that a steel stick this thick and long was just as deadly as one with a point at the end. Especially in my hands.

"We can always add a point! Let me make it, please!" Lellip hurried forward; now that I was done hammering she knew it was okay to disturb the air around me and the anvil.

"It's still hot," I warned her as I walked over to the barrel of oil. The black gunk smelled, especially since it was warm. It was a little too close to the furnaces.

"Watch, Renn! This is quenching! It can ruin all your work if you're not careful and don't do it right!" Lellip said happily, as if she had never seen it before herself.

"You temper stuff first, Renn. Usually," I reminded Lellip, by telling Renn, as I dunked the spear into the oil.

As it quenched, I smiled at Renn's odd look. She was smiling warmly, just like Pram... which was odd, since Pram was smiling thanks to seeing her daughter's happy joy. Maybe Renn was smiling because of it too.

After all what else would they be smiling like that for?

Once the steel cooled and was done, I pulled it out slowly. What little of the oil didn't sizzle off the steel dipped back into the barrel as I held the thing over it. With a small shake I got the rest off it, and then pointed the spear upward to the ceiling.

Nice and straight.

"Here!" Lellip offered a black knife. One she must have pulled out from somewhere unusual, since I hadn't seen her grab it or have it on her person earlier.

I lowered the spear and allowed her to tap the steel with her own knife. She did so lightly, and a singular pure note ran out throughout the forge.

Renn's face furrowed as her ears twitched wildly, and the sight made Lellip laugh proudly as if she had been the one to forge it.

Tapping the spear with my thumb, I nodded. Yes. She should be proud.

As should Nebl...

"Get the other ingot Lellip," I said as I went to put the spear down.

"Oh?" she froze, as did Pram.

"And your hammer," I told her with a nod.

Lellip's face erupted into a huge beam of a smile as she quickly nodded. "Yes-right-away!" she shouted, rolling the words together into one.

Pram sighed as she covered her face, and I smiled at her and Renn who stared at her oddly.

"It's not a spear, Pram. It's a stick. I promise," I said to her.

"Just... just don't say anything. And don't tell her father, please," Pram groaned.

Renn hurriedly looked around, especially at Lellip who was running full sprint into the other room. To get the other ingots and her tools. Renn looked absolutely worried as she tried to understand what was happening.

Once Lellip was out of earshot, I smiled softly to Pram who was glaring at me. "Let her enjoy this, Pram. I don't have much else to give her as solace," I said gently.

Pram's glare immediately died, unable to withstand my words. She then took a deep breath and nodded.

"Okay... fine... Just this once," Pram agreed.

"Just this once," I agreed.

Renn hesitated, unsure of what to do with herself as Pram and I made a promise.

Nebl had undoubtedly taught Lellip how to forge weapons. Even if he hadn't, there was no way she wouldn't have figured it out by now anyway. The process was nearly identical to anything else you made in the forge, anyway.

But sometimes... sometimes one needed to see. To watch. To learn. Even if they already knew it.

"Come here Renn," I gestured for Renn to come over as I went to the furnace I was using. To put some more fuel in it from the wheelbarrow.

"Huh?" Renn hesitated, as she looked to Pram first.

"I need to measure you. Come here," I said.

"Measure...?" she still hesitated... until Pram took the box she carried from her, and gestured with a nod for her to hurry up.

Renn made an odd noise as she complied and hurried over to me.

After tossing some of the charcoal into the hearth of the furnace, I stood back up and studied her. She really was deceptive. Her ears made her seem almost as tall as me... yes, they were big.

Reaching out, I stopped right before touching her ears. I turned my hand around, and noticed the blisters on it. It was the hand I had been using to hold the handle of the billet.

Switching hands, I ignored Renn's weird stare as I put my hand on top of her head. I lowered her ears, as gently as I could... and she lowered them the rest herself. It

seemed she was able to make them nearly go flat on top of her head. "That's how you hide them under your hat?" I asked her.

"Sometimes. It's uncomfortable to keep them like this," she said, and sounded a little odd too. As if she suddenly was itchy all over. Maybe she was.

"Hm..." I leaned back a little and studied her new appearance. With her ears lowered, she was about the height of my chin.

Once sure of her height, I reached down and grabbed her hands. I didn't worry about touching her hand with my blistered one, since she could just wipe it off later.

"Hmhm?" Renn made an odd noise as I ran my thumbs along her palms, and opened her hands up wide. I studied the shape of them, and their size... and her fingers length...

She didn't have tiny hands, but they definitely fit her size. They were probably about as big as mine had been when I was a younger child. Maybe in my teens. But her fingers were longer than mine had been then. They were nearly as long as mine were now, although much smaller in width.

"Make fists," I told her.

She did so, but slowly... as if enjoying the sudden moment.

She was. She had a weird smile on her face as she balled her fists up inside my palms.

I held her fists for a moment, and realized that her hands really were small. She'd need a spear about half the thickness of my own, and a pommel only a tad thicker than that... yet shorter in length.

Odds were her and Reatti were a little different, but it'd be close enough. Reatti was scrawny too, and about her height.

"Okay," I patted her hands in thanks as I stepped away from her.

"Huh? That's it?" Renn asked, sounding far too disappointed.

Pram giggled as she saw whatever face Renn was making, but I kept my eyes on the approaching Lellip. She was hurrying; carrying a large metal box that I could hear was full of stuff.

"Did you see that Vim?" Pram asked as her daughter hurried over to us.

"See what?" I asked.

"That lovely face," she said flatly.

"Which one? Mine? Yes it is, at the right angle," I said as I tapped my own chin.

Pram sighed and shook her head, seemingly giving up on me. "Oh well... I guess if she can make that kind of face I need not worry. Not anytime soon at least," Pram said, and then turned to go.

Watching her go, I smiled in thanks at her... odd way of approving what I was doing. If even just because I was forcing her to.

"What kind of face do I have?" Renn whispered a question to Lellip, who hesitated with a quick shake of the head.

"No idea?"

"Is it funny looking?" Renn worriedly asked further.

"What does?" Lellip asked, now sounding just as worried.

"Have fun," Pram laughed at us as she left.

"Master..." Renn complained as Lellip tried to step away from her, obviously not understanding at all what was happening.

"Vim...?" Lellip asked for help, but I knew better than to offer it. Especially since Renn was looking at me now too.

"Come on, while the fire's hot let's get to work."

*Chapter 100: Chapter Ninety Nine – Renn – Someone Who Loves What They Hate*

This mountain was a little... odd to me. It was far flatter than I was used to. Vim and I had been walking for about half an hour now, and honestly we haven't ascended or descended much at all.

For the week it had taken to get here, I had assumed these mountains were rocky and hard to climb... especially since from a distance I hadn't seen much trees upon them.

Yet here we were, walking calmly through what almost looked like a normal forest. Not one covering a mountain.

I'd doubt we were still on a mountain, if not for the massive looming mountain to one side of us and another side showing the world beneath us for as far as one could see.

"I can still smell the smithy," I told Vim as we rounded a large tree. I couldn't see the smoke from the furnaces, or the house, anymore. And that wasn't just because we were

walking in a forest. Every so often the trees cleared out enough to give me full view of the sky and its horizon.

"It does have a unique smell," Vim agreed.

I nodded. Today was the tenth day that we've been here, and I still really haven't gotten used to the smell. Sometimes I woke up in the middle of the night, bothered by the smell. Which was funny, since Lellip thought I should be waking up from muscle pains instead.

But honestly I felt fine. The first night I had noticed some aches and pains, but they had faded before I even noticed.

And there were things far more important to worry about than mere body aches and smells...

Vim carried a leather wrap, which was wrapped behind his back. It held a bundle of glistening items. The ones he and Lellip had been forging the last few days.

Swords. Spears. He had also made others, like small daggers and bows but had left them back at the smithy for now.

I gulped as I noticed what was likely our destination. A large field of clovers and ankle high grass. Spacious and even.

Sighing softly, I wasn't sure what to say or think. Vim hadn't exactly been... secretive about what was happening. He had made it clear to others, all the while I stood in the same room listening.

He hadn't exactly told me to my face, but it was clear.

Vim was going to see if I could kill or not.

Or well, if I had the skill to do so properly. In his perspective.

Lellip had been jealous over the crafting of the weapons, but had been genuinely relieved that she wasn't expected to join us this morning. The sight of her groaning in relief as we left, leaving her behind, made me very anxious.

Maybe this would be painful.

Vim walked into the open field of clovers and glanced around. Sure enough he nodded and walked over to a nearby rock. One that stuck out of the earth in such a way that told me it was a genuine part of the mountain. It was probably massive, at least the part that was buried underground.

Here though it was perfect sized for Vim to lay his bundle of weapons up against.

"Vim... I..." I started to speak, to say what I felt my heart needed to... yet couldn't find the words.

I had agreed to learn from him. I had agreed to try. To become like him.

And that very obviously meant I'd need to learn how to protect. In the very literal sense. Not in the form of emotions, or kindness... but with violence.

"You want to learn, Renn. This is one of the things that must be taught," Vim said as he slowly un-wrapped the leather bundle. Its contents made familiar sounds as they clanked against each other. I had heard that pure note in the air many times as Vim and Lellip worked on them in the forge.

Why did they make such clear sounds? It was almost not fair. They sounded like little bells ringing out.

Something so beautiful sounding shouldn't be so... menacing.

Vim hefted one of the swords. I went still as he stared down its edge, to its point.

It didn't have either. He had made them blunt on purpose... but I knew full well that a blunt sword meant nothing in his hands.

The man before me could cleave me in two with that blunt weapon. Likely with ease.

"Take your hat off. And get your tail out. You'll need to feel as comfortable as you can to start, or else it'll ruin you forever," Vim said lightly as he inspected the blade.

My ears and tail shifted at their mention, and I went to oblige. I put the hat onto the rock near the bundle of silver looking weapons, and untied my pants enough to get my tail free. I then retied my pants, a little tighter this time.

After a moment Vim turned and stepped towards me. He shifted the blade and suddenly its handle was being held out to me. For me to take.

I gulped and hesitated, but knew I couldn't.

I knew since three days ago. Since I had watched Vim make that first spear. Since I had heard Pram and her daughter argue in the house, over allowing Lellip to help Vim craft what Pram considered weapons.

I knew this moment would come since then.

And not once did I ask him to reconsider. Not once did I voice my opinion on it.



I had no right to argue now... but...

"Vim... I've never wielded a sword," I said softly.

"I know. Yet you've held a bow, I believe," Vim said.

About to reach out for the sword, my hand came to a stop mid-reach. "Huh?" I glanced at the man who had somehow known something that he shouldn't.

He nodded. "Right? Maybe not for war and battle, but to hunt at least, I'm sure," he said.

Gulping lightly I nodded. "Most my life... before coming to the Society... But that had been to hunt," I said softly. How had he known? It was how I had fed myself. How I had fed all of those who had been with me.

"This is also hunting, Renn," Vim said gently.

I shook my head. "People aren't animals, and I don't eat them," I said.

"Funny."

I ignored the many obvious quips he could have given, especially to me with my ears and tail.

A long moment of silence followed... and Vim said nothing but he did smile. With that smile he nodded to the handle, pushing it closer to me.

Taking it, I wanted to complain but couldn't. Especially since this was the first time I had actually touched the weapon myself.

Wrapping my hand around the handle, I felt the strange wood that Lellip had carved for it. The material was smooth, but it had ridges and little twine pieces of leather inside the grooves. To make it easier to hold.

Vim released the sword from his end, and suddenly I felt its weight.

It wasn't much at all.

Hefting it, I stepped back a step from Vim. I knew he'd never allow himself to casually get stabbed or cut, but I still worried over accidentally hitting him with it as I studied the blade.

"Why's it so light?" I asked. I had thought it'd be heavy. The people over the years I had seen use them had always done so... slowly. Implying they had been heavy for them.

"It's not. A human man would actually be holding it with two hands right now, especially if it was their first time lifting it like you. A woman probably would have let the point fall to the ground," Vim said.

Turning the blade a little every which way, to get a better look at the thing... I wondered if that meant I really was that much stronger than most humans.

"The ball at the end is the pommel. The handle is that or hilt, depending where you are in the world. The two wings above the handle, where your hands are, is the guard. That one's a cross-guard. It's actually not to guard your enemies blade from cutting off your hands, but to guard your own hands from your own blade as you lunge it into your enemy," Vim explained as he stepped forward and pointed at each thing he spoke of.

I quickly nodded, even though most of this wasn't new. He had told Lellip the exact same stuff as they had worked on them together. Had he forgotten I was standing right there the whole time?

It had been enjoyable. And part of the reason why I probably felt so calm about this even now, as I held it in my hands.

Watching Vim teach Lellip had been...

Well to sum it up it made me teary eyed.

"After the guard is normally a blunt section. Intentionally left blunt so you can grab it if you need to. Obviously the whole thing is blunt this time, so..." Vim shrugged as he pointed to where the blunt section probably ended on a normal sword.

"Lellip complained you didn't let her decorate it," I told him.

"These are tools, nothing more. Decorate your home, not what kills," Vim said sternly as he stepped away from me.

I gulped at his suddenly strong tone. He hadn't liked my comment at all.

Maybe that was why Lellip hadn't actually complained to him, but to me and in private. She had known he would have gotten upset.

A little odd, considering he usually so firmly believed in the ideal of free-will. Was it not free-will to do what one wanted?

Obviously not when it came to weapons, it seemed.

"Lift it up straight. Make the point reach my nose," Vim ordered.

Blinking, I realized we were already starting.

Great.

Doing so, I felt silly as I tried to point the sword's end at his nose. I felt absolutely ridiculous as I shifted my shoulders and arms, trying to find the right position.

Once I did, I tried to imagine my own stance. My legs were too close together. My body too shrunk into itself. My arms too outstretched.

And the fact that even I could tell all of that, told me how bad I probably looked to Vim.

"Lower it now. Take the point to my stomach," he said.

I obliged. This was easier, since I only had to lower it straight down and didn't really need to change how I was standing or holding the thing.

"Now my groin," he said.

I blinked, but knew why he had said it. Stabbing there was probably very effective.

"Hm. Now lift it all the way back up, and swing it down slowly. Same movement," he said.

For a tiny moment I pondered what he had just asked me to do.

Swing the sword.

Slowly lifting the sword back to the first spot, to where the sword-point pointed at his nose... I then took a small breath and slowly swung the blade. I tried to keep it in the straight line he had just taught me, but knew the moment I swung that I had failed to do so.

"Again. This time put force into it."

Hefting the blade, I squeezed the handle tight and swung it with more force.

This time I heard the blade go through the wind. It made an odd sound.

"How am I supposed to hold it? It slipped a little that time," I asked as I moved my hands around a little.

"You'll either figure that out or you won't," he said plainly.

Frowning at him, I knew for sure that he knew exactly how to hold it. Hadn't I seen him just holding it? What had he been doing...?

Well he had only held it with one hand for one... but I wasn't comfortable yet with that. I didn't want to swing it harshly and fling it out, hitting him.

But he had held it a little different... and not just because it had been with one hand.

I closed my eyes for a moment and remembered the way he had held it. Then I thought of that time near that river. Before we had returned to Ruvindale, before we had found the Sleepy Artist ransacked and empty.

He had held a sword then too. Not his sword. Not this one. But a sword. From a knight.

He had hefted it and swung it. Twice.

Slowly moving my fingers, I replicated the way he had held it then. At least to the best of my memory.

Once done I opened my eyes and nodded. That felt a little better. All I had done was adjust the way my thumb laid against the handle, and my other hand.... But it still felt more secure now.

"I'm a firm believer in experience being the best teacher. So..." Vim shrugged as he suddenly lifted the other sword.

Wait... what! When'd he get it!

Quickly looking to the rock, I noticed it was in fact gone. He had picked it up and I hadn't noticed.

Impossible!

"Wait...!" I started to speak but Vim neither listened, nor cared. He stepped forward and raised the sword.

Although blunt... although I knew he actually wouldn't hurt me... my heart still skipped a beat as I stepped back away from him.

He looked focused. Serious. Dangerous.

Vim the protector stood before me, with a raised sword. His eyes were dead set onto mine, and he was... He!

Then he swung.

Turning my body, instead of the blade itself, I allowed his blade to land upon mine.

Which was a mistake. It hit with such force that the blade shot backward towards me.

I firmed my grip, and steeled my arms and back. It brought my own blade to a stop, mere hairs from my face.

"Careful Renn. Don't make me feel bad about scarring your beautiful face," Vim warned as our blades scraped onto each other. He wasn't really pushing into me, but it still felt heavy. Forceful. Demanding.

"Then don't do it in the first place!" I shouted and pushed his sword away and stepped back.

Suddenly I was sweating, and breathing heavily. I took in deep breaths of the mountain air, and noticed the sudden lack of the distinct smell and taste of the nearby furnaces.

I was so focused on him I didn't even notice that stink. Great.

Shifting the sword, I took another deep breath... and realized I was smiling.

"I'm coming again. This time from your right," Vim warned as he stepped forward.

I nodded, and shifted my body. This time I kept the sword's handle a little closer to my chest. It felt better to block that way.

And worked better to. This time my sword didn't get pushed back much.

Yet my heart still went into my throat when he swung his sword at me.

And did again and again, each time following that.

After a quick three blows, I hurriedly stepped back and almost fell over. Luckily Vim didn't swing at me a fourth time as I coughed and lowered the sword. It was suddenly very heavy.

"Lower the blade a little. Imagine the tip of your blade as an extended finger. Keep it leveled with your own arm," he told me.

I gulped, and tried to do what he told me. He was basically telling me to see the sword as an extension of myself right?

Shifting a little, I nodded to tell him I was ready to try it out.

He didn't nod... but he smiled as he swung again.

Which wasn't fair.

I was smiling too.

So I understood why he would.

But him smiling, and looking so happy, only made it all the harder to be scared of him.

And I wanted to be scared of the man he was right now.

I needed to.

I needed to fear the art of killing.

I needed to hate it.

Not love it.

Which seemed impossible, since it was obviously something he himself loved too.

And how could I hate what he loved so dearly?