

The Non-Human Society

#Chapter 1: Prologue - Vim - Again - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 1: Prologue - Vim - Again

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A layer of snow had begun to form, and my heavy footfalls became even louder because of it.

I could smell it now. The wind had shifted. What had been clean, if cold, air was now... tainted.

That wasn't just wood being burnt.

Looking up, I grimaced at the black smoke. I could just barely see the forming cloud of ash and smog through the treetops against the morning sky.

"Again?" I picked up my already strained pace as I cursed at myself.

Again.

The smell grew stronger as I rushed forward, ignoring the tree branches and limbs that tugged and scraped as I ran by. I ignored the herd of deer that had jumped up from their grazing spot, scattering in all directions as I passed them. I ignored the horrible truth that was deep down in my heart.

Again.

Through some trees, I finally made out the small village. The beginning of it. The familiar small storage building which the village used to store wood.

Bursting through the last row of trees, I slowed my pace as I approached what remained of the village.

Although the village was small, and nothing had really been built near one another... it didn't take long for me to take the whole area in sight. Especially since most of the buildings were already leveled. Already burnt to the ground.

Walking past the storage building, and the crackling fire that was growing large, I noticed the small field of blackness between it and a nearby house. The fire had spread, even with the snow falling.

"Again..." I growled, and tried to smell through the disgusting truth in the air. I tried to not just see if anyone was alive, but smell them too... and...

Tracks of feet and hooves scattered the area around the village. I heard no horses, and knew that the village hadn't had any. They had no need for them. Which meant...

"Is anyone alive?" I shouted, and did my best to strain my ears. I ignored the sounds of the few fires still burning. I ignored the sounds of the light wind, brushing the scattered snowflakes onto the still hot ashes and embers; causing them to sizzle.

I ignored the silence that hid behind all that.

"It's Vim!" I shouted, a little louder. Hoping for a response. Even if from one of the assailants. Especially from them.

Heading deeper into what had been the village center; I realized that most of the buildings had been set aflame. A few were still somewhat standing, and only three were still actually on fire... but...

My eyes finally found them, and my feet finally stopped for good.

Taking a deep breath, I studied the pile. Did my best to count them. Although burnt and charred, most looked to be in... one piece... so...

Seventeen, it seemed. Give or take a few.

That was everyone, if so.

I forced my feet forward, closer to the burnt pile, and hated the reality before me.

"Again," I accepted, staring at one of the sections. It was hard to tell, but I could see it. The forms. The parents, holding a child.

Blinking watery eyes, I glanced around. To see if there were any other bodies. Any human ones.

I couldn't see any... but humans sometimes buried their dead. Or maybe they had simply thrown them into the pile with the very people they just mercilessly slaughtered.

When I had smelled the pile, on the wind earlier, I had partly hoped it had not been all of them... sometimes the humans took the women and children alive. For one purpose or another. Which meant there was a chance to save them. At least them.

Not this time it seemed.

Which meant the perpetrator was pretty obvious. Any brigands, or mercenaries, would have taken them. For money. For amusement.

There were only one kind of humans who would burn even women and children. Even if they had non-human traits.

"Again," I said to myself, and enjoyed how much pain it brought me to admit it.

I had let it happen again!

Something cracked nearby, and then I heard a piece of heavy wood fall. For a moment the forest around me echoed with the sound... as if it was trying to tell me, again and again, of my failure.

I didn't need to be reminded.

Taking a deep breath, I looked away from the pile of burnt corpses and closed my eyes. All it did was make me feel worse, since it made me smell the stink of failure even better.

Stepping around the pile, I did my best to scan the houses and buildings around me. For any hint or hope, of possibly a sign of a survivor... or maybe a hint at which group had done the deed.

It had to have been the church, but which one? There weren't as many as there used to be in the past, but there were still several. And in this region alone I knew of three.

Of course, even if I knew which one... did it matter? I'd try to get revenge, but it's not like it'd bring them back.

It's not like it'd make up for my failure.

But it'd make me feel better, if only for a short time.

Walking around the village, studying the place... I began to notice the footprints. Heavy ones. And not of our kind. Those here had been foxes. Light in weight, and their voices even...

"Again," I cursed myself, and buried the thoughts down. As deep as I could get them, with all the rest.

Passing a well, which had not been burnt or destroyed, I knew the truth of the heavy footprints.

Knights in armor. Which meant it was likely the church of saints. Although all of the churches had knights, and armies too, only they in this region were powerful enough to field a lot of them at once.

Though... it'd not have taken an army to bring down this village.

Reaching the largest house, or at least what was left of it, I played back a few memories of staying here. The chief of this village hadn't even been one of us, but a human. A woman who had married into our little society, who even when she had lost her husband had chosen to stick around and support them. To cherish them.

Odds were she was amongst that pile too.

These people had been good. Simple. Gentle. Foxes, although predators, were like the rest who had survived until now. Meek. Feeble. Not the kind to wage war, but to hide. To run.

Why hadn't they ran?

With a dry mouth I slowly turned around and wondered how it had happened. They were the type to flee at the first sign of danger. Yet they hadn't. They probably hadn't even fought back. The main reason why none of the attacker's bodies had been left behind.

The main reason there was no blood anywhere, staining the ground.

They had easily been rounded up and tied together, and set aflame.

Why didn't humans think about that? Why didn't they ever notice?

How could they be monsters, when all they do is cry and beg and plead and...

"Again!" I growled at myself, and with it noticed my raspy voice.

Yes. I had ran hard, and far. And...

Remembering the well, I wondered if the bucket was still usable. It hadn't looked broken, but...

Walking back to the well, I grabbed the rope, and noticed it was unraveled. With a small tug, I felt the weight of something. The bucket was not only still attached, but submerged.

I began pulling the bucket up, and as I did I felt the familiar feel of weight. It was full of water.

As I pulled it up, I did my best to not glance around. To not look at the remnants of chaos all around me. To not remind myself I was surrounded by not just failure, but death and...

With a tug, something snapped. The rope suddenly went taught, then became lighter... and I knew that the rope had broken.

So it hadn't escaped being damaged... maybe the rope had been caught on fire somewhere along itself, but had fallen into the well... and...

"Kya!" a shrill shriek rang up from the well, as something splashed, and then the bucket hit stone.

Hurriedly looking down the well, my breath caught at the sight of shadows below. The water was splashing, a bucket laid on a lap and...

Grabbing the stone for support, I smiled as I stared down at the frightened eyes. The familiar gleam of their reflection told me it was one of us.

"It's me. Vim," I said calmly, trying my best to not sound too excited. I heard my voice echo down to her, and noticed I hadn't done well at hiding it.

"Vim...?" a tiny voice called back, and I recognized the young tone of it. A child. A young girl.

I remembered there had been three. Who was she? "Are you alright? One moment, I'll help you out of there," I said to her.

"I... I!" she started to say something, but her composure hadn't lasted. Stepping away, to look around for something to help get to her... I realized I was probably going to have to just climb down then back up. Everything around here was burnt.

Once I was sure there was no other rope or anything around, I went to climb into the well. It wasn't that large, and it was old. I'd have no trouble climbing back up it.

"I'm coming down to get you," I said loudly, trying my best to be comforting.

"Okay," came back a sad voice. A single word that had undoubtedly been forced in-between tears and heartbreak.

"Did you fall down here?" I asked her.

"N...no... daddy pushed me in," she said.

The well was a little too wide for me to just reach out my arms to both sides, so I had to carefully navigate down. Choosing broken stones, which were stuck out a little farther

than the rest were. Although I wanted to hurry down there to her, I didn't want to slip and fall. Last thing I needed was for me to kill her by falling onto her.

I needed to protect her. She was a miracle. To have survived was...

"Are you hurt?" I asked, glancing down. She was close. I could make out her ears. They were drooped, and soaked, but she was undoubtedly a fox.

"I... I don't think so. The bucket hit my head, and..."

Drawing closer, I watched as she rubbed the back of her head, behind her large fox ears. She looked at her hand afterward, as if expecting blood, but I didn't see any glistening. But she was also soaked, and looked to have been for some time.

Unable to climb back up. Or even maybe, too afraid to, even if she could...

Once I was near her, she stood up, as to give me room.

Dropping the last bit of distance, I landed in the water and noticed... it wasn't deep at all. The water only came to my thighs, and I felt the murky mud beneath, though my boots.

This well had almost run dry. How I wish I had come here to find them asking me to dig them a new well, instead of this...

"I'm Vim. Do you remember me?" I asked her. It's been many years since I've been here, and...

She wasn't that tall. Even accounting her ears, which were nearly half a foot in height, she only came to my waist. Most of her body was submerged.

"I do. You're the protector," she said, and I noticed the hope in her voice.

With a small breath, I did my best to smile. "Yes. I am. Are you hurt anywhere? Think you can hold onto my neck so I can climb and get you out of here?" I asked her.

"I... I think so. I think I can," she said, nodding.

"Good. Alright, come on. You look like you're freezing," I said.

She nodded quickly, and I felt the cold splash of droplets as she did so. Sure enough, as she clambered up onto my back, I felt the damp and frozen clothes she wore.

She's been down here for awhile.

"How... how long ago did the sounds stop, from up there?" I asked her gently.

"A day," was all she said.

Once she wrapped her arms around my neck, and clasped them, I nodded and found the path I had used to descend. A few of the stones down here were damp, but it wasn't too difficult to get a foothold and begin climbing.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Lomi," she said in my ear. She squeezed me tighter, as if for warmth. Her closeness made me feel her thick hair, made thicker by the water and mud she had been stuck in.

"I remember you. You were born at the same time as Pronda," I said. It was why I had visited that year. To help them build a new house to accommodate the new family members.

She nodded and suddenly sobbed. I hesitated for a moment, mid-climb, but knew the reason for it.

She had probably watched her best friend die.

"Do you know who did this?" I asked her, hoping to change her sobbing sorrows to that of burning anger. Such anger kept people alive, sometimes.

"The Bishop," she said, between a cry.

Bishop? "Which one?"

"I... I don't know. They just said they were here because the Bishop had a dream."

A dream. A prophecy. Or at least, what the humans called it.

But by who? From who?

Someone had to have told them. But who? There had only been a few humans in this village... and they had all been like that widow. Gentle, and true.

This village hadn't even traded with others. It hadn't been on a map. Hadn't been...

"Vim... my... my family," she said softly.

"I know," I said back.

She squeezed me tighter. Although it didn't bother me, it surprised me at how strong she was.

A young child. Barely ten years of age. Yet had the strength of a grown man.

If only they'd fight back.

"I'm sorry," I said, as we reached the top of the well.

With a firm motion, I pulled the two of us out. I made sure not to whack her head on the top of the well's roof as I did so, but I knew her ears had probably brushed it.

Stepping a few feet from the well, I wondered if I should walk her over to one of the still burning fires. Would another set of clothes be around here? A few of the buildings weren't burnt that bad... I was going to have to find something for her to wear. Or at least, she was going to have to dry what she had on.

Even though our kind weren't as weak as humans, they could still succumb to such cold. Especially the children...

Lomi began to shiver, and I knew it wasn't because of the wind. Although I hadn't looked at the pile in the distance, I could feel her staring at it.

"They screamed," she whispered.

"I know," I whispered back. While she still clung to my back, I headed for the building that was farthest from the pile. Luckily one of the farthest houses was still somewhat on fire. I'd be able to use it to make a small campfire for her to dry off at.

"They screamed!" she cried, burying her face into my neck.

"I know."

She sobbed, and I hated how familiar I was with the sound. How familiar I was with this whole thing.

"Momma...!" her heart broke, again.

Again.

"I know."

Chapter 2: Chapter One - Renn - Time

Grass was starting to grow.

It hadn't taken as long as I had thought it would have. Maybe because winter was upon us. I had expected the large plot of earth to remain mulch and black for longer than it had.

"But time isn't fair, is it?" I asked my friend.

These last few months had been... very long for me. A rarity. Precious, in their own way.

Yet all the same, for as much as I wanted to hear her voice again, and laugh with her over some silly long forgotten joke...

I didn't. Because I didn't want her to suffer again.

"I'll probably never see you again," I said to the few blades of grass that had started to grow. They were roughly where her head was. Not too far from the small cross I had made for her.

She hadn't been very religious most of her life, but near the end she had renewed her faith. The book she had forgotten for years upon a shelf had become a permanent fixture in her hands and on her lap those last few months. Out of respect of that, I had done my best to make that cross. Hopefully it lasted longer than it looked like it would.

"But I'll remember you. Maybe not as your old self, but that vibrant woman who had helped me. You were brave," I said to her.

Birds were chirping, and I knew I was going to miss them as well. Their familiar sounds were... almost comforting. I glanced to the tree that they had made their nest upon, and hoped they'd stick around for a long time. To watch over her for me.

For a few moments I looked around. The large yard we had tended. Full of fruits and vegetables. Trees, and bushes. A decorative table, which had always seemed too big for just us two.

The small cabin that had honestly been a little cramped for the both of us. It looked a little... rundown now. And not just because she hadn't been able to keep it clean like she always had during her last few months. It was indeed starting to wear down. The wood we had used to build it was becoming brittle, and I knew there were a few sections that the insects were doing just too much damage to. Even during these cold days.

"It was fun," I said, to her and this place.

About a decade. Maybe a little longer...

For me it had passed in the blink of an eye.

"You said it was okay to stay here, after... but I can't. I can't..." I whispered, and did my best to stop the tears.

She had saved me. Yet humans did not live as long as we did.

They never did.

With a gulp, I walked towards the patio. I wasn't going to go back inside. I had finished. I had closed the door. I'd never go in there again.

I was leaving a lot of stuff here, but... I couldn't carry it all. And...

"Sometimes starting anew is best," I said, as I reached down to grab the small pack.

A few small things. A few set of clothes. Some money, that I honestly didn't know if was even accepted and used anymore. Hopefully a single decade didn't change things too much beyond our little grove.

While I secured the pack to my back, I felt my hat shift on my head. I grumbled, and wondered if it was going to get me in trouble later.

Steadying my hat on my head, I felt my ears shift under it. They weren't so large that they'd push it off, but it was somewhat uncomfortable. I also didn't like how the world got a little... quieter, with it on.

My human ears weren't as effective. Nearly useless, in fact. They were real, but they'd never been as good as the ones on the top of my head.

Walking away from the porch, I did my best to try and take everything in again. So that somewhere down the road, a long time from now, I'd remember at least a few things.

Like that tree, that she used to shoot her bow at. The plant that was supposed to have given us giant pumpkins, yet never did.

The stone path that we had painstakingly spent months on, finding the perfect flat rocks for, only in the end to have it get overrun by weeds. Barely visible anymore amongst the grass.

Stopping in front of the large tree, that although was barren now I knew would bloom into pretty purples during the summer... I smiled at the small cross.

"Goodbye, Nory," I said before the grave. "Thank you for being my friend, even if it was just because you hated your own kind."

With a deep breath I smiled, turned, and left the little grove.

I felt cold. And not just because the winter was starting to really show itself. Snow hadn't yet begun to fall, but I could tell by the smell and taste of the air it'd only be a matter of days.

It was why I had to leave now. Or at least, the reason I was using as an excuse.

After all, what was snow to someone like me? No matter how high it stacked, or how deep it packed itself... it was in the end, but snow.

I wasn't sure where I was going. I wasn't sure where I'd end up... but I knew it had to start with the human village down the mountain. It was a few days away at my pace, but...

Hopefully it was still there. It's been two years since Nory and I had left this section of forest. She had gotten sick, and needed medicine. Otherwise she'd never have gone.

I smiled at the memory. She had been adamant in dying to the fever instead. She had hated humans that much. It had taken my own begging to get her to go.

"A human, hating humans," I said, and wondered how often such people came to be. It was why I had stuck around with her for so long. She had been... amusing. Interesting. A conundrum, yet not.

But her death was more than just a sad, bittersweet memory.

It was also a lesson.

I was tired of watching my friends die. I was tired of watching people waste away, before I even got a chance to really love them. To really connect with them.

A wolf ran by, its thick paws made odd sounds as they scraped the rocky ground. I watched it disappear into thicker trees, and wondered if eventually the little cabin would be overrun. Or rather, how quickly it would be.

In the decade we had been out here, no human had ever shown up. Not a hunter. Nor a visitor. Odds were that cabin and everything around it would decay and disappear, without anyone ever being wiser.

Which... was why I was heading back into the world of humans.

I didn't want to end up like that cabin.

I didn't want to end up like Nory.

Rounding a group of large mushrooms, I studied them for a moment before heading onward. Nory would have picked some.

"Friends," I whispered, thinking of Nory.

It was a selfish idea. A selfish plea... but I wanted more. Needed more.

Life was too sad without them.

Yet...

The wind picked up, and the treetops of the forest became noisy. Luckily they were thick enough that most of the wind didn't reach me.

"Yet humans die," I said, to the wind.

We did too. My parents were dead. My brother, gone not too long before I had met Nory.

But we didn't die to age. At least, none I had seen. None I had known. And even though I knew I was many, many, times older than Nory had been...

Glancing at my hands, and seeing the same hands I had known nearly all my life... I wondered if our kind died of old age. Was it possible?

It was time I found out.

It was time I found more. More of my kind.

They didn't even have to be like me. Just... not human. Not like Nory.

That way I would never again have to bury a friend.

That way I would never again have to watch someone I loved wither away, to the point of even forgetting who sat in front of them.

I shivered at the memory of her scream. The cry of fear, upon seeing my ears and tail.

That scream had broke me. I should have expected it. I should have foreseen it. I knew human minds grew odd during their last days. I had experienced it before.

Yet it had still...

The howl of a wolf drew my attention from my thoughts, and I wondered if it was the same one who had just ran by earlier.

A farewell maybe? Or a warning to others, that I was walking about?

It was too bad I couldn't understand them. I remembered my mother telling me of our ancestors. They had been able to communicate with base animals. They had been able to talk to them.

Yet... they had also not been as human as us. Not able to blend in, when needed.

Picking up my pace, I returned onto my path. I wasn't going to be able to get out of the forest before nightfall, but if I wasn't careful it'd take me weeks to get out of here. And a single, in their eyes young, woman showing up out of the forest during the middle of winter wasn't seen as normal. I needed to make it to the city before the snow really began to fall. Lest I be suspected.

I should have left earlier. A few days ago... but...

Glancing behind me, I couldn't see the grove anymore. It was long behind me... but...

Somehow I could still see it. Somehow I could still hear Nory's humming, as she cooked something. Or sewed.

"Goodbye, Nory," I said, one final time.

Again.