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Chapter 11: Chapter Ten - Vim - A Cloak For a Fox

"Is this the capital?" Lomi asked as we left the port.

"No. Just a large city. There's a larger town, on the coast, a few weeks from here. It even has walls," I said. Great gates and walls were becoming more and more common, thanks to the advancements the humans have made and their general numbers... but most cities were still without.

Lomi walked closely next to me and not just because she was wary of the many people on the road. She was now very conscious of not just her surroundings, but herself.

Luckily she was a small child, and it was still windy. No one would find her odd quirk of constantly checking her hat to be strange.

"This way," I guided Lomi to an alley, and made sure to account how many people were on the streets.

Not many. It was already getting cold enough that people were choosing to stay indoors even during the middle of the day.

The boat ride had been uneventful. Lomi and I had to take refuge inside the boats small cabin, alongside the captain and other workers. Not because the weather was that bad, but because they would have found it odd if we hadn't.

No human father would let their young daughter stand out in a near-blizzard willingly.

Because of that, Lomi had more than enough time to brood over what had occurred this morning. Since we had sat in silence together for most the trip.

Although I knew she'd not forget it, anytime soon, she was young enough to not let it completely tarnish this once in a lifetime trip for her.

"Ho there!" A man greeted us as we passed him. He was bundled up in a larger jacket, which reminded me this was a good place and time to get one for Lomi.

Glancing at her as she studied the buildings we passed, I took note of her hat. It was a little too big for her, thus why it had fallen off so easily.

Yes. Something better was in order. Not just because it was winter, either.

"It is getting cold," Lomi noted, staring at a group of people down the path. They were huddled together, talking about something. Most were wearing cloaks, or large jackets. A few even had things wrapped around their necks and head, to better protect themselves from the chill.

"If only you had fur," I said to her.

She smiled up at me, as if it was a joke she's heard before. One that reminded her of a happy moment.

A gust blew by, causing a nearby sign to creak loudly. Its metal hinges had probably begun to ice over, based off the sound.

The sign told me it was some kind of paper store. Maybe books. But books were still something only the wealthy could afford. Most humans were illiterate, and the common book was still something that took great effort to produce. They were made by hand still.

I knew it'd not be long until that all changed. I knew soon it'd all be different.

"Look, a statue!" Lomi grabbed my hand, to get my attention.

Walking into the center of the city, I allowed Lomi to study the large whale that had at one time lived in the lake.

The people here wouldn't remember, but that whale had been far larger than this statue. So large that it had nearly poisoned the whole lake upon its death, its carcass taking far too long to decay.

But why would they remember? They remembered the legends. The stories. But never what their actions wrought. I knew if I brushed aside the snow and ice, I'd eventually find a plaque that told the story of the ship of sailors who captured the great fish. How the city had only survived the harsh winter thanks to its meat and oil. But I knew it, and the entire town, would never remember the many years after that they suffered from a lack of fish, afterwards.

"Are there really fish this big?" Lomi asked, still studying the statue.

"Yes. Though not here. Not anymore," I said.

"Are those whiskers?" she asked.

"They are. It didn't have any, though," I said.

"Oh?" Lomi glanced at me, and I knew I had said the wrong thing. Sometimes I should just keep my mouth shut.

Before she could latch onto that subject, I pointed at a nearby shop. The windows were one of the few that had yet to be draped over, as to keep the cold at bay. "Let's go there real quick," I said.

Pulling Lomi along, since she still held my hand, I made sure no one in the city center watched us as we entered the shop.

There weren't many people out and about, but there were still a few. Thankfully no one seemed interested in us at all. People were too busy trying to simply get to their destinations, out of the cold.

"Welcome!" A happy voice greeted us as we entered the well lit shop, and I realized why they hadn't covered the large window yet like all the rest had.

There were multiple fireplaces, and all were roaring.

"Oh my! How are you, young lady?" an older woman waved at us from inside the shop. She was standing near a large dress, maybe some kind of ball-gown. It was displayed in the center of the room, and it looked like she had been setting it up.

Lomi shifted closer to me, and I knew the human woman found it normal as she giggled and looked at me. "How can I help you today?" she asked.

"Do you have any heavier cloaks in her size?" I asked.

"Oh sure. We always have many ready for the winter, and there's always leftovers... let me go get a few," the woman quickly hurried off into the back of the shop, disappearing behind a curtain.

Being left alone, I sighed and gestured to some of the nearby clothes. Ones hanging from racks, and on the walls. "Go ahead and take a look," I said to Lomi.

She hesitated, but nodded. Our hands separated as she walked up to the large dress that the woman had been working on earlier.

"It's a ball-gown, by the looks of it," I said to Lomi. I knew she had probably never seen such a thing before.

"How do you wear it?" she asked.

"With great effort," I said.

"Sir, would a fur-lined cloak be something you'd consider?" the woman peeked her head out from the curtains, and I noted the tone of her question.

Could I afford it?

"Yes. That would be preferred, actually," I said.

She smiled, and with a brisk nod retreated back.

Lomi glanced at me, but said nothing. She returned to studying some of the clothing, and I noticed that most of them were... a little too fancy.

Was this maybe one of the nicer stores? It was hard to tell. Surely not everyone could afford such clothes.

Had this town become wealthier since my last visit? I remembered the church settling down here, but hadn't thought it'd increase the common citizen's wealth this greatly. Let alone this quickly. It had only been a few years...

It didn't take long for the woman to return, carrying a bundle of clothes. I noticed two of them, and already knew which one we'd be buying.

The woman happily hummed as she walked over to a corner of the store, where two tall metal poles were. Keeping quiet, I kept my eyes on Lomi as she watched with fascination as the woman went to displaying the two pieces of clothes.

Both of the metal poles had little arms, which could be used to properly display clothes. It wasn't a perfect representation, but it was far better than anything else.

"They're both a little long for her, but I can hem them quickly if you'd like," the woman said, stepping back so Lomi and I could study the two.

Both were probably half a foot longer than what she needed, but I knew that would just make it a little better. A cloak being a little heavier at the ends was sometimes a good thing. Especially when it was windy.

Lomig glanced at me, and I gestured for her to go ahead and touch them. I already had made my choice, but I wasn't going to rob the little girl of the chance to do something like this.

After all, once our little journey ended... she'd never travel again. For better or worse.

"The one on the left is a little old, while that one is new," the woman said, as Lomi touched the one on the right.

Neither looked much different in build quality. Both were better than anything most humans wore, or bought, especially for children. But the one on the left was darker. Not just the leather, but the fur on the inside.

"They seem heavy," Lomi said softly, as if afraid to say anything.

"That's the point. Plus you'll get used to it. It feels comfortable," the woman spoke for me, smiling all the while.

She must have children of her own.

Lomi went to look at the one on the left, and I noticed the way she flinched upon touching it. The woman barely noticed, but I did.

The young girl spent a few moments with it, and then turned to look at me. The look on her face was undeniable.

"We'll take the one on the right. It looks like sable fur, is it?" I asked.

"It is! I'm surprised you could tell without touching it sir," the woman said, genuinely shocked. Her eyes focused on me a little deeper, and I realized I just became interesting to her.

Women were so odd sometimes.

"That'll work then. Mind shorting it just a tad for her, so at least it doesn't drag?" I asked her.

"Of course! Let me just measure you real quick, sweetie," the woman had expected this, and already had her tools ready. A long thin strip of twine appeared in her hand, which she quickly used to measure Lomi.

Lomi went perfectly still at the woman's sudden closeness, and remained still until she was done.

"It'll be three penk," the woman said as she went to gathering the two cloaks off the metal stands.

Doing the math in my head, I realized that wasn't too bad. I didn't know the current conversion rates, but it hovered around fifteen renk to a single penk. Forty five renk for a newly made fur lined cloak was...

"Are the cloaks made here? That seems a little cheap," I asked as I went to digging out the coins.

"They are! We have a hunter lodge in the north forest, where they get the furs. The craftsman building is in the south of town. My husband works there," she said as I handed her the coins.

"I see," I said, and wondered why I had even bothered to ask.

"Thank you. I'll get to hemming it right now; I'll be only a short moment. There's some chairs over there if you'd like to wait," she gestured to the opposite of the room, where there did indeed sit a small table with a couple chairs.

The woman left us alone once again, and I wondered if she was that trusting or if I was seen as less of a threat thanks to Lomi. Usually no one would leave a strange customer alone with merchandise like this so readily.

Although I had just given her a hefty amount of money, it was nothing compared to how much I could steal in a short amount of time.

"I thought money was called renk," Lomi asked, choosing to look at another dress instead of resting at the table. The dress looked made out of mostly wool, and was dyed an odd blue color.

"It is. Penk is a higher valued coin, made of silver. They're all minted in a nearby nation of Lenk," I said.

"Lenk..." she seemed to recognize the name, based on how she said it.

"Did merchants ever visit your village?" I asked her.

"Sometimes," she said softly.

Wonder if one of them had been the cause for the raid.

The churchmen we had seen in that bar had not known anything about Lomi's village. In fact, they hadn't even been a part of that region's abbey. They had been common monks on a pilgrimage.

"There's a church here," Lomi whispered, and I noticed the way she glanced at the door.

Sure enough hanging above the door was the symbol of the human's faith. An oddly shaped cross.

"They're everywhere nowadays," I said gently.

Lomi didn't seem to care for that, but knew better than to voice her grievances. Humans may not hear as well as our kind did, but there was no telling when the woman would return.

With a small sigh I glanced to a nearby fireplace. It was made of stone, and well crafted... the several logs inside were a bright red and popping lightly.

"Let's take a look!" the woman emerged with a loud voice, causing Lomi to flinch. She was simply excited. Maybe she was glad for a sale, during this bad weather, or simply took pride in her work.

"Here ya are," she said, holding the cloak open before Lomi.

Lomi glanced at me, and I nodded and gestured for her to try it on. I knew she was worried that the woman would ask her to remove her hat, but there would not be any real reason to. She only wanted to make sure the cloak didn't drag on the floor, more than anything.

While Lomi put the cloak on, I noticed the way the woman smiled. There was a hint of sadness in the smile, and I realized that she was likely not a mother at all. Or at least, not one anymore.

"Well look at that. Fits you perfectly," the woman said, once Lomi stepped back and studied her new attire.

"Looks good," I agreed, nodding. Lomi looked at me and smiled, as if my compliment made her warmer than the cloak did.

"Indeed it does. Will you be needing anything sir? Your jacket is rather thin," the woman glanced at me, and I wondered if I looked odd or if she was just trying to get another sell. It probably was cold enough that I looked under-dressed.

"I'll be fine. Thank you," I said.

She nodded, and didn't seem too concerned with my answer.

"Let's go," I said, gesturing for Lomi to join me out.

"Thank you," Lomi said to the woman, and it made her smile as she waved goodbye.

"Come again!"

Stepping out into the world, I noticed the chill for the first time. Spending so long in such a place with two lit fires made the difference obvious.

"It is warm," Lomi mentioned, happily enjoying her new cloak.

Grabbing the hood, I pulled it up over her head. It was large enough that it was able to go over her hat comfortably, yet snug enough that it actually was a boon. It'd keep her hat secured that much more.

"Sable fur is one of the nicer ones," I said.

"The other one was nice too," Lomi said quickly, rushing to its defense.

I nodded, and smiled gently.

Yes. Fox fur was nice too. Even if half the price.

"Of course. Probably finer by a great margin. But sometimes simple is best," I said, gesturing for her to join me on the path. We weren't far from the painter building. A few streets down.

"Mhm," Lomi nodded in agreement, and I knew she didn't want to say much more.

"Is it hard? To make clothes?" she asked.

"Some types are difficult, I suppose," I said.

"Think I could do it?" she asked.

"I don't see why not."

The young girl smiled and nodded. Pulling her cloak closer to herself, I wondered if that was a good goal for her.

Everyone needed something, after all.

Plus... "If you do end up a seamstress or something, make sure to let me know. I'm horrible with fashion, so knowing someone good at it would really help me out," I said.

Lomi smirked at me, and I could tell by the way she grinned that even she had noticed such a fact.

Was it that obvious? Maybe that was why that woman had asked such a thing. Not that I had looked cold, but because my clothes themselves were odd.

They were a little old... maybe a few years. Maybe it was time I got a new set. I wasn't as bad as most of our kind when it came to such things, but...

Guiding Lomi to the Sleepy Artist, I hoped she could indeed one day make clothes.

Not just because it was a decent job or because she'd find it fun... but because it was a very human occupation.

A very normal one.

Just like the old goat we were about to meet. He was annoying in his own way, but I praised his ability to adapt. To accept.

He found something that allowed him to blend in well. Something that fulfilled his personal desires and purposes, yet at the same time kept him safe.

I needed more like him. More like Elk.

It was time our kind started to adapt. It was time.

It was now or never.

If they didn't adapt, they'd die.

I knew there were only a few who could. Only a few that would even entertain it... but... What else were they going to do?

Fighting back wasn't working. Running didn't last. Hiding never worked.

And I'd rather have a few very human like non-humans, than none at all.

If only the rest of them could accept that fact.

If only I could too.

Chapter 12: Chapter Eleven - Renn - Storm

My room was... better than it should be.

There was a nice sized bed, and it didn't even stink. It wouldn't be long before my own scent was all one could find upon it.

A decently sized window loomed over a large desk, where I was currently sitting. Right now it was too cold to open it, but I knew during the summers it was probably wonderful to open and sit before it. I could already imagine the breeze, as I read a book or wrote something while sitting there.

Another table sat near the large dresser near the window. The table was empty, and the dresser wasn't much different. Amber had said she'd go with me to buy some clothes but we've not been able to do so yet. Too cold.

And then of course, a few paintings. When I had first stayed here, the first night, there had been only one. A solemn scene. Now however, there were five. And each one was fancier than the last. Happy. Bright colors. One was a very detailed beach scene, with sea animals jumping from the waves in the distance.

I didn't know who put them in here, but I assumed it was Lughes. He was... odd, especially when it came to these paintings. He took so, so much pride in them...

Smiling at the room, I hoped to enjoy it for as long as possible.

This was what I was looking for.

Or at least... if it wasn't, I wasn't sure I'd ever find it otherwise.

After all, how could there be anything better than this?

"May this last forever," I whispered.

The bell dinged.

My ears perked, and I listened intently to the sounds from below.

Everyone was home. Amber and Lughes had left in the morning, to pick up some of their paint supplies, but had returned not too long ago. Crane rarely left, and as far as I was aware Shelldon was in the basement, and hadn't left it in years.

Normally someone entering the shop at this time wasn't that strange. Customers came often, and we also had people deliver supplies occasionally. Yet lately the only people, who came since the snowstorm started, were the young boys in the morning delivering fire wood, and one of Crane's human friends who sometimes visited in the afternoon for tea.

Yet there were two voices beneath my floor. Two I didn't recognize.

Customers possibly? Glancing to the window in front of me, I noted the haze on the glass, and the ever growing layer of ice and snow on the other side.

"Surely not," I said, and stood from my chair. This was no time to be shopping, especially for paintings.

Opening my bedrooms door, I noticed the footsteps above me. Light pitter-patters. Crane was walking to the stairwell on the floor above me.

Exiting to the hallway, I closed my door slowly. As I did, I watched the nearby stairwell. Sure enough Crane appeared, as she descended to this floor.

"That sounds like Vim," she said to me as she rounded the stairwell, to head to the first floor.

Did it? I could hear voices, but it sounded like Lughes and Amber. There was another voice, but it sounded young. Childish. A little girl.

Smelling the air, I realized I couldn't make out their scents. There were several fireplaces in this building, but only one was currently being used. The large one, near

the kitchen on the first floor. That fireplace ran through the whole building, releasing warm air throughout it. The many pieces of wood inside it were most likely fresh, based off the smell. Because of that I couldn't smell much of anything else. Other than paint and wood.

Heading to the stairwell, I walked slowly. I wasn't too worried over meeting this so called protector... Especially since they've been talking more and more about his inevitable appearance... but it was strange. They somehow knew so little about him, yet trusted him completely. With not just their lives, but everything. Their homes. Their families.

It seemed... odd to me.

Why was he so secretive, when he was supposed to be the one who protected us?

Was I the weird one? Was I the one who was strange for finding it odd?

Maybe it was because I was a predator, and none of them were.

Either way... it was still exciting. Interesting. It made me anxious. Each step down I took, my heartbeat became heavier. My ears and tail a little more stiff.

Another member of our kind. To meet so many, so quickly, was... almost disturbing.

Was this all a dream?

Either way I needed to tread carefully. Not only was he a male predator, possibly far stronger than I, he was also...

Lughes and Crane hadn't outright said it, but the cold truth was plain to see. Especially for me.

They had been waiting on his arrival, to further judge if I was truly safe enough to keep around. It was why they hadn't really revealed much about the Society yet. I didn't blame them for it. Not at all. But now it was time.

He was here. I was here. So it was...

"Indeed so!" a loud Lughes laughed, and I paused at the middle of the stairwell to enjoy the sound of it. He sounded ecstatic, happy beyond reason.

Any doubt one had about the legitimacy in the trust they had for this so called protector was washed away with that heartfelt joy. It was too pure. Too real.

Amber sighed, and I noted the deepness of it. Was she annoyed?

"Poor girl!" Crane's voice was the next to be loud, but unlike the previous... sounded hurt. As if someone had just plucked a feather.

I found myself hurrying down the rest of the stairs at the sound of her discomfort. That hadn't been simple annoyance, but actual pain. Had something happened?

Reaching the hallway, I rounded to the front of the store. They were at the front still, not too far from the door.

"Don't strangle her now," Amber complained.

"Is she even strong enough to do so?" a man asked. A deeper voice than Lughes.

Reaching the storefront, I hesitated. It was odd to see a group in the store. There was barely any room for them, amidst the shelves and bookcases.

Yet... for as cramped as it looked, I felt as if I was suddenly looking at a new painting.

One that somehow fit in amongst the rest of the paintings. One of many. Yet special in its own way.

Amber and Lughes stood closest to me, with their backs to me. They were watching Crane, who had bent down to encompass what looked to be a child in a great big hug. She wore some kind of heavy duty cloak, and looked somewhat troubled by Crane's embrace. Not so much in pain, but worry.

Standing behind the clasped pair, was a familiar man. One I had never met before, yet somehow knew.

One who looked exactly like Amber had depicted him.

It was almost weird that he looked exactly the same. Was that the same set of clothes hidden beneath that coat? Even his hair looked the same, as if it had never grown an inch since Amber had painted him.

And he was looking straight at me.

Heavy eyes studied me, as I realized no one had told him about me yet. Was it wrong to have come down without a hat on? Without hiding my traits?

Amber noticed Vim's glare first, and coughed. "Vim, this is Renn. She showed up a little over a month ago," Amber said quickly, pointing at me.

The man's eyes never left my own, as Lughes turned to look at me. "Ah! Yes. Come here, Renn, this is Vim and little Lomi," Lughes gestured for me to join their little scene, and I felt almost embarrassed.

Did I really have a place in such an odd scene? Although Crane was seemingly crying, as she continued to hold the girl, the rest looked... happy. Joyful.

"Renn," Vim spoke my name, and it caused my foot to pause mid-step. I gulped as my back went straight, as if I was suddenly in front of my father.

Quickly tossing aside such an embarrassing thought, I glared back at the man who was looking at me as if I was some kind of enemy.

There was a heavy silence for a few moments, and then the man smirked with a nod.

"What?" I asked, and wondered why he was smiling like that.

"You're one of us. Now, Crane, please let her go. She might bite you if you don't, I've yet to break her of her nibbling habit," Vim said, turning away from me as if I was no longer a concern.

A little bothered, I watched as Crane laughed as she released the young girl. Who was as young as she looked. She had a strange smile on her face, but was also obviously bothered. Unsure of herself.

"I'd not bite her!" Lomi said with a complaint, looking back at Vim.

The gentle smile on the man told me he had indeed been just teasing. It made me wonder if...

Then her hat fell off, thanks to her cloak's hood falling off. The earlier hug must have dislodged it.

Revealing familiar ears.

Or at least, somewhat familiar ones.

Blinking at them, I almost stopped breathing for a moment. They had almost looked...

But no. They were a little too scraggly. A little too auburn in color.

A little smaller than my own.

She was similar to me, but not the same.

Before I finished calming myself down, I watched in awe as the young girl then ran up to Amber. The dark skinned woman hesitated for a moment, but returned the hug she got from the child.

"Nice to meet you too," Amber said as she and the girl spent a few moments in their embrace.

It was a nice gesture, even if the young girl looked a little awkward. She was smiling, but it looked forced... as if she was doing her best to not cry.

"Oh my, oh my!" Lughes grew excited as the young girl separated herself from Amber, then went over to give him a similar greeting. This time her hesitation was plainly visible. Did she think she had to give each of us a hug?

Lughes accepted the hug gratefully, he even bent down onto a knee. I saw the girl's ears twitch as his beard brushed against them. I knew that although his beard was mostly wool, and probably soft, it was probably ticklish beyond measure.

Pitying the poor girl, I went stiff when she finally released Lughes and stepped towards me.

When she did, she hesitated. Finally looking up at me, for the first time.

Her little red eyes went wide, and I knew it was because she noticed the ears on my head.

Quickly lifting my tail, and bringing it around to show her, I smiled gently. "Similar, in a way," I said to her.

The girl studied my tail, then smiled. A real one, full of joy. "A tail!" she stepped forward, and paused a mere inch from grabbing it.

"Go ahead," I said, and hoped she'd not squeeze it too tightly. Although it'd not hurt, it was a pain to get the hair to stop itching whenever it was messed with.

She touched it, but did so gingerly. Barely grabbing it as if afraid I'd snap at her if she did, when her fingertips touched my tail, I twitched.

How long had it been since someone else touched my tail? Before Nory, at least. She, although had loved me and never found me odd had always been off-put by my non-human characteristics. I had never faulted her for it, since humans found it so difficult to accept.

They waged war against others, over schools of thought, skin color, or even the languages they spoke... why then was it strange they waged war on us, who actually were different?

For the same reason I couldn't blame Nory for always being a little distant from me, thanks to her human instincts and fear... I could also do nothing but gently smile at the young girl who studied and touched my tail with awe.

I could very well be one of the first people she's ever met, like me. Like her. Who was I to deny her such a simple joy?

"Hm... are your ears this soft too?" the young girl asked, glancing up at my head.

Frowning, I glanced at the crowd watching us. In silence.

Glaring at them, I realized I found the placid expression on the protector the worst. Even though Crane and Lughes had stupid smirks, his blank face bothered me more.

Bending down, I realized she really was young. Couldn't be more than a handful of years old. Was she a fox? Some kind of cat like me? A dog maybe? I couldn't recognize her smell. What little of it I could smell, mixed in with all the other countless odd smells here.

Paints. Wood. Stone. Snow, old and new. Sweat. Feathers of a wet bird. Dirty wool of a sheep. A pond smell permeated the stone floor, from beneath. I could smell now also the leather she wore. Her hat especially smelled weird, even though it was still on the ground near Vim's feet.

Little hands gently brushed the top sides of my ears, and I went a little still. Yes. That was uncomfortable... but I had to endure it.

For that smile at least. For such innocence, I'd do far more than endure.

"Wow... Vim, she's soft!" the little girl turned to speak to the man who was glaring at me.

"I'll take your word for it," Vim said, and then glanced away from us. "Any other newcomers I should know about?" he asked Lughes.

"Oh shush, let us enjoy this," Crane though was the one who answered. And she did so with a stern tone.

You tell him!

"My name is Lomi," the little girl pulled her hand back, and smiled at me.

Seems I made a new friend.

"Renn. I'm a type of cat, or at least a part of me is," I said, smiling back at her.

"I'm a fox! A red one!" she then hurried forward, wrapping me in a hug.

Thanks to my bending down, like Lughes, she wrapped her arms around my neck. Unlike Lughes, I didn't have a large puffy beard to protect me from her large and thick coat. It was cold, and still had some snow on it.

Her embrace would have been wonderful if not for the cloak.

No...

"Nice to meet you Lomi," I said, giving her a return hug all the same. I gave her a gentle squeeze, remembering how I had so much enjoyed such a thing when I had been young. It brought back memories of my parents. My older siblings, and especially my younger brother.

She giggled, and for the tiniest moment... I broke.

My eyes became watery. My breath caught in my throat. The sounds of Vim and someone else arguing, probably Amber, became distant.

Quickly controlling myself, I blinked a few times to get the water out of my eyes before Lomi noticed. Or anyone else.

Taking a small breath, the girl and I separated, and I smiled gently down to her. She beamed a happy smile back, and I was glad to see she hadn't noticed. Even though she had been wrapped around me.

Too young to have noticed a heart break.

Stepping back, and standing up, I glanced quickly to those who had watched us. My tail went still, and I felt the hairs on the tip of my ears stand up as I realized the reality.

They had all noticed.

Looking away from the mixture of warm smiles, and looks of pity, I took a small breath again and cleared my throat.

"So! A feast! Vim, would you please go get something fancy? Maybe a turkey?" Lughes asked, glancing down to the young girl... who had now retreated to Vim's side.

She had been excited to meet us, but yet it seemed that earlier awkward demeanor was her true self. Shy maybe.

"Turkey," Crane said with a flat tone.

"What? Look at her! Vim's dragged her through sleet and snow! She needs a hearty meal!" Lughes loudly declared, as if he dared anyone, even a fellow bird, to complain.

"I don't know if I agree there, but I do agree she looks cold. Come on in, child, let's get that layer of ice off you and a warm drink in your hand," Crane said, stepping towards the girl.

The girl stepped back, half a step, and glanced up at the man she stood near. For protection. For guidance.

Studying the look, I watched in awe as she calmed down when the man looked down at her and nodded. "I'll get our dinner. You'll be safe here," Vim said to her, in a calm voice.

Lomi visibly relaxed, and then nodded as she took Crane's offered hand. To be guided into the back of the building.

Amber waved gently at the girl as they passed, and we all watched Crane take her away. The way she guided the girl with her hand gently on the girl's back, reminded me of the way birds walked with their newborn young. Covering them gently, guiding them.

"Renn, would you go with Vim? The merchant down the street will have one. Get a big turkey; if they don't have one just get something you would like... I'm sure as a fellow hunter, you'd know best what she'd like," Lughes said, happily content with himself.

"Huh?" I went stiff.

"I'll get started on everything else with Crane. You lock the store up, old man. I don't know why you left it open in the first place" Amber grumbled as she stepped closer to Vim, as to bend down and grab the little girl's hat. It had been forgotten in the moment. After looking at it for a moment she turned and went to the back of the building to join Crane and the girl.

"Pha. Storm. Snowstorm. These humans have no idea what real storms are," Lughes grumbled as he too left the lobby. It took only a few seconds for me to be left behind, alone.

Staring at the empty hallway, devoid of the people who had just abandoned me, I slowly glanced to the man who was staring at me.

Doing chores was nothing I couldn't handle. I enjoyed it. Cooking was even something I really enjoyed... but...

"Well? Go get a jacket at least. And a hat," he said, gesturing for me to hurry.

"Oh... oh... okay," I nodded, and it seemed the embarrassment in the air wasn't done with me quite yet. Feeling stiff I hurried to the stairs.

I knew the reasoning behind it. I was the only other predator. She and I may not be the exact same, but we were far closer than anyone else I'd met.

Yet... Vim was a predator too wasn't he?

Grumbling at them, I wondered if it was not so much them utilizing me since I was available but for another, simpler, purpose.

They probably thought nothing of it. Yet at the same time, even as air-headed Lughes were... he was still far older than me. Still wise, in his own way.

He probably thought me spending some time with Vim would give him the chance to tell if I was a danger to them, or not.

Honestly I did want to talk to him. But...

I'd rather spend time with Lomi than him.

Hurriedly putting on the jacket and hat, the only things I owned, I hoped he'd not find me at fault for anything.

If the protector declared I was no good, I had a sinking suspicion they'd immediately cast me out. No matter what I said or did.

"Hhmghm," I made an odd noise as I left my room and headed back downstairs.

Keep it together, Renn. Even though you're feeling more emotions and excitement than you have in decades, don't let it get to you. Keep it together.

Vim was patiently waiting for me. I found him studying a painting, one that hung a little off-center on the center shelf. It was a painting that I found a little bland compared to the rest. Just a simple village, right before harvest. Most of the painting was a burnt orange, replicating the waves of wheat under a lazy summer dusk.

"I'm ready," I said to him, after a few moments passed and he ignored me.

"Hm." He turned, and for a moment studied me. At first I expected him to complain, or say something about my attire, but he said nothing and simply turned. He opened the door, and then turned to me.

Standing there, allowing the cold wind to buffet inside, I realized he was holding it open for me. Quickly leaving the store, I felt silly.

Yes. Men sometimes did that. Quickly stepping out, I flinched as the cold wind attacked.

Watching Vim close the door, I tried to think of the last time someone had opened a door for me. Or rather, a man. Nory had, surely. Before her I had been alone for awhile... and before then, I had been traveling with a pair of children. So...

Suddenly I felt out of place again, as I realized Vim was staring at me. I had gotten lost in thought, and we were standing outside in the ever growing snowstorm.

"This way," I said, and almost said it again when I realized he had probably not heard me. The wind was stronger now, and I had spoken softly.

His nod stopped me from repeating myself, and I was forced to remember that he was like me. Even if he looked completely...

Yes. He did. He had human ears. Human eyes. His pupils were normal. His body seemed normal...

I could see now why they couldn't tell me what he was.

He might not even know himself.

In fact, with the wind blowing at me from behind him... I should now be able to smell him. Being out of the building, and thus away from all the paint and smells.

Yet I smelled nothing but the stink of the city. The freshness of the breeze, and the chill of the snow.

He either had no scent, or it was so soft I couldn't smell it even while walking a few feet from him.

The wind picked up again, and I reached up to keep hold of my hat. It'd not fall usually, it was a little too well made for that, but it'd be my luck that it'd fly off when I was trying to make a good impression on the society's protector.

Walking with the protector, I hoped my heart would settle soon.

It wasn't right that I felt as disheveled as I probably looked, thanks to this storm.

I was too old to feel like this.

This was too important, too precious for me to ruin. I needed to ensure I secured my place in the Non-Human Society. At any costs.

I'd never be able to live with myself, if I ruined this opportunity. The mere thought of spending centuries alone, all because I failed to meet whatever standard they had...

Trudging through fresh fallen snow, I forced my head clear. Forced my thoughts away, and out.

It'll be fine. I just needed to weather this storm.

Nothing new.

I've done this before. Kind of...

Well, not really.

This was a first for me. Blatantly so...

Yet... I'd accomplish it. I'd find a way.

Or at least, I'd survive it.

Chapter 13: Chapter Twelve - Vim - To Study And Shop

"Lughes is always so scatter brained! How could he forget he had family coming over?" the plump woman giggled, telling me that she was far used to Lughes. Probably too used to him.

I'd have to remind Crane to keep an eye on this relationship. Lughes, like most of our kind, always forgets that humans aged far quicker, and if this middle-aged woman eventually grew older and started to question why that scatter-brained forgetful old man was still alive and kicking, issues might arise.

"We actually have a few hams; I just cleaned and cut them this morning. Would you like those instead?" the woman asked, jubilant. Too happy, in fact.

"Sure, we'll take them," I said. I wasn't going to actually scour the city for a turkey. It'd take me all day, and chances were I'd not actually find one.

"I'll go have the boys prepare them for you," she waved happily as she retreated to the back of the shop. After a few moments, I heard her loud voice as she barked an order. Judging by the way she was yelling, those boys weren't any common boys. They were sons.

"She's a nice lady."

Shifting a little, I glanced to the woman who was smiling gently at the scene before her. Or rather, the loud conversation we could hear but not see.

Studying her for a moment, I found my eyes wander to her pants. They were old. Worn. Weathered.

Even for our kind, who sometimes paid no attention to their attires, they were too broken down.

Probably all she owned.

Yet it wasn't their wear that bothered me. It was the design.

Those little loops near her ankles, half covered by the snow stuck to her, were a familiar design. I even remembered the one who created it. I remembered that little church, and the young family who had spent days designing those emblems.

It wasn't a bad design. It wasn't out of place. It didn't tell others she was a slave, or a noble, or anything odd like that...

Looking away just as she turned to look at me, I knew she had felt my stare. I wasn't ashamed or embarrassed over it, but I wasn't in the mood to have to tell her why I was glaring at her.

At least not yet.

After all it wasn't necessarily her fault. Especially if she wasn't very old.

"Honey, would you like some bacon too?" the larger woman popped out from behind a curtain, smiling as she asked the question.

A good salesman, if anything. The woman next to me went a little stiff, and I knew it was because she had envisioned eating them.

"Sure. Got a few pounds?" I asked her.

"That we do! I'll bundle it all up with it," the woman happily retreated back into the shop.

I sighed, and did my best to ignore the happy smile on the woman next to me. She was not only glad I had bought some bacon, but seemed to actually enjoy the woman's happy demeanor.

So odd sometimes.

"Amber said this family has been running this shop for generations," the woman said gently. A little softly, as if to not be heard by the ones behind the wall, in the back.

"Most likely. People usually take over their parents positions when able," I said.

"It's nice. Makes me wonder what we'd be like, if we could do the same," she whispered.

Running my eyes along the counter in front of us, I was half tempted to lean on as if I was tired. I wasn't tired. At all. But felt like I should be.

I always felt as if I should be exhausted. Yet was I even capable of getting so anymore? When was the last time I was out of breath, or actually weary?

Tossing the thoughts away, I studied the little meat shop.

The front of the shop was mostly bare. There were a few signs hanging on the walls, to the left and right of the counter. Not behind it, oddly enough, that displayed their products and their prices. Freshly drawn numbers told me that they had changed them this morning. Most likely thinking they could charge a little more than normal thanks to the weather.

They were right.

An odd silence filled the room as I listened to the family in the back. Not only were they loud, they were busy. Something that sounded like glass was being moved, maybe a jug?

"Why... why was Crane crying? Earlier?" the woman next to me broke that silence with an annoying question, but one I understood.

"She was simply expressing her grief. She heard terrible news," I said.

The woman's eyes were a little golden in color. The kind of yellow that drew attention, especially the human kind. Yet her pupils were luckily not too different than a human's. A little too clear. A little too large, but still circular in shape. Though that might just be because we were in a small room.

I knew beneath her hat, made from a small animal... maybe an otter, were two large ears. Similar to Lomi's.

And then her most non-human trait, of course, was her tail. Now hidden beneath her baggy pants, and large jacket. If one paid attention they could just make out the tails outline. She had it wrapped around her right thigh.

Noticing the circular loops on her decrepit pants again, I wondered what to think of her.

She was... rare today. A real predator. Not too unlike Lomi, but yet still a step away. She wasn't just some cat, but a forest one. Maybe a leopard, based off the way her ears had looked to have different shades in their color. The coloration had looked like spots.

"You said your name was Renn?" I asked her.

The woman went still, and nodded uncertainly.

"Any last name?" I asked. Usually those like her did have them.

"Not that I'm aware of," she said.

Maybe she didn't know it. Or hadn't been able to learn it.

Just like Lomi, who undoubtedly would now go through her long life without knowing many family stories and secrets.

The thought weighed on me, and I forced my attention elsewhere.

Oddly my eyes ended up on her fingers.

They were coiled around each other, and I knew any human who saw the action would simply think she was trying to warm them. I knew better.

She was nervous. Anxious.

"Lomi's village was destroyed. About a month's distance from here. Burnt by the church," I said gently. Low enough that the woman who was heading back couldn't hear.

Renn's breath caught, and I was glad she was old enough to contain her emotions a little better than most. The shopkeeper didn't notice her sudden sorrow as she directed two younger men.

They carried out two small boxes. Made of some kind of lacquered wood. Within both crates were carefully wrapped items. Undoubtedly our pieces of hams and bacon slices.

"All set," the woman happily declared as the two younger men quickly retreated back to the rear of the store, as if afraid of being yelled at any more.

Glancing to the sign on the right, I quickly calculated the cost of the food before me. A little steep, even for the time of year, but who was I to complain?

Renn stepped towards the counter, excitedly. She grabbed the crate with the lesser amount of items inside it, and I was glad she did. I knew she was far stronger than any human woman, especially of her size, but she still needed to act as if she wasn't. Humans always noticed things like that.

"I can smell the deliciousness already!" Renn said happily, which brought a larger smile to the woman's face.

"Indeed you can! I soaked them in some nice honey. You'll enjoy it, I'm sure," the woman seemed more than happy to accept the praise.

Renn stood up a little straighter, and I knew if I peeled back her larger jacket a tad, I'd be able to make out the shifting of her tail beneath her pants.

Although I knew she really was excited about getting back, to eat the feast before her, I also knew it was her way of masking her inner turmoil. It was best to hide such internal discord with movement and action.

I had said it now on purpose, to see how well she took emotional news. Especially bad news.

She took it well. Either she was a true predator, and didn't care much of the deaths of strangers, or was stern enough to keep the sorrow inside.

Either way would give her a passing mark in my book.

"Fourteen renk, right?" I asked the woman, holding my closed fist out over the counter and boxes so she could grab them.

"Huh? Twelve, my good friend! You'd think I'd charge such an old family friend full price? The nerve!" the woman loudly spoke, but did so with a smile. She wasn't that offended.

"All the same. Especially since I might be in here tomorrow, asking for more, and maybe I'll want to be remembered," I said, hoping she'd just take them. I probably looked dumb with my arm extended like it was, over the crate.

"Oh, I'll just put it on Lughes's tab," the woman said, waving the coins away.

"It's my fault for showing up unannounced. Least I can do is pay for dinner," I said, and decided to just put the coins on the counter.

A little rude, but I wasn't in the mood to spend the next few minutes arguing with her.

"Jeez, I wish my boys were as upright as you! Hear that! That's what the younger generation is supposed to do! Lazy oafs!" the woman yelled back, and I could hear her honesty in her joke. She wasn't really joking.

Picking the crate up, I nodded to Renn.

"Have a good day Harren," the woman next to me said, waving as we left.

"You as well dear."

Leaving the shop, I held the door open for the cat as she sauntered out. It was a little amusing to watch her walk. She was stiff, as if cold or had bruised muscles... yet I knew it was simply because she was worried.

Worried about me.

Or rather because of me.

I was used to such things. Especially when it came to meeting people for the first time.

One could only imagine what Lughes and the others had told her about me. That young human especially. She has never liked me. Wasn't her fault though. Her mother had been...

"Is... is she the only one? That's left?" Renn asked quietly. Too quiet. Even I had struggled to hear her over the wind.

"Survivor? Yes. I found her in a well," I said.

"A... a well?"

Keeping an eye on her feet as we headed back to the Sleepy Artist, I made sure she didn't trip. The snow was starting to really pile up, and although there were no curbs on this road, that didn't mean there were no holes or stuff hidden beneath the layer of white. It'd not really damage the food, being wrapped, if she did trip and drop it, but...

"Don't make a big deal out of it. She's young enough that all it'd do is make her cry," I said.

The woman glared at me for a moment, and I wondered if I had insulted her.

"She has a right to cry," she said.

I nodded. "She does. And does, as well. Every night. But there's a reason that old goat is going to throw a feast, as he calls it, and do his best to be merry," I said.

"To distract, giving her a few moments of joy," Renn said, sighing.

Reaching the building, I studied the window for a moment. The painting in front, displayed proudly, was the same as it always had been. The same scene.

How many more times would I get to see it?

How many times will I walk through that door, hear the little bell that used to hang from that shepherd's staff, and then hear the happy greeting from the old goat? Or the grumpy one, that always accompanied a smile, from the Crane?

Odds were not many.

Glancing to the woman, I found her glaring at me. She was waiting for me to open the door for her.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked her.

She blinked, and her pupils contracted. Not too much. Nothing that a human would notice, but I saw it.

"You're Vim... the guardian. The protector, of the Non-Human Society," she said.

I nodded. "Do you know who I protect?" I asked her.

"Us... I mean... our kind. Them," she gestured with a nod, and I noted the odd tone. She was embarrassed to have included herself in that assessment.

"Indeed I do. I protect them from everything I can. Humans. The church. Other predators like ourselves, who eat our kind," I said, and stepped towards her. Close enough the crates we carried bumped into one another.

She held firm, glaring at me with defiant eyes. Daring me to continue. Wanting me to.

A little surprised at her willingness to confront me, I smiled down at her.

Cat indeed.

"I'd not harm them. Never." Her voice was as cold as the icicles that hung from the roof's gutter above us.

"No? Even though you so brazenly walk around in clothes of a lost culture? A civilization that hasn't existed for nearly two hundred years?" I asked her. Confronted her.

My eyes held hers. Especially as they contracted. Especially as the realization dawned upon her.

She nearly dropped the crate in her arms, as she turned to look downward. At her feet.

"So you do know," I said, and did so on purpose.

"Wait! No! I...!" she shook.

"Humans are forgetful creatures. But they notice the odd. They notice the out of place. No one would recognize that symbol, but they would ask about it. Ask their teachers. Their scholars. The churchmen. And one of them would know. One of them would wonder. Then eventually it'll reach the ears of someone who knows of us. Who hunts us. What then?" I asked her coldly.

I was glad that the storm was growing stronger. We were alone not just on this street, but probably all the streets around us. No one would dare this storm willingly.

The woman suddenly looked younger. Her appearance betrayed her years. She looked like a young woman, still not old enough to have children. Especially with such vivid emotion on her face. The tears in her eyes. The freight in her expression.

"I protect them. From danger. Of all kinds," I said sternly.

She faltered. The crate slipped from her right hand. But I was ready. I had positioned my own crate just under hers, on purpose. Catching it easily, I held it firm as she hurriedly tried to regain balance. Regain composure. She quickly picked the crate back up, and then looked up at me. Tear streaks stained her face. They glistened, and I knew they probably felt hot on her cheeks out here in this cold.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Are you?"

"Yes! I... I hadn't thought of that. I should have. I'm so sorry!"

Although her words were full of emotion, pure and real emotion, it was her eyes that told me the truth.

As blurry as they were. As pained as they were...

They still held my own.

"Hm. I believe you. Tomorrow we'll go get you new clothes, and burn those," I said, and with a nod turned to open the door.

"Wait! Wha..." ignoring her outburst, I gestured for her to get into the house already.

"My bacon is going to freeze if you don't hurry," I ushered her.

Standing there with a shocked expression, I wondered how many different faces she was capable of. It wasn't often I found a woman, a non-human one, that was so expressive. Lomi was, but she was a child. Even her, being a fox, would grow to become a little too stoic.

A byproduct of our long lifespans. Even though so many of us looked young, inside we were all still old. Old and weary.

"Wait... you're... not angry? At me?" she asked, stepping forward.

"Should I be?"

"I endangered them!" she shouted. I knew Crane had probably heard her. Lughes was too old. But I hadn't heard enough terror in her distressed shout to worry about Crane rushing out to see what was happening. Shelldon probably heard too, but I knew even if he heard true fear or terror he'd not come out to assess or save anyone. He was a coward.

"You did. Right now you're letting all the hot air out, and Crane gets her feathers ruffled when we do that, so come on," I said, gesturing for her to hurry.

She grumbled, but followed my order. Stepping into the building, I released a small sigh and closed the door behind us. Women, human or not, were always so...

"Vim."

The woman paused in front of me, and turned. Stopping me from venturing further into the building. I didn't see anyone, but I could now hear everyone deeper in the back. Lomi's laugh was soothing to the soul.

"Hm?"

"I... I really am sorry. I hadn't thought of such a thing. I should have. I'm old enough, wise enough, that I should have realized my clothes were not only outdated but unique. I'm sorry," she said, speaking from the heart.

"We will correct it. And you'll not do such a thing again, will you?" I asked her.

"I won't! Not... not intentionally, at least," she said, looking away.

"You worry there's other things you're missing. Don't worry, I'll point them out when I see or hear them. I'm pretty good at pointing out the obvious," I said.

She hesitated, and I enjoyed the look in her eyes.

That wasn't just fear, and pain, but anger. Anger at herself.

Seemed I wasn't going to have to kill her.

Not yet at least.

"I... I have so many questions," she whispered, and seemed to be agitated. As if she didn't know what to say or where to start.

"Ask away. Though do be careful. Some questions bring pain," I warned, and stepped forward. Forcing her to step back, if anything thanks to instinct.

Walking past her, I headed to the kitchens. Leaving the woman behind, who grumbled wordlessly in annoyance.

I'd study her more later. I had time. We'd be here for awhile. Maybe even until the snowstorm passes.

Instead I had another question I needed answered.

Passing the painting that had caught my eye, I once again noted the symbol at the top. Plastered upon a lone church, off in the distance in what looked to be any ordinary village that farmed wheat.

The sight of the symbol made me upset, so I stopped looking at it.

I knew that whoever had painted it, it looked to be Amber's work, hadn't known what that symbol meant. Neither would Lughes, or Crane. Not even Shelldon, for all his cowardly wisdom.

None of them could or would.

It was the symbol that marked the end, after all.

Heralding our extinction.

And there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Not even I could.

Chapter 14: Chapter Thirteen - Renn - Questions After Dinner

We sat near the fireplace, and honestly it was getting a little too warm. Lughes had fed the fire a little too much.

Crane had already gone to bed, and Lughes was just now walking up the stairs himself. I noticed the way the older man ascended slowly, and not just because he was a little drunk.

His age was starting to take its toll on him.

I sat a little farther from those who were left. Amber sat next to Vim, only a few feet from each other. The both of them sat a little closer to the fireplace, and were sitting in silence.

Lomi was already asleep. Lying on Vim's lap, curled up. I could see her grip on Vim's shirt, grasping it as if her life depended on it. If not for her gentle snores I'd worry she was having a nightmare.

"First time I've ever met one of you that was younger than me," Amber said gently.

"You're older than you are, it's your anger issues. Ages you," Vim said.

Amber glared at him, and I knew he had just offended her.

The fire crackled, and it drew my attention. The pit was deep, and the logs weren't that big, but for some reason I always worried the flames would ignite a fire. Even though there was brick all around the fireplace, and there was no carpet or rugs anywhere near it.

"How many were lost this time, Vim?" Amber then asked.

My ears perked up, and I sat up a little.

"I buried twenty five," Vim said, speaking as if he was talking of the weather.

Amber sighed, looking away to the wall nearby. Going lost in thought.

Although it should surprise me that a human was so... bothered by hearing of our kind being lost, it somehow didn't. She was a good person.

"Twelve last year. Too. That's a lot lately, isn't it? Is someone hunting us?" Amber asked.

"There's always a hunter lurking in the shadows," Vim said.

Studying him, I watched the way his eyes lingered on the fire. What did he see in the flames? He spoke so evenly, so firmly... as if he wasn't affected by what he said at all. But I knew the truth.

A man that didn't care about such things wouldn't have noticed the embossed symbol on my pants. Wouldn't have put one and two together so quickly.

He might be callous, but he was still emotionally vested in these people.

Plus...

Lomi shifted, and Vim glanced at her. Although he didn't smile, I did notice the way his face relaxed a little. His expression was a little more calmer. He gently rested his hand on her back, and she swiftly went still again, falling back into a deeper slumber.

Yes. This man really was a protector. A guardian.

"Is there... is there another village of foxes? For her?" Amber asked softly, as if afraid to wake her.

"Not a village. But there is a family, a few weeks from here. I'll take her there and see how it goes," he said.

"Hm... it's odd, but I guess humans do it too. Distant relatives and whatnot," Amber said.

"It is odd. But far too many of our kind don't feel comfortable living with different types. Not everyone is like Crane and Lughes, able to put up with each other," Vim said.

"They barely put up with each other as it is," I said.

Amber glanced at me, and I realized by her look that she had forgotten I was even here.

Vim though smirked a little, and I somehow knew it wasn't because of what I said... but because he had noticed Amber's slight shock.

"They're better than most. A few decades ago I had to settle a dispute in a village in the north. Ended up having to let them wage war. It was annoying as hell, and so I hated going there because all it did was piss me off," Vim said.

"Wage war?" I asked, trying to understand what he meant.

"I mean that literally. The two families waged war with one another. They had three battles, to settle their differences," he said.

"You mean actual fighting, don't you?" Amber asked, telling me she hadn't known of this either.

"Five died. Three to the family of bears and two to the wolves," he said gently.

"And... they still live together? In the same village?" I asked, surprised.

"Not only did they still live together, they lived in harmony. In fact last time I visited they had a wedding, between the youngest son of the bears and a daughter of the wolves."

I was too shocked to say anything, but Amber wasn't. "See! Not even humans are that crazy. Though I guess that is the better of the many consequences," she said.

"So some say," Vim agreed.

"I thought there weren't many predators left?" I asked.

"There isn't. You misunderstood me. I spoke of what happened after their war, not what happened recently," Vim said softly.

My eyes went wide, and I noticed the way Amber looked away, down to the floor. She had already known. Or maybe had already understood.

"They're gone," I said, not asked.

He nodded. "Have been for years. Not long after that wedding, a hunter showed up. It kidnapped the children and used them to influence their demise. By the time I arrived they were all dead," he said.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I sat back, unable to sit up straight anymore.

"How can you say that so lifelessly?" I whispered as tears fell.

"If I sobbed each time I spoke of the past, I'd have no time to live for today," he said.

"Sounds patronizing, coming from you," Amber said with a flat voice.

Vim shrugged, saying nothing more.

I hid my face, covering it with a hand as I silently tried to control my tears and emotions.

This was going to be difficult. Not just tonight, but from now on...

"You're a gentle one, Renn," Amber said softly.

"No. I'm not," I said honestly.

I was far from it. If I had been, I would have been long dead. Wouldn't have lived to adulthood, even.

For a few long moments they were silent. Letting the fire drown out the sounds of my light crying.

It didn't take me long to regain composure, and although a little embarrassed... at the same time I wasn't. It'd be rude to the ones I cried over to feel shame over the tears I shed for them.

At least that was what I told myself.

"Who... who was the hunter?" I asked after I was sure I'd not wake Lomi with the volume of my voice.

"They're gone. They'll not bother anyone again," Vim said.

"That wasn't what I asked," I said.

Vim's eyes met my own, for the first time in a long time. Probably since we had spoken to each other upon returning with the food earlier. It was a little odd that it had taken this long for him to look at me again.

"Renn..." Amber spoke softly, but I ignored her as I held his gaze.

"If she was still alive... what would you do?" he asked me.

"I'd..." I started to speak, but Vim's expression changed. Suddenly he was glaring at me.

"Hunt them? Kill them? You'd kill someone who has no real relation to you?" he asked.

"They killed a whole village, didn't they?" I asked.

"Did you know anyone in that village?"

Hesitating, I wondered why he was testing me like this. What was he doing it for?

Vim sighed, and his right foot shifted a little. Skidding along the floor, his sock made an odd sound as it rubbed the smooth wood beneath him. "Most cats live alone. Hunt alone. Usually they don't even stay with their mate, even after children are born you know?" he then said.

"We may be similar to what we are, but we're not actual animals," I argued.

"Some are, maybe," Amber whispered.

Vim shook his head. "Ignore her, she was talking about me."

"I knew that," I said. It was obvious from the way she had glanced at him as she had said it.

"I was," Amber said with a proud nod.

He frowned, as if offended. Not at Amber's statement, but the fact I had not only known but possibly agreed with her.

"It was a woman?" I asked.

"Is that so strange? Women can be rather ruthless, I mean look at her," Vim said with a nod to Amber.

She scoffed.

"Why did she hunt them?" I asked further.

Instead of answering, Vim sighed and looked at me. He no longer looked... accusing, but I could still see the annoyance in his eyes.

"She wanted revenge," he then said.

Hesitating, I wondered what to ask next. I had not expected that answer.

"Exactly. The one who hunted them, was in turn the one who had been hunted. She had lost her whole family to the wolves, a few years prior," he said firmly.

My mouth went dry; as I realized why he had acted the way he had when I asked him about her.

"Gosh," Amber groaned, looking away. As if suddenly sick.

"It's not that rare of a story," Vim said.

"Wait... wait... so... was she... was she a part of the society?" I asked, and knew my answer before he even nodded.

"Why would they do that?" Amber asked.

"Why would the wolves hunt boars? Why would a boar get revenge? Why does a fish swim? Why does a bird soar?" Vim asked.

"Don't so melodramatic Vim, I don't like it," Amber complained.

"It's the truth. Most of it was instinct. The wolves who had hunted her family had been outcasts, but members of that family all the same. She simply got her revenge. And because the bears were now married into, a part of that very family, they also fought back. They also stood their ground. They lost."

Vim told the story as if he was talking about the recent harvest, or fishing trip. His voice told no emotion, and his face had a rather serene expression.

"How... how many have we lost like that? To our own kind?" I asked.

I feared the answer, since it was so close to my own.

"A good portion. Most die from humans. Either a village burning them, thinking they're some kind of monster or demon, or the church. Others die from being alone. Getting hurt or sick, and not trusting anyone or anything to help so they just wither and die somewhere, far away," Vim said.

I groaned, and bent forward to rest my head on my hands. I felt as if I was suddenly exhausted. As if I could feel a looming headache, the worst I've ever had.

"Humans are the same, Renn. My own father tried to kill my mother," Amber spoke up softly, with a hushed voice.

Looking up at her, I found a gentle smile on the normally stoic girl. She looked as if she was... seeing herself in me.

"Cruelty is cruelty. Doesn't matter where it comes from," Vim said.

"I too lost family to family," I said to her. I couldn't bring myself to say more.

Amber gently nodded, as if to say she understood.

"None of my family killed each other, we were normal unlike you crazy people," Vim then said.

A groan mixed with a sigh as Amber and I shared our sentiments. It was obvious he was just trying to make the sour conversation a little lighter, but since he spoke in that plain tone it made it sound heartless.

"Are... is there a village? Of people like me?" I asked him. I didn't want to change the conversation, but it felt awkward to say anything else after hearing Vim's poor attempt at humor.

"Cats? Well... maybe. As I mentioned, your type usually stay alone. Wanderers. I've met a few. Maybe not exactly like you, based on your patterns and colors, but I've met similar. South, near a large set of lakes and waterfalls, is a smaller village. There is a family of cats there, but they're... well, not what you are," Vim said, genuinely seeming honest.

"Not what she is? What's that mean?" Amber asked for me.

Vim shrugged. "They're more simple. They're probably something smaller. It's hard to tell, I mean... most don't have many features. Look at Lughes, based off his beard you'd think him a sheep. Yet he's a mountain goat. Yet the only reason we know that, or that I do, is because I saw his parents. They had more animal like characteristics than he does," Vim said.

"I see. But they are similar, at least," I said.

"Yes. Close enough that if you'd like to meet them I'd allow it. But don't be upset when you find they're still different, all the same," Vim said.

"You're such a jerk," Amber grumbled.

Vim tilted his head. "What'd I say that was rude?"

"It's just... the way you are. Shut up," Amber looked away, to the fireplace. As she did I noticed that most of the logs were now embers. If we wanted to keep the fire going now was the time to add another log.

"Which one of you wants this thing?" Vim asked, gesturing to the girl on his lap.

"I'm not ready for a daughter, as much as I'd probably enjoy it," Amber said. A little too seriously.

"Daughter..." I tried to imagine it. Could I?

"Hardly think sleeping together for a night makes you a mother," Vim though corrected us as he sighed.

"Oh. I'll happily sleep with her," I said, standing up.

"Good. She slobbers all over and I hate it," Vim said, likewise standing.

She didn't wake even as he hefted her.

"I'll see to the fire for the night. Goodnight Renn," Amber said, waving.

Leading Vim up the stairs to my room, I excitedly opened the door.

"She won't scream when she wakes up without you, will she?" I asked as he laid her onto my bed.

"Why would she?" Vim asked gently, and then with a nod he turned and left.

"Goodnight," I said to him.

He paused upon leaving my room, and before he closed the door behind him he nodded. "Goodnight, Renn."

Chapter 15: Chapter Fourteen - Vim - A Balcony Fit for a King

The storm had died down a little. The fresh morning breeze was not as chilly as it could have been, and the whole world had been painted over with a layer of white.

My seat was a little damp, but that was my fault. I had been too lazy to bring a chair from inside the house, and had instead just brushed off the snow and sat down.

The world wasn't that quiet. Voices lingered from inside. People talking down the street told me that work was being done. Smoke from chimneys littered the sky, and every so often birds flew by while chirping at each other.

It's only been a few days since we arrived, and I already wanted to leave... but I knew I couldn't.

Lomi was having far too much fun for me to tear her away just yet.

Her laughter, which I could just barely make out from inside the house, was why I sat out here on the balcony.

I was not so cruel as to hate such happy joy, but honestly it was too much for me.

Plus it was good for her to spend some time with fellow women.

Lughes had left to meet a client. I had offered to join him, but he had said my cloudy expression would sully the art.

"The fact he was so serious almost makes it hurt more," I said to myself.

Amber, Crane and the new-blood were occupying Lomi. They had been in the kitchen, but now it sounded like they were a floor higher. In a bedroom maybe?

A dog barked from a few streets over, and a baby cried elsewhere. Closing my eyes, I took in the random, yet very normal sounds of the city around me.

The air was thick with the smell of burning wood. Every so often a light breeze blew by, and I got a breath of fresh air. I liked to hear the people talking, as well. Even during the cold, and with the layer of snow, they were still out and about. Shopping. Working. Earlier a couple had been walking by, just walking, and enjoying the day.

The Sleepy Artist would survive awhile longer, by what I could hear and see.

When there was peace, it was usually safer for those in the society. Humans became complacent. They began to lose their situational awareness around themselves. They stopped looking at their neighbors as strangers, and instead as family... in a way.

Yet, the moment war or chaos sewed their seeds that all changed.

Suddenly your neighbors were your enemies. Suddenly you began to notice the strange. The out of place.

Like how a woman's neck was a little longer than it should be. Like how a man's beard was strangely thick.

"Enough," I told myself, and forced the thoughts away.

This balcony was meant to be a place to relax. A place to rest. It was on the third floor, and facing the back street. There were no other buildings this high here, and no other balconies. Here one could sit and not be bothered, and not noticed. Even Lomi could sit here, without her hat, and be safe. Safe enough, at least.

Yet here I was, brooding as if I were a king with a whole kingdom of worries.

"That's a troubled face."

I blinked, and looked to my left. The door was open, and a gentle smile was greeting me.

"What is it?" I asked, since I noticed Renn was alone. I could smell Lomi upon her, but didn't see anyone else.

"Can I sit with you? Though if you don't mind I'd like to get that chair instead," Renn asked, pointing to a small wooden stool not too far from the door. One of the ones I should have grabbed myself, earlier.

Sighing, I wondered if I was willing to make her hate me or not.

"Sure," I said, and wondered why I wasn't willing to.

"Hm," she happily nodded and retreated back into the house, grabbing the small stool.

Placing it not far from me, simply thanks to the lack of space to do anything else, I sighed and moved my legs position a little so we'd not be touching.

"Close the door," I said, right before she sat down.

Renn paused, and went to do so. Seemed she had simply forgotten.

The door shut quietly, and she took her seat.

"What's the kid doing?" I asked.

"Painting. With Amber," Renn said.

I noticed the warm tone in her voice. She sounded...

"Don't like art?" I asked.

"No! I do... I really enjoyed it... but I had to leave," she said quickly.

Studying her, I wondered if those glossy eyes had been crying earlier.

"I know the feeling," I said honestly.

Looking out into the city, I noticed a few new tufts of smoke. More fireplaces had been lit.

"You do, don't you?" she asked.

"And? So what questions do you have for me now?" I asked her.

She has made a habit of coming up to me and asking questions. These last couple days we hadn't had much time alone. She spent most the day with Lomi and the rest. I was thankful for that, but honestly her questions weren't that bad. Most were simply about the society, but a few were sometimes a little...

"Why doesn't Shelldon come out? To say hi to you at least?" she asked.

Like this.

Shifting a little, I ignored the clump of snow my foot brushed up against. "He's a coward. I scare him," I said.

"Oh... so Crane was being serious," she said.

"Don't know what she told you, but yes. Shelldon is scared of me. He'll talk to me if I force it, like if I went down into the basement and confronted him... but he'll never willingly show himself in front of me," I said.

"Did you do something mean to him?"

"Well... maybe. I yelled at him once," I said.

"For what?"

"That's a private matter. You can ask him," I said.

She didn't persist, but instead nodded. As if that made perfect sense... as if she did indeed plan to ask him.

"How much longer will you be here? With Lomi?" she asked.

"Probably another week or two. We can't wait for winter to pass, since I have other places I need to check on. But I want to give her some time here, since she seems to enjoy it," I said.

"That's kind of you."

"It's a necessity. I've seen those much older than her break from such trauma. Little moments of happiness like this keep the soul together," I said.

"Not sure if I should praise you or chastise you," she then said.

"How about neither?"

She huffed, and looked away from me. To the cityscape before us.

"I like it here," she said.

"Then stay."

She glanced at me, and I knew from her expression what she wanted to ask. What she feared to ask.

I nodded. "I'll allow it. If you'd like to stay here, as long as you got permission from the residents, then do so. Do know I mean all of the residents, that includes Shelldon," I said.

Renn's fingers coiled around one another, as they twirled. It seemed it was a habit of hers. "Can I really?" she asked.

"Did you expect me to say no?"

"I did. I thought you'd force me to earn your trust," she said.

"And how would you do that, exactly?"

The woman fidgeted and shook her head. She had no clue.

"Life is all about risks. I let you stay, there's a risk to those too feeble to protect themselves. And I don't just mean from you yourself. Yet what should I do? Never let anyone try? Never give people a chance? We're called a society. A society is a band of people, working together. Can't really do that if you never give someone the chance to prove themselves," I said.

"Did you make the society?" she asked.

"No. I simply protect it," I said.

Least I tried to.

"Who did?"

"No one you'd know," I said.

"Ah. A secret. This supposed society sure does have a lot of them," she said.

"Secrets are valuable. If you want one, you need to pay the price for it."

"So I can buy them? What's the cost?" she asked, interested.

"They do say cats have nine lives," I said.

She huffed, yet smiled. "That is what they say."

Sitting in silence for a moment, I tried to think of which location suited her best.

There were a few predators still. More than most knew about... but most were solitary creatures. Living either completely alone, far away from anyone and anything, or lived in human cities on their own.

It was a good thing the ones she found to introduce her to the Society were Lughes and Crane. People who not only wouldn't shy away from a predator, but were also willing to coexist with one.

"Most... most struggle," I said, choosing my words carefully. Renn glanced at me, and I continued, "Most struggle to live with each other. Separate species, I guess you can call it. There aren't many places where more than one kind of peoples live together. In fact only a handful, that are left," I said.

"I see," she said gently.

"Other than the cat family in the south I spoke of, there's a larger town to the east. One where many different kinds live. The largest conglomerate of the society. Most of the village is non-humans, in fact. The problem there is you'd be the only predator. The only hunter. Everyone else would be prey," I said.

"Which might cause problems," she said.

"Little ones. But problems nonetheless. It's just reality. One of the families there are bunnies. Rabbits. No they don't multiply like them," I said, stopping the stupid joke that had crept to her forethought's. "But they are like Shelldon. If a hunter, a real one like yourself, took residence nearby... they might actually run away."

"I'd hate to be the cause of such discord," she said.

"I'm bad enough when it comes to that. There are a few places, a few families I can think of where you'd be accepted. Might even enjoy them. Yet at the same time you might wander all through the land, to each one, only to wind up back here," I said.

"I see... thank you, for telling me. I'm sure it wasn't easy for you," Renn said.

"Everything is easy for me," I said back.

Her smile told me she knew full well how deep of a lie that was.

"Where do you live?" she then asked.

"Nowhere. I travel, constantly. Have to. Even with me always going from one place to the next, I rarely am there when I need to be."

She nodded, as if in understanding. Maybe she did.

A large bird flew by, causing Renn to look up. Her ears perked as she did, and I realized they were probably her dominant ones.

There were a few like her, and Lomi, who had separate ears. Yet it seemed unlike Lomi, hers were fully functional.

I'd need to remember that. That meant she could hear as well as I could. She could hear the whispers of mice.

That meant she was more pure-blooded than most.

Which meant she was older than she seemed.

"Do you have anyone else?" I asked her.

She blinked, her eyes leaving the far off hawk to come back to my own.

"Family? Friends? Humans even?" I asked her.

"No... I had lived with a human, Nory, for the last few decades. She recently died, which is why I'm now here," she said.

"Before that?" I asked.

Renn hesitated, as she sat up straight. Maybe she thought I was interrogating her. "I traveled. For many years. Sometimes I stuck around in places for awhile, I spent many years in a coastal town called Pryti. I had to leave because people began to notice I hadn't aged."

"Before then?" I asked.

"Before that I... traveled with a pair of children. Human children. I stuck with them until they were both older. One died of disease, the other settled down with a family. I left after their second child had been born," she said. She spoke honestly, and clearly. It seemed she'd answer almost any question I had.

"Why'd you stay with them for so long?" I asked. Sticking with a human from children to old age was a long time, even for our people.

"I loved them. I... was like a mother to them, I guess. If I look back at it now, that's how I felt I think," she said.

"Have you been a mother?"

"No. Do you ask that because you're thinking if I'd be a good one for Lomi?" she asked with an odd smile.

I was about to say no, and then realized that wasn't right.

That was why I had wanted to know, wasn't it?

"Possibly. Before the children, what about then?" I asked, doing my best to not only change the subject but my own thoughts.

"I had been alone. Probably... twenty years or so, I think. Then I was with my family. We lived together, all of us. In a forest," she said.

"Alone? With your family, I mean," I asked.

"Oh. Yes. My parents absolutely hated humans. Despised them. Killed them on sight," she said.

"Yet raised a daughter who falls in love with them," I said.

Renn's face contorted into annoyance as her shoulders went a little taught. As if she was holding herself back from reaching out to smack me.

"There's no shame in it," I said gently.

"I know. And I know you didn't actually mean any ill, but the tone you used hurt me," she said.

Blinking, I wondered what tone I had used. I hadn't meant it in that bad of a way... in fact, I had actually meant it...

"Don't say anything. I can tell you didn't mean that. Just... let me quiet my heart for a moment, please," Renn then said with a raised hand, to stop me from saying anything.

Sitting back, I nodded and went quiet.

Renn's face scrunched up as she very obviously tried to keep her emotions under control, and I realized why I had doubted her age.

She was old. Yet...

She obviously didn't have much experience with those like me. Those like our kind.

Most of her experience seemed to be with humans. Unless she had omitted a great deal, it seemed that after leaving her family she had only spent time with humans.

With a deep breath, she finally seemed to return to normal. A small smile even planted itself on her face.

"Well done," I praised her.

Her smile went awry as she blushed, and looked away. "Thanks."

"Your family. They're gone?" I asked her.

I immediately regretted asking, as I watched her happy glow die off like a candle would with a sneeze.

"Yes."

"Then all the more reason to join the society. You need not rush the decision, but take care on taking too long in picking a home. If you dally, your options will become fewer and fewer," I said.

Renn opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated. I knew what bothered her, since I had been the one to address it, but that didn't mean I was willing to wait for her to gather her nerve and ask it.

"Is it that bad?" she asked gently.

"Worse. But don't worry about it. At least not right now," I said.

"Let you worry about it, you mean," she stated.

Glancing at her, I wondered if I looked like I was worrying in her eyes.

"Have you ever met a king?" I asked her.

She blinked and shook her head.

"I've met many. Kings. Queens. Rulers. Tyrants. Want to know what they all shared? A similarity that transcends not just race, sex, but even time?" I asked her.

"What?" she whispered her question.

"Fear."

Her jaw went taut as she understood my meaning.

I gestured to the world before us. The white sitting under the smoky grey. "They fear uprisings. They fear rebellion. They fear pestilence. Famine, religious fundamentalism, economic collapse, familial betrayal, and so on and so forth," I said.

"Sounds sad," she said.

"It is," I nodded.

"It's their job though, isn't it? To worry over their kingdom. Their subjects," she said as she stretched a foot out to lightly step on a nearby pile of snow.

Her foot left toe prints as she played with the snow. "It is. That's my point. I'm the protector. It's my job to protect. My job to worry. I'd be a bad guardian if I didn't fret," I said.

"Is there a king? Or ruler? Of our society?" she asked.

"No. There used to be. She's dead," I said.

"No one's tried to take her place?" Renn kicked some snow away, ruining her toe prints.

"Why would they? No one really gets along very well. They're all more distant friends than anything else. Lughes loves to paint others, yet he'll turn and ask you why you're still here once the paint dries," I said.

"Oh... will he do that to me too?" she asked, suddenly worried.

"Has he painted you yet?" I asked.

"Mostly."

"Ah... then who knows? You'll find out soon," I said, amused.

She grumbled, and I could tell she knew I was mostly teasing.

Renn sighed, and I noticed the wind picked up a little. Far off in the distance I could see new storm clouds rumbling towards us. Another layer of snow would blanket this section of the world tonight.

I enjoyed storms. Sometimes when the world becoming as chaotic and turbulent as my mind and heart, it usually put me at ease. If even the great vastness around me could struggle, then maybe my struggling wasn't too bad.

"Can I ask you something a little personal, Vim?" Renn then asked with a whisper.

"You can," I said. Though doubted I'd answer.

"Are you strong?"

Frowning at her question, I glanced at her. She was studying me with her golden eyes, looking as apprehensive as a newborn fawn.

"I am."

Her eyes narrowed, and I wondered if she doubted me. More so, I wondered if she thought herself stronger.

"Lomi mentioned you killed a man. Before you boarded the ferry," she said gently.

"Did she?" I asked. That was a surprise. I had figured she'd blame herself, and thus keep it quiet. They usually did.

"She cried," Renn said.

"I'm sure." That was more believable.

"I've always been stronger than most," she said.

"I'm sure," I repeated, and believed again.

Her eyes narrowed, and I wondered if she thought I was being sarcastic.

"Yet you're even greater, aren't you?" she though said, even though her face told me she was a tad upset.

"Likely."

Renn went silent for a moment, even though her eyes never left mine. They still glared at me, but hidden beneath that stare was... worry? Fear? Was she scared of me too? She hadn't shown such fear before. Worry, yes. Concern, yes... but not fear.

Still it was odd. Had this woman, and the rest of them, already become close enough with that young fox for her to reveal such things already? What else had she told them? What other secrets?

I should have warned her. I'll need to pull her aside later, to at least make sure she didn't reveal anything about Elk and his family.

The woman next to me suddenly took a small breath, as if startled... and nodded.

"Then... why are we losing?" she finally asked her real question.

Relaxing a little, I made sure to not let my relief appear on my face.

Was that all she wanted to know?

"Say I gave you spear," I said to her, gesturing to her with an open palm.

She blinked and nodded.

"A spear so sharp, that a mere... touch could kill anyone and everything. No matter how deep it punctured. No matter how strong the arm that threw it. The spear always killed its enemy," I continued.

She nodded again, but I noticed the way her hardened eyes softened. She was wiser than I had thought; she had already understood what I was trying to say.

Yet still, I continued. "Yet, how well would that spear do, you think... If before it was an army? One might argue that given enough time, you'd stab or even poke, enough to kill them all... but what if there were two armies? Three? How many would it take before even that almighty spear would fall? How long until it shattered, like the basic branch it was made from?" I asked her.

"Not long at all," she whispered.

I nodded. "A bad analogy but it gets the point across. I can't kill everyone. I can't slaughter every human there is. And even if I did, it's not like that suddenly makes us all safe and happy. Did I not just recently tell you of a whole village wiped out, not by human hands but our own?"

She nodded, and gave off a heavy sigh. As if she was burdened greatly.

"There are more enemies than the humans. There is time. Disease. Ailments. Strife. And those are even harder to face than the humans. All we can do is struggle. All we can do is endeavor and persevere. I just try to... help, when and where I can," I said.

"I see. I understand. I'm sorry if my question seemed rude and accusing," she said.

"It didn't. I get it often. Especially after I fail," I said.

"Hm..." She seemed like she wanted to say something, but decided against it.

"Plus not all humans are enemies. There are just as many like Amber as there are we. Hell, many are now family if not by blood at least by marriage," I said.

"Oh? It's possible?" she asked, surprised.

"For some. Though usually the offspring is completely human. Out of all the mixed children I know, only a handful have ever shown their animal traits. And even then not as prominent as their parent," I said.

"I see... Seems then that would be the most optimal solution, wouldn't it be?"

It was my turn to blink and stare at her.

She didn't notice my look, as she stared at the floor. To where her feet messed with an ever growing mess of snow. She was lost in thought.

"Some have said so. Others would die before they'd accept it," I said.

Renn smiled softly and nodded.

Ah... her parents had hated humans she had said. Those were probably the faces in her mind now.

Had I known them, perhaps?

Running all through my memories, I tried and failed to find them. I've known cats before. But their colors were always different. It made it hard to tell... and...

No, chances were I didn't. Or rather hadn't. If I had, they would have told her about me. About the society.

She wasn't old enough to know about my life before the society.

So few were anymore.

With a cough, Renn stood from her chair. She stared at me for a moment and then stepped towards the door.

Seemed her questions for now had been exhausted.

Before opening the door however, she paused. Her hand resting on the brass handle for a moment.

"Lomi hates you," Renn then said. She wasn't looking at me, but instead at the balcony door. Into the small foyer, what little could be seen behind the frosted glass.

"She should."

"She doesn't want to."

I nodded. "In time her hate may subside. Usually it doesn't."

"I..." she went quiet, and I had to turn to see why. The distraught in her face made me look away.

"Don't let it bother you. Imagine if I had showed up only a day after your family was hunted and burnt alive. You'd hate me too," I said to her.

For a moment she was silent, and then she chuckled. I glanced at her and was surprised to find an odd smile on her face.

"Rather I'd have wrapped you in a hug and kissed you... But my circumstances were different," she said, then opened the door and headed inside.

She closed the door behind her, and I realized she had left the chair she had dragged out here with me. I'd have to remember to take it in. That stool was not made out of the kind of wood that lasted long in such weather.

Beneath the now empty stool, were footprints. Snow was marked and scattered, as if some animal had rolled around moments ago.

Theoretically, one just had.

"Everyone has a story," I said after a moment, and sat back to relax a little longer.

Such moments never lasted, after all.