

# The Non-Human Society

*Chapter 16: Chapter Fifteen - Renn - A Happy Moment, Painted, Yet Distracted*

"Am I really that short?" Lomi asked, worried.

The painting we were studying was beautiful. Lughes had painted it, and done so with an oddly gentle theme. He had somehow painted me, Lomi, Crane and himself all sitting with each other before a fireplace. The only one not sitting in a relaxed chair was Lomi. In the painting she was clinging lightly to a chair's armrest, smiling and talking to me.

He had simply painted a mere moment. Where we were happily talking in the middle of the night.

Such a scene was beautiful. It was such a happy moment, even if some parts were imagined. We had a fireplace, but no chairs like that. No rugs those colors...

"You're not that short. Plus you're still growing," Amber said.

Glancing at her, I wondered if she found it insulting that she had not been included in the painting. Especially since she hadn't been the artist. There had been no reason for Lughes not to include her.

Amber though had a kind smile, and didn't seem bothered by it at all.

Honestly it made me wonder if that meant Lughes really didn't acknowledge her. Or rather, humans in general.

Maybe he wasn't as kind of a man as I had thought.

"Still! I look so tiny!" Lomi groaned, pointing at the painting before us.

"I think you look cute. Look, he even gave you a pretty dress," I said.

"It is pretty..." she admitted.

Lomi seemed to like clothes. Every so often she'd grab and study something we were wearing. Crane yesterday had worn a light dress, and she had spent some time studying the seams and frills on the sleeves.

"Renn."

I turned to the door and found Crane looking at me. "Would you join me? I think tonight we shall have some fish," she said.

"Oh? To go buy them? Of course," I said.

"Hm. How about you Lomi, would you like to help?" Crane asked the young child.

"I do! Let me go tell Vim!" Lomi rushed out the room, and I laughed lightly at her. She sometimes acted as if he was her father.

Crane smiled and headed down the hallway to follow her, as if to go with her to Vim to let him know just what was going on.

"Then I'll go get ready," Amber said, going to leave as well.

"Going to come shopping with us?" I asked, excited. Walking with everyone would be enjoyable.

"No. I need to go start the painting for the young lady of the Primdoll family," she said.

"Oh... I see," I said. She had gone the other day with Lughes to meet the family, and get the deposit amongst other things, but I hadn't realized she would start so soon.

"Will it take long?" I asked. Glancing to the painting still resting on the easel, I wondered if it would be anything like that. It had only taken Lughes two days to paint it, and to me it looked as professional as any other in this building.

"Probably a week or so, mostly since the young girl won't be able to sit still for long. A few hours at a time at best, probably," Amber said with a sigh.

"I see. Anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"If you leave before I get back, leave me a note at least," she said with a smile.

Amber left the room, leaving me alone.

Hurrying out after her, I watched her small frame as she walked down the hall. "Leave a note?" I asked.

"If you leave with Lomi. Of course," she said as if it was as obvious as the sunrise.

Watching her go, I hesitated.

Leave with Lomi?

For a long moment I stood there by the door, unsure of what to say or do.

Yes. I could, couldn't I?

It was obvious. Vim guided those like myself to places they could be safe. Places they could call home.

That meant if I wanted to, I could leave with them. Join them, until I found somewhere else. Somewhere I'd...

Glancing to the painting, standing in the center of the room, I found it looked a little silly.

The room was small. Smaller than my bedroom. There was a window, but it was firmly draped by a thin sheet. It was tied down at the edges, so that it'd not shift.

A single carpet sat on the floor. A blue felt, that was marked by countless little droplets of old paint.

And nothing else. No chairs. No shelves. No tables.

Just an easel, and a painting.

A painting of a scene that just a few months ago would have been enough to make me cry.

Yet now, already, seemed...

Walking away from the room, I left the door open. Heading for the stairwell, I wondered what the right choice was.

This place was wonderful. Beyond reason.

It'd be... sad, for Lomi to leave, but I understood the reason. Lughes and Crane neither seemed too interested in raising a child. Amber, although didn't seem to mind Lomi, was obviously a human. Lomi needed someone like us. Our kind didn't age as quickly as humans and...

Pausing in the hallway, I wondered if I was willing to do it. I had somewhat guided children before. Although they had both been a little older when I had found them, fleeing those flames.

My memories played out in my head as I tried to remember how well it had gone. One had died of disease, but that had been... A simple tragedy. Something uncontrollable.

The other had grown up fine. They had married, built a home, and even had children themselves.

But was I able to claim credit for any of that? Although I had felt somewhat like a mother to them, most of the journey and time spent with them felt more like one with siblings. I

could remember many nights arguing with them. Scolding them. Yet the next day having to be taught something myself, since I had not yet known a lot of the human's culture.

And... even if I found I didn't wish to stay here, did I not simply need to wait for Vim to return in a few years?

Then I could have him escort me to the next place.

If anything doing that every so often might be enjoyable all in itself. Spending a decade here, a decade there...

I couldn't help but smile at the idea. How wonderful it was to imagine it.

"Renn?"

I turned to find Amber. She was giving me an odd look, as if worried for me.

"Sorry. Just got lost in thought," I said.

Seemed I had stopped right before the stairwell. Which put me in her way, as she tried to walk downward, from her own room. She had a large sack hanging from her shoulder, as if she was about to go on a trip.

"Hm. Your kind does that occasionally. Just try not to do it in front of the stairs, would you? I know you're all stronger than us, but even you guys can get hurt," she said, stepping past me as she rounded the stairwell.

I smiled at her as she passed, and realized that I liked how blunt she was. Although she sounded annoyed, and looked it, I could tell now that she was being genuine in her concern. She was actually worried for me.

"Will you be long?" I asked her.

"Sometimes I stay the night at their homes, if they allow or want it. They're a lower noble so... it could go either way. They usually aren't as wealthy as they act, yet at the same time want me to so their neighbors don't see me coming and going for a week," she said, pausing a couple steps down from me.

"Coming and going?" I asked.

"Their neighbors. They'll realize I wasn't given permission to stay there while doing the painting, implying they weren't able to properly accommodate me. It'd be seen as a sign of being too poor or simply not very good hosts. It's just how they are," she said, and then after explaining continued down the stairs.

"Hm..." I headed down the stairs after her, but stopped on my floor while she continued down. After a few steps I realized she was most likely not conveying just how serious the matter was. Humans were so odd sometimes.

"To be judged by how you treated those below you," I whispered, and wondered if that was actually a good thing.

Although it was sourced from their desire to be seen as proper nobles, not because they were genuinely good people. So maybe it was both good and bad.

Rounding a corner, I went still as I bumped into a wall.

Or rather, a man who was as steady and firm as one.

"Sorry Vim," I said, stepping back a step since he wouldn't.

"Hm... Who, or what, are you hunting?" he asked me.

"Hunting?" I asked back, wondering what he meant. I wasn't hunting for anything. I was heading to my room to get my hat and jacket, so I could go with Lomi and Crane to the fish market. Yet was that hunting? I already knew where they were, after all.

"Your face said you were on the prowl," he said gently.

For a moment I wondered if he was judging me again, but instead I saw the way his eyes held my own. They weren't as... firm, as usual. Was he simply making light talk?

"I was pondering what Amber had just told me," I told him.

"And that was?"

"How the nobles are judged by how they treat her. By their fellow nobles," I said.

"Ah. The hubris of the powerful. Careful, there's little to truly understand there," he said.

He stepped forward, and I had to quickly step aside for him. He nodded as he left, as if telling me that our conversation was done and it had even been a pleasant one.

Watching him go, I sighed and wondered why he was...

Was he odd?

A part of me thought he was.

Yet at the same time...

Shaking my head, I hurried to my room to get my hat and jacket. I needed to stop getting side-tracked, or they'd leave without me. Crane was very punctual after all.

Reaching my door, I paused and glanced farther down the hallway. This hallway led to another, smaller one, which I had assumed had only a small storage room at the end. Another bedroom was across the hall from me, before the hallway turned to the storage, but it was empty. Vim had chosen a room on the first floor. The small one meant for human guests, or rather customers who traveled long distances to purchase the paintings.

Had he swapped rooms? Or...?

Opening my door, I glanced around to see if anything was different. Obviously nothing was... and it was silly to think there would be. It wasn't like I had anything in here anyway. My hat lay on the bed. My jacket hung on the doorknob on the dresser.

There was nothing else in here. Other than the blanket, and pillow... and the little book I had borrowed from Crane.

Maybe he had done something in the storage room.

I didn't smell anything odd in here. It smelled like me, actually. I didn't even smell the weird dust I had smelled when I first moved in. If he had entered my room, I couldn't tell by sight or smell.

"Let's go Renn!" A young Lomi called up to me, and I grumbled as I went to hurrying again.

Stop being so easily distracted!

Even if things were so vibrant, I had to focus.

Otherwise these wonderful moments would begin to blur together, and become easily forgotten.

And such a thing was an insult not just to this happiness, but those who brought it to me.

*Chapter 17: Chapter Sixteen - Vim - A Stroll to Ponder*

Ruvindale was a growing city.

It could no longer be called a village, and soon not even a town. It may already not even be classified a town anymore... at least on certain documents and ledgers.

I was circling the south side of the market district, and it was a little daunting to realize how quickly this place had grown so large.

The last time I had been here, this entire section had been fields. Now there were not only buildings, but stone roads, wells, places to dump trash and refuse.

Not only had the populace grown rapidly, they were still expanding. I had just left a whole block that was still being constructed. What had looked to be an entire new district was being built, by not just the common workers and people who owned it, but the knights and servants of the church here.

A growing populace. An ever expanding city. A rarity this close to Snowfall, since it got so cold during the winter...

There also seemed to be a new trade route with the river village not far from here, and it seemed to be, seemingly, strong.

It seemed they exported furs and fish, and imported cheese and pigs... A rather well made trade, to be honest. An equal trade. A trade that would benefit and allow all involved to grow and flourish.

Whoever had negotiated it, most likely the church, had done a good job. It was rare for such close towns to do such honest business with each other.

"Not for ten! I'll give you eight, not a single renk more!" a woman complained to a stall worker.

I studied the stall worker as I walked past, and knew they would already give in. The man even looked a little happy; he probably would have even gone lower if she had pressured him.

She felt good about herself nonetheless as she was handed a bag of carrots.

Although there was still a layer of snow on the ground, the snow was dirty. Old. There had been a few days since the last snowfall.

It was honestly time to leave. Lomi didn't seem ready, but if we didn't then I'd not get her out of here.

"Pardon me sir!"

I stopped and watched a young boy run up. He gave a half grin as he looked up at me, and pointed to a nearby shop. "We've got the best steak in town!" he said a little too loudly.

"Of that I have no doubt," I said to him.

His grin grew into a full smile, revealing half a mouth of teeth. Had his adult teeth not grown in yet, or had he already lost them... to beatings, or sickness?

Before he could get too happy at finding a potential customer, I dug out a single renk coin.

Although his smile deflated a little, he still seemed happy as I gave it to him. "Stay warm kid," I said.

"Thanks mister!" he said and ran off.

I took note of the stall owners who had watched the event. A few had smiled, nodding their heads before going back to work... but a few had shaken their heads in annoyance.

Rivalries. Different beliefs. Some were religious, some weren't.

Humans were as wildly different as we were.

Ignoring them I continued on my way.

Studying the stalls, and the signs hanging off buildings and shops, I tried to get a grasp on the current market.

It seemed furs were cheap. Some food was cheap too, like fish and pork.

Another sign that their trade route with the village down the river was a healthy one.

That also explained why Lomi's cloak had been so cheap. They had a large inventory of furs, and a steady buyer elsewhere. Made it cheap here for the locals.

If I were a merchant, I'd see opportunity around every corner here.

Too bad instead all I saw was a shrinking world.

The greater distances such towns and villages could exchange their goods, the smaller the world became.

Rumors would spread farther. Stories would get told and told, until they reached every corner of world.

It made it dangerous for those I protected.

Glancing towards the left, towards the center of the town, I studied the distant spikes and towers. The long, pointed, and detailed structures that sat in the center. Looming

high over the already tall buildings that became increasingly taller the farther center into the town you went.

Some of the buildings they loomed over looked even five or six floors high. A modern feat for them. Yet the cathedral that towered even over them made me feel small. Not many things could make me feel like that.

A great castle, surrounding a greater church.

That church wasn't new to me. They've been building it up for decades. Yet it seemed it was finally done. Finally its roots were deep enough to begin its expansion.

Soon most of this city would be made of stone. Wooden buildings would be torn down and rebuilt as stone. Roads would get packed by bricks. And if this place could endure long enough, a great wall would be erected around it.

Churches built the wall to supposedly protect itself. To protect the flock they guided.

Yet the truth was much more human. They used the walls, and gates along it, to keep track of those who came and went. To keep track of the merchants, more specifically.

Right now the reason this place was profiting so well, and its market so strong, was rather blatant.

Little to no taxes.

This was thanks to there being only a few gates. The city did have walls, but they didn't encompass the whole city. Most were within the city themselves, remnants of the old boundaries before its recent expansions. Nor were there gates and walls at each road that led in and out of Ruvindale.

The moment that the real wall went up, that would change. Rules would be enforced. At least, more than they were now.

Chances were right now the only taxes collected were when the boats docked. When loading and unloading. Maybe even only during one of those.

"Fred said three," a woman spoke to another, older, one. They were both a little more bundled up than most, probably still cold. They ignored me as I walked passed.

I was leaving the market, but it was still busy. People were still walking around and there were still businesses scattered here and there. Enough for me to still hear a few conversations.

"Howls. A sign of a storm. We'll get more snow, mark my word," an older man said as he and what looked to be his son walked past me.

Howls... wolves likely. A superstitious man.

Glancing to the sky, I studied the cloud floating above us. It was a bright white in color, and thick. Dense.

Snow. Possibly. But not today.

After a few more minutes I began to ignore the passing people and their conversations.

They were the same as always. Worries about the weather. Food. A family member who was sick, and was now bedridden.

My earlier assumption that this place was... safe, for now, was correct. There was of course, always a danger, to live in the same place as a large church... but Lughes and Crane should be fine. Neither looked too different than most humans. And they were both too skittish and weary to ever put themselves in positions that would allow them to be found out.

Amber was also a buffer for them. Acting as an employee, she was the one who did most of the talking and negotiating. A perfect separation for them. Keeping them even safer.

Yet even if I did decide that this place was unsafe, that didn't mean Lughes and the rest would agree with my assessment. I've given such warnings to many, and most refuse to obey. They understand the danger and my warnings. They always agree... but they are also unable to abandon their homes.

Like Lomi's family. They had undoubtedly known of the knights coming. They had to have smelled them, or heard their approach.

Yet they hadn't ran.

Nor fought back.

Why? Why were such weak-willed people, who would normally flee at the drop of a hat, always caught so off guard?

Was there more to it? There had to be...

Rounding a corner, I noticed the large whale statue pop up in the distance. I was nearing the visitor district.

The Sleepy Artist wasn't far from it. The street it was on was actually connected to the center district, where the nobles lived. A good location. Close enough to the rich and powerful that they wouldn't complain yet far enough that a commoner wouldn't be too scared to enter.

Rounding a corner, a figure caught my eye. Standing alone, near the corner of the road, was what looked to be a young woman. Her hat looked a little out of place, but the rest of her clothes finally looked normal. The leather was still a little shiny, telling those who saw it that they were freshly made.

She was looking into a window of a shop, studying the things displayed, yet her head perked up as I drew closer.

I knew if her hat had not been on, I would have seen her ears turn my way first, before her head and eyes did.

Walking towards her, I made sure to heavily scrutinize the people around her. Those who were coming and going. Shopping, carrying goods. A young boy was even pulling the reigns of a small donkey, which was pulling a small cart full of chopped wood. A firewood delivery.

None were paying attention to her. She was being ignored just as much as any common town girl, who was shopping.

Looking so young, and happy, made her seem nonthreatening. Especially to humans.

How little they knew.

Renn stood still as I walked up to her, waiting for me. She had a soft smile as I approached, and I wondered what question was on her mind now. They weren't as common as they had been a few days ago, and in fact this was the first time today she's come up to ask one.

"How'd you know I was coming down this road?" I asked her when I finally reached her.

Her smile became a large smirk. "What if I said I smelled you coming?" she asked.

"Really?" I lifted a shoulder to try and smell myself. I stunk? Really?

Renn giggled happily, stepping back a step as she laughed. "Nope! Honestly... you really don't smell at all. Lughes told me you usually circle the city, and I had seen you leave to the north so just assumed you'd come back from the south—here," she said, pointing down the road I had just come from.

I nodded, and wondered if I was really that predictable. Maybe I was just as set in my ways as everyone else, even if I wouldn't admit it.

"And?" I asked her.

Her smile turned into a mischievous smirk. "I want to see what you see," she said.

Frowning, I wondered what she meant exactly. There were many ways to interpret such a thing.

"Unless it's a secret. On how you judge a city. On how you decide if it is safe or not, for us," she said quickly.

Ah. That made sense.

"This town is fine. For now. The church has taken up residence, truly, but it's still establishing itself. It'll be a few decades more before the church becomes an actual danger," I said, and stepped towards the center square.

She hummed as she went to keeping pace with me, stepping alongside me. "Why's that?" she asked.

"Most of the residents are still pagans. Not following their doctrine. That means the church hasn't begun to enforce their rules, and the followers haven't ostracized and forced out the non-believers. It's started, I already noticed it, but it will take time."

We walked slowly back towards the Sleepy Artist, and I took care to walk slowly indeed. She had more questions lurking behind her gentle smile.

"So... we're safe. For now," she said.

"For now," I agreed with a nod.

"Safe enough for me too?" she asked.

Although she hesitated, almost coming to a stop, I kept walking as I nodded again. "Yes. Safe enough for you too," I said.

So she had chosen to stay here? A little odd, but not that much of a surprise.

After all, was I not just thinking that our people were so... strange? That once they fell in love with a place, or person, they defied even their base instincts?

"So... I just need permission right? From the rest?"

I nodded.

Passing a couple of laborers, I noticed how she went quiet as they walked passed.

It was good she knew not to speak of such things in earshot of others, but sometimes going silent so obviously was also noticeably odd.

"How... how long will it take, for you to come back?" she then asked.

"You mean return? Hm... unless I need to come back to this area for a specific reason, it could be up to five years. Maybe a little more. Six or seven, at worse," I said.

"I see."

For a moment we walked together in silence, until we came to the street that the Sleepy Artist, then she stopped for a moment.

I stopped too, and glanced at her. Did she have a question she wanted to ask without the others hearing?

"Yes?" I asked her.

She hesitated, and glanced around. As if to make sure not only were there no humans nearby, but to also make sure Lughes and the rest weren't either.

"What?" I asked, a little annoyed. I wasn't tired, but I didn't like standing in the middle of the road like this, doing nothing. It drew attention.

Renn flinched, but nodded. "I... I wanted to know if you were a hawk," she said, with a strange smile on her face.

"A... a hawk?" I asked, unsure of where she got such an idea.

She nodded quickly, and gestured with her hands upward... as if there was actually a hawk flying above us now. "You're... strong. Yet also stoic. You stare at things, and it would explain how you act and..." she went quiet, staring at me.

"Sorry," I said, as she sighed and grimaced.

"I was so sure..." she mumbled.

"I can tell. No I am not a hawk," I said and turned to return to walking.

She mumbled something as she hurried to catch up. "Would you tell me, if I got it right?" she asked.

"I would," I said. I had made that promise after all.

"Hm... Are you a land beast? One without wings?" she asked.

"I'll not answer questions like that," I said simply.

"Oh. Yea. Right..."

I sighed as we reached the Sleepy Artist. Before opening the door, I glanced at the odd woman next to me.

She smiled at my glance, as if happy to be acknowledged.

"Sure you're a cat and not some kind of dog?" I asked her.

The woman's smile widened, turning into a grin. "Positive. My parents were very adamant... and my uncle, my mother's brother who was much older had more um... He had paws," she said, raising her hands.

Her hands looked perfectly human. They even looked as if they lacked calluses.

"Dogs have paws too," I said.

"Trying to insult me?" she asked, although her smile remained just as large as before.

"No... just trying to comprehend you is all," I said.

"Hm... I'm pretty simple, I think," she said.

Grabbing the door handle, I hesitated.

Simple? Far from it. None of our kind were truly simple... no matter how many times I often thought of them as such, they honestly weren't. We were too old, we lived too long, to be simple.

"Simple," I said lightly, opening the door.

As we entered, I took note of the sound of voices inside. No one was at the counter, but there were people in the kitchen.

The little bell dinged as I entered, but I wasn't able to step into the building. A gentle hand had stopped me.

Glancing down at the hand grabbing my sleeve, I glanced at the woman who held it.

"What?" I asked her.

"Can I ask a favor?" she asked.

"Hm?"

"Before you leave, would you help me learn?"

"Learn what?" I asked.

"Renn is that you?" Crane's voice came from within. From the hallway.

"Yes it's me!" Renn said quickly, and I could tell she had done so to hopefully keep us alone for a moment longer.

"Well?" I asked her.

"I... I want to learn how money works. So I can help work here," she said quickly.

"Why not ask Amber? Or Crane?" I asked, a little annoyed.

"I'm older than Amber," she whispered.

"Yet not as old as Crane. Ask her," I said.

"Crane will tell Amber," she said quickly.

I sighed and shook my head. What the hell?

"Please? I promise I'll learn fast."

"Fine. Let me go. I'll teach you tomorrow," I said, and pulled my arm free from her grasp. She let me go easily enough, and smiled and nodded.

"Thank you, Protector," she said, and hurried past me inside the house.

Shaking my head, I closed the door behind us and was glad she had chosen to stay here.

The mere thought of traveling with her for years as she searched for a home was daunting.

A single child was bad enough.

*Chapter 18: Chapter Seventeen - Renn - A Coin For a Dream*

"They're minted in the north?" I asked, holding the silver coin.

It was actually kind of pretty. It had neat looking trees designed onto it, and the other side had the name of the coin. The coin had a large P-Letter on its face, with the word penk below... and rounding the edges were the words 'Lenk, For God.'

The words were done in a rather fancy way, with little curves and loops on certain letters.

"The current market rate here is about eighteen renk to that single penk. Above the penk is a gold coin, but they only mint a few hundred of those so odds are you'll never see them. Here," Vim pulled another coin out, and rolled it across the table at me.

I hurriedly grabbed it, since I feared it rolling off the table and falling between the floorboards. Upon grabbing it, I was a little shocked at how much heavier this one was.

Like the others, it had trees on one side and the name on another. "Lenk," I read, this one didn't have a singular letter on the front face, but instead some kind of crest. An odd symbol that kind of looked like a flower, with a cross looming over it.

"That's the symbol of the Lenk family. A powerful merchant guild. They're the ones who ensure the value of the coin. Show that gold coin anywhere in their nation, and you can basically get whatever you want for free," Vim said.

"Wait? For free? Why?" I asked, rubbing my thumb along the coin's face. For some reason it felt... too smooth. Shouldn't I feel the ridges and bumps of the stuff stamped into it?

"Because the coin itself is worth so much. Show that coin, and sign your name, and the business you're dealing with can simply collect payment at any of the Lenk banks. At least, that was the idea for the coin when it had been made," Vim said.

"Had been," I stated, and recognized that look on his face. He was a little annoyed.

He nodded. "Problem is of course, people who weren't supposed to have them ended up getting them. Like yours truly," he said.

"Ah. So... what's it worth then?" I asked.

"Roughly a thousand of the silvers. That gold coin is worth enough to buy this building, and most the paintings inside it. Maybe not all, but one could argue that not all of the paintings could be sold in the first place... so maybe it could?" he said, raising an eyebrow as he thought about it.

Studying the heavy coin, I felt as if it was suddenly a little heavier.

This whole building? All the paintings?

All this happiness, and the feeling of home it brought, shrunk and contained in such a tiny little thing? It barely took up a quarter of my palm.

"Really...?" I asked softly.

"Really. There might not even be a single other one of those coins in this whole town," he said.

"How many do you have?" I asked him.

"Why?"

Rubbing the coin lightly, I smiled at him.

He smiled back but shook his head. "I might need it, so no. You can't have it."

I nodded, understandingly. I reached back across the table to give it back to him.

Although I readily gave it back, once I dropped it onto his palm... I felt as if suddenly I was poorer. As if it had really been mine.

"Take up the brush, and maybe you can earn one yourself," he said.

"Think they'd let me?" I asked.

"Doesn't hurt to try."

"Hm... maybe. I've never been very good at such things. I can barely sew, too," I said.

Vim shrugged as he stood up from his chair. "Understand enough for now?" he asked.

I nodded, thankful. "Yes. Thank you. I do appreciate it."

"Sure. Sure," he said gently, and headed out of the room.

Watching him go, I wondered if he put any value into those coins at all. He acted as if they were worthless.

In fact, he had even left some.

A handful of the bronze, and twice more of the silvers, still laid on the table. They had been his, but it seemed he had given them to me.

After all he had made sure to get the gold one back. Yet these...

Maybe he wanted me to have some, just in case?

Reaching out, I collected them all into my hand. As I did, I realized he had left me a rather small fortune.

Enough to have lived a whole year and a half at the Harbor Inn, if my calculations were correct.

A rather tidy sum, honestly.

Once I collected all the coins I hurried up the stairs to my room. To put them on my desk.

As I hurried to my room, I happily deposited the coins into one of the drawers of the desk. They made odd sounds as they clattered to a rest in the wooden drawer, and for some reason the sounds made me happy.

I had money. Again.

Vim had been true to his word. He had helped me understand them. I had long since known and understood the concept of money, but I had no idea what was worth what. He had been kind enough to not only explain the value of the coins, and their history, but also what one could do with them.

What one would do for them too...

It was a little odd to think such little metal pieces held such power, but I understood it.

After all, I had ran out of them.

If Lughes and Crane hadn't been kind enough to let me live here, I'd right now most likely be wandering aimlessly through the wilderness. Unsure of what to do with myself.

I would have not been able to experience this. I would not have...

Glancing around at my, still empty, room... I smiled happily at myself.

Someday I'd repay them. Somehow. Odds were Lughes and Crane found no value in those metal coins, just like I really didn't... but maybe that would work all the same.

Could I earn some for them, somehow?

"Someday," I said to myself, and left my room.

It was after dinner. The world outside was dark, and last I knew Lomi was with Crane...

Where were they?

I knew they weren't downstairs, since Vim and I had been there. Using the kitchen table... so...

Going upstairs, I listening closely. Yes. Noise, on the top floor.

Climbing another level, I found Crane. She noticed me, and nodded. She pointed to her left, lazily, to a room.

Amber's room.

She wasn't here. She was at that noble's house painting and...

Walking up to the door, I smiled softly at the scene.

Amber's room was larger than mine. Not by much, but noticeably so... yet all the same, it looked tinier. It was packed and cramped.

A single bed sat up against the wall, and that was the only section of wall that was visible. There were bookcases, trunks and chests, and even three easels... each with a half finished painting upon them.

Drawings, paintings, and paper were everywhere. It was honestly such a mess that it was almost praiseworthy that Amber could even accomplish getting her room so messy. How many years of junk were littered inside, I wonder?

Yet amongst all the color, and paper, was a small sleeping figure.

The little girl was curled up on Amber's bed, holding a small...

"Is that supposed to be a fox?" I whispered to Crane.

"I think so. Amber's one of the greatest painters I've seen, amongst the humans, but she can't craft to save her life," Crane said. Not as quietly as me. Lomi didn't wake, seemingly ignoring Crane's normal talking voice.

"To her it must be perfect," I said gently.

It looked more like a dog than anything... It had been made with yarn similar in color to Lomi's hair and looked, even from a distance, a little prickly.

She was holding it closely. Squeezing it. As if it was more precious than anything else.

"Hm. Come, let's let her sleep. Maybe now I can finally fix her socks without her bothering me," Crane said as she turned away.

Frowning, I slowly shut the door. Not all the way, but enough so that she'd not be awoken by any of us walking by or talking down the hallway.

"Socks?" I asked.

"She tore them the other day. Not sure how she did, but she did," Crane said with a sigh.

"Oh. Really?" I asked. I hadn't known. Must have happened when I was out elsewhere. Maybe when I was waiting for Vim yesterday.

"Really," Crane said with a sigh, as if it was annoying.

Maybe to her it was.

Did she not like kids?

Lomi was a little... rambunctious, but she wasn't bad. She was good-natured. Seemingly happy to just be alive.

Following Crane downstairs, I wondered if asking if she liked kids or not was rude.

After all, I would hate to ask it only to find out she had lost children before.

It seemed most of our kind had such history.

"I smell metal upon you," Crane said as we headed downstairs.

"Ah... I was messing with coins. Vim was teaching me about them," I said to her.

Crane nodded, but said nothing more.

She understood, maybe?

"Where's Lughes?" I asked.

"Asleep."

Hm... was it that late already? Both Lughes and Lomi? It didn't feel that late. Maybe it was their ages. Him old, she young.

"I'd offer to help you sew, Crane, but I'm horrible at it," I said as we reached the ground floor.

"That is good to know for future reference," she said.

Smiling at her odd tone, I watched as she gestured to the room where the main fireplace was. With the chairs, for sitting and talking.

I nodded, understanding what she meant. She planned to sit there and sew.

Walking into the room, I wondered if Vim had retreated to the guest room. His door was never fully closed, even when he was sleeping, but it did seem as if he would retreat to

be alone often. Maybe he did it on purpose, as if he was aware that Lomi and Amber didn't like him much.

Rather instead of saying he was aware, he was not just aware but willing to do what he could to make them feel as comfortable as he could.

Or maybe he simply didn't like being bothered. Maybe he was as uncomfortable with them, as they were him.

Sitting in the same seat I've been using since arriving, I wondered if I should ask Crane if I had stolen one of theirs. Everyone always seemed to sit in the same chairs. Even Vim.

The fire was burning, but not too strongly. The world was still cold, but none of us were as affected by the cold as a human would be... and Amber wasn't here to complain and overfeed the fire.

"See? Hole as big as her foot," Crane said, stepping into the room.

Glancing at her, I realized she was somewhat kidding. The hole didn't look that big.

"Is... is this someone else's chair, Crane?" I asked as Crane sat in one of the chairs that was a little farther from the fire than most.

"Hm?"

"This one. I just want to make sure I didn't rudely take over someone else's chair," I said.

"Oh. No... Actually, maybe. Vim usually sat in that one. But he's not a resident, so you don't need to worry. You can have it," she said.

Vim had?

Glancing at the chair I sat in, I wondered why.

It wasn't the biggest. Nor the comfiest. In fact, the reason I had originally chosen to sit in it... was precisely because it wasn't the nicest.

I had been afraid to sit in any of the nicer ones, since I didn't want to intrude.

Though...

Thinking about it. That was most likely the same idea Vim had, when he chosen this chair.

Crane got comfortable, and went straight to work sewing up the hole in the sock. Her movements were swift, and a little...

Watching how quickly she moved the needle, I realized that even if I had been good at sewing I'd not have been able to help.

How was she so fast?

"So? Leaving with them, or staying?" Crane asked suddenly.

For a small moment my mind went blank, but I quickly composed myself.

"I uh... I... I'd like to stay, if that was.... If it's okay. For now," I said. Even I could hear how unsure I sounded.

Crane nodded. "I do not mind sharing my nest. Shelldon is fine with it as well, for long as you don't hunt inside the town's limits," she said.

"Huh? Oh... wait... hunt in the city's limits?" I asked, unsure of what that meant.

And she had spoken to Shelldon? And they had accepted to let me stay? I hadn't even asked yet...

Though maybe Vim had mentioned something.

Crane sighed with a nod, looking at me. Even as she looked away from her needlework, she still continued. In fact she seemed to even pick up her pace. She had already moved on to another hole. "He's being rude. He means don't kill or eat any humans, animals, or us, while inside the city. Do it outside it," she said.

"Oh... I'll not do such a thing, though," I said, this time sounding much more sure of myself.

She nodded. "I figured. You're a predator but not hungry. Probably your upbringing," she said with a huff, as if somehow it was a bad thing.

Had she wanted me to be... hungry...?

"Still... thank you, Crane. You too Shelldon... if you can hear me?" I asked, looking down at the floor.

Supposedly he was there. Beneath us. But...

"Hm," Crane nodded, looking back to her needle.

For a moment she paused, to study her work.

She must have been proud with it, for she put the sock down and then went to the other. Were there more than just socks in that pile? Looked like there were.

"So now all I need is Lughe's and Amber's permission... wait..." I realized something important. "Will I be able to get Amber's in time? Before Vim and Lomi leave? They're leaving in a couple days right?" I asked, worried.

"Amber already said yes. I heard her tell Vim," Crane said.

A small breath of relief escaped, as I relaxed.

She had? Really?

"Lughes... hasn't yet. But..." Crane shrugged, as if to tell me not to worry about it.

Somehow that made me worry even more.

"Vim?"

I turned, and found the little fox. She was rubbing her eyes, and as she did I noticed the gleam of tear streaks thanks to the fire. Her cheeks were reflecting strongly.

"Lomi?" I stood, and wondered what was wrong. She had been asleep hadn't she?

"Renn?" she mumbled my name, and I realized she was half asleep.

Had she woken from a nightmare? She was looking around, with a strange face. As if lost. Standing at the doorway, with groggily blinking eyes.

"Come on, want to sleep with me?" I asked her as I approached, worried.

She mumbled something I couldn't understand, but I understood the meaning of her head-shake. She didn't want me.

She wanted Vim.

She wanted to be protected.

"Come on," I gently said, and glanced back and nodded to Crane. She nodded back without a word, and went back to working with her needles.

"Vim...?" Lomi mumbled groggily as I gently guided her down the hall, towards the door near the stairwell.

"This way," I said softly, as I guided her to the guest room. Opening the door for her, I jumped a little as the door opened faster than I allowed it. It hadn't been closed, but I hadn't pushed that hard... it had nearly swung open.

Luckily it didn't startle the little girl.

"Hm," Vim stood there, holding the door open. He sighed as he bent down a little, and with familiar ease he picked Lomi up.

I noticed the way her ears twitched wildly for a moment as she wrapped her arms around his neck. Without a word, or even opening her eyes, she had recognized him. She quite visibly relaxed and released a deep sigh.

Without a word Vim turned around, and walked over to the bed.

A bed I noted was still made. Untouched. Not a crinkle. He hadn't been on the bed, and probably hadn't used it at all by the looks of it. Was he that good at making the bed, or had he not slept the entire time he's been here?

Had he been sitting in the dark? The chair however was tucked away under the desk. Unused as well.

Watching him, I noticed the way he gently sat on the bed. Resting back against the wall the bed was up against, he easily got comfortable. Lomi slid from his neck, as he allowed her to use the pillow to rest on his lap. Curling up, she took another deep breath, and then slowly released it.

Content.

Smiling at her, and Vim, I decided to step into the room.

Staying quiet, I ignored Vim's look or rather his glare as I knelt down next to the bed, carefully resting my arms and head on the bed's edge as I stared at Lomi.

She looked happy. Even though her cheeks were still a little glistening, even in the dark... I could see the relief on her face. The assuredness. The comfortable relief.

Poor girl. A part of her heart despised him... yet when a nightmare terrified her; it was he she reached out for.

That must be quite conflicting inside.

Looking up from the young girl, I found Vim staring at me. He didn't seem to be glaring anymore, but I could tell he was still bothered. Maybe though he might just be unsure of me.

What are you doing? His eyes seemed to say.

Well...

Looking back down at her, the little girl who was already deep into slumber...

Smiling, I got a little more comfortable. Crossing my arms, so I could rest my chin and head on them. So I could sit here for awhile. Resting against the edge of the bed, I felt as if this was the only place in the whole world to exist. As if nothing else, no one else, was beyond these few wooden walls.

I wasn't really sure what this was. I didn't have words to describe it.

After all, the source of this scene was sadness.

She was lonely. Scared. Worried. Terrified.

Relying on a man a part of her hated.

Yet...

It was wonderful.

It was memorable.

I wasn't sure if it was what I was looking for. I couldn't tell yet if this was what I had wanted, or still wanted.

Was this my dream? Was this what I had longed for? At the very least... it was a start...

I found it lovely...

And it made me happy beyond reason. For an unexplainable reason.

Thank goodness there was someone to protect it. Thank goodness it existed at all.

It was precious. Valuable beyond reason...

Vim's eyes finally left me, but they didn't close. He looked away, to the bed... as if tired.

Unable to contain my smile, I sat there and soaked in this wonderful moment.

Maybe staying here was the right choice. If it meant I'd get to experience this occasionally.

This was precious after all.

It was more valuable than all the coins in the world.

*Chapter 19: Chapter Eighteen - Vim - Journey Onward*

"Will I be able to go back someday?" Lomi asked.

"Maybe when you're older. Ruvindale isn't too far from where you'll be living, honestly. So it's not impossible," I said.

Lomi seemed to like that thought, but she still didn't smile.

She kept turning around, to stare at the ever growing distant city. We were walking along a tightly packed dirt road. Not even the hooves of the horses which passed us, or the heavy carts they pulled, were able to dig into the dirt.

The church and whatever lord ruled this territory spent money to keep it so properly tendered. Maybe they planned on even making a real road. One of stone. It'd let them expand their trade routes, at the least.

"Why didn't Renn come with us?" Lomi then asked.

I had expected this question, especially after having watched the young girl sob as she held onto the cat's neck for so long. It had been such a pain to wait that I had actually pulled them apart.

Renn had nearly hissed at me as I had done so, but it was time. We had spent too long there as it was.

Lomi I had expected... but I had not expected Renn to also try to stop me from separating them from one another. Animalistic instinct, or was that just her personality? To care deeply for those she saw as friends and family?

An oddly unique trait for a predator. Although usually fierce, and emotional, they were also normally solitary. Choosing to be alone more than as a pack.

"She is still joining the society. Spending some time in the same spot will do her good. You can see her again someday," I said.

"Hm," Lomi nodded, but didn't seem any less bothered.

If anything she looked more disappointed.

"I'm boring to travel with, I know," I said.

She finally turned back around, to stare up at me. No longer longingly staring at the town. "You are kind of boring," she said.

"So I've been told," I admitted.

"Were you always boring?" she asked.

"I might have been. I think so," I said. I didn't try to think of my youth, there was no point.

"Probably were," she sighed. Lomi shook her head, as if she wasn't sure what to do with me. For such a young girl she seemed to already have quite an odd outlook on life.

Yet she was still just a little girl. Two nights in a row she had chosen to seek me out in the middle of the night. Suffering from nightmares and terrors. The rest of the Sleepy Artist all thought it was because of what had happened to her, but I knew it was something a little more recent.

She hadn't wanted to leave. She had been happy there. Comfortable. As odd as it were.

I understood Amber, but I hadn't expected her to also like Crane and Lughes.

Crane was an old grouch, and Lughes was so scatterbrained...

A fox... wanting to live with a crane and goat. Not the oddest, but also not a normal grouping.

Renn had been understandable. Foxes and cats weren't too far apart. Granted Renn was not some normal cat, but a large hunter, but their diluted blood only made it easier for them to be so similar.

Maybe it was wrong of me to take her to other foxes? Maybe I was making a mistake?

What if letting children mix with other kinds and types was the answer...?

Suddenly doubting myself, I stopped thinking for a moment. After all, thinking like that got me in trouble.

Eventually they'd stop loving each other, after all. It was instinctual.

Even the cat. Although she was old enough to last longer, it was bound to end badly eventually. Even if she herself didn't do anything. Crane or Lughes might simply wake up one night in terror, and panic. Resulting in either blood being spilled or...

There were many who found themselves coexisting, or even loving one another... but it was so, so rare for predators and prey to do so. Throughout all this time, and the thousands of those who tried, the number who succeeded in doing so could be counted on two hands.

Such a sad ratio. Such a disappointing truth.

Hopefully when I visited next time, I'd find my worries were unfounded.

Hopefully.

"How many people are going to be at my new home?" Lomi asked.

The same question again. I'd doubt her ability to remember if not for the fact that she always seemed happy to hear the answer.

"There had been four in the fox family. Two snakes, whom are elderly, and a squirrel," I said.

She giggled, "A squirrel."

"He's... a kind man," I dared to say. After all he was, but at the same time it was hard for me to say it.

"Is the town big? Like that one?" she asked, glancing back at what was probably a distant blur on the horizon for her.

"No. But there's a town that size nearby. They grow the wheat for them. You'll see," I said.

"Wheat..." she mumbled.

If she had been human she would have been happy. After all, the family she was going to join was wealthy. They were the sole providers of wheat for thousands of families.

Yet our kind never cared much for wealth. The few who did only dedicated their time and energy to making money for more noble reasons. To support the Society, or keep track of the powerful humans.

They saw money as a tool. A weapon, against their enemies. Nothing more.

Lomi went quiet and drew closer to me as a carriage passed by. Two large northern horses pulled it along, and the man who held their reigns didn't even glance at us as he passed.

I didn't recognize the symbol on the carriage, but I assumed it was just a merchant. Maybe a noble one, maybe not.

"Is it fun? To ride those?" Lomi asked after she watched it for a moment.

"Some are uncomfortable. They bounce. But if you're old, or have difficulty walking then they're the best way to travel," I said.

"Can we get one?" she asked.

"The Society has some. But by the time we went and got one, it'd be a waste of time," I said.

Lomi hummed for a moment, and then smiled. "What if we bought one? Or made one?"

"Crafting one isn't easy. It'd take a long time too. We could purchase one, I suppose, but then people will notice. There're only a few places they're even made, so the humans are able to somewhat keep track of who buys what and where," I explained.

"Keep track? Why?"

I sighed and wondered if spending time at the Sleepy Artist made her more... bold, when it came to being childish.

"Only the wealthy can afford them. The powerful. Humans like to keep tabs on the ones who are above them, or as strong as them. It's just how they are," I said.

"Seems silly. Do they keep track of you then? Since you're so strong?" she asked.

"They've tried before," I said honestly.

"Huh."

Another horse passed us, but this time it was a sole rider. The horse had two large packs, bundled behind the rider, but no cart. The woman stared at us a little oddly as she passed. Enough to make me question what she had seen. Lomi's clothes and hat were now new and mended, I didn't need to worry over another mistake happening again... and I didn't even need to hide anything.

Had she recognized us? Or me? Or was it just the fact that a single man was traveling with a young girl?

Wives were lost often. Their medicines had yet to advance far enough to stop the lives lost from childbirth, and other common factors... so my being seen as a single father shouldn't be that strange. Not yet anyway.

"She stared at you," Lomi said after she was out of earshot.

"She did, didn't she?" I agreed.

"Maybe she found you tasty?" she asked.

Smiling at her, I wondered where she had heard that from. The Sleepy Artist? Or something that her own parents had said at one time?

"I would be tasty," I agreed.

Lomi giggled, obviously disagreeing with me... even if she herself probably didn't understand what she was saying at all.

"Still, this road is a lot busier than the last one we were on," Lomi said. Glancing down the path, towards the forest, I could see another silhouette in the distance. Not someone on a horse, or carriage, but on foot.

"Large towns mean more chances for business."

"Business," she repeated the word as if it was annoying to hear.

"Plus the church is there now. That alone will cause traffic. People will travel here from their remote homes, or villages, to pray and ask for guidance," I said.

"Prey?" she asked, and I noticed the way she said it.

"Had I said it oddly?" I asked.

"You said it like a hunter would," she said with a smirk.

"Ah. So I had," I nodded. I had.

"Does praying work?" Lomi then asked while studying me.

"Well... for some," I said, trying to be as honest as I could.

"Some? You mean... only for the ones who believe, then?"

I sighed. "No. I mean sometimes praying is all one can do to stave off desolation," I said gently.

"Des..." she tried to repeat the word, but failed.

Making sure the person approaching down the road was still a ways off, and wouldn't hear our conversation, I nodded to Lomi.

"When you were in the well, Lomi, did you not pray?" I asked her.

She slowly came to a stop, so I did as well. Staring down at the young girl, who now looked at me with wide eyes... I watched as she slowly nodded.

"See? Yet we do not worship their god. Yet still... you begged, and pleaded." I spoke softly. As to not make her break.

"I see. I begged, and you showed up," she said, just as softly.

"Oh... well, I hadn't really meant that, Lomi," I said.

The young girl smiled softly, suddenly looking years older than she were. "I know," was all she said.

Returning to walking, the young girl no longer had much pep in her step, but she wasn't crying. Wasn't trembling. Her back was straight, her shoulders proud.

"Hm," I nodded, and joined her.

Such strong people. Yet so weak.

It was terrifying how similar to humans Lomi and the rest were.

Only a few generations ago, they had been more animal than not. More instinctual. More basic.

Yet now...

"The humans use their god for evil, often, Lomi. But remember that it is the human who swings the axe, or lights the fire, not that god," I said.

She glanced at me, and I watched the way she soaked in my words. Tried to understand them. Reached her own conclusions.

"But they made god, didn't they?" she asked.

Smiling softly, I nodded. Yes. That was usually the first thing one would think.

"Do we have one?" she asked.

"A god? Some of us do. Others believe in the same god the humans do. A few think they're a god themselves," I said.

Lomi tilted her head, and I noticed even through her thick hat that her ears twitched. "God themselves?"

"Well... sometimes people just... are very confident in themselves," I said, unsure of how else to phrase it for her.

She frowned, and I knew I had done a bad job of explaining it. If anything a horrible job.

"If you ever meet anyone who declares themselves a higher being, just ignore them. Or run from them, honestly," I said.

"Oh...?" she nodded, but didn't seem to really understand.

"Those people are more trouble than they're worth," I added.

"Amber said you're sometimes more trouble than you're worth," she said.

"I'm sure she did," I said.

Lomi smiled, seemed talking about her friends made her happy.

"Will we get there before the snow melts?" she asked.

"Yes. Especially since another layer will come soon," I said. I didn't even need to see the heavy storm clouds in the distance to say that. Winter wasn't over just yet.

The lone traveler finally drew close enough that Lomi and I went quiet. The man looked a little haggard, but not diseased or hurt... just tired. He didn't even lift his head to look at us as we passed one another, and not because he was trying to hide.

Had he traveled all through the night maybe? He looked exhausted enough to fall over at any moment.

It didn't take long for us to separate, and the distance between us to grow larger and larger.

"He was tired," Lomi said.

"Very." Maybe something had happened along the road.

Odds were either wolves or brigands. It was too cold for bears still, and if it had been a large bear that was still awake and not hibernating then that man wouldn't have been unharmed.

"He needs a carriage," Lomi said.

"He does," I agreed.

"We do too," she sighed.

With a sigh I nodded.

Of course we did.

*Chapter 20: Chapter Nineteen - Renn - The Faded Memories Upon The Horizon*

The snow had returned.

Not as strongly as before, but enough to keep the store empty of customers and the streets silent.

Although even if the snow wasn't falling, and it wasn't cold, the streets would still be empty.

Off in the distance I heard the church bells ringing a tune I wasn't familiar with. Crane had mentioned that most of the humans would be there now, celebrating some kind of holiday.

Although a part of me had wanted to go and see it myself, Crane and Lughes being so upset over it made me keep that desire hidden.

If it bothered and upset them that much then there was no way I could go and enjoy it. It wouldn't be kind.

I sat on the small stool behind the front counter, and had been for awhile now.

The curtains blocked the large windows, but the front door also had a small window near the top of it. Three small panels of glass, which let me see the slow falling snow outside.

Sighing, I wondered how much longer it'd be before it got busy again. We never got many visitors, but someone showing up once or twice a day had been normal.

Slowly letting my head fall to my arms; I laid my head down and sighed again.

The house had become a little too quiet.

Amber was still gone. She was staying at that noble's house, painting.

Lughes was busy in his room, painting something, and only came out to eat. He was so focused he didn't even say hello half the time when he emerged.

Crane was keeping busy, and although I got to talk to her during the morning, and during dinner, she too kept herself busy enough that we rarely spent time together.

And now Lomi was gone too.

Shelldon wouldn't even talk to me...

With no customers, and a strange festival happening down the road, I couldn't help but feel a little lonely.

I'd even welcome Vim walking back in, even though sometimes he wasn't much fun to talk to.

Staring at the countertop, I wondered how it was so clean. Not a single blemish was in the wood, nor a drop of old paint stained it.

Not a single mark either, from something heavy being dropped upon it.

Yet it didn't seem new. The wood felt old. Lacquered and smooth, but old.

Running my hand along it, I wondered who had made it. Lughes was an artist, but did he also craft furniture? Crane sewed, knitted and cleaned, but did she sand and polish?

Did Shelldon do anything?

Tapping the floor a few times with my foot, I wondered how deeply he slept. Although we had floorboards, beneath those were stone I was told. Thick and heavy stone. Yet Crane had hinted that he could in fact hear us, even when we were simply talking lightly.

I wonder if we kept him awake, or if he slept through even the banging and noises when we were noisy. Like when Lomi had been running around.

Heavy feet made the ears under my hat perk up, and I turned a little to watch the hallway. Sure enough a smiling Lughes emerged, nodding proudly to himself.

"Renn, I have created a masterpiece," he said happily.

"Oh? It's done?" I asked, sitting back up.

Lughes nodded quickly as he walked out into the lobby, then around to the front of the counter... standing before it as if he was now a customer.

"A moment of brilliance came! The other day, I heard you and Vim speaking to one another about coins," he said, eager to share his excitement.

"The coins?" I asked, wondering when he had heard us. I hadn't realized he was nearby.

Lughes nodded quickly. "Yes. Yes! It got me thinking about humans, and their greed, and our greed too! So that made me think of the mountain tops, and so I painted my home. A scene I had thought I forgotten, yet there it is! Before me again, as if seeing it now!" he spoke quickly, yet happily. Proud of himself, and yet fulfilled.

"Wait... your home?" I asked, trying to follow. How did he go from coins, to mountaintops, to his home?

He mentioned greed. Maybe his greedy desires left him homesick.

"Indeed! Come, you must see it!" he ushered me to follow as he hurried back to the stairs.

I complied, especially since he seemed so excited. He was even more excited than he had been when Vim and Lomi had first arrived, and threw a feast.

Following him upstairs to the top floor, I had to pick up my pace as he hurried. He ran into his room as if fleeing an unknown enemy.

"Behold!" Lughes shouted as I followed him into the room. I noted that it was his actual bedroom, not the room he normally painted in.

Sitting in the center, propped up by an old and somewhat decrepit easel, was a large painting. One of the biggest I've seen yet.

It, sure enough, was a painting of mountains. High and tall... where the clouds were thick and low. I counted seven peaks, each higher than the last. The scene looked to go on forever, as if I was looking out a window. It'd not surprise me if the clouds began to move, as if real.

"It's beautiful," I said, and meant it. Admittedly it was a little... odd. I saw only mountains. Snow. Some trees and rocks. The details were very fine, and it had been painted and drawn masterfully... but...

There seemed to be nothing else than the mountain scene. No homes or people. Not even goats.

"Hm, it is," A new voice entered the room, and I stepped aside to let Crane in.

She studied the painting with a keen eye, her long neck stretching even more as she drew closer to it.

"Is it? Isn't it?" Lughes asked, happy. He looked delighted.

"Looks cold up there," I said.

"Cold! Nonsense! It's warm as can be, it is," Lughes scoffed, but his smile remained large.

"It's a wonderful painting, Lughes. Shall we display it in the window?" Crane asked.

"No...! No... never," Lughes's smile dissipated as he rapidly shook his head, as if suddenly worried.

"Hm. Still, this is a joyous moment. I'll go start preparing your tea. You've earned it you think, yes?" Crane asked him.

"Oh yes! I have!" Lughes seemed to grow even more excited, he perked up as if someone had just given him a wonderful compliment.

Crane nodded, and turned to leave. "Would you help, Renn?" she asked me.

Help make tea? Me?

Although the request made little sense, I realized the true meaning of it.

"Yes, of course. It really is beautiful Lughes, thank you for showing me," I said as I turned to follow Crane out of the room.

Lughes though no longer heard me; he was staring at his painting... his eyes blank, his pupils wide.

Crane slowly shut the door after I left, and for a few uncomfortable seconds I followed her quietly down the hallway.

Reaching the stairwell, I kept my tongue in check as we descended. Lughes hearing wasn't as good as mine, but it was still too close to his room to say anything yet.

Once down a floor, I followed Crane as she walked down the hallway. Towards my room.

"Tea?" I asked her.

"Hm. Lughes is old, Renn. Older than any of us. He occasionally paints that scene. It's been a few years since he has, and he always acts as if he's never painted it before. Here, let me show you," Crane guided me down the hallway. All the way to the back. To the storeroom I hadn't been in yet.

My heart ached as I watched Crane open the door to the backroom, revealing a rather large storeroom. One full of paintings.

There were hundreds at least, of varying sizes, and the room smelled horribly of paint. It was strong enough of a scent that it made me wonder how I didn't smell it normally. Was this room specially made to keep the stink in?

"See?" Crane pointed to a section in the corner. About a dozen paintings sat up against one another, a little lonely by themselves. Noticeably kept alone amongst the forest of wood frames and painted canvases.

Sure enough, the same seven peaks were displayed.

Stepping into the room, past Crane, I felt my heart slow in its beating as I understood.

Quickly scanning the painting, I tried to compare it to the one upstairs. Yes. They were the same. Down to the location of rocks, and trees. Even the clouds were...

Stepping up to them, I grabbed the edge of one of them to look behind it. At the one just behind it. Sure enough the same painting was there.

As was the next, and the next.

With a dry mouth I sighed. "I see. But he seems so fine otherwise? A little... air-headed yes, but fine it seemed," I said.

"He's air-headed, yes. But only on certain things. This however is a... special characteristic of him. He'll spend a few days staring at it, and then will bring it down to the first floor to sell. Forgetting that it's special. We make sure to put them here for him," Crane explained.

"I see," I said softly.

"It was his home, Vim says. It's the scene he saw each morning. Yet he seems to have forgotten it. Vim won't say why," she said.

"Oh..." I nodded in understanding. Humans got like that often.

Honestly I hadn't thought our kind could suffer similar ailments... but maybe it was obvious that we could. We too got old, after all.

Maybe it was so rare, and why I had not thought it possible, because so few of us lived to such an age.

"We all have our quirks, Renn. Hopefully when mine causes issues you'll be gentle with me too," Crane said.

"Did I seem gentle just now?" I asked her.

"You look like you're about to cry," she said with a huff, as if annoyed I'd even consider doing such a thing.

"Well... it's sad," I said honestly.

Crane reached out and patted me on the back. Her strange smile, a mix of anger and kindness, was an odd but pleasant sight. "I'm going to go make him his favorite tea. Make sure you close the door firmly when you leave. It'll stink up the rest of the house if you don't," she said, and then turned to leave.

"Can I look at the rest of these?" I asked her.

"Of course," she said flatly, her usual annoyed tone back in full force.

Watching her go, I smiled and wondered how long it'd take for me to learn everything about them. Years surely... but how many? Decades?

Such a wonderful thought...

Though...

Glancing back at the painting of Lughes home, I wondered where it was. I didn't know of any mountains that were that high, nor that many. There looked to be at least seven massive peaks, and who knew how many were behind and around, out of sight from the view of the painting.

He must have traveled a long ways.

Granted, that might also be the reason he seemed to forget his home. Only remembering it on occasion, and re-painting the scene... only to forget it again later.

Maybe the memories hurt.

Maybe remembering home was a joyous, wonderful occasion... but then as he stared at the finished painting, he began to remember the rest. The stuff that hurt. The memories that broke even the strong.

Looking away from the stack of mountain paintings, I glanced around the room. Most paintings were larger in size, and simply stacked on top of each other or up against each other along the wall. There were only a few crates and shelves in the room, and there was no rug. The floorboards looked a little... old. Parts were breaking, and I was going to have to make sure to step lightly. I was wearing shoes, and didn't worry over splinters or anything, but I'd hate to be the reason the floor broke and the paintings got ruined.

A nearby stack of paintings were of animals. Basic ones. Bunnies, deer, birds... just seemingly in their natural habitats. On branches, in groves, running in forests. A few were beautiful, but some were also a little plain. Like the one I had seen in the inn, which had led me here.

Part of me had thought that this room was full of precious paintings. Things that had great meaning... but maybe most were simply extras, or paintings that can't be sold for one reason or another...

I remembered that Vim had come into here. Now that I knew his personality a little better, I knew he had not gone into my room. So this was definitely where he had gone... but why? For what?

Which had he looked at?

Another stack of paintings nearby were of towns and villages. Some looked vaguely familiar, but nothing stuck out enough for me to name any of the locations. Some were painted in summer, others with layers of snow or seemed dark and broody thanks to the rain and storms.

Oddly, as I began to look at the many paintings... I began to realize that most were old. Probably older than Amber. Some I could tell were very obviously painted by Lughes, while others seemingly had a style of art that told me that someone else had painted them without doubt.

Granted Crane had mentioned that they've had many painters over the years. Many humans too. And...

I paused for a moment, holding a painting back as I peered at one hidden behind it. It was a little smaller than most of the others here, but still large enough to be very detailed.

After only a few moments of studying the painting, I had to push the painting I held back in front of it. I couldn't stare at it any longer.

Taking a deep breath, I sighed and controlled myself.

Yes. It was obvious that people would paint such depressing scenes too.

Joy and fond remembrance weren't always the sources of art.

Very carefully, I pulled the painting back again. To take another look. This time I steeled myself, and readied for the heartache.

It was a dark colored scene. Even though the setting sun loomed over the horizon, letting its rays beautifully illuminate the dozen or so graves. A pair of figures stood before the graves, and what looked to be someone bowing in front of them, grieving. There were houses in the distance, still smoking from fires... and the hill they were on looked burnt too. As if at one time the dirt spot they were on, had been full of flowers and trees.

Gulping, I tried to tell who the figures were.

One was obvious. The broad shouldered man was staring off in the distance at an angle, enough of an angle to see the human features clearly.

Next to him looked like another man. A man missing an arm, leaning on a crutch of some kind. His legs looked fine, but he was obviously injured.

There was a woman between them, who had been painted as if she was about to rush to the one before the graves. The one grieving... weeping.

I couldn't tell who she was, or the man, but I knew for a fact that it wasn't Lughes and Crane. The woman was too portly. The man, crouched before the graves with his hands held tightly together as if in prayer, was far too big to be Lughes. Even at this angle, in this somewhat unlit room, I could make out the man's massive muscles.

What I couldn't see clearly were the oddities. Where were the Non-Human features on them?

Pulling aside the painting I held, to lay it against another, I bent down to get a better look at the scene.

Oh. There was. The woman had odd ears. They were on the side of her head, not the top, like humans... but they were far too big. They created great shadows even, forming behind her. There was a single ray of sunlight illuminating her, and her great ears looked fuzzy thanks to it.

The man as massive as he was... was curled up in a way that didn't show much... but the other man, the one with a missing arm, had a tail. Something with scales it looked like. Part of it was missing.

Was this a scene so often beheld?

Looking around, at the hundreds of paintings, I felt sick to my stomach as I tried to envision how many of them were like this.

How many heartbreaking scenes had been painted? How many hadn't been? How many couldn't be remembered?

How many had Vim seen alone and told no one of?

Daring to look at the painting behind it, I almost didn't look... but was glad I did. This one was much happier.

A family. Of our kind. They were all tall and skinny. It looked like even the young child who was running around in the field of grass was taller than me. They all had smiles, and it was a lovely scene. I didn't recognize anyone, but I could tell by the white horns sticking out of the top of their heads and their height that they were most likely some kind of larger animal.

I enjoyed how happy they looked.

Made me wish my own family could have looked like that.

Slowly sitting down, to sit before the painting... I found myself silently basking in its glow.

Hopefully no one would show up, daring the snow and cold... so I could spend some time in here.

These paintings were like tiny windows to another time. Another place. Another world.

A world where there was peace and happiness. A world of disgusting reality. A world of fantasy.

Our world.

Yet...

Would one day my painting be here too? One of many? One of countless?

Would it get hidden behind others? Would anyone ever look at it?

By the layer of dust, I could tell it's been some time since anyone's looked at this painting. Years. Maybe even years upon years. And even then, who was to say the last person who had seen it had only moved it or cleaned it... like Crane or Lughes?

If so...

Studying the young girl's face in the painting, smiling at her parents who watched happily as she danced around in the knee high grass... I wondered if they were gone too.

Rather something told me they were.

"Gone, but no longer forgotten," I said softly.

Sitting alone amongst hundreds of paintings, I vowed to study each one.

To remember each one.

No matter how long it took.

Even when, or if, I grew to be as old as Lughes... and became forgetful...

I vowed to remember all of them, even till the end.