

# **The Non-Human Society**

## **#Chapter 21 - Twenty - Vim - A Log and A Hen - Read The Non-Human Society Chapter 21 - Twenty - Vim - A Log and A Hen**

*Chapter 21: Chapter Twenty - Vim - A Log and A Hen*

Lomi sat quietly, staring up at the large moon.

The sky was clear, and the chilly winter air was being kept at bay by the campfire before us. There was only a light wind, and we were far enough from the road that Lomi was able to sit without her hat on. Her large ears were casting shadows on her face since she was facing away from the campfire. It gave her a forlorn look, even though she seemed happy.

"Mother used to say the moon was where we came from," Lomi said softly.

"Explains all the lumps on your head," I said.

Lomi's ears twitched, as if she heard something in the distance. Although she glanced at me with a glare, she did so with a smile.

"Think it's true?" she asked, choosing to ignore my joke.

"Hm. Many say such things. Or that we're from another world, or realm. But who knows? If we are there's no way to prove it, nor return, so it doesn't matter," I said.

Lomi sighed, and I knew that was because she hadn't liked my answer. Rather, she hadn't really wanted a real answer at all.

She had simply wanted to talk of tales and legends.

Children liked such things.

The fire popped, and her attention went to it instead. One bright glow to another.

While she studied the fire, I studied the log she sat on. It was old, dried out, and free of bugs... but there was an odd shape to it. Had it been carried here? There were no trees anywhere around us, not for some distance, and the wood looked out of place.

Maybe it had fallen off a cart... but we were a ways from the road, and there was no river here. Usually travelers stuck close to the path, or only left it to camp near a water source.

"How far have we traveled?" Lomi then asked.

"From your home? Two months. We've traveled through three nations, eight towns, a dozen rivers, a great lake, and over two mountain passes. Many leagues. A feat worth being proud over, as one so young as yourself," I said to her.

"I should be proud?" she asked.

I nodded. "You should. Traveling is dangerous. And I don't just mean that because of our circumstances. There are wildlife, bandits, slavers, diseases, natural disasters like mudslides and floods... getting lost in the forests. There are many ways to get hurt or die while traveling. Especially alone," I said.

"I'm not alone though?"

"True. But all the same, you should be proud. Most of our kind doesn't travel like this. They hate it. It's why so many of us have problems," I said.

"Like my family," she whispered.

Opening my mouth to speak, to agree, I realized I had once again brought up a sad memory for her.

"It's okay," she said, smiling softly.

I nodded, but knew it wasn't. It never would be.

"One day you'll look back on this trip... you may not remember all of it, but there will be moments. Most I guide, even decades later, remember things that I don't. Things I said. Things we did. Moments. You will too," I said.

Lomi's eyes were steady, but I didn't see any sadness within them.

"I miss my parents," she then said.

"I'm sure you do," I said.

She sighed and nodded, and didn't seem to become any sadder... she wasn't about to cry and sob, but rather was simply making a statement.

"You always will," I added gently.

Lomi glanced at me, and pondered my words for a moment. Then she nodded. "I'm sure."

"But eventually, you'll have children of your own. You'll have friends. Family. Time will pass. Then one day I'll show up again and you can tell your children and all those around you how mean I was to you as we traveled," I said.

The young girl finally looked her age as she giggled, her smile growing large as she nodded. "I will!"

I nodded alongside her laughter, and hoped the day would indeed come.

It rarely did lately, so it'd be nice if it would.

"A long time ago I helped a large hen. I don't mean one of us, but an actual hen. The chicken was... well, about as big as those trees over there," I said with a point to a part of the nearby forest.

"A hen?" she asked, intrigued.

"Yeah. She could speak. In your terms she was probably what you'd consider an ancestor. Before we all became... well, more human," I said, and wondered if I should even mention something like that to her or not.

"And?" she asked, growing interested. She scooted along the log a little, to be a tad bit closer to I who sat on the ground near her.

"Every few years she laid eggs. Giant ones. About as big as you. Sometimes they hatched. My route at the time hadn't been as big as the one I do now, so I came around more often than not. So usually I'd show up only a few months after they hatched. There was always a few. Sometimes one, sometimes five, baby chickens to meet," I said.

"The eggs were as big as me?" she asked, leaning forward.

I nodded. "Sure were. When I usually came around they were already bigger than you. Sometimes even my size. It didn't take long for them to grow at all. Anyway, their mother loved to use me as a scare tactic. She told them how mean I was. How I'd cook them up and eat them if they didn't behave," I said.

Lomi blinked for a moment, then broke out into a huge grin. "So they were scared of you!" she understood quickly.

Smiling, I nodded. For a brief moment I re-lived the many memories of watching all the little chicks run away from me, bawking and screaming in terror. "They were. They'd run and hide under her wings, and wouldn't come back out until I left," I said.

"Hehe, you deserve it!" she said.

"Probably. It always made my visit there an enjoyable one... an odd one, but fun all the same," I said.

"What happened when they got older? Did they stop being scared of you?" she asked, standing up off the log.

Watching her step towards me, excited to hear the rest, I realized once again I made a small mistake.

"I'm not sure Lomi. They never lived long," I said gently.

Lomi hesitated, and I knew I was going to have to explain. If anything so it wouldn't trouble her forever.

"She lived near a larger creature. One that demanded sacrifice..." For a moment I hesitated, but knew better than to let my sensibilities stop the truth. "Food," I added plainly.

For a long moment Lomi stared at me, and I watched her quickly understand. I watched her happy, joyous smile, slowly die. A long, heartbreaking death.

The young fox stepped back, and nearly missed the log as she sat back down. Her shoulders slumped, and she suddenly looked weary. As if our journey so far had been far, far, harder on her than it had been.

As she slumped there, I noticed again how odd the log was. So out of place here, in this grass field. Surrounded by forest, yet not a single tree nearby.

How had it come to be?

"She... she sacrificed her children?" she asked softly.

"She did. She had to, to survive. The world back then was a little... different than the one today. Just as bad. Just as hard. Yet... different all the same," I said.

"You... you didn't help her? Why didn't you kill the thing eating her babies?" she asked.

I blinked, and wondered how someone so young was so quick on the uptake. Maybe this trip was maturing her faster than she should be.

"I wanted to. She'd not let me. If I had killed the creature, she and many others would have suffered. That beast, as evil as it were, protected them against an even greater evil. And... although I am the Societies protector now, I hadn't always been. At that time I was more of an observer. A watcher. Enemy to many... A friend to a few," I explained.

Her eyes narrowed, and I wondered if she could wrap her young head around my meaning. Could she really understand that sometimes, lesser evil was necessary? Especially when the ones I wanted to help, refused it?

"What happened to her? The mother hen?" she then asked.

"Died not too long ago. If it's any comfort, she eventually did raise many children. To their full potential. As the world changed, so did its rules, allowing me to eventually help in a way," I said.

"Are any alive today?" she asked, her sad face uplifting a little at the news.

"Yes. A single bloodline remains. She's not as big as her mother, she's a little bigger than me. She is what the humans call a guardian deity. She watches over a human village, her and her family, far to the east. They're not a part of the Society, though... although not a human, she's also not like us. She's more animal than not," I said.

"I see. They're far away? I can't meet them?" she asked.

"Too far. It'd take a year or so to get you there, and then another back. Too dangerous," I said.

"Hm..." she nodded, but had a small smile. It seemed I had somehow kept her heart from breaking.

Good job, me.

I shifted a little, and brought myself closer to the log. To lean back against it, using it as a backrest to rest an arm on. Lomi glanced at me with a small glare as I caused it to shift against my weight.

"The point of the story was to tell you how amusing it is to tease your children, using me," I said.

She huffed and shook her head. Her ears danced a little as they did, telling me she was holding back a laugh. "Maybe I can convince them to bite you on sight," she said.

Smiling, I nodded. Yes that would be alright too.

While I rested against the log I ran my hand along it. The dried wood reminded me of driftwood. In fact, it felt, looked, and smelled like it.

Yet we were many days from the nearest ocean.

And a few days from the lake we had just left.

A river was nearby, but it was more a stream than anything else...

It was just a log... why did I always worry about things that had no relevance?

Forcing my attention away from the log, I glanced at the campfire. It wasn't distracting enough, so I looked back up at the bright moon. It was now hidden by a small layer of clouds.

"When I'm gone, will you tell others about me too, Vim?" Lomi asked.

The bright moon went a little more hazy, and not because more clouds appeared.

"Yes. I will," I said.

"Don't let them know I cried so much," she said softly.

I smiled and nodded. "I'll tell them how brave you are Lomi. And that is no lie. I told you... I don't need to lie," I said.

"Hm. Though my story isn't over yet, is it?" she asked.

"That's true. Who knows? Maybe you'll do something crazy, and I'll have to protect something or someone else from you," I said.

Lomi giggled, as if such an idea was so ridiculous even her childish mind couldn't fathom it.

She didn't giggle long, and I noticed that after some time... I found it quiet.

The moon held my attention in the silence for a moment... but only a moment. My eyes then found a nearby patch of clouds. They were dark enough that even the bright moonlight couldn't pierce them.

My attention didn't last long there either.

Finding my eyes back at the young fox, I found her staring at me. She had a faint smile, but hidden behind it was sorrow. Sadness.

At least it wasn't accusing hatred.

"It's okay," I said to her.

She nodded. "Yep."

Glancing back at the sky, as the clouds slowly revealed the moon in full view again, Lomi and I went to sitting in silence.

Better such silence than the screams.

"Did you ever eat one of her babies?" she then asked, breaking the silence and forcing me to wish for screams after all.

*Chapter 22: Chapter Twenty One - Renn - Silence Broken*

Sometimes, the world went quiet.

Not just of people. Not just during that few moments' right after the fireplaces died out, and the popping and crackling stopped...

It was also when the world itself went silent.

The wind stopped eerily, as if it had never blown before. The snow that was falling lightly did so with such ease one didn't even notice when it landed on you.

There were no voices lingering in the distance. No dogs barking, or creaking of wood and stone...

It was almost as if the world had decided to stand still.

Not even the forest ever got this quiet.

I sat on the balcony often. Sometimes multiple times a day. I enjoyed these moments. I liked how I could sit and be alone, even in this massive city. Thanks to the lack of similar balconies nearby, I was out of sight here.

Usually I could sit here and listen to the houses nearby. The conversations of the people living across the street. The businesses to the left and right of us. The creaking of carts, and the clacking of horse's hooves as they pulled them.

Yet today it was quiet. Silent. Eerily so. Not even the birds were chirping.

How was it that a town of humans, some of the loudest creatures to exist, could become quieter than anything else?

And how come it was only for a brief few moments? And randomly?

I'd understand if maybe the humans had an agreement. Like, the few moments during the dawn, but it was purely coincidental. Unplanned. Unheard, too.

Did anyone else ever notice these moments?

I released a small breath, and noticed a faint haze. The world was cold, but not freezing. Not so cold that it should stop people from coming outside... yet...

On this balcony, I could sit without hiding my ears and tail. Yet at the same time, I knew soon I'd return inside. No matter how safe it could be, I still had the instinctual fear of being seen.

Not so much for my own safety, but the safety of everyone else. I'd hate the idea of being the cause of ruining this precious place.

Looking down at my hands, I noticed the way my nails were a little more pointed than usual. I needed to clip them. Most humans wouldn't notice right away, but if I didn't keep an eye on their length then...

"At least they're not claws," I said softly. My grandmother had not just paws like my uncle, but claws too.

She would not have been able to fit in and hide as we did. Even if she hadn't hated humans as fiercely as she had.

Lomi had no tail, and I couldn't remember any other features upon her. Only her ears and eyes had been... non-human in appearance.

Crane had feathers, but hid them beneath gowns and dresses. Lughes had his beard, but it was similar enough to an old man's raggedy unkempt one that he didn't need to shave it.

I had unique ears and a long tail... my eyes were a little odd, but not enough to draw attention... My nails became pointed if I let them grow freely...

Tapping my palm with my nails, I wondered how many generations it would take for my bloodline to become entirely human. A single one? Dozens? Would they lose their tail first, like Lomi, or would their ears be the first to go?

What dictated the loss of our features? When we mated with humans? Or was it just natural? As far as I was aware, the last few generations of my bloodline were all of the same kind. All of us had been cats.

Yet I was nothing like my grandparents. And their parents had been even more beast-like.

Did that mean it wasn't just decided by our parents, but something else? Was it the food? Something in the air?

What if all humans were just... descendants of us? Our kind? From long ago?

I had been spending a lot of time in that storage room, looking at all of those paintings... and one thing I could tell, was most of our kind were similar to me. Human in appearance, with only a few animalistic parts to them. Usually it was their ears, or a tail.



Occasionally there was one with a horn sticking out of their head, like antlers, or patches of scales on their skin. There had only been a handful of paintings I'd found so far of people that looked more animal than human.

Though that might simply be because only those who looked human ever came to be painted. Those who were more animal than not, like my grandparents, had probably despised human just like them... Just like my parents and...

A distant shout echoed through the air, and I realized that the silence was gone.

I now heard birds. People off in the distance. Voices. A horse neighed nearby.

The world was awake again.

Releasing another small sigh, I noticed the lack of haze from my breath. Had the world gotten warmer too?

The sun loomed overhead, but there were grey clouds blocking it. The snow falling from them was light, and scattered. It looked as if at any moment the snow would stop.

Something scrapped stone nearby, and my ears tilted at the sound. It was an unusual sound. One I rarely heard out here.

Had something fallen? It had almost sounded like a large claw scraping stone.

A loud cough, which made my eyes narrow, echoed down the street. Something about it was...

Then I heard footsteps. Heavy ones. Ones that slipped as much as ran. I heard the crunch of snow, and the ice beneath. I heard the feet misstep, and another cough because of it.

Someone was running. Towards our street. From the corner nearby.

A child maybe?

The footsteps I heard earlier became louder... then I heard the sound of someone falling. Tripping.

Sitting up, I noticed the figure down the road. Near the corner. I tried not to peer out too far, lest I got seen, but...

Slowly standing, I felt an odd sense of unease. A person falling in this cold, at this hour, wasn't that strange. There were drunks here. More than not... yet...

That was no drunken sailor or vagabond. Far too small. Too skinny.

And her dark figure wasn't just because of her jacket.

"Amber!"

Clambering up over the ledge of the balcony, I didn't even check to see if there was anyone else nearby. I didn't care if anyone noticed or saw, as I leapt off the balcony to the street below.

I landed a little less gracefully than I should have, and I blamed the snow... but there wasn't much of it on the ground. My heart thumped loudly in my ears as I smelled not just Amber, but blood.

Rushing forward along the street, I skidded to my knees next to her, and quickly began to smell more than just blood.

"Amber..." I groaned, and hefted her head a little. To see if she was awake or not.

She wasn't.

Hurrying, I took her into my arms and stood. Hefting her was easy. She wasn't much bigger than I, even though she felt heavy for some reason.

With her in my arms, I felt the seep of blood. Warm yet cold. The feeling of it made me panic, as I turned quickly back towards our home.

"Hurry!" Crane stood at the door, holding it open. She must have heard my scream, or had smelled the...

Don't think it.

It didn't take me long to get Amber into the Sleepy Artist. "The kitchen, Renn. We'll need to clean her wounds," Crane said hurriedly, before I even asked where I should take her.

Yes. That made sense.

"Oh no!" Lughes cried out as I passed him, he had been descending the stairs, and had fallen to his butt as we went by.

Being careful to not knock Amber's head or feet against the doorways, I hurried to the large kitchen table. The one we used to prepare food.

There were bowls, and plates littering it. With unprepared food. Crane had started preparing our dinner, there was even a hastily discarded knife on the ground.

Crane didn't even hesitate to knock them all off the table's surface. They clanged loudly and a plate broke as I laid Amber on the table.

"Oh no!" Lughes entered the kitchen, crying out as he hurried to the table.

"She collapsed near the corner," I said, and noticed the stains of blood on my sleeves.

She was bleeding badly. Real bad.

"Amber!" Crane went straight to holding Amber's head, and I noticed the way she opened Amber's eyes. She hadn't done so gently.

Yet Amber didn't even flinch. Her pupils were up, half hidden, as if in a deep sleep.

"She's breathing. She's breathing," Lughes reached out to start undressing her. Pulling off the torn cloak, and revealing her clothes. Oddly her clothes looked untouched. No tears. No rips. Yet...

They were soaked. Soaked with blood.

"Why?" I groaned as I went to helping Lughes get the clothes off her. To see what was wrong. To see the truth and...

My stomach went into knots, and even Crane and Lughes paused for a moment as we finally saw what the clothes hid.

"Lughes..." Crane made a weird sound, but the source was from her grief. It almost sounded like a sad squawk.

"We need to clean them. Then... then..." Lughes hesitated, and then glanced to the nearby fireplace. It wasn't lit. Crane had been preparing our dinner, but hadn't started cooking it yet.

"Get that lit. We need boiled water and bandages. We'll need to cauterize a few of them," Lughes said firmly. Somehow, suddenly, he wasn't meek anymore.

I nodded and went to the fireplace first. Before Crane could. I didn't know enough else on how to help, so I'd leave Amber to them for now.

After all, what could I do?

Quickly fumbling with the wood and tinder, I dared one small glance behind me. To the young girl on the table, covered in deep gashes.

Crane and Lughes were staring silently at each other. And I didn't need to hear their thoughts to know what they also saw. What they also smelled.

Amber looked asleep. Her face wasn't even contorted in pain. If not for the sight of chill on her face, you'd think there was nothing wrong with her. She didn't even twitch in pain or...

Looking away from the young girl, I took a deep breath in. Not to smell the match I just lit. Not to smell her blood. Not to smell the desperation in the air...

But to take hold of the scent that was wrapped around her.

It belonged to someone. I didn't know who. I didn't recognize it.

I didn't know where they were.

But I'd find them.

I'd find them.

*Chapter 23: Chapter Twenty Two - Vim - A Cold Cup*

Lomi's stomach gurgled and her face contorted into an annoyed expression as she turned to look at me.

"It'll be ready soon," I said to her.

She sighed but nodded. She sat closer to the table, and turned a little to stare at the nearby counter. Where the lone young girl was working.

The girl was most undoubtedly the daughter of the family who owned this small tavern. I could hear her parents, and what were most likely siblings, in the back working. Preparing not just our lunch, but the large dinner that would soon be demanded by the townsfolk once the sun started to set.

"Smells good," Lomi mumbled, as if angry about it.

"That's a good thing isn't it?" I asked her, amused by her upset expression.

"I... I suppose," she admitted, and realized she herself wasn't sure why it made her angry.

It wasn't like we've been waiting too long. We spent more time picking a table than anything else. Lomi had sat in one, hadn't liked it, and moved to another. Three times, before we ended up here.

She had complained that the seats weren't right. Yet to me they all felt lopsided and worn down. If anything this table felt worse for wear than the last two had.

Running my hand along the table's edge, I felt the smoothness not from just a sanding but time. Wear.

These tables were older than Lomi.

"How old do you think she is?" Lomi then asked.

Glancing at the girl at the counter, trying to clean a smudge off a large copper platter, I wondered if she was asking as to compare herself or just out of curiosity.

She looked like a young girl. In my eyes she was no older than Lomi. But she was taller. Nearly a foot or more in height, even including Lomi's ears.

"Probably not much older than you," I said.

"Hm..." Lomi studied the girl as she hummed.

"We age a little slower. You know that," I said to her.

"Yes, but... She's twice my height," she whispered.

"And some folks are just taller than others. Crane was taller than me, remember?" I reminded her.

"Ah true," she nodded.

The girl finally cleaned the platter well enough for her standards, and with a brisk jog she ran around the counter and up to us.

"What kind of drinks would you like?" she asked happily.

"Milk for her. Anything cold for me," I said.

"Two milks!" Lomi said quickly, showing both her outstretched hands as if she was going to order far more than two.

"That's six," I said as I counted her fingers.

Lomi smirked but didn't correct herself, as I nodded to the girl. "Couple milks," I said.

"And for yourself, ale or...?" the girl paused, as if unsure why she was hesitating in asking me such a thing.

"Whatever's the coldest," I said.

She nodded quickly and hurried away, back past the counter and through an open door to the back of the tavern.

"She probably thinks you're a drunk," Lomi said.

"Maybe. But they wouldn't understand if I told them the truth," I said.

"The truth?"

"That I can't get drunk," I said plainly.

Lomi nodded, as if finding what I said perfectly reasonable. I knew that was simply because of her age.

Anyone else would have found my comment odd.

"Why cold?" she asked.

"When it's cold outside? Why not? I'm already cold so why change it?" I asked her back.

She sighed and shook her head, finding that comment odder than the last.

"How much farther?" she asked.

"About a week. But we'll spend a day here I think," I said.

"Huh? Why?"

I gesture to the nearby window. Outside, even though it was the middle of the day, was dark. Very dark. Foreboding.

The humans wouldn't, couldn't hear it yet, but I could. The roar of the storm was distant, but approaching quickly.

"That storm. We can traverse it, but the roads from here on out are very busy. Too busy. If anyone sees us traveling while it's so stormy; we'll be questioned," I said.

"Oh... Are we going to stay here?" she asked.

"No there's an inn next door. After we eat we'll go get a room," I said.

"Hm."

The young tavern girl returned, carrying a small half-box full of cups and a pitcher.

Putting the box on the table, Lomi and I watched as she quickly dispersed the drinks. Two large cups of milk for the fox, and a large wooden cup of dark brown liquid for me.

There was also a pitcher of milk. Telling me she had believed Lomi in her ordering of multiple cups.

The wooden cup had frost all over it, telling me that they had stored it in their ice room.

Instead of storing the liquid, they stored the cups. It worked. Sometimes.

"Thanks," Lomi happily thanked her as the girl smiled and hurried off, back to behind the counter.

Before I could reach out and take a drink, or rather find out what kind of nasty brew they had given me, Lomi had reached out to touch the cup.

"It's cold!" she sounded happy over it.

"To chill its contents. No you can't try it," I said, although I let her touch the cup for a moment.

"Hm... Can I get one of those cups too?"

"Go ask," I said.

I had expected her not to, being the shy girl she was, but she quickly hopped off her seat and ran to the counter.

Watching her greet the girl, who gave her a huge smile on her approach, I gave a small nod in confirmation when the tavern girl glanced at me.

After a moment she hurried to the back, disappearing again. Lomi stood at the counter happily, waiting for her cup.

Although a part of me hoped Lomi had simply become less skittish, I knew the truth. She simply saw another child. A friend. Someone she didn't need to fear.

If it had been an old man, or even a woman, Lomi wouldn't have done such a thing.

Not as happily, at least.

The tavern girl returned promptly with a cup similar to mine. It had more metal on it than mine did, but was empty.

Lomi happily thanked her than ran off, hurrying back to the table.

"Happy?" I asked as she returned to her seat.

"Very!" Lomi quickly went to pouring the contents of one of her cups into the chilled one.

She spilled some of it, but I didn't chastise her or clean it up. She'd probably make a mess later anyway once the food came out.

A few extra coins would be more than enough to purchase forgiveness.

Lomi took a drink from her new cup, and I noticed the way her eyes twitched and her hat moved. Her ears had twitched even harder.

"Well?" I asked her.

"It's... chill to the lips, but the milk doesn't seem that much colder," she said while touching her lips.

"Let it sit for a moment, like I am," I said, gesturing to my cup.

"Ah..." she realized her mistake and nodded.

Lomi studied her cup, and its contents, as she went to patiently waiting.

"Is it hard? To run a restaurant like this?" Lomi then asked.

"Sometimes. Just need enough people, and of course a good source of food. Travelers will forgive bad food, but the locals won't," I said.

"Travelers? We would? Why? I want good food," she said sternly.

"Because we're strangers. Most wouldn't dare complain about the quality of food when they're alone in a whole village. Think about your village, what would all of you have thought if some random guy showed up and started berating and insulting your food, houses and home?" I asked.

"We'd... we'd be upset," she said, barely taking a moment to consider it. "But!" She spoke up before I could, and nodded. "We'd not hurt anyone for that though. Maybe kick them out, but..."

"Exactly. And being kicked out from a village, or banned, is life and death for most travelers. So they'll just keep their mouths shut and eat and drink. With a smile," I said, hefting my own cup to do just that.

Lomi sighed, but seemed to understand.



"For most humans traveling is terrifyingly dangerous. Most never leave their homes, or only travel to one or two villages away. It's like another world to them," I said.

"This is another world..." she mumbled, and went to drinking her milk.

It must have gotten colder, for she paused momentarily to enjoy it. She seemed happy that it was cold now.

Another world...

It felt like it sometimes.

"Almost done with your food!" the young girl shouted from behind the counter.

Lomi startled at her shout, but the girl didn't notice. She hurried into the back after letting us know.

"Will it get loud here like the last time?" Lomi asked, worried.

"Probably."

Lomi groaned.

Sitting back, I heard the whistle of the wind as it grew stronger. The storm was here.

Which meant so would we be, until it passed or at least softened enough for our trek not to be seen as strange.

Hopefully it didn't take too long.

*Chapter 24: Chapter Twenty Three - Renn - A Broken Brush*

Everything was falling apart.

Crane and Lughes were downstairs, in the basement, talking to Shelldon. I could just barely make out the shouting. Shrieks even.

"Steady," I told both myself and Amber.

The young girl looked even worse than this morning. Her face was now pale, she was shivering even though we had all fireplaces burning and blankets wrapped around her... and...

I squeezed her bundled up hand and wished I knew what to do.

We had brought the bed that was in the spare room, the one Vim had been using, into the kitchen. Near the fireplace. For her. It didn't seem to be helping at all.

Humans were fragile. Far more than our kind. And the wounds on her were actually severe enough that even members of our race could have suffered. Even I would have been bedridden, maybe for days.

A part of me was screaming to run and find who had done this. Another was telling me to find a doctor. A human one.

Lughes and Crane hadn't allowed it. Yet...

"You need one..." I whispered, and wondered if I should just go get one.

She was a human after all. Had I not just watched Nory suffer so? Had I not watched her deteriorate from disease and age? How many arguments had we had, with me begging her to let me take her to find help...

Another scream echoed up from the floorboards, and I recognized Crane's voice. I couldn't make out the words being said, but they were definitely not happy ones.

Standing away from the bed, I hesitated.

If I went and got one without their permission... I'd most undoubtedly be kicked out.

I'd lose my place. Maybe not just here in the Sleepy Artist, but the Society as a whole.

Which meant Vim would...

A tiny cough came from the girl, and I knew I had no choice.

She was a human. But...

But she was still one of us.

A friend.

Hurrying to my room, I made sure to climb the stairs as quietly as I could. Even though the three other members of the Society were downstairs, screaming at one another, they'd still hear me if I wasn't careful.

The outside world was dark. The sun had just set. And although it wasn't storming, there was a wind. A chill in the air.

Where would a doctor be? Would I even be able to find one alone? In the night? Where should I...

Putting my jacket and hat on, I made sure to hide my tail well. Just in case the wind blew my jacket up and out, I hid it beneath my pants.

Especially since I'd be running... and...

Before leaving the room I hurriedly grabbed all the coins Vim had left me. I didn't know if it'd be enough, but I could always get more. They made oddly loud clinking sounds as I put them into a small pouch.

I flinched as they made noise as I hurried out of my room and downstairs. They could hear such a sound. It was so distinct. So unnatural...

"Renn!"

Hesitating, I paused at the bottom of the stairs. Crane stood down the hall, and was huffing. She had hurried back up.

"She needs help," I said to her.

"She does. But even a human surgeon won't be able to save her, Renn. It's too late for her," Crane said harshly.

For once I didn't find her brisk personality appealing.

"We have to try," I argued.

"If you let a human doctor in, they will know. They serve the nobles first, before us. They'll let the nobles know. Which means all will know. It will mean making an enemy out of the powerful humans, Renn!" Lughes shouted from somewhere behind her. Maybe still in the basement.

I stepped back a step. Towards the door. Yet I didn't turn around. Not yet.

"Can't you smell it?" I whispered.

Crane flinched, and I tried to hold in my anger.

"Can't you smell her dying?" I asked again. Louder this time.

"Exactly why, Renn. Please. If you... if you go do this, it will risk us all. This home. Please," Crane said.

"She's one of us," I said.

"She's a human," Lughes shouted, stepping past Crane. Pushing past her, to the point she almost fell.

"That's Amber!" I shouted back, and wondered why he was acting like this. Had he himself not panicked and tried to help earlier? Most of the wounds had been cleaned by his own hands!

"We've done what we can! She'll either survive or she won't!" Lughes shouted.

I shook my head and hated what I was hearing. They sounded so...

"We can... we can leave. Go somewhere else. If it gets that dangerous," I argued.

"Leave!" Crane nearly fainted. She had to put her hand on the wall to keep herself upright.

A weird whine echoed from beneath my feet. It echoed upward, and into the hall.

Shelldon.

"Coward!" I shouted down at him.

"We all are! Renn... if you leave this house, and go to the humans I'll have no choice but to bar the door!" Lughes said loudly.

"Bar...? She needs help! The humans know more about such things than we do!" I said.

Lughes took in a deep breath, as if to yell at me... but stopped himself. For a long moment, the air was heavy. Lughes looked larger than he ever had. Crane looked faint, ready to pass out at any moment... and I could still hear the odd whine coming from Shelldon down below.

To think such a happy, warm, home would degrade so quickly!

"Take her yourself then," Lughes then said.

I hesitated, as Lughes nodded. "Take her. If you carry her out of here, I'll let you. But I'll not let you bring her back," Lughes said.

Staring at the man who had always seemed air-brained, but kind all the same... I suddenly felt as if I was in a stranger's home.

"Fine."

Stepping towards them, I did my best to not hesitate and stumble when Lughes and Crane actually shied back. They flinched as I walked past them. They glanced away, to the floor and ceiling, as if I wasn't something they wanted to confront.

Cowards.

Heading into the kitchen, I wondered if this was the right move. After all I didn't know where a doctor was. Didn't know how long it'd take me to...

"Will you at least tell me where one is? What part of town?" I asked them, loudly, as I approached the bed.

Amber looked broken. Sunken into herself, almost. As if she had suddenly lost a lot of weight. She hadn't had much weight in the first place!

"Head to the church. A large brown building across from the church has doctors," Lughes said from the hallway. His voice sounded empty. Devoid of life.

He had already cut me from his life.

He spoke to me as if I was someone he never knew.

I knew where the church was. I hadn't been in it, but I had walked past it with Amber a few times. And alone.

With a few quick movements, I did my best to wrap Amber as tightly in the blankets as I could. I made sure to also cover her face. Not so tightly that she'd suffocate, but enough to keep her safe from the chill of the outside and wind.

I'd need to hurry.

It would look strange to others. To the townsfolk. I wasn't big enough, neither tall enough or in size, to carry such a large bundle so easily. Luckily it was late.

Picking Amber up, I hefted her heavy body. I was glad that this time at least, my arms didn't become soaked with warm blood.

She didn't fidget. She didn't move. Amber didn't even realize I was lifting her.

"It'll be okay," I said to her.

Turning, I carefully carried her out of the kitchen. Into the hallway.

Crane and Lughes hadn't moved from their spots. Yet they went stiff, their backs going straight as I passed them.

"Cowards," I cursed them as I walked past.

Leaving the hallway, I struggled for a moment to open the door. The bell dinged once as I finally got it open, and I hated the sound of it. Despised that clear ringing.

That stupid bell annoyed me as I stepped away from the Sleepy Artist.

I didn't even try to close the door behind me as I carried Amber out into the street. The snow littered the ground, but wasn't in the air. Only a cold wind.

There wasn't anyone around as I hurried down the road. Heading towards the center, towards the massive dark shadows in the sky. Where the church and castles loomed.

Brown building across from the church.

I'd get her there.

I'd save her.

Since no one else would.

If it cost me that precious home... so be it.

After all, the home I wanted didn't abandon those who lived in it.

Not so easily.

Not so willingly.

After all what was the point of a home then? What was the purpose?

Passing the corner where Amber had fallen this morning, where I had picked her up, I noticed the clumps of snow. The darker stains, where her blood had seeped.

Groaning lightly as I hurriedly carried her, I did my best to only allow tears to stain my eyes. I did my best to not let a cry escape my lips, or my heart to break any more than it already had.

I'd let it happen later.

Running through the town, I barely noticed anyone else I passed.

I ignored everything and everyone.

The only thing that mattered was the girl in my arms.

*Chapter 25: Chapter Twenty Four – Vim – Meeting The Owls*

"She's lively. A good sign," Windle said.

I nodded as we watched Lomi chase the large dog around the massive tree. She was giggling happily as she chased the shepherd dog. Both of them were completely lost in their own little world.

"Still a child. She hasn't been crying as much lately, too," I said.

The tall man sighed softly, and I knew it wasn't just because he was feeling for the girl. That sigh was one mixed with disappointment. Of me.

"What?" I asked. The balcony we stood on overlooked the main yard, and thus the tree. I couldn't see Windle's wife, but I could hear and smell her. She sat right beneath us, probably on a chair on the patio.

Windle turned his head a little, to smile gently at me. As if he was looking at someone just as young as the young girl we were talking about. "You never change, Vim," he said.

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

Lomi stumbled. Probably over one of the many small roots sticking out of the giant tree. The dog paused a moment, its wagging tail going stiff, and didn't renew its happy wag until Lomi regained her footing.

"It's been some time since someone so young has run under these leaves," Windle whispered.

"Hm," I nodded. His children were young, but not that young. Most were grown.

In fact one could verify the age of his children by the trees at the edge of the large yard. Seven tall sprouts, now fully formed, lined the center of the field. They had been planted separately, away from the large forest that surrounded us. They were special. Unique.

Those seven were not like the forest of trees surrounding this house. They were like the massive tree Lomi was running around. Each one a little taller. A little older than the last.

The newest of the seven was tall, but not as tall as the house yet. I knew it was several decades old, but it looked tiny compared to its brothers and sisters. Somehow they had planted them to seem more representative of whose they were. The trees that had been planted for the sons were all thicker. Wider than the rest.

If I had brought Lomi a few visits ago, she'd be running around with a few other children. At least the three youngest ones.

"Don't plan on having more?" I asked Windle.

Windle said nothing, and a glance at him told me he'd not break that silence. He wasn't really a private man, when it came to such things, but he was easily embarrassed.

The dog paused a moment to bark at Lomi, then dashed behind the tree. Out of our sight. Lomi quickly chased after.

"Have your children come back yet?" I asked Windle, stepping away from the balcony.

This place was safe. Plus Windle's wife was downstairs in the garden, watching Lomi. Although just as tall, and thin, I had seen firsthand her fierceness in protecting children.

Lomi was safe enough that I needn't keep an eye on her all day.

"Only my youngest." Windle watched Lomi for a few moments more as I went to the seat.

Sitting down across from Windle's writing desk, I frowned at his answer. "Just her? What'd she come back for?" I asked.

"To weep," he said gently.

Glancing at the owl, I kept my next question inside for a moment as he slowly went to his own chair. He sat gently in it, with ease and grace. The kind that would unsettle a human.

He looked human enough. Taller than probably any human was, and his eyes were... a tad bit bigger than usual, but nothing about him screamed non-human. In fact only his tall height was unnatural. The man had nearly no Non-Human traits.

His wife, Lilly, on the other hand...

"She fell in love. It did not go well," Windle said, as if that summed it all up perfectly.

"She still here?" I asked him. I hadn't seen or heard her yet. Usually by now she'd come and ask me a riddle, one she had crafted over the years since I had last seen her.

"No. She stayed for about a year, and then went off to meet her brother at the cathedral. They plan to travel along the coast, and then return home next summer," Windle said.

"I see. Was it a human?" I asked him.

"It was," Windle said.

"Only your firstborn has any non-human traits, correct?" I asked him.

Windle nodded with a small sigh. "Yes. Her... The issue hadn't been about who or what we are, but simple disastrous happenstance. The young lad met an early end," Windle said.



"Ah. I see. Hopefully she'll in time recover," I said.

"As do I..." Windle softly spoke as he stared at me, yet I knew he didn't see me. His wide eyes were staring at something far beyond me. Maybe he saw his young daughter, weeping her heart out.

"The other children?" I asked.

"All fine, last I heard. Branches joined a mercenary band in the north. The Silken Band," Windle said.

"Really?" I asked, surprised. Branches was his firstborn, but hadn't the height of his father. He'd only been a little taller than me.

"Really. As I'm sure you know, I advise against such choices... but the entire point of them venturing forth from our nest is for them to learn. To stumble. To fail," Windle said.

His disappointment was clear to the ears, yet he had a smile on his face. He was still proud of his son.

"I'll check on him. When I can," I said.

Windle nodded quickly, happy to hear it.

"Other than the brood, how goes the farm?" I asked.

"The trees grow strong. We'll have many ready by next year for harvest," Windle said.

"Good," I nodded. That meant the Society will have its steady supply for another year at least.

"Our forest is safe, Vim. How many can even find it, let alone traverse it?" he asked.

"I've never had any trouble," I said.

Windle smiled, but did so knowingly. He always found it funny when I tried to act like a normal human.

The sound of the shepherd dog barking filled the world for a moment, and I listened to Lomi shout something. Maybe she had finally run out of stamina and had collapsed. She sounded out of breath.

"How's the rest of the Society?" Windle asked.

"Other than her village, not too bad. Children were born in most of the villages I went through recently. A new village is in the works, to the east near the Lake of Sand. I'll probably head there in a few years to help them settle," I said.

"Ah, wonderful news," Windle nodded quickly, and went to grabbing a pencil and paper.

He enjoyed his notes.

Knowing him it wasn't just the news I told him that he wrote down. He was probably also writing whatever strange thoughts entered and left his mind, as we spoke.

"The church is growing more powerful, but at the same time we expected it. Planned on it. So..." I shrugged, as if nothing more needed to be said.

"Was it the church that burnt her village?" Windle asked as he took notes. His wide eyes focused on what he was writing, as if he was transfixed by the words he wrote. As if he was reading someone else's writing and not his own.

"Most likely. I've not verified it yet, but Lomi's made it very clear they were associated with the Bishop near her town. They probably declared their decree before burning the village down. Might have even chanted sermons, based off the way she acts around them," I said, remembering the moments we passed priests or monks. She always shied away, hiding from them.

"Indeed..."

"There's a large war in the south, I'm sure you've heard of it," I said, continuing with my brief updates.

"I have. My son's warband plans to head south, to join it," Windle said.

"Woe for those fields of flowers," I said, remembering the vast fields. At one time they had been free of not just humans entirely, but even most animals. Now most were muddy fields. Crushed beneath soldier's boots or their horses hooves. The flowers that somehow didn't get stepped on would be drowned by blood.

Sadly those flat plains were perfect for waging wars.

Windle smiled softly as he paused in his writing. "Who will win, do you think?" he asked.

"The ones willing to sacrifice the most. Which today is the northerners. But things happen. You know I don't care much for the wars of humans," I said.

"Yet, you know them so well," Windle said softly as he went back to writing.

I glanced to the bookshelf behind his desk. It was littered with scrolls. He was capable of making books, and did so often, but old habits died slowly.

"A few new human settlements have arisen here and there. Especially near the coast. But until they last a few decades, there's no point putting much stock into them," I said.

"Yet still, maps must be updated," Windle said.

"I've never needed a map," I said.

Windle ignored my bragging, and went to the next sheet of paper. Continuing his note taking.

"If you'd keep an eye on Lomi, I'd appreciate it," I said.

"Always. We watch all we can, while we can," Windle agreed.

I nodded, glad to hear it. This forest was a hidden grove, not yet bothered by humans, but that didn't mean it was completely disconnected. Windle, or his children, often ventured around this small forest. To the villages, and cities, nearby.

Lomi's new home was one of those they frequently visited.

"This is good tidings. Porka is pregnant, hopefully it will be a son," Windle said.

That was news indeed. "Really?" I asked.

Windle nodded, still focused on his notes.

"Really..." I said softly, and listened to Lomi laughing as she spoke to Lilly.

Our kind never had many children. For Porka to be pregnant now was...

"The child may even be born already. I've not visited for three moons," Windle said.

"Hm."

"Members lost. New ones gained. Just like the forest," Windle said, pleased with himself.

I'd not say a whole village was equal a single child, but I kept such a thought to myself.

A dog's bark told me that they were back in the house. It had come from downstairs.

"Been some time since it's been so noisy," Windle said, his pencil going still.

"Owls are noisy creatures," I said.

Windle smirked, the pencil began to twirl a little as he spun it between fingers. "So we are," he accepted.

"How's Lilly?" I asked him.

"Wonderful. She's glad you're here. You saw her smile when she greeted Lomi, I'm sure," Windle said.

I shrugged. I had noticed. Lilly although no longer had her wings... was just as prideful and strong as ever. Most of our kind broke when they lost something precious to them.

Losing her wings had only made her stronger.

"She's strong," I said.

"Stronger than me, no doubt," Windle agreed.

"Most are," I teased.

The tall man smirked, unabashed by my comment.

He was a pacifist. His wife a warrior.

It was interesting to hear that one of his sons took after the mother. I'd need to meet him again.

If anything to teach him a few things, to keep him alive as long as I could.

"Vim!" Lomi's voice now came from inside the house. Being shouted from the stairwell.

Windle's eyes finally left his note-taking as we both listened to her quick footsteps. She was running up the stairs, looking for me.

"And our silence broken," Windle said with a smile.

"Was it that quiet in the first place?" I asked him as I stood. To open the door to the study, so Lomi could find us easier.

"The forest is never quiet," Windle said briskly, standing to join me.

Opening the door, I sighed as Lomi rounded the hallway's corner. She smiled as she saw me, and picked up her pace.

She was covered in dirt, as if she had been digging with the dog.

And based off the wry smirk... ready to tackle me.

Wonderful.