

The Non-Human Society

Chapter 26: Chapter Twenty Five – Renn – Worthless Metal

The morning sunlight had begun to peer into the room.

I sat alone, and felt a little cold. Even though there was a still burning fire nearby.

Dust lingered in the morning rays which peered through heavy curtains, and I quietly focused on the voices that filtered through the wooden walls.

The bench I sat on was no longer cold. Yet at the same time, it was uncomfortable. I hated it.

I hated this building. I hated the smell of it.

I hated everything that had happened, and that was happening.

"Another. Why won't the church do anything?" a woman asked. This voice was a new one. She had entered the building only a few moments ago. At first I had thought she had been hurt, based on how quickly she had ran into the building, but I now knew that was only because she had been late for work.

"Why do you think? Because they're nobles," a deeper voice said. If not for the very audible disgust in his voice, I'd find myself hating the man.

It wasn't his fault.

He had done what he could.

My eyes were no longer leaking, but I knew that was because I had simply run out of tears.

They hadn't officially come out to tell me yet that she had been lost, but...

"What of the girl? In the waiting lobby?" the new voice asked. The older woman who still sounded a little tired, who had just got here.

"She's unharmed. She's a friend... she found her outside, collapsed," the doctor said.

I took a deep breath and did my best to hold it in for a moment. Lest I screamed.

"For now," the woman scoffed, and then I heard them leave the room on the other side of the wall. Heading deeper down the hallway...

The two kept talking, but I began to ignore them.

There was nothing more I needed to hear.

Nothing more I needed to know.

Amber was dead.

My fists popped and creaked loudly in the silent morning as I squeezed my jacket. My eyes surprisingly went blurry again, as if I hadn't just cried for hours.

"Amber..." I softly whispered her name, and felt horrible.

I should have brought her here faster. I could have... I should have helped her quicker and...

A door creaked open, and I looked up to watch a young boy enter. He had cut wood in his arms, and he completely ignored me as he hurried over to a large box. Near the fireplace.

The logs clunked as he quickly began putting them into the box. Restocking it.

Without a word the young boy hurried out, to grab another armful.

"The world continues on," I whispered, realizing that once again I had lost someone precious.

You'd think I'd be used to it by now.

Yet... this was too early.

Even for a human.

I had only known her for a few months. I barely knew anything about her! I still didn't even know her mother's name, or what nation she had come from. I didn't know if she had believed in any kind of god, or...

"Stop," I whispered, stopping myself from growling in anger.

"Huh?"

I looked back up and realized I had spoken loudly. The young boy who was still carrying wood had paused, looking at me with worry. As if he had done something wrong.

"Sorry. You're fine," I said quickly.

He frowned, but went back to working. This time a lot more conscious of himself. He put the logs down into the box with much more care, doing his best to do it as quietly as possible.

"Sorry," I said again, much quieter this time. The boy hadn't heard me as he hurried out, closing the door behind him.

Leaving me once again alone in this large room. Joined only by the silent rays of morning light.

I sighed at myself, and knew I was going to have to do something.

Did... did I bury her? Would they let me take her? Should I take her body back to the Sleepy Artist? Or was that door now barred for me and her forever? Would they not help me bury her?

And beyond that, what did I do after?

The doctor, and those who helped him, had all made it very clear.

The noble had done this.

The one she had worked for. The one who had hired her to paint the young daughter of the family.

Not only had the doctors recognized the wounds on her, she wasn't the first to have endured them. There had been other young women who had suffered from their disgusting violence. One had been brought here only a month ago.

When I had first heard such things, I had not believed them. I had thought I had misheard. After all, was I not hearing through many walls? Weren't their voices hard to make out and sometimes not audible at all?

Yet that wasn't the case.

The Primdoll family was one of debauchery. One that even the common folk knew about.

So then... why didn't anyone do anything about it? Why did none of the humans get revenge? Why were their evil deeds not punished?

Why hadn't Crane known? Lughes I would understand, being so air-headed, but Crane intentionally kept friends amongst the humans. To talk of rumors, and secrets.

Why hadn't she realized it? Why hadn't anyone noticed?

What of the Lord who ruled this city? Or the church who was rebuilding it?

Was that not their job? To protect their flock? As that one lady had mentioned?

"If not them, then..." I whispered, and realized I was tearing my jacket. I was squeezing the edges too tightly.

Stretching my fingers out, I noticed how white they were. And not because it was cold. I had been gripping my fists tightly for too long.

Why hadn't Vim, the protector, done anything? Why did this happen after he left?

"I have to do something."

Could I just... get revenge? Could I kill them?

I was no great warrior, but I was stronger than most humans. During my youth I had mistakenly hurt a few, simply because I hadn't realized how weak they were sometimes.

Killing them was possible. Not just physically, but emotionally. I was angry enough. Furious enough.

No amount of snow could extinguish this burning anger and hatred in my heart.

Yet... if I did that... what would happen?

Would Lughes and the rest suffer, as they said they would?

Would my killing, or at least the act of trying, only get them in turn killed too?

What of the young daughter of the family? Would I kill her too?

What was I supposed to do...?

"Renn?"

Looking up, I sniffed at the sight of the large man.

He was older, yet muscular. He wore a tight jacket which hugged his burly arms closely. It gave him a funny look.

"Yes?" I asked the doctor.

"May I sit with you?" he asked, gesturing to the open space on the bench next to me.

I nodded. I knew what he was going to say already, but I still needed to hear it.

The burly man sat quickly, yet gently. He seemed used to this. The look on his face told me he was genuinely upset at what he was about to do, what he was about to say.

"I'm sorry, Renn, but your friend... her wounds were severe. We did everything we could, but she fell asleep and passed away. She's gone," the man said.

Even though I had known what his news was going to be, even though I had already known for hours... I still found new tears falling from my eyes.

"I see," I said softly.

"I'm so sorry. She fought hard, she really did," he nodded, as if to confirm it. "But the wounds were... very bad."

I nodded, unsure of what to say to that.

"If you'd like, we're willing to handle her body. We'll bury her with the rest, at the cemetery behind the abbey," the man said.

"I..." I hesitated, since I wasn't sure if that was the right thing to do.

"It's free. It will cost you nothing more for us to do this," he said quickly.

He had misunderstood my worry.

"Alright... Yes... Please do that for me," I said.

He nodded, glad I had accepted.

"What... what do I do now?" I asked him.

"Go home. Sleep. Did she have any other family? I know you said she did, but they weren't here and..." the doctor hesitated, and I knew it was because of what he had seen on my face.

Disgust at the idea of family.

"Yes. She did. They're not here... I'll... I'll let them know," I said, unsure of how else to say it. How else to accept it.

Her family had abandoned her.

Even if they had been right... for them to have...

"I see. Alright. You... you already paid, Renn, but there will be another fee. One you can pay later," he said gently.

"Fee?" I asked, unsure of what he meant.

I had laid all the coins I had down the moment I arrived. A young woman had taken them all from me, without a word, while he and the rest had treated Amber.

"The church provides for our service. They pay our salary, and for all the items we use. Bandages, bedding, the burial... but there is a tax for the dead," he said.

"Tax...?" I asked, and felt a little angry.

A tax? To die? Why?

"A silver coin, a penk," he whispered lightly. As if suddenly scared of me.

Which was ridiculous. He was huge. Even though older. A human of his size shouldn't be scared of me. Not without first seeing my ears and tail.

"A coin. For dying," I said, repeating him.

He nodded slowly.

"I gave you coins," I said.

"I know. Here," he then dug into his pocket. The sound of metal clinking and clanking told me they were coins.

Holding his hand out towards me, I hesitated. What was going on?

"Your coins. She took them, since you were in a panic... but as I said, the church covers the cost for our services," he said.

Slowly reaching out, I allowed the man to place the coins into my hands.

Sure enough, it looked like each and every coin I had given to the young girl earlier.

Staring at them, I felt sick.

I didn't want these.

"I'm sorry. Come back later, to pay the tax... unless her family wishes to pay it. For now though, please go home Renn," the man said gently. The look in his eyes told me he was being very serious.

He wasn't telling me to go home just because I looked tired. Or just because he didn't want me here anymore.

"What should I do?" I asked him softly.

The large man blinked, and then glanced around. We were alone, like before, but he hesitated as if we weren't.

"They killed her," I whispered.

He flinched, and then nodded.

Squeezing the coins in my hands, a few slipped between my fingers. They bounced onto my lap. A few rolled down, to the bench and then to the stone floor.

We both ignored them as I glared at the doctor who hadn't been able to save Amber.

"They killed her," I said again.

"They did. Please. Go home. Don't let them kill you too," he then said. A little harsher.

The harsh voice was a surprise to hear, but I didn't feel threatened or hurt by it. Especially since his eyes were just as watery as mine.

"Please. You're young. Too young to be involved with those nobles. Go home. Forget about everything. Don't involve yourself with them anymore," he said.

For a long moment he held my gaze... then he nodded and stood.

Glaring at the burly man, I watched him retreat back into the building. Leaving me alone.

He had said his peace. He had told me what had happened. He had returned my coins.

He had done all he could.

Yet it hadn't been enough.

An odd sound filled the room, and I glanced down at the cause.

Opening my hands, I found a mangled mess.

The coins were now curled. Bent. Broken. Some were even stuck to one another now.

"Worthless," I spat, and let the coins fall.

The clumps of worthless metal fell as I stood.

Feeling as useless as the bits of metal I left behind, I opened the door and headed out into the world.

Leaving Amber's body behind, I headed back towards the Sleepy Artist.

I didn't know where else to go.

Chapter 27: Chapter Twenty Six – Vim – To Soar Amongst Warriors

Little animals frolicked through the meadows. Dozens of bunnies were hopping around the seven solitary trees in the distance. Foxes, actual ones, played near the large tree in the center. Deer of all sizes came and went, walking slowly through the meadow from one end of the forest to the other. Some ate leisurely while some galloped as if on a journey.

As usual, the Owl's Nest was full of life.

An oddity, concerning how dangerous the forest which surrounded it, were.

Yet at the same time not. After all, even a basic animal could learn where to go and where not to. As long as it listened to its basic instincts.

What kept the humans at bay, keeping them from entering this deep into the forest, was the same thing that kept the animals here sheltered.

Even though both the animals and the humans would suffer that creature's wrath all the same.

It cared not who or what you were. It would kill you all the same.

"Protector."

I turned to acknowledge Lilly. Lomi wasn't with her. This meant she was either sleeping, or playing with the dog again. She seemed weary of Windle, so I doubted she was with him. Maybe the way the thin man's head turned a little too unnaturally bothered her.

The tall woman smiled as she approached, and for a tiny moment she looked for all the world happy to see me.

That moment didn't last long, as her smile turned into a small frown upon getting closer.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Lomi tells me you left a predator at the Sleepy Artist," Lilly said.

I shifted a little, but not because I was being accused. Not because of her tone, or upset expression.

"A large forest cat. Yes. Her name was Renn," I said.

Lilly's expression didn't darken, but it didn't get softer either. Her eyes lingered on me for a moment, and then glanced around. At the massive tree they called home. At the meadows surrounding us. At the thick, dark forest, surrounding the meadows.

"I'll not ask if it was wise... but..." Lilly stopped talking for a moment, and I wondered what she really wanted to ask.

"Out with it, or you'll never know the answer," I said to her.

Lilly went still for a moment... then a part of her shirt shuffled. I heard the remnants of her wings as they fluttered beneath her shirt. Annoyed. "Predators are becoming rare. Rare enough that any met could be the last," she said.

"So it feels like," I agreed.

"Then... why leave her there?" she asked.

I nodded, understanding her frustration.

Here I had expected her to be upset over risking the Sleepy Artist.

"She's not a warrior, Lilly. She is stronger than most, I noticed a lot of strength in that small body... but she's no warrior. Not a knight," I said gently.

At least, she wasn't one yet.

Lilly's eyes narrowed, and her brow furrowed. For a brief moment an injured owl stood before me, not a woman.

"Yet..." she whispered and grabbed her arm with her other hand. Squeezing it tightly, as if scared.

Scared. Yet this owl was not capable of being scared.

She was a warrior. Even if wounded, and no longer able to fly.

"In time maybe. For now, she needs to find her place. She's older, not as old as we, but older all the same. I don't know her whole story, but I can tell you she is unaccustomed to our kind. She knows more about humans than she does us. And even then, she knows little. Give her time to... settle. To nest. To find something worth protecting," I said to Lilly.

The owl sighed, as if upset that I had already long understood what needed to be done.

"I've done this many times before, Lilly," I said to her.

"Yes. You have. Yet that is the issue. You bring us to those we fall in love with. And lose any opportunity to enlist us as soldiers," she said.

I frowned. "I've always seen you as a warrior, Lilly," I said to her.

She blinked, her pupils going wide as she looked into my eyes. As if in doubt of what she had heard.

I nodded, unafraid to be so honest.

Lilly smiled softly, and nodded back. "I see. Still... all the same. I do wish you'd enlist those who were capable, before it was too late," she said.

"If our kind could be saved by just having a few more soldiers, Lilly... we'd all be fine. The war would be over already," I said.

"I find that hard to believe Vim," she said briskly.

"Yet it's the truth all the same. Even if there were ten of me, our lives would be no different," I said to her.

"What if there were a hundred? A thousand?"

I took a breath, and realized suddenly why Lilly was so focused on expanding her household.

Was this why she was so... prolific?

"Sorry," she whispered, and looked away. As if ashamed she had just questioned me.

"Don't be. But Lilly, do remember... Do you remember the battle?" I asked her.

Her back went stiff, and her shirt became tight again. This time tight enough to show her belly.

It was a little rounder than it should be.

"You remember that morning?" I asked her.

"I do." Her nubs of wings flapped.

"Did it change anything?" I asked her.

Lilly blinked, and with her blink her eyes became watery.

Silence grew between us, and I knew it was because I had just taken her heart and soul and stepped on it.

It was very likely I was the first, and would be the only, person to ever ask if losing her wings had changed anything. Anything of value.

"Very little," she whispered finally, after a long moment.

"Yet it was momentous, wasn't it?" I asked her.

Lilly blinked a tear out of her eye, and then frowned. She spent a few moments pondering my words, but then slowly nodded. "Yes. It was," she said.

"I've forgotten more moments like that than I can count," I said to her.

The owl hesitated, and stepped forward. As if to argue with me. As if to contradict me.

I continued before she could, "Thousands of those moments are mere memories for me," I furthered.

Lilly's eyes narrowed as I pointed at the tree nearby. The massive one, which she and her family called home.

"That there is precious. It is worth protecting. It is worth the price of sacrifice that it demands," I said to her.

"Yet it will be cut and burned, if we don't do something," she argued.

I nodded. "I agree. But, Lilly... it will happen anyway. Eventually."

"All the more reason! If it's bound to happen, by fate and design, than we should struggle all the more! Otherwise what would be the point and...!" she went quiet, but not because I stood there quietly.

Not because I was looking at her with pity.

"You could amass an army, Lilly. But all you would do is add a few moments," I whispered.

She shook her head. "Yet you will march with me, the moment I asked you to."

"Never said I wouldn't," I countered.

She smiled as she sighed. She nodded weakly, as if tired all of a sudden.

"Your children. I hear some have picked up the sword, while others have found love," I said.

Lilly wasn't bothered by my change of topics, but nodded softly all the same.

"That's how you win, Lilly," I said to her.

"Is it, Vim?" she asked.

"Only those like them are still around, Lilly," I said.

Lilly twitched, and I knew it was because she herself had thought something similar. Even if she didn't want to admit it.

"Let the cat find her place. Let your children. Let them all find a home, a place to treasure. We cannot amass armies; we cannot field warriors... so we must simply struggle. Striving to outlast that which threatens us," I said to her.

"Until we're nothing more than the very thing we fight," Lilly whispered.

"Possibly. That can be one of the many outcomes. I hope you didn't fault your daughter for falling for a human," I said.

Lilly smiled, quickly shaking her head. "No. I'm not so cruel as that," she said.

Some birds landed nearby. Colorful, and a little bigger than usual. Some kind of forest bird, with their pretty colors. They began chirping and pecking at the thick grass.

I knew if Lomi had been here, she would have run into their little group. Chasing them off with a laugh.

Lilly stood with me, quietly watching the birds for a moment.

A moment turned into many minutes.

Then finally, the birds took to the sky. Flying off towards the high branches of the mighty tree.

Lilly's breathing got a little stronger at the sight, and I heard her wings again.

She turned to leave, walking back towards the wooden house. Seemed our little conversation was over.

"Do you regret it, Lilly?" I asked her.

She paused for a moment, but didn't look back at me. Instead she looked back upward, to the sky.

"I do miss the sky. But no. I'd do it again."

Smiling at her as she returned to the house, I nodded my head in a small bow to her.

Warrior indeed.

Chapter 28: Chapter Twenty Seven – Renn – An Envelope

The Sleepy Artist was cold.

Crane sat alone, at the counter. I could not hear Lughes, or Shelldon, but...

Closing the door behind me, I wondered if Crane would tell me to leave. If she would force me out.

Her soft smile as I approached gave me hope, but...

"She's dead?" Crane asked softly.

I nodded. Unsure of what to say.

"I see," she whispered.

The tall woman lowered her head. It drooped unnaturally low, thanks to her long neck. A little more and her forehead would hit the desk she sat at.

Although there was no storm, and it was the bright morning, there was no need to worry over anyone entering the building.

The streets I had just walked through had been rather empty. Thanks to the cold.

It wasn't snowing, nor storming, but it was frigid. Even the bright sun wasn't able to warm the world today.

Even I found the Sleepy Artist to be chilly. A fire needed to be started, and soon.

Yet I knew, somehow, that none would be lit.

Crane heaved a great sob, and reached up to cover her face. For a few long moments I listened to her crying, and wondered if I should be angry at her or not.

She'd weep so, yet had...

No... maybe it had been obvious.

They had been willing to accept the inevitable.

It was I who hadn't been.

Was that simply my nature, or... was it more?

Was this the difference between predator and prey?

Crane's crying didn't take long to come to a stop, but her sniffing continued. For a long while the world was quiet, only marred by her nose.

"Lughes?" I asked gently, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Crane shook her head. "He'll come back later."

I noted the way she said later.

"Why?" I asked her.

Crane looked up at me, and I found red eyes. Not just from crying either.

The long night must have been quite rough on her.

"You're right. We're cowards, Renn," she said.

"I... I apologize for saying that. I had been..." I started to speak, but she shook her head to stop me.

She took a deep breath and looked up, at the ceiling. To where faint cobwebs hid.

"You're right. We should have done what you did. It would not have mattered. She would have died all the same... but..."

I didn't know what to say, so I stayed silent as Crane did her best to keep herself from weeping again.

"But she was family. I practically raised her... Lughes... Lughes and Shelldon won't be back until you leave, Renn," she then said.

"Leave," I whispered, and felt my heart... or at least, what was left of it, shatter.

Crane nodded. "I'm sorry. But..."

"But now I'm scary," I said, and knew it was the truth.

She flinched, but nodded. "Yes. Although we... although they know you'd not actual hurt us, you had bared your fangs. You had faced us down, and we..."

They knelt. They bowed.

We had confronted each other, and it was they who had stepped aside.

It wasn't just my act of taking Amber to the humans that had caused a rift.

It was the mere fact I had shown them I was willing to do what they didn't want me to.

I had proven to them that I was willing to endanger myself, and thus them, when and where they weren't and wouldn't.

We couldn't live together, because to them I was too dangerous.

Too different. And not just because of our appearances.

"I... I'm sorry, Crane," I said.

Crane lowered her gaze back to me, and I knew by the way of her hardened look that she had just made a decision.

The same decision as Lughes and Shelldon.

"I am as well. Here..." Crane bent down a little, and grabbed something beneath the desk. After a moment she laid a small envelope onto the countertop.

It was bright red, and seemed a little thick. Not just because the paper was thick, but because there were many pages within.

"Inside is... a small map. It will lead you to where Vim is going," she said.

Hesitating, I wondered if I should actually take it.

"There's also a letter from Lughes. And Shelldon. You can read them if you want," she said.

"Not one from you?" I asked her.

Crane's eyebrows knitted as she shook her head. "No. I've nothing to say."

She pushed the envelope farther across the counter, to imply I hurry and take it.

I didn't want it.

"Is... is there nothing I can do? To stay...?" I asked gently.

Crane blinked, and for a small moment I saw a chance of hope. That moment barely lasted, as her eyes narrowed again.

"I'm sorry Renn," she simply said.

My feet were heavy as I stepped forward, closer to the counter.

Upon drawing close enough, Crane arched back a little in the chair.

Suddenly very aware of how weary she was of me, I did my best to not begin weeping myself.

My hand was just as heavy as my feet as I reached up to the counter. With stiff fingers, I picked up the red envelope.

It was heavy. And not just because of how emotionally vested I was with it. It weighed as much as a bag of coins.

Carefully taking the envelope, I wondered what to say now. What to do.

"Goodbye Renn."

The finality in her voice was very clear. Especially in this quiet building.

Stepping backward, away from the counter... I found myself once again a stranger.

Looking around, to the paintings. The ones on the walls, and upon shelves... I realized this was it.

It was over.

The precious home I had so wonderfully happened upon, was now lost to me.

And not because I had betrayed them, or had not been accepted... but simply because of a matter of different opinions. Different morals, perhaps.

"Goodbye," I whispered. Not just to her, but...

Crane didn't nod. She didn't smile, or cry. She simply watched as I stepped away. Towards the door.

With heavy feet, I blinked watery eyes as I left.

Holding the envelope close, I wished I knew how to fix this. How to change what had happened.

Pausing before the door, right before I reached out to the handle... I turned a little.

Crane still sat there. Staring at me stiffly.

"The doctors thought it was the Primdoll family who killed her. They're known for evil acts," I said to her.

Crane's head lowered a little, as she glared at me. Yet she said nothing.

"They've killed others. Like Amber. In the same way," I added.

"Human actions. Done to other humans," Crane said firmly.

Her voice carried somehow, as if sing-song like. It made my back go straight.

She spoke to me as if I were a stranger.

I had not heard that tone from her before. Even when we had first met, when she had been weary of me... it had not been as cold as it were now.

"Be careful, Crane," I said gently. "Goodbye."

Opening the door, the little bell above it dinged loudly. Somehow that sound was really painful to my ears.

I'd never hear that bell again, would I?

Stepping out into the cold, but bright, day... I dared one last glance into the shop before closing the door.

Crane sat there, unmoving.

Closing the door, I listened the ringing bell behind the door for a moment... and then stepped away.

My eyes lingered on the painting in the window. The familiar village now seemed sad. Distant.

"Goodbye," I whispered again.

Then I left.

Chapter 29: Chapter Twenty Eight – Vim – Snack In The Dark

"Why's it so dark?" Lomi asked.

"Because the sun cannot reach here," I said, glancing to the treetops above us.

Very faintly I could see little spots here and there. Sunlight peeking through the thick leaves and branches, only rarely and only for a moment. None of the sun's rays reached us down on the ground, no matter how much of it breached the treetops.

"Wasn't this dark at Lilly's house," she complained. She was walking closer to me than usual, and not just because the path we walked was overgrown with grass and weeds.

"This path is a little special," I said.

Lomi sighed, and looked to our right. She studied the trees around us, and the darkness that loomed over everything with a strong gaze. Had she seen something? Or at least, thought she had?

We were alone. Other than the trees, nothing else was here.

Not even bugs crawled around here.

Only trees, their roots, and the grass and weeds lived in this section.

And even if there had been something out there, lurking in the dark... there was no way she could see it.

Odds were she couldn't even see more than a few feet away from her.

"I don't like it here," she whispered.

"We'll be out of here soon," I reached out to pat her lightly on the head. Her thick fuzzy ears tickled a little. Did she need a bath?

Her ears twitched, as if in annoyance, but she said nothing. In fact she drew even closer.

"The forest at home wasn't like this," Lomi said.

"As I said. This place is a little special," I repeated.

"How so?" she asked.

Although usually I'd not care to reveal such things, I knew it would probably help her remain calm.

"A very powerful monster died here, a long time ago. Its blood soaked into the land, and ever since it's been like this. No matter how bright the day, it's always... dark and quiet," I said.

"A monster?" she asked, suddenly sounding even more worried.

Woops. Maybe I shouldn't have used that word to describe that beast.

"Well, something like it. You probably can't smell it, but there's an odd lingering scent here amongst these trees. It scares off all animals and insects. It's actually a miracle the trees and plants survive, without anything to support their ecosystem," I said.

"Eco...?" Lomi's confused whisper told me I had said too much again.

"Basically this place is seen as poisonous, or dangerous, to animals and bugs. Thus why it's so quiet," I said.

"Is it dangerous for us?" she asked.

"No. As long as we don't stay here long, or eat or drink anything that grows here," I said.

"Oh...?" she looked around, and I knew what she was thinking.

Eat or drink what?

Nothing was here. Though I've had grass gruel before, but I doubted I could let such a young girl endure such a poor meal.

"Other than our dim world around us, what did you think?" I asked her.

"Think of what?" she asked, glancing up at me. I noticed how her eyes squinted as she did.

Seemed this place was much darker to her than it was to me.

"Of the Owls, and their home," I said.

"Oh! Yes... they were nice. Lilly was nice," she said quickly.

Lilly was, I noted. Not Windle.

"They'll visit you occasionally, at your new home. Make sure you're nice to them when they come," I said.

Lomi happily nodded, and for a brief moment her smile casted aside her worries and fear of the darkness around her.

Rounding a larger tree, I felt a small breeze go by. One that was a little too warm for the current winter air.

Yes... this place was odd. I couldn't blame Lomi for feeling out of place here.

Nothing normal belonged here. And even though our kind were far from normal... we were still seen as normal to the true oddities of the world.

Lomi, like all the others I've brought along this path acted the same. On edge. Worried. Scared. It made how fine I felt here all the more strange, and made me realize just how different we were.

I tried not to think too deeply on what that really meant.

For a short while we walked in silence, true silence. Not even the warm breeze made any noise. The leaves didn't rustle. The grass and weeds didn't sway. Even our footsteps were oddly... quiet. And not because I was intentionally trying to walk silently.

"Was Lilly pregnant?" Lomi then asked.

Frowning, I wondered if neither had told her.

"Yes. She was," I said.

Lomi's head tilted, and I wondered what she was wondering. A childish thought or something different?

"They have seven kids already?" she asked.

"They do. One is dead. Six still live, as far as I'm aware," I said.

"Seven children..." she whispered.

"A large number... but not so for those of us who live a long time," I said.

"They were old?" she asked, finding that more interesting than anything else.

"Compared to most, yes. There's only a few amongst the society older than them. The snakes we're going to meet soon are similarly old, as you'll probably realize upon seeing them," I said.

"Oh..." she groaned, as if upset to find out that her new home was going to be full of old people.

"You'll be old yourself one day, Lomi. Might as well get over it now," I said.

She sighed.

Poking her in the ear, I smiled as she made an odd sound and stepped away from me. Only for a moment though, as she scratched her ear. Once the itch was done, she returned to walking by my side.

"Being old isn't that bad," I said to her.

"Are you the oldest?" she asked with an upset tone.

"There's..." I stopped for a moment, and quickly thought of those older than me.

There were a few left. But they...

"Well, I'm one of the oldest, I guess..." I said as I admitted it.

Had that much time passed already?

"Knew it," she said with a smirk.

"Yes, yes."

Stepping over a large root, I waited a moment as Lomi happily clambered over it. I held back from offering to help, since it seemed she enjoyed the challenge.

It took her a few seconds to scamper up, then fall down to the grassy ground.

Lomi brushed her knees off as she hurried to rejoin me, heading deeper into the dark forest.

"How long will we be in the dark?" she asked.

"Few more hours," I said.

"Oh? That's not bad..." she said, seemingly happy to hear it.

"Well, it'll be sunset by the time we escape this dark pool... so technically..." I shrugged.

"Typical... Will we at least be out of the forest today too?" she asked.

"Yes. We'll reach a large river soon; we'll follow that to a plain." I gestured with a finger, as if she could see the river I was pointing at. It was silly of me to do so. Just because I could see the waters gleam already didn't mean she could.

"Plains?" she asked.

I nodded. "Large fields. Endless they seem, sometimes. We can get some fish from the river before we leave it, if you'd like," I said.

"Oh! Yes. I would like that," she nodded quickly.

Lomi grew excited at the prospect of food. I knew by now she'd be getting hungry.

She ate a lot for such a small girl...

A tiny sound drew my eyes from the girl happily walking next to me, and I noticed the far off sound of running water.

We were finally leaving the dark pool.

Rather, in a certain sense, we had already left it. It just would take a few more hours for light to regain its brilliance.

"Wonder how everyone at Ruvindale are doing," Lomi said.

"Probably bored. It's still snowing there," I said. At least, it should be.

"Wish I was bored," Lomi huffed.

"This isn't boring?" I asked her.

Her ears twitched. "It is..." she sighed.

Smiling, I gestured to a nearby ray of light. "We're leaving the darkness, at least," I said.

"Oh!" Lomi skipped a step as she saw it too.

I could tell a part of her wanted to hurry over to it, so I allowed it. It took us off the path a small distance, but it wasn't dangerous.

Walking over to the solitary ray of sunshine, I watched the young fox study it closely.

"How's it... why's it alone?" she asked.

"It's stronger than the rest, maybe?" I asked.

Rather it was simply because of the angle. Off in the distance I could see others, closer to the river.

Lomi swung her hand through the ray of light, and the dust that floated in it spun in the air as she did so.

She giggled, enjoying herself.

"Come on," I ushered her after a few more moments. She happily obliged, hurrying to keep up with me as I returned us to the path.

"Is this darkness why no humans can find the Lilly's home?" Lomi asked.

"Yes and no. The darkness does help. But the real reason is the creature that lives in the forest," I said.

"Hm?" Lomi glanced at me, and I nodded.

She had been asleep when we had traversed into the Owl's Nest. I had carried her through the forest last time, so she hadn't known or noticed. Even if she had been awake, she'd not have really questioned it. After all, this dark pool was only on this side.

"A very dangerous creature lives in this forest. It hunts anything that doesn't belong. Both the humans and our kind. So humans right now avoid it. They're scared of it," I said.

For now they were, at least.

"It hunts us too?" she asked. Although she glanced around, she did so with a small smirk.

She wasn't scared.

Scared of the dark, but not the creature that lived within it.

Though that might just be because of who she was walking next to.

"Yes. It's never bothered me though," I said.

"Did you hurt it?" she asked, smiling at the thought. Probably liking it to the large cat in the mountains near Snowfall.

"Actually no. It's never tried to hurt me, so I've never bothered hurting it," I said honestly.

"Huh... then... what about Lilly and Windle? Or their children?" she asked.

"They know how to circumvent it. As do those who come and go here," I said.

"Would I be alright?" she asked.

"Well... no. But you shouldn't ever have to come here. At least not alone," I said.

"What if I had to?" she asked.

For a small moment, I was unsure of what to say.

Yes. That was a genuine concern. A real question.

"Well... I suppose you'd just have to try your best," I said.

Lomi sighed, as if upset that I wasn't willing to worry for her.

"You're small enough that it might not see you as much more than a snack, so it might leave you be," I said.

"Snack..." she mumbled, as if afraid of such an idea.

"A tiny one," I said.

"I'd be a tasty snack!" she argued.

"A noisy one, at least."

Chapter 30: Chapter Twenty Nine – Renn – The Letters

The small carriage creaked loudly, and not just because it was worn and old.

Through the tied down curtain, I could see the rows of wheat we were passing. They swayed wildly in the strong wind, making as much noise as the cart did.

Two large horses were pulling the cart, but through the windstorm and the noises I couldn't hear them. I also couldn't really make out the conversation the two women who sat at the front of the carriage were having. I could make out their complaints of the storm, and the cold, but I only caught a few words here and there.

Other than I, and the two sitting at the front of the carriage, there were only two others. An older man and a young boy. They sat on the other side of the carriage, more in the middle than not. Probably because the wind was cold and it crept in between the curtains.

None of them had bothered me much. They had passed by me as I was walking out of Ruvindale, and the two women invited me to ride with them. When I had told them I hadn't the coin to pay for it, they said it was fine.

Perks of being a young woman, or at least looking like one.

I'd need to do what I could, when I could, to pay them back for the kindness. Maybe later when, if we stopped, I could help them cook or something.

The carriage tilted for a moment, and it made me feel uneasy. The whole world was flat all around us, yet it seemed we were rolling over many hills.

It was a good thing it wasn't raining and storming, otherwise I'd worry over getting stuck in mud.

The road was packed dirt after all, nothing more.

"It's cold," the young boy whispered to who I assumed was his grandfather. The old man nodded in agreement, but said nothing.

Did they not have a blanket?

Granted I didn't have one either. Yet I wasn't as susceptible to such things as humans were.

Maybe the two women had invited them into the carriage too, out of kindness.

There hadn't been much said between any of them since I had climbed in. Mostly because of the loud storm... but...

Something told me none of them were related in any way.

Shifting, I sighed and reached in-between my legs. To where my little backpack sat.

It wasn't the one Nory had made me. Nor was it the one Amber had purchased for me, after Vim had complained over my attire... It was just a small pack that I had bought with the few coins I had left, before leaving Ruvindale.

Leaving all those coins at the doctors had been a mistake. Yet I was too worried to go back and get them, even if there was a good chance that they would have been willing to return them to me. I didn't want to show my face there again, just in case it really did endanger the Sleepy Artist.

Yet it had seemed that I hadn't handed the nurse all the coins in my panic. There had been a few renk and a single penk left in my little pouch, which had helped a little.

It had been enough to purchase another small bag, a light cloak, and some rations. Dried meat, though I wasn't entirely sure what kind of meat it was.

Opening the small bag, I pushed aside the bundles of wrapped meat wrapped with some kind of large leaf. Finding the envelope crane had given me, I pulled it out carefully, and was a little upset to find that it had already bent a little.

Maybe I should have carried it on my person... but I had worried over the rain, upon seeing the dark clouds and feeling the heavy wind.

I could smell the rain, rather clearly, but I had been able to smell it for some time now. Either it was still on the way, or it was falling not too far from us.

Glancing up at the top of the carriage, and the dark cloth that the canopy was made out of... I hoped it'd last against a heavy storm. It looked thick enough, but until it happened...

As my eyes left the canopy, and returned to the envelope, I realized I was being watched.

The young boy's eyes bored into me, and for a brief moment I worried that my hat had shifted with my movement. But a quick shift of my ears told me it hadn't. It was still firmly on my head.

My cloak, although thin, did indeed have a hood... but I had lowered it upon boarding the carriage. I wanted them to see my face, as to not arouse suspicion.

And my tail was hidden away under my loose pants. Wrapped lightly around my left leg.

I smiled lightly at him, and he looked away. Maybe he was just bored.

Returning my attention to the envelope, I carefully went to opening it.

Luckily Crane hadn't sealed it in any way. The flap opened easily enough, and I quickly pulled out what looked to be the thickest of the papers.

The paper was thick because it had been folded several times. Unfolding it, I found a rather large piece of paper. It was obviously the map that Crane had mentioned, and it didn't take long to glance over it.

There were only a few locations on it, after all... and it was rather crude.

Honestly I had expected a rather fancy map... yet I knew the reason for its base appearance.

Neither Crane nor Lughes really wanted to help me anymore... nor did they care for me. Thus its plainness.

Ruvindale was in the center. It was represented with a single circle, and a large letter R inside it. From there were two lines, one heading north-east and another heading south.

The south was a single solid line, to a large... cross. Church of Safety was written next to it, and beneath it said that Vim frequented that location and to ask for the Silver Saint.

Why was a church of all things a place I could go to find safety...? And once again a Saint was being mentioned. Were they more common than I had been originally led to believe?

The path northwest had a few more stops. The first was some kind of human village. "Plobo," I read the name aloud. After that there were what was probably supposed to be trees. "The Owl's Nest in the dark forest," I read that aloud too, and wondered if that was what I thought it would be.

Would I find owls there? Actual owls, or of our kind?

After that were two more locations. Both were real close to one another, drawn in such a way to imply they were probably not far from one another. A large city called Bordu, and next to it a smaller place called Twin Hills. Next to Twin Hills was a small note, telling me that was where Vim was escorting Lomi and if I hurried I'd be able to find them there.

There was nothing else on the map, even though there was plenty of room on it for more. Why use such a large piece of paper, for so little?

Unless whoever had done it had planned on putting more... at least, before their fully realized who it was they were making it for.

Gulping a dry mouth, I glanced away from the map. To look out the little flaps of the canvas next to me. The world was getting darker. The wind was picking up, and the smell of rain was becoming stronger.

The storm would be here any moment.

Folding the little map up, I quickly put it back into the envelope. Pulling the next piece of paper out, I went to quickly reading it. Before there was no light left to do so.

I quickly realized Lughes's handwriting. His letters were large, bold, and a little wavy. As if his hand trembled while writing them.

I knew though that it wasn't wavy because of emotion. I had seen his writing before our... falling apart, and it had looked the same.

"Forgive me for being a coward," I whispered, and immediately regretted reading it now.

Blinking away tears, I glanced to the two other passengers in the carriage. Luckily, it seemed the two were now asleep. The older man's head was hanging low, slack, and the young boy had lain down on his lap, his right arm dangling from the seat since it was too small for him to lay on completely.

Taking a deep breath to control myself, I quickly debated reading the rest.

They would not appreciate me breaking down, sobbing here. Humans found such things odd, and worrisome.

Yet...

I had to know.

Forcing my eyes back to the small letter, I felt a little numb as I went to reading it.

Each word I read made Lughes's voice echo inside my head. Oddly, even though the letter was a sad one... I somehow heard his happy tone as he spoke.

He apologized for being a coward.

He apologized for hiding from me.

Yet at the same time he chastised me.

At the same time, it almost seemed as if...

"He blamed Amber," I whispered, finishing his letter.

Him being angry at himself, and me, was understandable. But the fact that he blamed Amber for her death, and endangering them and the Society...

It was insulting.

Quickly folding the letter up, I slid it back into the envelope and pulled out two more papers. Probably Crane's letter.

I was glad I had not read it while still in Ruvindale. I'd have grown angry enough to find the old goat and give him a piece of my mind.

How was it Amber's fault? She's the one who had suffered... she was the one who had died!

"Stop," I whispered at myself, and right as I unfolded the second letter, the world became bright.

The whole carriage lit up, and then after a moment got dark again. Then the loud boom of thunder woke up the other passengers.

Both the child and the old man startled, but the boy had been the worse off. He had rolled off the old man's lap, and off the seat, to the floor of the carriage.

He groaned, and I wondered if the main reason he had fallen was because the old man had startled and had started to stand up.

"You alright?" the old man though quickly regained his composure, and went to checking on the young boy.

The boy didn't cry, but he did groan as he rubbed his head.

For a small moment there was noise. Not just from the wind and the oncoming rain... the two passengers went to talking, just as the two women who sat at the front of the carriage went to talking as well. I heard their sighs and complaints as they most likely saw the approaching rain.

Going back to my letter, to hurry and read it before the rain arrived, I was glad for the urgency.

It kept my heart from breaking further.

Crane's letter hadn't been as... sad, as Lughes. In fact, it wasn't even for me. Which honestly shouldn't surprise me, since she had directly told me she hadn't written one.

She hadn't written me a letter.

This was for Vim.

She told Vim what happened, in rather deep and accurate detail.

"Bared her fangs, yet didn't bite," I read, and wondered if that was a compliment or not.

Crane told Vim of Amber, and...

"Shelldon dug deeper," I read, and somehow wasn't too surprised to know what that meant.

He had dug deeper, to hide better. From everyone. From the whole world.

From me.

Her letter ended with a small apology. To Vim.

"Tell her I'm sorry," was all Crane said.

Re-reading the end of the letter, I wondered why she hadn't addressed it to me...

Wait...

There was another sheet. I had forgotten about it, as I had read the other.

Expecting this one to be addressed to me, I was surprised to find it was neither Crane's writing... nor for me.

The paper was a different color than the others. It was... thinner too... and...

I didn't recognize the writing, but as I read it... the author became clear.

Small little dots began to appear on the letter, and I startled. Was the rain here already? And was the carriage leaking that badly?

But no. The rain still hadn't arrived.

Wiping my tears, I sighed at myself.

Folding Amber's letter carefully, I held it for a moment and wondered when she had written it.

Surely a long time ago, based off the faded ink... but how long? A few years maybe?

"I wonder if he'll cry when he reads it," I asked myself, as I went to putting the letters back into the envelope, and then to hide it all away in my bag. To keep it safe from the rain that had just begun.

The storm arrived without a care, and I was thankful for it.

With heavy rain, and thunder and lightning... maybe none of the other passengers would notice my tears.