

The Non-Human Society

Chapter 36: Chapter Thirty Five – Renn – A Cat's Meow

"This is as far as I'll go Renn," Lilly said.

I shifted on a heel, to look at her. She was serious.

"Why? Surely saying hello before returning home isn't..." I stopped talking, as I realized the look on her face.

"For the same reason we rounded Bordu instead of going through it," she said.

"Hm... are there that many humans there?" I asked. There were several buildings; most were in the center of the wheat fields. One had a red roof, and was the largest. Maybe many humans lived there?

"No... not usually," she said gently.

"I see."

Lilly smiled at me, and then extended her hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you Renn. May we meet again someday," she said.

Taking her hand I nodded. "Yes. Thank you. I learned... a lot," I said.

She smirked as our hands left the clasp. "You sure asked a lot! Goodbye Renn. Make sure you tell Vim I was the one who guided you," she said.

"I will! Thank you, really," I said, and meant it. Truly, truly meant it.

Lilly turned, and headed back towards the section of forest we had just left.

It wasn't her forest but it was dense all the same. Perfect for her to traverse and head home, to her nest and husband, without needing to worry about running into any random humans.

"Thank you!" I said again, louder. She waved at me but didn't turn around.

"Really, thank you," I said once more, and wished I knew how to properly convey to someone how precious their efforts were to me.

She had not only guided me to the town, but had spent the last two days teaching me well of the Society... stuff that Lughes and Crane really had not been forthcoming about. Lilly had been not just open but wanted me to learn as much as I could.

Looking back before me, at the buildings where the Fox family and Snake family lived, I wondered if there was something deeper to Lilly's aversion of meeting them.

Maybe she had used the humans here as an excuse. She had not shown any avarice towards Vim, but that didn't mean she was on friendly terms with anyone else here...

Deciding not to worry about it, I hurried towards the path that led to the buildings. It looked to be dirt and gravel, but it was large. Large enough for carts.

There weren't any carts, or people, upon it now... but that was undoubtedly because of how early in the morning it was. The sun had only just risen.

It didn't take long for me to reach the path, and I was a little surprised to find how tall some of the wheat was. Most of the field was as tall as I was, and some was even taller.

Wasn't it winter? There wasn't any snow falling right now, but it was only a few days ago that there had been...

As I headed for the buildings, I realized I was nearly jogging. Slowing my pace, if anything to make sure no one found me odd... just in case someone was watching, or if a human appeared somewhere along the road.

"Careful Renn," I warned myself.

Walking carefully, I tried to smell and listen for anything odd.

I couldn't smell anything strange. The wheat smelled, of course, and it was the loudest thing here. There was a light wind that came and went, causing the stalks to brush against each other and sway.

Off in the distance I could hear other sounds. A stream was nearby. Something akin to cows could be heard in the distance too... and...

A creature darted out from the wheat to my right, and I watched as a small cat ran across the path and into the other field.

"Cats," I said, recognizing the sound of meowing and meowing. And by the sounds of it, there were many.

As I walked, more and more cats appeared. Some were just running across the path, others were meowing loudly from within the wheat somewhere. The meowing was increasingly becoming noisy, and...

"They're upset," I said, realizing the distressed meows that started to become the standard.

There was an obvious reason why, of course.

One of the cats emerged from the wheat and hissed at me as I walked past it.

Smiling at the upset creatures, I wondered why the only animal that ever really despised me was the very one I was supposed to be.

Did others have the same issue? Did owls hate Lilly and Windle? Did foxes hate Lomi?

Maybe that meant the best way to find out what Vim was... was to simply bring every animal in front of him and wait to see which one freaked out the most?

It was an interesting thought. Especially since I had learned from Lilly that no one knew what Vim was. It hadn't just been something Amber and the rest had said out of a lack of confidence in me as a person. They had genuinely, and as far as Lilly was concerned, not known what Vim was. No one in the Society knew.

One of the cats ran across the path, and I realized most of the noises had died down. It seemed most the cats had run away, no longer hissing at me or voicing their complaints.

Maybe I stunk to them or something...

Looking down the road, I realized I was close. I could see the buildings nearby. There was smoke coming from one of the chimneys; it was thick enough to not be dispersed by the light wind.

I felt a growing anxiousness bubble within me. This was it. Within moments I'd be standing before Vim... or at least, other members of the Society.

I'd been chasing after him for almost a week now, and...

And I wasn't ready. I still hadn't really figured out what I was going to say, let alone what to say first.

My tail shifted beneath my pants, and I felt a twinge of pain as some of the hairs on my tail got tugged and snagged. The feeling made me want to pull my pants down and let my tail free, but I knew better than to do that. Especially since Lilly had told me that humans farmed this wheat, not our own kind.

While walking, I did my best to not get too bothered by my anxious tail as it twitched and trembled. My ears were likewise being active, but the hat had more than enough room to not feel as discomforting.

Wiggling my tail to a better spot, to wrap around my thigh, I breathed a small sigh of relief as no more hairs got tugged and pulled.

Yet still I couldn't help but feel unsettled.

A cat meowed behind me, and at first I was going to ignore it... but the meow was...

Glancing behind me, my heart thumped at the sudden appearance of a person. Standing right behind me, they were almost close enough to reach out and touch.

Stepping a few steps away, I quickly calmed down after I realized who it were.

Vim.

Going still, I gulped.

I definitely wasn't calm anymore.

He was carrying a little white cat with black spots, which laid on his hand and forearm and looked relaxed as can be. Its legs were dangling, and it was staring at me with a calm set of eyes. It was also purring.

"Vim," I said his name, and realized he wasn't happy to see me.

Vim said nothing, and I watched as he gently stroked the cat's neck with his thumb.

Opening my mouth to say something, I hesitated.

Don't hesitate! Don't hide it! Lay it all out, Renn!

"The only reason I haven't killed you yet is because I smell Lilly upon you. So you better say the right things, and you better say them quickly."

A cold sweat erupted all over my body, and I gulped a severely dry mouth.

Vim's voice had been firm, yet not cold. He hadn't sounded angry... and he wasn't snarling or glaring at me... but there was no mistaking that look in his eyes.

I had never seen such a look on his face, but it was clear what it meant.

He now saw me as a threat. Not just to him, but to the Society.

"I... I have letters for you," I said, and hated how desperate my voice sounded.

"Written in blood are they?" he asked.

Blood.

He smelled blood on me.

The reality of how desperate this moment was came falling upon me as I realized what had happened. He had smelled blood... and came to find it was me, a woman who should right now be several leagues away living with his friends.

Maybe that was why the cats were acting as they did. That was why Windle had been so scared of me.

I still smelled of blood and death, because of my carrying of Amber.

"Amber died," I said.

Vim's eyes narrowed, and the man's thumb went still. The cat's ear twitched, as if in complaint.

"She... she was..." I took a deep breath, and found myself light-headed. As if I hadn't breathed for a long time. I took a few moments to calm my ever stronger heartbeat, and nodded at him. "She was killed by a human noble."

"And?" A single solid word was spoken and it made me shiver.

"No one else... Lughes, Crane and Shelldon are fine. I... I was told to leave, because I had grown angry. Angry at them. The humans..." I felt tears well up and blinked away some of the liquid.

Vim's eyes, which were hard... seemed to soften a little as he finally looked away from me. He looked down, at the ground.

Although hard, I craned my neck to see what he was looking at. I was surprised to find that he was staring at my feet. Or rather my legs.

They were trembling.

For a few moments I silently allowed my tears to fall. I didn't even try to stop my knees from trembling; I knew there was no point.

Vim's thumb returned to petting the cat, and then he sighed. "What did you do?" he then asked.

"I... I came here looking for you. I was told to leave by Crane, and I met Lilly and," I stammered a little, but he shook his head to stop me.

"What did you do to be told to leave?" he specified.

"Lughes and Crane... they didn't want to help Amber. Wouldn't let me take her to a doctor. I did it anyway," I said.

My stomach tightened into knots as Vim's eyes narrowed a little. I couldn't see much anger in his expression, but I knew better than to think there was none in it.

"So you took her to a human doctor. And she died anyway?" he asked.

"Yes."

"So you risked our own kind for no reason then," he stated.

Opening my mouth to protest... I knew better than to argue. "Yes."

Waiting for the protector of the Society to... protect the Society, from me... I felt my eyes go blurrier with every passing second.

Then a minute passed.

Then the cat meowed.

Then Vim nodded. "Okay," he said.

Taking a deep breath, I blinked tears out as I watched him bend down to put the cat down. It hopped off his palm, and after a small stretch it bounded off into the nearby wheat field.

Once the cat was gone, Vim stepped towards me.

My fists clenched, and I realized that he was going to kill me.

My instinct told me to run. To fight back.

Yet I wouldn't.

After all, what was the point? The Society was...

Closing my eyes, I listened intently to Vim's approach. His footsteps were solid, but not heavy. I heard the rocks and dirt crunch under his feet, but also could tell he was walking calmly. Naturally. Without effort.

Would it be quick?

Then I heard his footstep near me...

Then I heard another next to me.

Then I felt him pass me by.

Opening my eyes, I shivered at the lack of Vim in front of me.

Turning, I found him stepping away. Towards the buildings.

"W...wait!" I felt ridiculous as I shouted at him.

He glanced back at me, and looked a little annoyed as he did. As if he was suddenly in a hurry to go do something else.

"Wait..." I whispered, and wasn't sure what to say. What to ask.

"You said you had letters for me? I'd rather read them while seated, if it's all the same to you," he said.

I blinked, and although didn't find a blurry world... I did find myself wobbly. As if dizzy.

"I... You're not going to kill me?" I asked him. My voice cracked as I spoke.

Vim frowned and then shook his head. "Not right now."

"Am... Am I still able to be a part of the Society?" I asked.

"Did you want to leave it?" he asked back.

Releasing a sigh, it sounded more like a sob. I reached up to squeeze the tears out of my eyes. I found a far wetter face than I had expected. Wiping my face on my sleeve, I made sure to not accidentally knock off my hat.

"You better not be crying when we go inside. The snakes wake early, and it's too early for me to deal with their nagging," he said.

I nodded, even if I wasn't entirely sure if I'd be able to accomplish it.

"Come on. You can tell me more inside," he said.

"Mhm," I barely got my agreement out as I went to follow him.

I barely got my tears under control before we reached the house.

Chapter 37: Chapter Thirty Six – Vim – Letters. Scents. Heartbeats.

"Lord Vim!" Montclair entered the room quickly with a huff.

Looking up from Amber's letter, I nodded to the panting squirrel. If not for having known him for over a hundred years, I'd have worried something was actually wrong.

"Your guest is taking a bath, sir," Montclair said.

"Cats do like to keep themselves clean," Trixalla said, entering the room from behind him.

Montclair quickly stepped aside for her, and bowed caringly at her as she entered.

"She smelled of blood," I said. Amber's blood.

The thought of it made me angry again, so I did my best to toss the thought aside.

"I shall prepare her room now, Madam," Montclair said eagerly, bowing once more before leaving.

"Thank you Montclair," Trixalla said as he left.

She watched him go for a moment, and once he was down the hall she went to closing the door. Giving us a little more privacy.

"She's a large predator, Vim. One of the great ones," she said as she went to sit.

"A large cat of some kind, yes," I said. The fact she was not just some normal cat, but a true one, was evident by the way the cats around the farm treated her. They were terrified of her.

Going back to finishing Amber's letter, I patiently waited for Trixalla's true purpose in appearing.

I made it half way down the last page before she cleared her throat. Looking away from the letter, to her, I found her giving me a gentle smile.

"What is it?" I asked her. She was looking at me as if I was sitting in her study and acting as if I owned the place.

Granted I was in her chair... and she now sat in what should have been the guest's spot...

"Mork told me what your conversation had been about," she said.

Of course Mork had heard our conversation. Maybe I shouldn't have brought Renn back here before hearing the whole story.

Trying to go back to Amber's letter, I realized I wasn't going to be able to. Not because I couldn't focus enough to read while speaking, but because it wasn't courteous to the one who had wrote it.

It was her last words to me... they were precious, and deserved my entire attention.

Putting the letter down on the small table in front of my chair, I sat back and nodded to let her know it was fine to continue.

"It is a miracle she is still alive Vim," Trixalla said.

"Isn't it? I've become very adept at restraining myself," I said.

Her eyes narrowed at me. "She's a real predator. All those like her die quickly. For their families. For their young. For those they cherish or the land they grew up on," Trixalla said. She said the last bit a little more seriously than the others.

"Hm."

Trixalla sighed, obviously upset that I wasn't taking this conversation as seriously as she wanted me to.

"The fact she didn't pursue those human nobles is a testimony to her personality. She's overcome the limits of her bloodline," Trixallsa said.

"Or her bloodline is simply that thinned out," I countered.

"Does that matter anymore Vim?" she asked.

"To some," I admitted.

"All the same. What do you plan to do?" Trixalla asked.

"I promised to negotiate for you. I can't do anything until after that," I said. Yesterday an attendant from the noble of Bordu arrived, to confirm that the Lord would visit next week.

"What do you plan to do about her?" she asked with a glare.

"Ah. Then as of now, nothing. You know me well enough to know that if I was going to punish her I'd have done it already," I said.

"I do know you well enough, but it's because I know you that I know you'd withhold your judgment until you knew the full picture. Mork's hearing is second to none, but not even he can hear the written word," Trixalla said as her eyes left me and went to the letters on the small table before me.

"Not ones already written at least," I said, smiling.

Trixalla didn't smile, and instead waited for my real answer.

She was worried the letters would seal the cats doom.

I couldn't blame her for it... but at the same time...

"I'll return to Ruvindale. To confirm that our members are safe," I said after a moment.

"And if they aren't?" she asked.

"Then more blood than Amber's is on her hands, and she must pay for it. Those drops of blood are precious beyond reason," I said.

Trixalla held my gaze for a moment, and I wondered if she'd fight me on this.

"What if I demand she stays here? She'll be safe here. Welcomed. You saw how happy Lomi got upon seeing her," Trixalla said lowly.

"You'd invite a stranger into your family, one who arrived smelling of blood?" I asked her.

"I would."

Looking away from the elderly snake, I wished she hadn't aged so drastically since her youth. She looked old enough now that I felt as if she was older than I. As if she really was my elder.

The fact she wasn't made these moments even more difficult than they should be for me. Sometimes when she spoke I still heard the young girl, doing her best to protect her parents.

"I'll not budge on this Vim. If she really wasn't the cause of Amber's death, nor any others, I'll not let you cast her from our Society. Even if I must endure your anger," she said.

"If everything is fine, so shall she be," I said, agreeing.

"Yet you are upset."

How could I not be?

Amber was dead, and not because she had simply grown old.

I had saved her mother. She had been a saint, and not just in name. One of only a few that throughout all these years had been willing to betray their holy church. One of only a handful that had chosen us over the religion they believed in.

Such allies were more valuable than...

Than what?

Amber hadn't been a saint herself. She could have become one though. Her bloodline allowed it. My plan was to take not her, but her children to the Cathedral. Once there had been enough generations born and lived within our Society. Maybe, if lucky, once a member of that bloodline had blended with one of us.

Yet my schemes never really bore fruit did they? Though one could argue that was because I didn't actually enforce them. I didn't nurture them.

I hoped certain things would happen, but never forced them to. I didn't force Amber to do anything. I didn't force her mother to do anything. I wouldn't have forced her children. I had simply hoped that was what would happen, someday down the line.

"Leave her here. When you return," Trixalla then said.

"No."

If she was the cause or had enabled disaster to poison our Society...

"Vim..." she shook her head, closing her eyes in grief.

"These letters confirm her words. She spoke the truth. Lughes, Crane and Shelldon are fine. Disturbed. Distressed... but fine. They don't blame her for Amber's death, but they do blame Renn for endangering them. Her actions could have possibly put the Sleepy Artist at risk, thus their banishment of her," I explained.

Trixalla breathed a sigh of relief, nodding in thanks for my telling her of the truth.

"As such I doubt I'll find anything different upon arriving there. So you do not need to panic," I said.

"What will you do with her then? If you won't let me keep her here," she asked.

"It's not your choice," I said to her.

Trixalla blinked, and then slowly smiled. "Ah. Yes. You'll let her choose, won't you," she said.

"Freedom," I said plainly.

She nodded, glad to hear it.

"Though she may be the first to be banished from the Sleepy Artist, isn't she?" Trixalla asked gently.

"That I know of." Many had been told to never return, but none had been officially banished. Lughes's letter had three signatures, his, Crane's, and Shelldon's. All confirming it.

"Am I allowed to invite her then?" Trixalla said.

"Obviously," I said.

She nodded, glad to hear it. Though I worried her... gusto will be the cause of Renn choosing not to. Sometimes such enthusiasm had negative effects.

Trixalla looked at the letters again, and I wondered if she'd ask to read them. I'd not allow it, of course, but it would be interesting to know her thoughts about them all the same.

"She'd be safe here, Vim. She'd not have to bare her fangs, thanks to our agreements with the Lords of Bordu. She can fit in with Porka and her family easily, too," Trixalla said.

"You need not sell me the idea, Trixalla," I said.

She hesitated, and then smiled. "I was trying, wasn't I?"

"What does your husband think?" I asked.

"He worries you'll have to take the life of one of our family once again," she said.

Of course he was.

We sat in silence for a moment, and the silence continued as we heard the sound of hurried footsteps.

Trixalla smiled at me as Montclair hurriedly knocked on the door. The knocks sounded odd, as if a child was the one doing them.

"Come on in Montclair," Trixalla allowed him in.

The squirrel happily entered, smiling as he lowered his head in a quick nod. "Lord Vim's guest is about done with her bath. I've come to ask if you'd like one as well, sir," he said.

"Me?" I asked.

He nodded, hopeful.

"Do I stink?" I asked Trixalla, wondering if I did.

"Oh! No sir! You've never smelled of anything, ever!" Montclair hurriedly spoke, his eyes going small as if in worry.

Glancing at Trixalla, she smiled and nodded. "It's true. Mork's made it clear that you neither have a scent, nor make much noise. Only your heartbeat is noticeable sometimes," she said.

I frowned, and wondered what my heartbeat sounded like. Sure I felt it, and heard it on occasion, but nothing like Mork probably did.

"I'm fine Montclair, thank you," I said, deciding to let it be.

"Hm..." he seemed troubled, and I wondered if there was some other reason behind his request. Maybe he had already prepared the bath for me, expecting me to say yes.

"Which room did you give her Montclair?" Trixalla asked.

"The south corner," he said.

"Good. Ask if she's hungry, and then let her sleep. She's undoubtedly exhausted," Trixalla said.

"Of course," he nodded. I could tell by the way he didn't rush out right away that he had most likely already begun preparing a meal for Renn.

"How come I never get a nice room?" I asked.

Montclair's pudgy cheeks became more normal, shrinking in as his eyes went a little wide.

"Because a bed is wasted upon you," Trixalla said.

"That's true," I admitted.

Montclair relaxed a little, but didn't say anything.

"Don't let him tease you Montclair, he likes his room," Trixalla said.

"I do," I admitted again.

The squirrel visibly relaxed, becoming more comfortable.

"I do have a favor to ask of you, however," I said, before the squirrel could escape.

He stood up straighter, which somehow made him seem even shorter. "Yes sir?"

"The cat, Renn. I need you to let me know if she tries to leave," I said.

"Leave sir?"

"He means if she tries to run away in the middle of the night," Trixalla said.

"Ah! I see..." Montclair went into thought as he pondered my request.

"Just keep an eye on her for me, please. An extra set would be helpful," I said.

"Of course sir. I'll do so! I will!" he nodded quickly, and hurried out of the room... probably to do just that.

"Hopefully she isn't too observant or it'll unsettle her," Trixalla said.

"She probably is. But that's the cost of her actions," I said.

"Would you stop her? If she did try to leave?" she asked.

"Would you?"

She nodded.

"Then hopefully if she does, it's you that notices and not me," I said simply.

Trixalla's expression grew worried... and then degraded into sorrow. "You're our protector Vim, but sometimes I wish you weren't," she said.

"I know," I said, and reached over to grab the letters. To return to my task. I wanted to finish them before Renn appeared before me again. Although she had been exhausted, since she hadn't slept once this last week... there was a chance after her bath, and some food, she'd come and find me.

I needed to read the rest of the letters before she stood before me again.

Before I found myself hating the woman who was so desperate for forgiveness.

With letters in hand, I sat back and went to sorting them. Somehow a few of the pages had gotten mixed up.

Trixalla understood my meaning, and stood from her chair. Without a word she left the room, but left the door open... as if she wanted to imply I too needed to leave the room.

Or maybe, she had left it open out of kindness to the woman who might soon be searching for me.

Choosing to start Amber's letter from the beginning again, I read her first sentence.

"Mother loved you until she died," Amber started.

"I know," I whispered.

I know.

Chapter 38: Chapter Thirty Seven – Renn – Kindness. Worthlessness.

Watching Lomi from above, I wondered if she really hadn't known any of these people before coming here.

She was playing with two other children. A boy and a girl... The boy's name was Horn, but I wasn't sure which sister the other was. Yelma or Pelka.

All three were laughing and playing tag, chasing each other around as if they had been family their whole lives.

How had she found a home so swiftly? They had only been here a few days before I had arrived. Less than a week. Such a short time, especially for our kind, yet here she was already a member of their family...

I was jealous. Envious.

Yet...

It wasn't just her quick ability to be accepted, and the family's willingness to accept her so easily... but something deeper.

Why hadn't...

Why hadn't my family been like this?

"Miss Renn."

My ears perked up, and I turned to look at who had addressed me.

Standing near the gate next to the house, a short and somewhat pudgy man bowed his head lightly. Greeting me as if I was some great lord or noble.

He looked ridiculous... and not because of his stature or appearance.

Why did he bow?

"Madam Trixalla would like to speak with you," he said calmly.

I blinked and realized that was probably the only real reason he'd come search me out.

"I'll be right down," I said, and turned to head back into the house. To head downstairs.

Although there were no humans around currently, I wasn't foolish enough to just start jumping off balconies. Especially not here. More so because of all the little animals everywhere.

Last thing I needed was to land on a cat. Lomi and the rest wouldn't like me anymore if I did that.

Hurrying downstairs, I found Montclair waiting for me at the gate. He smiled and nodded, gesturing for me to follow him.

"Thank you Montclair," I said to him, as he went to opening the gate for me.

He also closed it behind us, and I felt a little silly.

He acted like a servant.

Yet he wasn't... was he? He was like us. Lomi had told me he was a squirrel, but why would that place him below us?

"This way," he said, and hurried towards the red-roofed building across the large gravel road.

I followed him dutifully, and wondered why I was being summoned.

Hopefully they weren't going to banish me too...

The house that the snakes, and Montclair, lived in was large. The red roof was bright amongst the golden sea of wheat... and although the building had only one floor, it was nearly four times as large as Lomi's new home.

Vim and I were staying here as well, even though Lomi had invited me to stay with her in her new room. Although I felt bad about turning her down, Vim had made it very clear I was to not stay with them.

Hopefully it was simply because he wanted to give Lomi the chance to find her own place in the family, and not because he no longer trusted me with her.

Hopefully.

The sad thought hurt as I followed Montclair into the house, and down a hallway.

There was a smell of food that permeated the house. It smelled good, and made me a little hungry, but there was another scent that seemed soaked into the wood and stone.

A scent of something burnt. As if not too long ago there had been a fire.

Yet none of the house looked destroyed, or burnt... and I wasn't able to really smell it entirely... it was just a scent I could smell every so often. It smelled stronger, and more dangerous, than the scent a simple fireplace gave.

Maybe there was some kind of fire-pit inside the house somewhere?

"Madam Trixalla, I've brought her," Montclair knocked on a large white door, which looked newly painted not too long ago.

"Come in," A kind voice greeted us, and Montclair opened the door.

He stood back, letting me enter first.

The room was not too small, and looked to be something of a study. There were shelves, and books, and a desk...

Surprisingly Montclair closed the door behind me, and had not entered with me.

An old woman sat behind the small desk. One that looked a little cramped, thanks to all the papers and books upon it.

The sight reminded me of Windle's desk. It too had been cluttered.

"Please sit Renn. Hopefully you weren't busy, I told Montclair to wait in his summons until you were free but knowing him he didn't," Trixalla gestured to a large cushioned chair across from her desk as she greeted me.

There was another chair before her desk, but it wasn't the one she gestured at... plus it didn't have a cushion. It looked uncomfortable compared to the other.

"I wasn't busy," I said.

I had spent most the morning talking to Porka, but she and her husband had to do something with Vim... so I had just been watching Lomi and the kids play.

Right before sitting in the chair, I realized it was probably okay to not have to hide my ears and tail. Taking my hat off, I also pulled aside my pants enough to let my tail out. I stretched it, and wished I could find a pair of pants that had a little hole or slip for it as I did.

I couldn't wear such a thing of course, even though it was possible to make it... because any human who saw it would simply wonder what it was. And maybe, at the wrong moment or angle, they'd see the tail beneath my pants while staring at the odd hole.

"I wanted to talk to you before Vim returned," Trixalla said as I sat and got comfortable.

"Oh...?" that didn't sound too good.

"Don't worry. I simply wanted to invite you to live here," she said.

For a small moment I hadn't believed what I heard.

Then I realized she was serious.

"Really?" I asked softly.

She nodded. "Really. You can live here, with us, we can even eventually build you your own home too," Trixalla said.

For a small moment, my mind was full of memories.

Ones not made yet. Ones not real.

Memories of watching wheat fields come and go over the decades. Memories of getting to watch Lomi grow up. Of getting to watch all the children here grow up. Of getting to make a home for myself, a real one... and...

They were lovely beyond imagine.

But just as quickly as the memories were created so too did they disappear.

"Thank you," I said softly.

Trixalla's expression went from a gentle smile, to a sad one.

"Yet you're going to say no, aren't you?" She asked, just as softly.

Although hard to do so, I shook my head. "No... not yet. I... can I have time? To decide?" I asked.

"Of course you can. Vim will be negotiating for us here in a few days. After that you two are going to go back to Ruvindale. You'll be able to come back if you wish, so you have plenty of time to decide," she said.

Wait... "Going back?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Me too?" I asked further.

She nodded again.

"I was banished," I whispered.

"From the Sleepy Artist. Not from Ruvindale," she said.

My eyes blurred, and I wondered if I'd be able go back to that town. Granted I hadn't been there long, and hadn't really... known it well... but...

"Vim will require you to. It's part of the process," she said.

"I see," I said.

I hadn't known. But maybe that was for the best.

"Beyond that I just wanted you to know that it will be alright for you to stay here. For as long as you wished," she said.

"Thank you. Really," I said softly.

She nodded, and I could tell she was not just firm in her decision but... actually meant it.

Trixalla wanted me to stay as if we were friends. Yet I had only spoken to her a few short times so far.

"I... I'm not sure what to say," I said.

"Take your time. My husband heard most of your conversation with Vim. We know that you're... unsure of yourself. But that is simply because of your age," she said.

"My age..." I whispered, and wondered just how old she was. After all, I wasn't that young either. Yet she acted... and looked, far older than I.

"You're not as young as Lomi, and may even be older than Porka... but not much more than that, I'm sure. To me you're still just a child," she said gently.

"I see."

"What did Lilly think of you?" she asked.

"She wanted me to go to the Cathedral," I said. Wherever that was.

"Of course she did," Trixalla said with a sigh.

Judging by the tone of that sigh, and the rolling of her eyes... Trixalla had not agreed at all with Lilly's idea.

"What is it? This Cathedral?" I asked.

"It's the birthplace of our Society," she said.

I perked up at that, and wondered if that meant that was where most of us were.

"It's also the strongest church in the world," she added.

"Wait... church?" I asked. Did that mean we had a religion?

"The very church that hunts our kind," she nodded.

Frowning, I was about to ask more but the door opened.

I stood as the old man entered. His white eyes stared at the floor, but his smile greeted his wife.

"Sit, young cat. I need no help in my own nest," Mork said, albeit gently.

"Oh... um..." I slowly sat back down, and watched as he indeed closed the door and went to walking about the room as if he could see.

"Don't be mean to her," Trixalla said plainly.

"I wasn't," he said with a huff as he sat in the chair across from me. The one that wasn't as comfortable looking.

A part of me worried about not letting him take the more comfortable chair, especially since he looked so elderly that he could collapse at any moment, but I knew better than to voice my worries after being told not to.

He had already chastised me about being too conscious of him. It'd be rude to keep doing so.

"Why are you bothering us?" Trixalla asked her husband.

Although her tone sounded harsh... her smile told me that she didn't mean it.

"Came to make sure you didn't tell her anything important. Vim made it very clear where she stands," he said.

My heart fell, and I did my best to not let my eyes get too watery.

"Don't panic, Renn. Vim only said that he has to confirm first, before anything else," Trixalla said, most likely noticing my emotions. They were probably well written on my face, and especially so on my ears.

"Hm. Yes. You need not let your heart break so quickly. It's simple rules, nothing more," Mork said.

"I see," I said, and hated how sad my voice sounded. Why did my voice sound so... weak and sad lately? How long was this going to last?

"She sees, she says," Mork said with a chuckle.

Worried I insulted him; it was Trixalla who waved my concerns down. "He's teasing you."

"That being said, I must ask... Why did you risk coming to Vim? Why not simply give those letters to Lilly and Windle?" Mork asked.

"Give them the letters?" I asked, wondering what he meant.

"He's wondering why you risked your life like that," Trixalla said.

"Oh... Well..." I shifted in my seat, feeling out of place.

"Or did you not realize how likely it was he could have killed you?" Mork asked.

"I... I knew it was dangerous. Lilly told me he might slay me on sight," I said. In fact that was the reason I most suspected Lilly had left for.

She hadn't wanted to see me die.

"Yet you still came yourself," Mork said.

I nodded.

"Good. At least you have a spine," Mork said.

Did I? I spent most of last night crying in bed... Though I wasn't sure how many tears were from relief, and how many were from shame.

"Speaking of Vim, where did he go?" Mork asked.

"He took Pelka out to hunt," Trixalla said.

Blinking at that, I wondered why she had said that so oddly. She spoke as if she was perplexed.

"Hunt? Really... I'm surprised he agreed to it," Mork said.

"What's wrong with hunting?" I asked.

The two were silent for a moment, and then the blind man smiled and chuckled. "It's not the hunting, but the one who's teaching her how to do it."

"Oh... Does Vim not usually do that or something?" I asked.

"Vim does whatever Vim wants to do," Trixalla said.

"Until he doesn't," Mork added.

I sighed, since it seemed they were just like the rest of the Society.

Speaking in riddles when it came to Vim.

"It's not the hunting, but the reason for it. Pelka wants to learn how to self-sustain, so she can leave on her own. Out into the world," Mork said.

"Oh... wait... that young girl?" I asked. She must mean the other sister, the one that was missing. She had only been a little taller than Lomi.

Trixalla nodded. "Indeed."

"So... Vim's okay with that then?" I asked. He was teaching her, after all.

"Vim believes in free will," Trixalla said.

Ah. So he thinks that everyone had a right to choose what they want to do. Even if what they wanted, was a little... unwise.

That explained his willingness to let me stay at the Sleepy Artist. It had seemed a little odd how easily he had given up.

"What's her mother think of that?" I asked.

"Don't get her started on it," Mork said with a sigh.

Seemed it was a touchy issue.

"She has already lost a daughter to the call of adventure. So be gentle with her when she acts out because of it," Trixalla said.

I blinked a little, and thought of the pretty woman I had spent time with this morning.

She's already lost children? Maybe that was why she was so willing to accept Lomi.

"I see," I said gently.

The three of us sat in silence for a moment, and I wondered where their children were. Surely they had some over the years? They supposedly had been together for a very long time. And were far older than me.

To be honest, the idea of living with a partner for that long and not having at least a few children was...

I decided to stop thinking about it, since the very reason there were none was obvious, and instead chose to think about the present.

"Can... Can I ask a personal question?" I asked carefully.

"Ask away," Trixalla said.

"Are you two older than Vim?" I asked.

Trixalla blinked, and Mork let loose a tiny snort of a laugh.

"Sorry," I quickly apologized, and looked away. For some reason I suddenly felt very out of place.

"We aren't. In fact Vim was there to witness my birth," Trixalla said.

Mork nodded with a huge happy smile. "I joined the Society later in life, but yes. Vim's older than I as well," he said.

"Then... Then why...?" I started to ask, but found the two staring at me with sudden looks of...

Was that pity?

It was.

"We don't know. We're old. I won't bother telling you how old I am, there's no point. But we are old. Old enough to remember when this had once been a giant lake," she said.

Giant lake? Did she mean here?

"Vim's old beyond reason. There aren't many older than him," Mork said.

"Why doesn't he look it then?" I asked. He looked like any man. Maybe not a young man, but definitely not an old one.

"If we knew, do you think our bodies would be as old as they are now? To be honest even Vim probably doesn't know," Trixalla said.

"He doesn't. But even if he did he'd not tell us. He doesn't think like that," Mork said.

"He doesn't, does he? He could be sitting on the cure for age and he'd not share it!" Trixalla nodded in agreement, as if she too found it ridiculous.

"Hm," I nodded in agreement. I didn't know Vim anywhere near as well as them, but I could see that happening.

"Why do you ask?" Trixalla then asked.

My tail, which had been dangling next to my thigh, suddenly went stiff.

"Uh..." I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't really have a reason. It just came to me, because I was trying to distract myself from wondering about their lack of children.

"Her heartbeat just tripled," Mork said.

"Shush," I said, right as Trixalla did.

She glanced at me, and I smiled as she laughed.

They were good people. So were Lomi's new family.

Lilly and Windle had been great as well. I had even found Windle's... cowardliness to be a little comforting, for some reason.

Lughes and the rest were amazing people too.

So far all the members of our society I've met have been... if a little odd, genuinely good people.

Even Vim. For as much as he made me feel out of place sometimes, he's really not done anything rude to me.

Amber had been wonderful too.

And yet... all I had done was cause them grief and sorrow.

Although I had not killed Amber, or got her killed, I had still caused discord. I had still caused issues.

I had been given nothing but kindness and welcome, and returned it by yelling at them and endangering them.

Such a fact made me feel worthless and small.

"Vim acts odd all the time, though," Mork then said.

"Stubborn," Trixalla said with a nod, agreeing with her husband.

Smiling at them as they went to complaining, in a nice way, about Vim... I did my best to not break down and cry.

I hadn't expected to be allowed to feel... included, anymore. I had expected, even if forgiven and allowed to live, to be an outcaste. To be banished not just from the Sleepy Artist, but the Society as a whole.

For me to not only still be alive but to still be seen as a member... as family...

I'll need to spend my whole life to earn this. To pay them all back, Vim especially, for their love and kindness.

Hopefully... I'd find a way to do so.

Or at least live long enough to figure out how.

Chapter 39: Chapter Thirty Eight – Vim – To Prepare Is To Hunt

"That wasn't clean, but it wasn't sloppy either," I said to the young girl.

She huffed as she stood up, leaving the knife where she had delved it.

The small deer wasn't breathing anymore. There wasn't much blood on Pelka's hands or body surprisingly, considering where she had stabbed it in the neck. Even now some blood was pooling around the blade and handle.

Pelka huffed, stepping two feet away from the animal she just killed.

"You're rather fast. Your problem, as I mentioned, will always be the power behind your blows. Luckily you're not a human, but you're still young and our kind isn't all powerful. So you'll always need to be careful, and on guard," I said calmly, keeping a keen eye on the way her fingers opened and closed into fists.

"Is it dead?" she asked.

"It's dead," I said.

She blinked a few times, and then reached up to wipe her face. She stopped right before she touched her face with bloody hands.

Holding out a towel, I smiled as she stared at it... then looked up at me. I nodded at her, and put it closer to her.

She took it and went to wiping her face.

"Won't blood ruin the towel?" she asked.

"That's the only one I have. So your next kill better be clean," I said.

She stopped wiping her face, and her large eyes peered at me from behind the towel.

Smiling at her, I nodded; glad she realized what that meant.

Stepping towards the dead deer, I knelt down to get a closer look at the thing's neck.

Pushing the back of its neck, where its spine was, I felt the bones under its skin and fur.

She hadn't killed it with the stab of the knife, but the simple blow. She had decapitated it, by stabbing it as hard as she could.

"Did I miss?" she asked, sounding worried.

"No. You hit the artery. It would have bled out and died, either way," I said.

"Either way...?" she whispered, stepping towards me. She didn't need to kneel down as low to get a better look; she was short enough that all she needed to do was bend forward.

I pointed at the spot where she had broken its neck. "Give it a feel," I said.

Although her hands were no longer bloody, they were still stained as she went to touching the fawn's neck.

"The bone?" she asked.

I nodded. "You broke its neck. That's what killed it so quickly," I said.

"Oh... so I failed?" she asked with a worried look.

"No. I told you to kill it. You did."

"But... not with the knife," she said.

"It would have died from the knife wound, as well. It would have taken longer, but its death was assured," I said.

"Oh..." Pelka blinked a few times, slowly comprehending what I meant.

"This is a good thing, actually. It lets you know that you are strong. That you are capable," I said.

Pulling the knife out of the deer's neck, Pelka stepped back to avoid the splash of blood. She wasn't too skittish about such things, but my quick action had startled her all the same.

Grabbing the deer by the head, I hefted it and then considered giving it to her. It was her kill, her responsibility...

"Lead the way," I said to her.

"Huh? Oh. To the river, right?" she asked, and the two large ears on the top of her head quickly began to twitch. She moved her head, which told me they weren't as mobile as Renn's were. Her ears actually moved on their own, and she didn't need to move her head completely like the foxes did.

Was that a fox trait? Surely not... that must mean she was more animal than they were, in that sense.

"This way," Pelka said, pointing to the north.

Nodding, I was glad she chose correctly. There were actually two small creeks nearby, and the sounds they gave off were a little tricky. It made the southern one sound closer, when it wasn't. The fact she chose correctly gave her another passing grade.

Following the young fox to the river, I paid close attention to the way she trotted in front of me. She was happy now, bounding a little with each step.

Not only had I allowed her to hunt, even when her mother had voiced against it... she was, or at least was so far, passing with flying colors.

I sighed a little, and wondered how long it'd be before she went out on her own. Hopefully a few years, at least.

Usually I tried to accompany those who ventured out by themselves for the first time. At least to the first village or two... but sometimes they couldn't wait for me. It did take me years to return after all.

Reaching the small river bend, I allowed Pelka to pick where we'd clean the deer. She chose a spot with some trees near a bend, where the water ran a little fast.

Although Pelka, and her parents, had asked me to teach her to hunt... this wasn't her first time, at all. She didn't even wait to be guided in preparing the deer for quartering. She held her hand out for the knife, and once I handed it to her she went to work.

I was a little surprised to not just see how quick and clean she was at it, but also how experienced she seemed.

She's probably been the one cutting and cleaning the animals for the family for some years. Her hands were as steady and sure as any experienced butcher.

"How often do you do this?" I asked her. She had already cut open most of the deer, and was getting ready to pull out all the organs.

"About once or twice a week," she said.

"Who hunts for you?" I asked.

"Father hunts sometimes. But usually the hunters of Bordu drop off game on their way through the farm. We get most our food from them," she said.

"Ah," I nodded in understanding. That made a lot more sense. She must have, or Porka had, negotiated with some hunters. After all, being so close to Bordu meant they shouldn't have to actively hunt themselves. They had farmers and workers coming and going from Bordu on a daily basis, and any of them would happily bring a cart full of food for a little extra pay.

"Am I doing it wrong?" She asked, suddenly conscious of my attention.

"No. You're fine. Do you keep the kidney?" I asked.

"Want it?" she asked as she pulled the stomach and the rest out.

"No," I said.

She paused, and glanced at me as she held the kidney in her hand.

"I don't, really," I said to her.

She studied it for a moment, and then tossed it aside into the pile of other organs.

"Want to hang it here?" she asked as she went to cleaning out the few other parts needed.

"You plan on staying here for a few days?" I asked.

She hesitated, and then smiled. "Guess you're right," she said.

"Just quarter it. We'll wrap it in the towel and take it back with us," I said.

Pelka nodded and went to do just that.

Watching the young fox, I felt a little proud of her.

Of course I hadn't raised her. Nor did I actually teach her to hunt. Her father had done most of that. The only thing I was doing was saying the words necessary to help her gain her confidence.

She already knew how to hunt. She knew how to dress an animal.

She even knew how to kill. For her it could have even been instinctual.

She just needed me, the Society's protector, to tell her she was doing it correctly. Doing it well enough that she could survive on her own, relying on her own skills.

"Pelka, have you seen death?" I asked her.

Her knife paused in mid slice; she had been skinning the deer. "Of people?" she asked, understanding.

I nodded.

She pulled the knife away from the carcass, and sat on her knees. Pondering my question.

"It's a yes or no," I said.

Pelka's ears twitched, and she nodded. "I know. I've... I've seen the knights kill bandits. I saw you kill that thief a long time ago. You killed him in the wheat, remember?" she asked.

Quickly running through my memories, I tried to remember what she spoke of. I vaguely remembered it, but didn't remember anything about a thief.

"I killed a thief?" I asked.

"They broke in to steal from Trixalla's house. They saw my mom, with her ears out. You chased them," she said.

"Ah," I nodded, I did remember that. I hadn't thought of them as a thief, which was why nothing had come to mind.

"I've seen farmhands die too. One was kicked by a horse. Another tripped... we found him a long time later. His body was... weird. Dried out," she said.

I nodded, and knelt down across the carcass from her. She studied me closely as I held out my hand for the knife.

She gave it, and I noticed it wasn't wet. She really was good at cleaning a carcass.

"You stabbed this deer," I said with a point at it with the knife.

She nodded.

"Could you stab me?" I asked her.

"You took the knife back," she said.

Blinking at her words, I forced back the smile that wanted to creep onto my lips. "I did," I said.

For a long moment she stared at me, and I calmly let her hold my gaze.

Would she try?

She didn't. She blinked, and looked down at the carcass. "I can kill someone if I have to," she whispered.

A little disappointed, I made sure not to sigh or let it show on my face.

"Could you?" I asked.

She nodded.

"What gives you the confidence?" I asked her.

"You."

I couldn't hide my frown now. "Me?" I asked her.

She nodded, and reached out to pull apart the ribs a little more... so I could cut into the tenderloins.

Obliging her, I went to cutting the meat off the deer.

"You didn't hesitate that day. When you killed the man who saw mom's ears. You simply... killed him," she said.

"You think you can do the same?" I asked her.

She nodded.

Pulling the tenderloin out, I held them in my hand for a moment. It was warm.

"Could you kill a friend?" I asked her.

Pelka looked away from the carcass, to stare at me.

"Is that what I have to do...?" she asked with a husk of a voice.

Scoffing, I shook my head. "Of course not," I said.

"Oh." The obvious relief on her face was a good sight.

I wanted my people to be strong, emotionally especially, but I didn't want them to be monsters.

"What if one day, as you're traveling... you find a friend. Someone who you come to cherish," I suggested a hypothetical situation.

"Oh..." Her shoulders slumped, as she realized exactly what I meant.

Nodding, I pointed the tenderloin at her. Her eyes narrowed on it as I did. "Could you kill them? Let's say if they saw your ears on accident. Or they somehow found out something about the Society, or your family? Putting them in danger?" I asked her.

Pelka stared at the dark red meat for several moments... then she nodded. "Yes."

I believed her.

"I hope you never have to," I said to her.

She blinked. Then she frowned.

"Thought I'd say otherwise?" I asked her.

"I... I don't know what I thought you were going to say," she said.

"People think I'll say something profound. That's why they're always disappointed," I said.

"What's profound mean?" she asked.

"Thoughtful," I simplified.

"Ah... I guess. I thought you were going to make me do something to prove I was ready," she said.

"Like what? Kill a human?" I asked.

"Father said that might be it," she mumbled.

"Your father is a good man, but he's been listening to Mork's stories too much," I said.

She giggled, and I held out the tenderloin for her.

With quick fingers she took it and went to putting it on the towel she had been using to wipe the blood off. It was all we had, really. I probably should have thought of this a little better.

"Mother thinks I'll die," Pelka then whispered, as I went to cutting other meats off the carcass.

"She does," I admitted.

"Will I?" she asked as I handed her another section.

"It's possible."

Pelka hesitated in putting the next section of meat onto the towel, but eventually gathered her nerve.

"I... I want to try," she said.

"And that, Pelka, is why I'll never stop you," I said to her.

The young fox went a little wide eyed.

"Go into the world. See what you want to see. Experience all you desire... just do so carefully. With caution. Remember it's the human's world, not ours. Remember that if you get caught, it's not just your life you're risking but your families. Your fellow members of the Society. The ones who are weaker, or more scared than you," I said.

She nodded seriously.

"But don't hate or grow angry at your parents for trying to dissuade you. After all... they love you. They cherish you. They don't want to lose you. Not just your life, but you yourself. If you venture out into the world, and are gone for years and years... that too is sad for them. That too hurts them. Even if they know you'll one day come back," I explained.

She blinked watery eyes... and ignored the next clump of meat I was trying to hand her. Instead she stared into my eyes.

Nodding at her, I decided to hold off on the rest of the meat. At least for a moment.

"I want to see the sea," she said.

"Then see it."

"I want to climb a mountain."

"Climb the peaks," I offered.

"There's so much out there," she said, tears welling in her eyes.

"More than you can imagine," I agreed.

"But I'll regret it, won't I?" she whispered.

My shoulders got suddenly heavy as I watched her start to cry. The kind of crying that was quiet, and was accompanied by a face covered in grief.

"You might," I whispered just as quietly.

"Do you?"

Slowly shaking my head, I did my best to not lie to her. "I don't."

"What if... what if I do? What if I hate it out there?" she asked.

"Then you simply run home," I said.

She blinked, and then blinked again. She sniffed, and suddenly her eyes unfocused. She was so watery eyed, she couldn't see anything. She reached up, to wipe her eyes, but her hands were bloody again. And she hadn't worn a shirt with sleeves. Her forearms weren't that gross, but gross enough she didn't want to wipe her face on them.

Putting the knife into the chunk of meat in my bloody hand, I reached out with my clean hand. The one untouched. She smiled as I wiped the tears from her eyes for her.

"Take a chance. You can also do it slowly. Take a small trip to a nearby town. Spend some time in Bordu, alone. Spend a year there. Then go home. Spend a year at the Owl's Nest, and then go home. So on and so forth," I said.

"I can do that?" she asked.

"You can do anything. And if anyone tries to stop you, just come get me," I said.

She chuckled and nodded.

"You have a long life ahead of you Pelka. The world might seem like it'll fade away without you, but it won't. It will be there for you when you're ready. And will be there when you're not," I said.

Pelka sniffed... but smiled and nodded. Glad to think of it that way.

"Okay," she said. Not just to me... but she herself.

"Okay," I agreed with her.

We stared at each other for a few moments, and I thought of the cat.

She was older than this girl, yet similar. Just as...

It wasn't innocence. What was it?

Pelka blinked and looked away, back to the carcass.

Holding out the section of meat she had ignored earlier, she nodded and took it.

I went to cutting another section off as I tried to think of what my mind had thought of. I had compared, and likened, this young fox to that cat. Yet were they the same?

Maybe it was because I had just seen utter sorrow on the cat's face too. Maybe I saw the same anguish. The same heartbreak.

Pulling some meat off the hind leg, I was about to hand it to Pelka but she ignored it.

"Going to miss that part too?" she asked, pointing to where I had just cut.

"Hm..." I sighed and went to get the slice I had missed.

Once we were done with the carcass, Pelka bundled all the meat we had gathered and we went to head back to Twin Hills.

It was a few hours away, but we walked slowly. Neither of us seemed in much a hurry to get back.

"That lady. Renn. Is she a friend?" she asked out of the blue.

"She's a member of the Society, just like us," I said plainly.

"Father said you hate her," she said.

Frowning, I wondered what gave him that idea. "I don't."

"Mother thinks you do too," she countered.

"Everyone always likes to think for me," I said.

Pelka giggled, and I noticed the way she strode next to me. She seemed far more comfortable in her strides, as if a burden had been lifted.

"She... might have made a mistake. I need to find out before I can decide if I hate her or not," I said.

"Oh... what'd she do?"

"Hopefully nothing," I said.

"Is... is she dangerous?" she asked.

"I'm not sure yet," I said honestly.

"If she is... I'll kill her for you. If you want," she said.

Glancing at the little girl, I was a little surprised to find the seriousness in her gaze.

"Hm. She's strong you know," I warned.

Pelka blinked, and then frowned. "Really?"

I nodded.

"Stronger than me?"

I nodded again.

"Oh... Well..." suddenly she seemed less confident.

"You're still a child you know," I said.

"I know," she groaned.

Smiling at her, I wondered if I should send her to Lilly...

"Pelka, I'll help you set up a place in Bordu. Live there for a year. If you can do that, and still desire to see the world, I'll take you to Lilly," I said to her.

"The Owl's Nest?" she asked, suddenly far more interested than before.

I nodded. "Yes."

"Really?" she grew excited, and I nodded again.

"Deal!" she happily smiled, nodding quickly as she agreed.

Good. By then she'll find out how serious her desire to leave her home is. If by then, after spending a year training with Lilly, she still desired to see the world...

Then at least then she'll be a little older. A little wiser. A little stronger.

We'd be able to give her enough tools and experiences, to survive. Or at least, have a chance at it.

And after all, that was all she needed.

That was all anyone needed.

Which was why it was so... depressing, that it was becoming so difficult to provide it.

Maybe that was what bothered me about the cat.

She was a predator. Not just like Pelka and the snakes... but a real one.

Why did she act like all the other prey? Why did she act weak?

Why did I feel like I wanted to trust her, when I knew I shouldn't?

Glancing at the little fox next to me, who was smiling proudly... I realized she was probably going to become useful. Another Lilly, maybe. Another member of our Society who could possibly be used to help protect the Society, instead of simply exist within it.

She was precious. And didn't know it yet.

"Stand tall Pelka," I told her as we neared the forest's edge.

She tilted her head at me as I repeated myself. "Don't be ashamed of what you are. Stand tall."

"Stand tall," Pelka whispered.

Nodding at her, she smiled back.

Stand tall.

We needed to. Since so many wouldn't.

Since so many couldn't.

Chapter 40: Chapter Thirty Nine – Renn – A Heavy Cookie

Sitting on the top of a small wooden fence, I watched Montclair as he spoke to the representatives of the Lord of Bordu. They were standing in front of the red roofed building, speaking to one another... about the weather, and other things.

The small group of men looked... a little too relaxed, considering the fancy clothes they wore. Four men were dressed in what looked to be robes of some kind, and were far cleaner than anything here on the farm should be.

At first I had thought they were the Lords themselves, but I had been talking to Pelka right as they arrived. She told me that they always sent the representatives first, a few hours before the Lord actually showed up.

I had a lot of questions about them, but I had no one to direct them to. Pelka would have been perfect but...

She had run off, leaving me alone, once Montclair greeted the group. She had left to let her parents know they were here.

It was... odd to me, that this was happening. The Lord of the nearby town was coming to negotiate the next few years' worth of wheat. I understood why they would need to renegotiate every so often, since the market and the needs of the city would change over time... but...

Why did it seem so unnatural to me? Was it because in my perspective, it was odd to work so closely with humans? Or was it because I believed an individual shouldn't rely so heavily on another?

After all how did this happen? How did they convince an entire human town to rely entirely upon them for their wheat? That was most of their food. Obviously the humans didn't know it was our kind that owned and ran these farms... but...

Something shimmered off in the distance; I focused on the glimmer and knew it was most likely the Lord of Bordu. He was riding a carriage, and something metal had reflected in the sun.

A part of me wanted to meet this supposed lord. What was a human lord like? Were they wise? Powerful? Strong beyond reason? I've met village elders, and a few nobles while working at the Sleepy Artist, but never someone who ruled over entire towns.

Though maybe they would look as normal as anyone else. Just like how Vim was.

Montclair and the visitors finally noticed their Lord approaching, and the conversation shifted. They went from talking about the wild cats to the Lord's recent moods.

My ears strained under my hat, trying to hear as much of the conversation I could. One of the men sighed and complained about their Lord's sudden penchant for some foreign fruit. They were troubled not just because of how expensive the fruit was, but how small they were. The Lord wanted dozens at a time.

Montclair laughed a little, and bowed his head as if in thanks for the information. He then went and told them about his own masters, Trixalla and Mork, and how they had wanted similar over the years.

Smiling a little at the group of men, and their sudden solidarity and happy smiles, I wondered if Montclair bowed like that to everyone.

Him bowing to these humans, although odd, wasn't strange. We were trying our best to be as genial as possible. It made sense. Plus they were the Lords of this land...

I could somewhat also understand his bowing to those he called masters. And even Vim, to a degree.

But he bowed to me too. And Porka. And even Lomi.

Something told me it wasn't a squirrel thing. But maybe it was?

Montclair and the four men then entered the house. I was a little surprised by it, since I had thought they'd wait for their lord... but he was approaching slowly. His cart was moving oddly slow. As if whatever horse was pulling it was taking its time. The cart had barely made it much farther down the hill than it had been a few minutes ago.

At that speed it could be an hour or two before the Lord was here.

Hm... maybe I should head to Lomi's house then. I doubted Vim and the others wanted me anywhere near the Lord and his people...

A sudden knock on the fence I sat on startled me. I jumped upward off the fence and spun.

Sitting down on the fence, not too far from where I had been sitting, was Vim. He was shifting a little, probably because the spot he sat upon had been a little lumpy. The man didn't even glance at me as he got comfortable.

"Vim..." I groaned, upset at him.

How had he snuck up behind me? A few feet from the fence, on the other side, were fields of wheat. There was no way he had gone through all that and not made a single sound. It was impossible. Even if he had approached at an angle, alongside the fence... there were plenty of rocks and bushes. Stuff that would, should have, made his approach obvious.

"Renn?" he asked back, as if I he wasn't sure what my problem was.

"You startled me," I said.

"I saw."

"You're not acting like you saw," I grumbled, and glanced around... Half expecting Lomi or some other child to be nearby, smirking and giggling at me. There wasn't. It was just Vim.

Which meant I had no choice but to glare at him, instead of smile and laugh it off.

Vim didn't even blink at my glare, he simply sat there... staring at me with that placid expression of his. As if he was...

"Are you bored?" I asked him.

"Not yet," he said.

Did he mean I could make him bored, or...

"Are you here to tell me not to go near the Lord? I know better than that," I said to him.

Vim's eyes narrowed, but not into a glare. I'd almost think he was squinting, to see the Lord I was talking about if not for the fact that I knew he didn't need to do such a thing... and that he was still staring right at me.

"You can meet him. He's not a Lord. He's the head of the merchants of Bordu. He runs the baker guild. He's a noble, but nothing too extravagant," Vim said.

"Huh...? Oh..." I glanced to the approaching cart. It hadn't gotten much closer yet. Why did it seem like it was taking so long?

"Rather I came to ask you a small favor," Vim then said, changing the topic.

"A... favor?" I asked. Although it was... worrisome to be asked such a thing from Vim, it was also exciting. Did that mean he wasn't as angry at me as I thought?

He nodded, and glanced at the fence he sat on. Or rather, at the spot I had been sitting.

Did he want me to sit back down? To sit with him as we spoke?

Wearily I went back to the fence. I easily stepped up onto it, to sit back down. Although I sat a little farther from where I had been sitting.

"I took Pelka on a hunt yesterday."

"I know," I said. She had told me all about it.

"She wants to spend some time in Bordu. Alone. To see how it feels," Vim said.

I nodded. She had told me that too.

Vim pointed at the Lord who was approaching. "I'm going to ask him to employ her at one their bakeries. I'll work it into the deal. A place for lodging for her, in return for employment and a tiny little discount of the wheat," he explained.

"A... discount?" I asked.

He frowned, as if upset I'd even ask. "Yes."

"You're giving them a discount, so she can work for them?" I asked.

"Ah. You find it ridiculous because the values aren't equal," he said, suddenly smiling.

I shifted a little, and wished my tail wasn't stuck beneath my pants. It wanted to twitch and sway. "Well... yes, I think," I said.

"It's true. If one only took into account her labor. But once you factor in a place to sleep, and food and drink... well... Plus it's fine. The merchant will see it as a great offer. He gets a small discount. The family gets help, and he gets potential good will amongst his clients. It's how relationships like these work," Vim said.

"Alright..." I nodded, even though I didn't fully agree with it. Surely a bunch of wheat, for a whole city, was worth more than a single young girl's labor? Or a small room? She was tiny!

Though if she was anything like Lomi she probably could eat far more than normal...

"Plus do you really think our kind actually care about wealth? Have Trixalla show you the basement sometime before we leave," he said.

"The basement?" I didn't know there was one.

"I'd like you to tell her about your time living with humans. You said you lived with them for awhile right?" Vim asked, ignoring my earlier question.

"I did. I have," I said quickly.

"They deal with humans all the time. Workers. Merchants. But she's never lived amongst them. Just give her... some guidance. Think of things that you'd wish you could tell your younger self, before you ventured out on your own," he said.

"Oh. Yes. I can do that," I said quickly. I could definitely do that. I had lots to say about that.

I had honestly expected... wait. Maybe that meant he didn't trust me to do anything else, or rather anything more important.

If that was the reason... that was a little upsetting.

"Hm," he nodded, taking my acceptance in stride.

"Can't you do that for her, though?" I asked.

"I have. But it coming from another, a woman especially, might make her a little more receptive. Surely you understand?" he asked.

"Ah... yeah, I can see that," I said.

"Thanks."

He hopped off the fence, and I heard the odd sound of something heavy landing on solid earth. How come he sounded as if he weighed thrice more than he looked sometimes?

"Is that it?" I asked him, worried he was going to just... walk away now.

"Did you want to do more?" he asked.

"I... I don't know. Maybe," I said honestly.

"Hm..." Vim studied me for a moment, and then he tilted his head... and suddenly I felt out of place. My tail and ears went a little still as I watched him study me. Actually study me... as if I was suddenly someone he's never seen before.

"What?" I asked after a few minutes passed. What was wrong?

"Wondering what to do with you," he said.

"Oh..." I didn't know what to say to that. How depressing, that I was still being judged for death.

"You chose this path. Hold your head high," he then said.

Glancing up, since I had indeed lowered my eyes to look down at the ground... I found Vim nodding as he walked away from me. Towards the red-roofed house, and the approaching Lord.

I chose this path...?

He meant my actions, didn't he? He meant what I had done at the Sleepy Artist. The conflict I had created.

Watching him go, I realized he had probably in his own way just praised me.

Did that mean... he agreed with what I had done? Or said?

"He is a predator," I whispered, and wondered if that meant he too had the same beliefs. That one didn't abandon others just because we might be in danger later.

Though... maybe that wasn't true. My family proved that not all predators thought like that, after all.

Somewhat startled at the thought, I tried to imagine what it would have been like for my family to have known of the Non-Human Society.

Would they have joined it?

They had hated humans. And although my parents, and grandmother, had been something of friends with another of our kind... They had also fought and killed a few others who had dared to enter their forest.

Odds were... Vim would have slain them. Deemed unsuitable for the Society.

Hopefully I'd not suffer a similar fate...

Vim reached the red roofed building, and calmly strode inside. Seemed he didn't care about waiting for the Lord either.

Glancing around, I noticed the sound of children's voices in the distance. They were probably hidden by the tall fence that surrounded the large grass yard behind the several story building that Lomi called home.

Hopping off the fence, I wondered if Vim would let me listen into his conversation with the Lord. I wanted to know... what this supposed negotiating entailed. Was it hard? Were there difficult conversations, or was it something simpler?

Did he treat humans like the treated us? Was he rude to them? Abrupt?

Walking towards the red roofed building, I decided to enter from the back. Near the bathrooms. Hopefully Trixalla would be there, and I'd be able to ask her for permission to sit in one of the many rooms... so I could listen in.

Vim had said it was okay, after all. Kind of. I should have latched onto that statement the moment he made it. Foolish of me.

Heading into the building, I heard the sound of Montclair and other men speaking with one another. The human visitors.

Using my nose, I quickly found Trixalla. The older woman didn't stink, but she wore a strange garb that smelled of flowers. The clothes she wore were made out of unique plants I'd never smelled before.

She was in the kitchen, preparing drinks and what looked to be light snacks.

"Montclair didn't prepare them for you?" I asked as I entered the kitchen.

"He'll grumble to find me helping, but it gives me something to do," Trixalla said.

I went to stand next to her, and hesitated. Did that mean she didn't want help?

"Would you clean those?" she asked lightly, pointing to cups that sat near a bucket of water.

Happy to be given permission, I went to it.

"Can I listen into Vim's conversation? With the Lord?" I asked.

"Did he say you couldn't?" she asked.

"No... but he didn't say I could either," I said as I dunked a cup into the water. It was warm, which told me she or Montclair had just warmed it.

"Just stick around. You can hear Montclair right now, yes?" she asked.

I nodded. He was talking to another man about a new building being built in Bordu. Some kind of underground room for storing ice.

"Then feel free. If you do go meet them, just make sure to not be noticed," Trixalla said lightly. With words that were spoken lowly, yet calmly. I knew better than to take her offhanded gentleness for granted. That warning had been genuine and serious.

If they saw my ears or tail, not only would Vim have to kill them... he'd kill me right after.

Maybe even before.

Pausing in the cleaning of the next cup, I wondered if Vim had ever... killed one of our own. Not that I doubted he had, but if he had done so for that very reason.

Had he ever been in a position where he had to kill one of us, because we had been exposed?

Somehow I could see the scene play out in my head. Groups of humans, and one of us being exposed... and Vim, being alone and having to play the part, acting as a human should.

Something told me it not only could happen, but has.

Would I be able to do the same?

Could I kill one of our kind, to save others? Not because they deserved that death, or earned it, but out of simple necessity?

Vim could.

"That's a sad face," Trixalla said.

Looking up from my task, I found the old snake staring at me. I took a small breath, and was glad to find I wasn't crying. "Just thought of something sad," I said.

"You're too young to have such thoughts. Here, try this," she held out something small. It looked kind of like a cookie but...

Taking it from her, I was surprised to find it soft. Fluffy. I had to hold it in my palm, since it started to crumble when between fingers.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A heavy cookie," she said.

Heavy...? It wasn't heavy at all...

Biting into it, I was shocked to find it so soft that it almost melted while I chewed.

Quickly devouring the thing, I sighed at how quickly the tasty little thing disappeared.

"Heavy because after you eat it, you realize how precious it were," Trixalla said with a chuckle.

I nodded as I looked around for more. Was there more? "It was tasty," I said.

"They are. I'll let you have more once you're done, and after you take those plates to Montclair and Vim," she said, pointing to a nearby table. My eyes darted to it. It was near the door to the hallway, which was why I hadn't noticed it earlier.

Half a dozen plates, all full and packed with similar styled treats as the one she had just given me littered the table. The sight made my mouth water.

"Sure," I happily agreed, and went to hurry and finish cleaning the cups.

Who cared about the negotiations now? After tasting something so yummy...

Clean plates. Deliver food and drinks to Vim and those humans... what simple tasks, in return for such joy!

Maybe if I'm lucky I'll learn how to make these delicacies before Vim makes us leave!

Maybe I should come back here and make this my home...

Finishing up the last cup, I went to the table and grabbed a few of the plates. They were oddly heavy. The metal they were made out of was cool to the touch, and... surely that wasn't gold?

"I'll be back," I told Trixalla as I hurried to deliver the plates.

The faster I did, the faster she'd let me have more.

Licking my lips, I found myself longing for the taste of that wonderful treat... and...

Glancing at the many different types on the plates I carried, I groaned as I realized there were possibly dozens of different types before me.

How was I going to get to try them all?

Maybe I should weasel my way into the negotiations after all...

"Well at least we're not pagans," a man said as I neared the room they were all in.

"Right! A squire is now an orphan. Not even ten years old! All because of some pagans in the woods," Another man clicked his tongue in disgust.

Carefully approaching the door, I found it almost closed. Worried I'd look strange being able to open it, with several plates per arm, I was somewhat surprised to find it open on its own.

Vim glared at me, and I smiled at him.

The four humans glanced at me, and I heard Montclair make an odd... wheezing sound, as he saw me too.

"Snacks," I said, entering the room. Vim didn't move out of the way for me, so I simply squeezed between him and the door frame.

Ignoring his look, and the calm stares of the four human men, I went to putting the plates onto the single table in the room.

It was a huge circular table, with nearly a dozen chairs around it. All four humans were sitting at it, and so was Montclair.

"Oh my, look at those," one of the oldest looking humans said as I laid the plates down.

"I'll be back with the rest, and the drinks," I said quickly, remembering similar things being said at the restaurants and taverns in Ruvindale.

"Ah, let me assist you!" Montclair quickly stood from the seat, to follow me out.

Vim said nothing as he watched me and Montclair leave. The squirrel didn't even glance at Vim as he passed, but I couldn't help but notice his look.

Stepping out of the room, I sighed as I went to follow Montclair.

Heavy cookie indeed...

Hopefully I'd live long enough to eat another...