

The Non-Human Society

Chapter 5: Chapter Four - Vim - To Gnaw A Tree

"What's that sound?" Lomi asked, drawing closer to me.

I smiled as the sound reverberated in the air. I didn't know if she could also hear the rustling of the leaves, and the complaints of the birds, but I knew even a human could hear the slamming sound.

"Our destination. That is probably Elk, felling a tree," I said, patting her head.

Her thick hair and ears shifted under my hand, and I wondered once again why her people hadn't ran. They were so, so, skittish...

I hadn't asked her. Because all it would do would make her cry. Make her feel blame. And I didn't want her blaming herself. It wasn't her fault.

It was mine.

"Elk? The deers?"

"His name is Elk. I know, unoriginal, but what do you do?" I asked her.

"Pick a new name?" she complained, as if it was insulting to her.

I laughed and nodded. If only she knew how common it was. I could think of more than a handful of our people who had similar names.

Lomi sighed and stepped away, out of reach of my patting. She didn't seem to mind, but at the same time did. Maybe it was just because she was a young girl.

The sound came again. Rolling through the dense forest, the small layer of snow only aided in making the sound last longer as it echoed. Thanks to how close we were, the sound was loud... and it caused Lomi to step back towards me again. As if she sensed danger.

"What's he doing? To make that sound?" she asked, concerned.

Although I wanted to answer, there was no need to. We were nearly upon him. I could smell him, and the broken trees he was most likely surrounded by.

"You'll see," I said to her as we rounded a large tree. Sure enough, off in the distance, I saw him in-between some trees.

He was readying a large hammer, hefting it up above as to swing it.

The tree he was felling was the biggest in the area, and had a large metal spike sticking out of it. Lomi paused upon seeing the sight so I stopped walking too, as she and I both watched him swing the hammer onto the spike's head.

Upon hitting the spike, the whole tree shook violently. Leaves and branches fell thanks to the violent shaking, and the sound echoed for some time.

"He's hammering the tree?" she asked.

With her questioning voice, Elk finally noticed us. He startled, and turned quickly. So quickly, he almost dropped his large hammer.

It was a worrisome sight, to see a shirtless man who was twice my size look so... frightened, as he studied us.

"Vim?" Elk shouted, and I noticed the worry in his voice.

"Hey Elk," I said, stepping forward. I left Lomi behind, mostly since I knew she was still worried.

Elk visibly relaxed, releasing a pent up breath as he looked around. "Jeez, you startled me," he said with his deep voice, and for a moment his face was covered in white smoke from his earlier deep breath.

I smiled, and glanced at the clearing nearby. More than a dozen trees were stacked into a small pile nearby. Already stripped of branches and ready for transportation.

Trees big enough that I knew no human could move without great numbers or help from an animal. Yet Elk was the only one here, and I knew the only one who had been for some time.

Once again, I had to be reminded at how strong our kind really were. How powerful we could be.

Yet he had looked scared enough to pass out earlier, just because we had startled him.

"How are you, Elk?" I asked, drawing near.

"Oh! We've been fine Vim... everything's been normal. Been awhile since I've seen you," he said, putting his large hammer down. I noticed the way he stared not at me, but the young girl behind me.

"This is Lomi. From the village across the mountain," I said.

"Ah! I figured! A fox yes? Nice to meet you," Elk said, smiling. He was happy to meet one of our own. It was so very rare, after all.

"Yes. Nice to meet you too, Mr. Elk," Lomi greeted him politely, but I knew it wasn't because she herself was polite. She had walked up to us, but had chosen to stare at him from behind me. Using me for cover.

She was still shy, as I had remembered her from years ago. Seems her comfort with me was just simply her relying upon me, in a moment of discord.

"There was..." I wondered how to phrase it, but knew I couldn't sugar coat it. "Her village was attacked. By a Bishop," I said to Elk.

Elk's smile immediately died, as he looked at me. I nodded to him, to confirm the thoughts obviously written on his face.

She was all that remained?

"Oh... oh my... I'm so, so sorry Lomi," Elk knelt down, and I felt Lomi stiffen at his sudden closeness. She might have turned and ran, if not for the very visible emotion on his face. He was nearly crying.

"I just wanted to check on you and your family, before taking her elsewhere. Since we were in the vicinity," I said to him.

"Yes. Of course... Let's head home, quickly," Elk nodded, and I could tell he was now worried. Worried for his own family.

"When was the last time the humans came to collect wood?" I asked Elk as he went to put his hammer up against the tree.

"Just last moon, like always. There's... been no hint of anything off, Vim. Same as normal, as always," he said.

"That's good," I said. And meant it. Although this area was a few days from Lomi's village, it was still close enough that I had worried for it.

"I have a son about your age, Lomi," Elk said as he gestured for us to follow him. I knew where his home was, but allowed him to guide me.

"I see," was all Lomi said.

"Any new residents?" I asked him.

"No. Old Frank died a few moons ago, but did so from old age. He died in his bed, surrounded by family," Elk said.

While Elk gave me an update about the few humans that lived in his little village, I startled when a small hand snuck itself into my own.

Glancing down at Lomi, I noticed the way her ears twitched as she firmed her grip onto my hand. She wasn't looking at me, nor Elk, but I knew it was because she was still unsure of him.

She was probably just unsure of herself.

I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. Her ears twitched again.

"The price of wood went up, as well. We got nearly fifty renk a foot this time," Elk said, continuing his update. I usually didn't care much for such things, but little details were sometimes important.

"That's good. Or maybe not, if everything else is getting more expensive too," I said.

"Hm, actually most of what we buy from the traders have gone down in price. Pelts were rather cheap last month," Elk said, scratching his bare chest.

He should be cold. There wasn't much snow on the ground, but it was still more white than green.

"Has your boy started helping with the logging?" I asked him.

"Yes. But he's still young. Takes him all day to bring a single tree down, and clean it of the branches," he said with a laugh.

A whole day? "Maybe let him use an axe?" I asked.

Elk scoffed. "Never."

I kept my mouth shut, since I knew it was a losing battle. He'd never actually argue with me, but that was one of the few things he'd not give in on. A part of me was even happy for it, even if it was ridiculous.

So what if an axe killed your mother? The tool didn't do it, the man who swung it had.

"Should I worry, Vim?" Elk then asked, pausing for a moment. Although he looked at me, I noticed he was doing his best to not look at Lomi.

"No. I don't believe so," I said, and meant it. After all, there was a rather plain reason as to why Lomi and her people had suffered so... while Elk and his would be fine.

Elk smiled in relief, and I noticed his large teeth. Not that much bigger than most, but enough so to be noticed. It was as if each tooth was twice as big as they should be.

"Will you be staying the night? Or?" Elk asked his next question, and I knew it wasn't because he didn't want me to stick around. Like most, they wanted me to stay as long as possible. It was safer when I was nearby, after all.

"Just tonight. We have a small journey ahead of us," I said.

I could tell that Elk wanted to ask where we were headed, but he kept his question to himself. Not that I intentionally kept some places secret, but I knew he was afraid of saying something that would make the young girl next to me cry.

"Ah, good. The fireplace is going," Elk gestured to the sky, and I noticed the few plumes of smoke. Probably three houses worth.

"Not everyone likes to prance naked in the snow," I said to him.

Elk smiled, and I noticed the way he looked down. Lomi stiffened as she looked away. She had smirked too.

Stepping into a larger clearing, I noticed the white of the snow that surrounded the scattered buildings.

The snow was clean, and not just because it kept piling up or was too cold to walk around.

Did even the humans here learn how to walk like Elk and his people? His very obvious lack of footprints, or trail, as he walked next to us was glaringly obvious.

Lomi kept trying to mimic him, to the point of gripping my hand tightly as to step as lightly as possible.

"Ah, look. My lovely family," Elk said to himself, noticing the figures on a nearby porch. All five of them stood waiting, and I knew they had smelled their father returning from a distance.

Following Elk to his home, I noticed a few humans off in the distance. Talking to one another. Ignoring us. Fellow loggers like Elk. They were large, burly men.

I knew none of them knew of Elk and his family's secret. Unlike most of our kind, Elk and his family were lucky. Their outward appearance was not strange. Even their teeth, being a little larger than normal, didn't seem that odd. Just a unique trait to their family.

If only the rest of our kind could blend in so easily.

If they had, then...

Glancing to Lomi, I smiled gently as I watched her study Elk and his family. She watched with keen interest as Elk was hugged, as the family greeted one another.

Yes. Even this young girl noticed why they had nothing to worry about. Even with her young age, thanks to her experiences... she now knew. I gave her hand a small squeeze, and she glanced up at me. I saw the way her eyes softened... as if she somehow knew what I was trying to say.

Nodding to her, she nodded back.

I continued to hold her hand as we were welcomed into Elk's home.

Chapter 6: Chapter Five - Renn - Paintings

With a dry mouth, I stared into the large window.

A massive painting, larger than me, was being showcased. They had draped a blue curtain behind it, making it all that was visible... but it was obvious why.

There was nothing other than this painting that they needed, to display the purpose of this building. To display the skill.

Yet it wasn't just the artistic talent I saw in the scene.

It was still a little early. Most of the air was full of the smell of wood being set alight. And it was now mixing with the smell of cooked food, or boiling flavored water. Tea, mostly.

An older woman last night had told me of this shop. It was a little hidden, one of only a few shops on this road, but it was large. Three stories tall, with a fancy looking roof. There was even a balcony on the third floor, overlooking the road.

We were only a few roads from the center of the city, where a large castle sat. I didn't know yet if there was some kind of king or something that ruled here, but right now I didn't care about such things.

The only thing I cared about, was finding out who painted the scene before me.

It was of a small village. Several small houses, with thatch roofs. A small creek that ran through the center, with a bridge. Scattered every so often, were people. Villagers. Some were working in fields; some were walking on the paths. A man was fishing off the bridge, and a child was climbing a tree near the front of the painting. She was the closest in the view, and was thusly the most detailed.

And because of that detail, I saw it clearly.

They looked normal. Normal humans. Normal poor, but happy, farmers.

At least they did, until you noticed their shadows.

Any human who noticed the well hidden shapes in the shadows, would probably only think it as an artist expressing something. Or maybe, they'd see it as something religious. After all, their shadows had wings.

The front door was still locked, which was the only reason I hadn't gone into the building yet... but I was growing impatient.

There was a very, very, good chance that whoever had painted this painting was like me. Or at least, knew of those like me.

I wanted to see more of their paintings to confirm it, but I also hoped that once I entered the building I would be able to sense if there was anyone non-human inside.

About an hour ago I heard sounds from within. Barely audible, mixed into the sounds of the city, but I heard them. Someone had opened a door, and then there had been a small conversation between two people. I couldn't hear what had been said, but I thought I heard one of them be a woman's voice.

I knew I probably looked ridiculous standing out here, staring blindly at the painting in the window... but hopefully no one would call the city-guards upon me. I didn't want to leave, and walk around, because I feared the people inside leaving and me having to wait another day or more to find them again.

Stepping back a step, I read the sign again. It wasn't painted, oddly... but it had been carved with a steady hand. It looked well made, and worn. It had been hanging there for a while.

"The Sleepy Artist," I whispered, and wondered what kind of creature they could be based off that name alone.

Something that slept a lot? Hibernation maybe? Many animals did sleep through the winter...

A single snowflake landed on my shoulder, and I wondered if maybe that was why they hadn't opened their shop yet. Maybe they hid away all winter...

Should I just bang on the door?

Before I could allow my curiosity to force my hand, I heard it. A footstep, just beyond the door.

Going still, I waited impatiently. Who would it be? A human? Someone I knew, maybe? Someone who knew me?

Yet the door didn't open.

Hesitating, I tried to listen beyond the door. It was so hard, with my hat on. If not for there being half a dozen people on this path, I'd have removed it.

Several moments went by, and then something caught my eye. The curtain behind the painting in the window shifted.

Studying it, I realized someone was looking at me. I could just barely make out an eyeball and...

Stepping forward, I didn't have to knock on the door. I heard a large lock clang behind the door, and then it opened slowly...

Revealing an old man.

Going still, I knew he was like me.

His beard was a little off. A little too... fluffy. His eyes a little too oddly shaped.

His stance a little off.

"Hello... My name is Renn. I... I think you're like me," I said softly to him.

The old man's eyes glanced me up and down, and then promptly looked left and right. Up and down the street.

"We're pretty different, I'd say. Come in," he said gently.

Vastly relieved, I wondered if this was fate. To find one of my kind so quickly! I had expected it to take many, many years...

Following the older man into the building, I quickly noticed the smell of paint. It was so thick, it actually hurt to breathe.

"Close the door behind you," the older man said plainly, as if giving me an order.

I obliged, even though I really didn't want to. This place needed to be aired out.

While I closed the door, I looked around. There was a pathway to the back of the building, and there were... shelves all over. Pretty much all of them were covered in paintings, of all shapes and sizes.

"Amber!" the old man raised his voice, and I heard someone curse deeper into the building. A few moments later, a young girl appeared from a hallway. She was

surprisingly short, and had dark enough skin that I wondered just how far south she had come from. She looked too young to have traveled such a great distance, however.

Yet as unique as her skin tone was, she was undoubtedly human.

Unsure of what to say, I watched as the old man slowly sauntered up to her. "Keep an eye on the shop, I have a guest," he told her.

"Sure," Amber said.

Following the older man, who headed to where Amber had come from, I gave her a nod as I passed. She somewhat glared at me as I did.

"Are you here to be painted?" the old man asked as we walked down a hallway.

"Painted...? No," I said, and wondered why he would think that.

The older man paused, to look back at me. To study me.

"You weren't sent here?" he asked me, and I noticed the odd tone in his voice.

He was now worried.

"No. I had seen a painting in the Inn I'm staying at, and inquired who had painted it. They sent me here," I said to him.

The old man's eyes went a little wide, and as they did I noticed their shape. He was definitely like me. A forest animal, of some kind. His pupils weren't circular, but wide... almost like...

"A sheep?" I asked him, taking into account his odd beard.

His earlier shock disappeared as he chuckled, amused. "Sheep! Come, let us sit and talk properly," he said gesturing for me to follow him once more.

Excited, I did so.

Other than my own family, I had only met a few like myself over the course of my life. A bird, when I was young. My father had been friends with a bear. And I had heard tales from my mother about others they had met.

Yet myself knew very few. In fact...

Glancing up a stairwell as we passed it, I noticed someone standing at the top. A tall, thin woman.

My instinct told me she was the same as us.

I wanted to greet her, but the old man spoke as he turned into a room. "Come! Sit!" he said, sounding somewhat excited.

Following him into the room, I found a large square table. There were six chairs, and even some cups of... water, before them.

They must have their meals here, and was what I had heard earlier. Them talking over their breakfast.

"Sit, sit," he ushered, as he too sat down.

Sitting across from him, I glanced at the open door. He hadn't shut it.

"The girl in the front..." I started to speak.

"Amber. She is a human, yes, but she knows of us. You have nothing to fear from her," he said, knowing.

"Ah..." I didn't know just how much I could trust her, or even him, yet... but he hadn't denied he was like me.

It was only fair then...

Reaching up, I took off my hat gently. Placing it before me, I watched as the old man studied my ears.

"Hm... those aren't wolf ears. Maybe a fox?" he asked me.

I smiled gently, and shook my head. "A cat," I said. I didn't know which kind, but my mother had made it very clear.

"A cat! A predator... I'm quite surprised. Welcome, welcome," the older man happily smiled, as if I was some long lost old friend he hadn't seen in a lifetime.

It made me smile back at him just as purely.

"My name is Lughes. Did you really not know of us? Did no one in the society tell you we were here?" he asked, sitting forward with interest.

I slowly shook my head. "I hadn't known... and what society?" I asked, reaching for a nearby cup. I could tell someone had drunk from it already, but it was still mostly full.

Lughes sat back a little, his eyes narrowing. "How old are you?" he asked gently.

"A little more than a century, I suppose," I said. I didn't truly know.

"Did you come from a village?" he asked further.

Although a little bothered with being the only one getting questioned, I decided simply answering would get me my own answers the fastest.

"I just came from a small cabin not too far from here. In the mountain to the south of the lake. If you mean where I was born then... no. My family had settled far from any village or city. My parents hadn't trusted humans," I said. I wasn't going to tell him just where I had been born. I didn't want anyone to know.

Lughes went a little stiff, and I noticed the way he went deep into thought. As if suddenly this conversation was far more serious than it were.

"What's this society?" I asked him.

"It's what we belong to. What we all belong to."

Turning to the new voice, I smiled at the tall thin woman. She was more than a head taller than I was, but probably weighed less than I did.

"Ah... Crane, this is Renn," Lughes said quickly, as if he had completely forgotten she had existed until now.

The tall woman walked up to the table, but didn't sit down. Instead she glared at me.

"Crane?" I asked her, and wondered if that was what she was... it'd make sense, in a way...

She raised her head, and somehow the act reminded me of a bird trying to puff out its feathers. "I am she," she said plainly. As if daring me to say otherwise.

"Nice to meet you," I said, and genuinely meant it.

The woman hesitated, then with a huff pulled out a chair as to sit down with us.

"She's a predator," Crane said simply.

Although it was a little odd to hear it said aloud, I wondered why that mattered.

"Don't birds eat more than simple berries too?" I asked her.

"It's not the same," she said, and looked away from me with an odd noise. For a brief moment, I thought I saw her dress become larger... as if something beneath it had enlarged.

She didn't possibly have feathers, did she?

"Now, now... This is a momentous occasion, Crane. How long has it been since we've met another, for the first time like this?" Lughes asked, and I noticed that he was genuinely happy. He even had tears glistening in his eyes.

Although I too was excited... I didn't know yet if it was something worth crying over.

After all, I had no idea if this was really going to be a good meeting yet or not.

"True... probably fifty years. Shelldon, I think," Crane said, pondering his words.

"Shelldon?" I asked, and wondered just how many were here.

"Another member of our house... although you will probably not get to meet him. He is very, very shy," Lughes said gently.

"He hides," Crane said, and I could tell by her tone that she wasn't too happy with it.

"How... how many of our kind are here?" I asked, excited to hear about more.

"Just us three are in this town, though with you that's now four and..." Lughes said, and then tapped the table, as if he remembered something. "I must have you painted!" he said loudly.

Startled a little, I sat up straight as he hurried off the chair... heading out of the room.

"Wait... what?" I started to stand too, but Crane didn't budge. So I stayed seated.

"Leave him be. He always does this. Are you here to hurt us?" she then asked, sternly.

"Hurt...? Why? No? Are you going to hurt me?" I asked her back.

She blinked, and then sighed. "I see. Good."

Unsure of what to say, I heard shouting from down the hall. Lughes was arguing with someone.

"Leave him be. Amber will handle it," Crane said, and I could tell she meant it. This must really be something common.

"Why... why would he paint me?" I asked.

"So that you'll always be remembered, of course," she said plainly.

My mouth went dry, and I had to sit back a little. I suddenly felt like crying.

"Don't get so emotional, it'll just make him cry and then Amber will yell at us all day," Crane said with a huff.

Smiling gently, I wondered how I was so lucky. To find them, so quickly.

What was going on?

"I heard you say you saw a painting in the inn? Which one? The only paintings we sell to the local merchants are the common ones," Crane asked.

"Oh, a beach scene. I don't know why, but I felt like I recognized it," I said.

"A beach scene...?" She went into thought, but didn't get to say more as the dark skinned young human entered the room.

"Are we painting her?" she asked, and sounded somewhat annoyed. As if she didn't want to do anything today.

"Unless you can convince him to not," Crane said.

The look on Amber's face told me how likely that was.

Studying the woman, I realized she was younger than I thought. Even for a human. Barely a woman at all.

"Hm... she'll be easy, at least... Do you have two ears?" she asked, studying me.

"Two...?" I asked back, and reached up to see if possibly one had fallen off.

"Oh, I see them. You should tie your hair into a braid, or something, so people see the normal ones," Amber then said, pointing at her own tied braid.

Ah, she had meant that. My human ears must have been hidden by my hair.

"Well let's get started then. You can tell me your story as they paint you," Crane said, standing from the table.

Although it sounded so ridiculous, I still found myself smiling and standing just as quickly, to oblige.

Chapter 7: Chapter Six - Vim - A Plate of Thoughts

Lomi was already on her third plate, and I was glad that most humans barely took notice of their surroundings let alone something like how much one could eat.

After all, there was no way a young girl could eat more than several grown men. Not normally, at least.

"The river's already frozen over," a man said behind me. Their table was packed full, and noisy. Most of it was just common chatter, but it was good to hear what troubled this town's fishermen.

Sometimes their commonplace complaints were the best things to hear. It meant nothing weird was going on, nothing was out of place.

To the right of the table of fishermen, was a small family. A pair of parents and an older girl. They were complaining about the man trying to court her. They didn't like him.

Across from them was a table of three men. They were quiet, but no one seemed bothered by them. People knew who they were, at least.

We sat at a corner table, which I was glad we had done. When we had first entered, there had been no one else here. It was now packed.

The only two empty chairs in the whole building were next to me, at our table.

Luckily no one had tried to sit down with us.

"Heard the mountain pass is already overtaken. No more merchants from Ruvindale," a man complained loudly. The snow had lessened here, in the plains, but the mountains were still getting buffeted.

"No more trinkets for the wives!" a man from another table happily agreed, others laughed.

Men were starting to get drunk, and the building was steadily growing louder. People had to shout for the barkeep to send his children out with extra food and drink, instead of just raise their hand and wave.

"Trinkets?" Lomi asked, and I noticed the way her hat shuffled a little. No one else would have noticed, so I said nothing.

I shrugged at her and watched her scan past me. She sat across from me, with her back to the wall. It allowed her to see the whole bar.

I had her sit there so no one would accidentally brush up against her and knock off her hat.

"To another winter!" a woman raised her cup, and for a brief moment the tables grew silent as everyone else joined in a toast.

Lomi likewise raised her cup, even though she seemed to do it just out of instinct. She saw everyone else doing it, so joined them.

After a few moments the place got noisy again, conversations returning.

"Where are we going next, Vim?" Lomi asked, staring into her cup. I could hear the liquid within still sloshing around, so knew it wasn't because it was empty.

"There are two more stops before yours. First is a large lake, then a dark forest," I said.

Lomi absorbed this information, tapping her cup. "Are they far away?" she asked.

"Not really. The lake is about a week from here. Give or take, based on the weather," I said.

Usually the weather didn't affect my speed, but she was a little too young to trek through blizzards and storms. We might end up staying a few days here and there along the way, at random inns and villages.

"Oh..." she went quiet, and I wondered if she was upset that we were still so far from her next home.

Or maybe she thought we were too close?

We'd already been on the road for two weeks...

Maybe I should have stayed longer at Elk's place. She had enjoyed playing with his children.

But I needed to get her to somewhere safe. Every day on the road like this was dangerous for her. I'd protect her, yes, from anything... but...

"Where do you live Vim?" Lomi then asked. She had done so quietly, probably worried others would hear... but I didn't worry about it. The tables around us were either deep in conversation, or drunk. Even the quiet men nearby had started to get into a heated discussion.

"Nowhere. I travel too much," I said.

"Oh... to check on everyone," she said, understanding.

I nodded.

Lomi shifted in her seat, and I wondered if she was done. There was still a plate of food before her, but she had only taken a few bites of it. Maybe seven plates had been enough.

"Why... why were you late?" Lomi then asked.

Although I had expected such a question to come, it still hurt.

"I actually hadn't been. I was several weeks early in coming to your village, Lomi. The timing was..." I said gently.

For a moment she glared at me, and I knew it was because she had originally interpreted my words as a sad excuse... but her gaze softened after a moment.

"Did you know?" she then asked.

"No. I smelled the fires as I approached," I said. It was the truth. I had broken out into a run the moment I had noticed the odd level of stink in the air. I had ran for a whole day.

"Hm..." she went quiet, and once again went to staring at the inside of her cup. As if it was full of wonder.

Staring at the young fox, I knew there was not much I could say. No apology could be given. No promise could be made.

I knew she didn't truly blame me for failing her and her people... but I also knew at the same time, she always would.

Such was the consequences of being the protector of so many people. Such was the inevitability. Failure was not a question of if, but when.

"How long does it take you? To go to each place?" She then asked.

Such a question was normal, but at this current moment... not. It told me she was trying to understand, not just the how but the why.

"Nearly a decade," I said gently.

Lomi looked up over her cup, and stared deep into my eyes. They were glistening a little, and I hoped she didn't start bawling. Although we could pass as father and daughter, it'd be weird if it happened here. Who knows what the people around us would think.

"You normally don't find out until later, huh," she then said.

I nodded softly, and wondered how a child came to such a conclusion.

"Why... why don't we all live together then? So you can always be there?" she asked, a little angrily.

"Why indeed?" I asked back.

Lomi fumed as she took a drink.

Smiling at her, I kept the real reasons inside. After all a young child wouldn't understand.

Or maybe she would. Sometimes such tragic events matured people, far past their years.

"Any more food, folks?" the young daughter of the barkeep asked us as she rounded a nearby table.

I glanced at Lomi, who shook her head quickly.

"Nope, think we're done. Thank you," I said.

She didn't even nod, and went to the next table quickly. Taking more orders, I wondered how much money this place made a day.

There had to be nearly fifty people here. Not bad for a small village on a little river.

I knew there were a few other places to get food here, but this place had been right across from our inn. Quick and easy.

"Do it again!" a man shouted, and several dozen laughs made the place loud. Louder than it had been.

"Are all places this noisy?" Lomi asked, as the room became even louder. Someone had done something stupid.

More alcohol was flowing.

"Actually yes. Usually. Especially once they start drinking," I said.

"It's annoying," she complained.

I knew to her ears, it was probably more than just annoying. Maybe even painful.

"But makes it easy for people like us," I said to her.

She nodded, but grumbled all the same.

Resting my head on a closed fist, I watched Lomi glare at something over my shoulder. Maybe the table behind us. She slowly picked at a piece of food on her plate, as she watched whatever had caught her attention.

This was undoubtedly the first time she's ever been to a real human settlement. Her parents might have taken her to a nearby village once or twice, but had probably not allowed her to mingle like this.

They were, after all, skittish people.

Which might have been why they had been found and hunted down.

Lomi quietly chewed on what was now probably a cold piece of meat, and I wondered how I could start to convince those like her to...

To what?

Become more human?

It made sense to me. If you were like them, you'd not be hunted. At least, to a point.

How could I do it? So many of them hated humans. Despised them. Ran from them, in terror.

It was impossible.

I sighed, and knew it was something I was going to have to actually think about. It was my job to protect them, and doing what I could to prevent future atrocities was also a way of protection.

Times were getting harder. Humans ventured out of their hometowns more and more. Roads were being built. Ships sailed not just seas but rivers and lakes.

The world was shrinking, and not in a good way.

There were a few who lived in human settlements. The painter did. To the south a beaver not only lived in a large village, but actually ran it. Ruled it.

Yet they were seen as the odd ones out. They were the outcasts, the strange ones.

"Say that again!" a man shouted, and I recognized the anger in the slurring raised voice.

I didn't worry over it, nor the sound of a chair falling over as another stood, because it came from the other side of the building. Near the bar itself.

Lomi though went still, her back going straight and her ears perking up beneath her hat.

Waving her down, to tell her it was fine, I wondered if I should ask the painter when I see him. He was on our path, after all.

Maybe it was time I actually started the process. Even if it took decades. Even if it cost lives.

After all, lives were lost anyway. Naturally. Always.

Living all together was impossible... but if I could convince enough of them to adapt, more than they did now... maybe they'd live longer. Last longer.

Maybe I wouldn't lose a whole village, ever again.

I still needed to find the bishop who had done the deed. Or at least, ordered it.

Needed Lomi safe and away from harm, before I could, but I was going to have to come back here eventually...

That was another problem. One even harder to address than how to protect my people.

Even if I killed the bishop, and all those who participated... what would it accomplish?

By the time I found them, most would be too old to do it again anyway. Then their children would just seek revenge. Their family. Their neighbors.

Destroy one human, ten more took their place.

Destroy a single human town, and a whole nation arose from its ashes.

Yet you destroy a single one of our villages, and it quite nearly makes a whole race extinct.

How many foxes were left?

Watching Lomi push her now nearly empty plate away, I knew the truth.

Her race was gone.

The family I was taking her to, who had chose to stay with their friends instead of moving to Lomi's village was just that. A single family.

There might be a few more families out there, which I didn't know of. That no one knew of... but the odds of them surviving much longer...

The odds of them finding each other...

That family had only daughters as well. No sons.

Which meant...

Rubbing my forehead, I hated the honest truth.

Because I had been too late, a whole line of peoples were now gone. Forever lost.

Lomi, or the others, could... have children with others. Humans even. But in most cases, the offspring of our kind didn't carry on the traits. Out of all the halves I knew, only a few had ever been like their non-human parent. And their children had never been.

Mating with a human was the same as dying off.

Though... maybe that was the point.

Maybe that was what was destined to be.

For everyone to be human.

How ironic.

"Vim, can we go?" Lomi asked.

Glancing at her, I realized I had been somewhat lost in thought.

"Ready?" I asked her. I knew she was now full, but I had expected her to want to sit here for some time. To stare and watch the people. The humans. Even though... timid, it was something many of our kind did. We hated them, yet were entranced by them.

"Uh..." she hesitated, and I noticed the way her eyes looked.

Fear.

Fear?

Turning a little, to stare behind me, I expected to find something wrong. Maybe a crowd of armed men.

Instead, I simply found a common scene.

A bar fight.

It wasn't directly near us, but several tables and chairs had been pushed aside, or over, as a group of men fought amongst themselves.

"Hm," I realized what was wrong. Lomi wanted to leave, because of this.

"Break his legs!" one of the men who had been sitting silently near us shouted. Seems they were talkative now.

"He's biting him!" another man shouted, laughing as he spilled his drink.

I studied the fight for a moment, and realized very quickly that it was just that. A simple fight. None of the men were actually trying to kill one another. Several of them were already rolling on the ground, out of breath and stamina.

Too drunk to do anything else but cause a disturbance.

"Let's go then," I said to Lomi. Although I knew it'd not take long for the fight to die down, and some semblance of peace and quiet would return, there was no point to force the poor girl that far outside her comfort zone.

I quickly emptied what was left in my cup, which hadn't been much, and went to guide Lomi out of the bar.

With a steady hand I guided her around the crowd that had formed to watch the fight... and thanks to the commotion, no one noticed us as we left.

"Are they always so violent?" Lomi asked once we were outside.

Taking a nice deep breath of clean winter air, I shrugged. "Sometimes," I said.

I knew what she had really meant. To her that was almost outlandish. Such a brawl was something she had, before her village had been raided, been something she's never known could happen.

Our kind rarely, if ever, actually fought after all.

Lomi stepped closer to me as we headed for our inn. It wasn't that late, but it was dark enough that there was no point doing anything else.

She glanced behind us, most likely to look at the building we had just left, and I wondered if such a moment had hardened her hate for humans, or lessened it.

Usually I would try to teach her to... learn and accept, such things... but I knew there was no point for her.

She had just watched her whole world get ravaged and destroyed by humans.

She'd not understand, nor care to, anytime soon. If ever again.

But I couldn't blame her for that.

"Did you not notice, Vim?" she then asked.

"Notice what?"

"The churchmen," she said plainly.

Pausing, I realized something horrible.

Her look of fear hadn't been because of the fight at all.

"Back there?" I asked, turning around.

"Hm," she nodded, unsure of what to say.

Studying the bar, I noticed the shadows dancing in the lights that emerged from the windows and door. The place was still lively; maybe the fight was still going on.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"They had the same thing on their hats," she said, pointing at her own hat.

A symbol? A pin? Maybe a cross of some kind?

I hadn't noticed.

"Come on," I said, patting her back.

Taking her to the inn, I made sure she fell asleep before I went to find them.

Chapter 8: Chapter Seven - Renn - To Meet a Mouse

"Have them arrive after lunch, please," the older woman requested.

I wrote the request beneath her address, or rather her... master's, address.

Repeating her information, and her request for Amber to not arrive until after lunch time, I made sure to verify it all.

"And the deposit?" the older woman asked.

"Amber will collect it then. Once she knows just how big of a painting it will be, and how much time it will take," I said to her.

"Good. My young lady is looking forward to it. You painted one of her friends, and since then she's done nothing but ask for it," she said with a sigh.

Although the older lady was obviously a servant, I could tell from how she spoke that she did in fact cherish her master. Or at least, the daughter of her master.

"Amber is very good. Most of the noble portraits are done by her," I said.

"Well, I shall eagerly await her. Please let her know that my young lady is indeed a little young, so please be... understanding," the woman smiled gently, as if trying to ask for forgiveness already.

"I'll do so," I said, and wondered if she was speaking of just a normal child's antics or something worse.

Once the older lady left, I retreated into the back shop for a moment to find Crane.

She was preparing our dinner, and it smelled a little odd. Some kind of fruit was mixed in that my nose didn't seem to agree with.

"Which household was it?" she asked.

Looking down at my note, I read the family name. "Primdoll."

"A lower noble. Recently moved here," she said.

"Is that... strange?" I asked.

"Not really. Ever since the church settled down the city has been growing larger and larger, and thus more humans. Which means more powerful humans, too," Crane said.

"Powerful..." I wondered what she meant by that. How were they powerful? Wealth? Numbers? Strength?

"Who's the painting for? The head of the household? The family?" Crane asked further.

"The daughter. She told me to tell Amber that she is... young, and to be understanding because of it," I said.

"Ah, that means she's spoiled. Typical, but typical of even the poor, so not unique to the rich humans," she said.

Spoiled.

I kept an ear out for anyone else entering the shop, and hoped another would soon. Although a little silly, I enjoyed working here. It was... interesting.

"Are all of our customers going to be... servants?" I asked her.

"No. Nobles come in all the time. Then we get the odd ones, like the churchmen. We also get the poor occasionally, or businessmen looking for some new business avenue," Crane said as she went to cutting up some kind of green vegetable.

The kitchen wasn't that large, but it was nice. Large counters, and many drawers. There was a stone fireplace, which allowed one to cook larger items without causing smoke to fill the house. The cabin that Nory and I had used hadn't had such a thing. Nory never minded the house being filled with smoke, but my nose wasn't kind enough to forgive it.

"What do the poor buy?" I asked. Amber had spent some time teaching me over the last few weeks, and I've learned our prices were a little... exorbitant. Even the smallest paintings, of the most basic scenes, were worth more than all the coins I've ever held in my long life.

Granted, I've not held money often, so maybe that was a bad frame of reference.

"Lughes sometimes paints for the unique, for free," she says.

"Oh. Like me," I said. My own painting wasn't finished yet. It was in a room on the third floor, last I heard from Lughes it was about half done.

"You're a little different, Renn," Crane said with a tiny chuckle. While she giggled, I noticed the way her neck twitched...

It was a little longer than normal. Enough to be noticed. And although she herself was a thin woman, her neck did seem a little larger than it should be.

When she became very expressive, or laughed, it jiggled a little oddly. As if she wasn't as thin as she looked. As if she had a bunch of extra skin.

Crane finished chopping whatever she had been dicing, and went to dumping the newly diced ingredients into a large pot.

Stepping towards it, I tried to make out the smell of the contents. I could smell spices, and recognized a few of the herbs...

"Some kind of fruit?" I asked.

"Pumpkin," she said with a smile.

Pumpkin. Nory had tried to grow those.

"You and Amber shall eat these," Crane then said, pointing to a nearby plate.

Sure enough, long thin strips of meat sat waiting to be prepared.

"Hm..." I studied the marbled meat, and wondered what it was. It looked like some kind of deer meat.

"No. It doesn't bother me to cook game or meat," Crane then said.

"Ah... I figured. You make it often for Amber. Do you not eat meat at all?" I asked her. Although I've been coming here for several weeks now, it was only the last few days I've actually dined with them.

I started eating constantly with them once I moved in. Or rather, once my money had run out.

"I... can. Oddly, it doesn't even make me sick... yet..." Crane went silent, and I knew that was all I'd get from her. She went quiet often.

Studying her as she focused on the task before her, I hoped to spend many years becoming close friends with her. Her and the rest.

They were good people. Although, always busy. Crane was always here, in the building, but was always doing something. Amber and Lughes were also always painting, or visiting a customer elsewhere, so I hadn't had much opportunity to talk much with them.

It was interesting to see how infuriated Crane and Lughes had become, once I came to offer my goodbyes. They had felt insulted that I'd just up and leave, all because I had nowhere to live.

"Hm. I'll try some of your pumpkin too. Is it a soup?" I asked.

Before I could get an answer, the little bell on the front door made a noise. I turned and left Crane to her cooking, since I could tell by the odd sound of the feet that it wasn't anyone I knew.

Sure enough I found an older man. He was dressed nicely, and had a long black cane. One he actually used for support, unlike many others I've seen using for simple ascetics.

"Welcome to The Sleepy Artist," I greeted the man, and put on a smile.

Amber didn't smile when a guest came in. She was odd that way... and she also had told me I didn't need to, nor did I need to fake a smile... but...

I wasn't faking it.

This was enjoyable.

"Yes. I am Brian Hardsetter. I've come to inquire about a painting I saw a few months ago in a friend's home," he said.

As he spoke he stepped towards me, towards the counter near the end. I noticed his eyes linger and scan the paintings he passed, seizing them up in more than just a glance. He was looking for something.

"We keep a record of what we paint, but some clients request their purchases to remain private... could you describe the painting?" I asked him.

It was what I had been told to say, after all. Oddly many customers were men like him. People who had seen one of our paintings elsewhere, and either wanted one for themselves... or rather a better one.

"It was a snake. A very, very large snake," the man said, coming to a stop before the desk.

Studying the man, I took note of his eyes. The pupils especially.

He was human. His appearance, his smell... nothing about him told me he was anything but human.

I had met a snake before. Although our meeting hadn't been very pleasant, I'd never forget their eyes.

This man didn't have eyes like hers.

Yet... you couldn't be so sure.

The man was still looking around; at each and every painting he could see. There were many, of course, and I was used to it. Very few could enter here and not let their eyes wander.

"A large snake. That will probably be rather easy for our artist to remember. Did your friend tell you when he had purchased it?" I asked him.

"About five years ago. He bought several from you, but that's the only one I am interested in," he said.

"Would you like to commission a similar painting?" I asked, wondering if that was what he wanted.

"Well..." he paused, and his eyes finally found something

I stayed silent as he studied a painting not too far from me. Behind me, near the ceiling just by the hallway to the stairwell.

Glancing at the thing that caught his interest, I noticed the very large bird swooping over a lake. It was a pretty scene, but there was indeed something... mystical about it.

After all, the bird was obvious. It didn't look too strange, but if one studied close enough they could see that the lake the bird was gliding over was no small pond at all.

The bird in the painting was probably bigger than anything possible. Bigger than this very building we were in.

"Who paints these?" the man asked.

"We employ several artists. They come and go. Currently we have three artists in our employ," I said.

I had still not yet met the turtle, though.

"I'd love to meet them. I'm..." the man startled, and seemed to realize he was being a little odd. He coughed, and while leaning on his cane stuck his hand out over the desk.

"Forgive me. I'm Brian Hardsetter. I'm on the hunt for myths," he said. Re-introducing himself as if he forgot he had already done so.

My smile was finally faked, as I forced myself to shake his hand.

"Hunting myths?" I asked, hoping to get as much information out of him as possible.

"Yes. You see I was born in a rather... odd town. Which worshiped a very large mouse," he said.

Blinking, I watched him dance his fingers along the countertop after our hands separated, as if he was trying to mimic a little mouse running along its top. "So big in fact that the hole it lived in is now considered a cave. One of the largest all around," he added.

"I... I see?" I said, and wondered what to say now.

"Since then I've been fascinated. I recently had the pleasure to meet someone who also came from a similar village, although they worshiped some kind of giant lizard. Told all this to my friend, who then invited me to his home to see the painting. He told me that the painting was done based off a legend from some town, with a similar theme," he said.

As he rambled, I started to calm down. My fake smile became a little less forced and my heart began to beat a little slower.

"So by hunt you mean..."

"To research. I wish to write a book," he said happily.

Although it should have been obvious, the man was far too old and... infirm, somehow. Maybe his left leg. An old wound maybe. His knee was a little oddly angled... He was no great warrior.

"So you want to ask about the legend that was painted? It's a common theme, I'm sure," I said. I was feeling a lot better now that I knew what was happening.

Not that this man wasn't still a little dangerous. But...

"Yes. And to commission one myself. Of my family's old deity," he said happily.

"The large mouse," I said.

"Giant. A giant mouse," he corrected.

I nodded, and noticed he had taken offense.

Maybe it wasn't an old deity at all.

To worship a mouse though... Humans could be odd sometimes.

"I'm sure that can be arranged. Are you a local or do you live elsewhere?" I asked, beginning the process of taking the man's information.

"I'll be staying here for the winter. If it takes longer than that, I hope enough can be done that you'll simply be able to deliver it once you finish it," he said.

Pulling around the paper we used for such orders, I made sure to study the man intently as I took his information.

I studied his posture. His smirk. I memorized his smell.

Just in case.

Just in case...

Chapter 9: Chapter Eight - Vim - A Boat, a Fisherman and a Lizard

"How does it float?" Lomi asked, studying the far off boat.

It was still an hour or so away. Rather annoyingly, honestly. There was a cold wind in the air, and although it didn't bother me it was bad enough that it was strange that it didn't.

Only one other person was here on the dock after all, because of how cold it was. And I knew if Lomi and I didn't start shivering and complaining, he'd notice.

Humans always noticed the oddest things.

"It's because of what it's made of, and because of how it affects the water. The shape. There's..." I glanced at the older man. A fisherman, by the look of him. He had no fishing pole, nor carried fish, but the smell that permeated him was the stink of a man who spent long days, many long days, with fish. He was far enough down the dock, and the wind was strong enough, that he'd not be able to hear anything we said. "There's a science to it," I finished.

Lomi glanced down the dock, to the man I had looked at.

"Is that a bad word?" she asked, wondering why I had paused like I had.

"To some. This town has a large abbey. A church. They're not always... discontent with teaching things, but sometimes they get uppity about it. Better safe than sorry," I said.

"It's bad to teach things?" she asked, her childish innocence was painful.

"Sometimes."

"Is he a churchman?" she asked.

"Doesn't look it. He smells like a fisherman," I said.

She turned her head in thought, and I noticed the way she sniffed the air. "I don't smell him," she said.

"I only smell him when the wind hits the right angle," I gave her a tiny lie.

Lomi hummed as she glanced at the man again. "Why's he waiting so far away from us?" she asked.

Another part of innocence that was painful.

"Could be several reasons. He might not like waiting so close to the water. It might make the air colder, after all. Plus you're obviously a child. He probably doesn't want to seem odd by getting close to you," I said.

"It'd be odd to get close to me?" she asked.

"Sometimes. In some situations," I said. Humans were odd like that sometimes.

"He looks cold," she noted.

"I'm sure he is," I nodded.

Lomi quickly lost interest in the man, and returned to looking out towards the lake.

The lake was large... and I noticed that there was a severe lack of boats on the horizon. Either the weather was actually worse out there than it looked, or it was some holiday I didn't know about. I never paid attention to the time of the year. Unless it started snowing, or became blazingly hot, I'd rarely notice the change of the seasons.

"They live inside the town?" Lomi asked, changing topics.

"Yes. Near the market," I said. Unless they had changed buildings for some reason. It wasn't often, but it did happen sometimes. Accidents. Fire. Re-building...

"Huh," she found that odd, but I knew why.

She hadn't lived near a town. Neither had Elk's family. For an obvious reason.

The fewer humans around, the better.

"Lughes is odd. He likes humans," I said.

"He does?" Lomi asked, turning toward me in worry.

I noted the way her eyes studied me. There was a hint of fear in them.

"To a degree. Humans can be... cruel," I said, and was careful in how I said it.

After all, she now feared them. She was fine when I was next to her, but...

"You'll learn to hide amongst them, you've been doing well already," I said to her, hoping a small compliment would change that look on her face.

Such looks hurt. Especially on someone so young.

Lomi smiled, but it was a sad one. Her eyebrows were knotted in grief, and I had to look away.

Despair like that was why I had become who I am. Yet... lately...

Lately it's felt like my efforts have been useless.

It was less than a year ago that another village had been burnt down. Granted, only one had died. The rest had ran and escaped... now living happily again in a thick forest up north, but the fact remained that they had lost their home. A place they had lived in for hundreds of years.

A better result than Lomi's village... but was it really?

"Look at that," Lomi pointed downward, towards my feet.

Looking down, I found a small lizard. It had climbed up onto my shoe, maybe to get off the thin layer of ice on the ground we stood on.

"It shouldn't be awake right now," I said. Why was it still awake? It was far too cold already. It should have long since...

But I knew the reason.

This was its last year. Age. Disease. Injury. It could be one of many things, but the animal probably sensed it. Sensed that if it hibernated, it'd die anyway.

Lomi knelt down, to study the small lizard. It had small horns on its head, and ignored her even as she drew close.

"Are... are there those like us? But like this? Not human-like?" she asked.

Although the question was odd... I knew why she had asked. She had met the family of deers, and had compared them to her own. They had not looked much different than humans. While she had ears, that were very obvious.

"There are. I've met a few animals that can talk, and reason. But most stay to themselves... and..." I didn't like to say it, but knew she could handle it. "And humans have hunted most of them, too," I added.

Lomi looked up at me, and that sad look came back. I had expected it, but it bothered me all the same as if I hadn't.

"Why?"

Such a simple word. Yet it was full of emotion. Layers upon layers of feelings, and thoughts.

If only I could show her face to the whole world. If only moments like this could be painted, and captured, for all to see.

Maybe then people wouldn't be so violent.

Maybe then they'd realize we were just as human.

"It's not simple, Lomi. Many... creatures, are violent by nature. And some are just doing what they must. Many of our kind were very cruel to humans in the past. Although that was a very, very long time ago the humans don't forget. Or rather, even if they forgot, their instincts didn't," I said.

There was no point to go into detail into just how cruel our ancestors had been. Especially those who are considered predators. She'd not understand. She may not even care.

Lomi stood up, and I noticed the lizard remained seated. Was my foot that warm?

"So... because some of us killed humans, they all hunt us? How is that fair?" she asked.

"It's not. Nor is it an excuse. But... it is the reality," I said.

She sighed, and I was glad that the boat was drawing closer. It was still a distance, probably so much that no one on the craft could see us on the dock waiting for them.

While I studied the wooden vehicle, I wondered how long it took to craft such a large thing. Humans could be quick, sometimes, and there were many of them... but did it take months? Years? Surely not days.

Feet crunched fresh snow, and then the tiny layer of ice beneath it. I didn't turn, since I figured that the fisherman had simply finally seen the boat on the horizon. Human eyesight was bad, especially as they grew older, so it'd make sense.

Yet he didn't just draw near, he actually came up closer. I listened intently to his footsteps, since I knew if I turned to address him too quickly he'd startle.

After all, no human should be able to hear someone walking up towards them in this loud wind. Even Lomi hadn't noticed his approach yet.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Lomi startled as I turned to look at the speaker.

It was the older man who had been standing farther away. He had an apologetic smile, and I wondered if he was going to ask me for the ferry fee. A beggar, possibly. He didn't look that poor, but...

But before he could say anything, his eyes left my own. They drifted downward, at an angle... and I watched a familiar face form upon him.

With a dry mouth, I glanced back towards my young companion... but I knew what I'd find.

His look had told me everything.

Sure enough, I found a young Lomi chasing a hat. One that had flown off... from either the wind or her brisk turn upon being startled by the man's voice.

It didn't land too far from her, and she was quick in putting it back on... but the deed was done.

I turned back towards the man, and watched the way his eyes lingered on her. The way the wide pupils had gone a little blank. The way his mind was turning wildly, to the point he had even forgotten to breathe.

While Lomi secured her hat, I spent the two seconds it took to decide. To see if there was any chance he'd chalk it up to a play of light. A delusion of tiredness and exhaustion.

Then his eyes looked at me, and the newfound fear in his expression decided my next move.

The man was old. Probably too old to be working. He may just be a traveler. Or fished for fun. Or maybe he oversaw, and gave orders, to the younger fisherman. But his frame wasn't small. He stood my height, and his shoulders were just as wide. His arms just as thick.

His body spoke of the years of hard labor. The years of hard work.

And men like him weren't cowards. Decades of hauling fish, and then drinking all night with their fellows made hardy men. At his age he might have even seen war.

The kind that didn't balk and cower and then flee at the mere sight of something impossible.

Yet it was precisely because he was that kind of a man, that he could tell what was about to happen.

"Wait," he was only able to say one word. He raised his hands, as he took a single step back. His earlier look of fear now heightened, by something new.

The young girl had startled him. Her ears had shocked him.

Yet it was I he was terrified of.

I stepped towards him. A single, heavy foot. One that had landed so harshly onto the ground, the dock that floated only a few feet away rocked from the impact. I heard waves. I heard things fall into the water with little thunks, most likely little icicles breaking and falling off the edge of the dock. I heard Lomi startle again, this time with a yelp. I heard a far off cry of a gull. An odd echo of wind, through the forest of trees nearby.

I heard the gasp of shock, as he tried to raise his hands to block me. To stop me. To flee.

Then, finally, I heard the crunch of bone and meat, as I sent my other foot into his stomach.

For a mere moment, I watched my foot dig into the man. Heel first. I saw a glob of spit, and probably snot, fly from his face. Mouth or nose, I couldn't tell from the angle. I saw the tiny lizard fly off into the air, towards the lake. The poor thing had still been sitting on my foot.

Then the moment ended, and the man was sent flying.

It was a solid blow. It lifted him up off the ground, and sent him backward. The man had flown backward with such force, a worn down shoe had flung off one of his feet.

The man landed limply, and rolled for several feet. Luckily, although there was a layer of snow on the ground... there was no trail of blood, or entrails. And I knew soon the continuous fall of the snow would hide the strange drag marks left behind from his tumbling.

"Vim?" Lomi found her voice, and I ignored her. At least briefly.

Quickly glancing around, I made sure we were really alone. Luckily I didn't see, or smell, anyone else. Not even a deer.

Walking towards the man, I didn't rush. The man wasn't moving.

Even his earlier trembling from the cold had stopped.

Reaching the man, I stared down at my deed.

The man was dead.

He was on his side, sprawled a little haphazardly. His face was frozen in a terrified expression. There was a tiny splatter of blood near his head. Oddly the blood wasn't even from his mouth, or nose, but rather because his right eye had popped out. It still hung in the socket.

Bending down, I grabbed the man by his thick jacket. Hefting him up, I once again confirmed he was dead. There was a certain weight to men who died. They were a little heavier than when alive, yet at the same time lighter than they should be.

I scanned the nearby forest, and quickly found a suitable location. Walking towards the forest, I made sure to walk elsewhere first... then after walking far enough into the forest; I rounded a set of trees and walked a little more.

For a little while my footprints will leave a trail, but I didn't need to worry. I just needed to hide the body long enough that no one who gets off the boat will find it before the boat leaves again.

Finding a good spot, between some trees and rocks, I dumped the man's body. The way his head hit one of the rocks told me that the man wasn't faking it at all. He was dead.

"Sorry," I said to him, and somewhat meant it.

The man hadn't been at fault after all.

Walking back towards the dock, I found Lomi still standing where I had left her.

She stood stiffly at my reemergence from the forest. And her eyes held my own as I walked back up to her.

"Vim..." she said my name, and I knew that it was more of an accusation than anything else.

"Lomi," I said hers gently, and hoped she understood what I meant.

Her face scrunched up, and she looked away from me. To the ground. As if I was too scary to look at anymore.

With a small sigh, I nodded and glanced behind me. To the footprints, and the place that the man had fallen.

The snow wasn't falling too harshly, but it was still falling. It'd be a few hours, and most of the evidence would be long gone. Buried, like everything else.

In fact, if the weather got worse... it could be a very long time before the man ever gets found. Especially if a bear, or something like it, found him first.

A heavy sniff drew my eyes back to the young girl.

Little hands, firmly gripping the hat on her head, pulled it down harder. As if to secure it forever in place. As if to turn back time, and stop it from ever happening again.

She was finally shaking, like she should be in this cold weather... but the chill on the wind was far from the reason as to why she shook.

I reached out, but hesitated. My hand lingered a few moments above her head, and before I could find my nerve my hand fell back to my side.

Looking away from her, and to the boat that was still slowly approaching, I hoped she'd stop crying by the time they got here.

Though if she chose not to, I'd not fault her. I'd cover for her.

It was my job after all. My purpose.

To protect them.

From being found. From being caught. From being hunted.

From even themselves.

And protect them I would...

Even if I was so damn bad at it.

Chapter 10: Chapter Nine - Renn - The Non-Human Society

"We get them a lot," Amber said as she stuffed another cookie into her mouth.

For such a small and thin woman, she sure did eat a lot. We had just got done with dinner. And she had eaten almost as much as me. And I've always eaten more than others.

"They're called pagans. The church does not like them, nor do they want us to associate with them, which is why they request things in such odd ways," Lughes explained.

"So... he's not a danger to us?" I asked.

"Most likely not. He probably just wants a painting of his god, this giant mouse thing," Amber said as she eyed the plate of cookies that sat in the center of the table. Was she going to eat all of them? I was tempted to not have any, just to see if she could or not.

"Are there many paintings like that? Here? Can I see them?" I asked Lughes.

"Oh... there are. I'll show you later," he said, excited.

Amber rolled her eyes, but said nothing. And not just because she had grabbed another cookie.

"Are there... lots of these pagans?" I asked another question, interested. It was a little odd, to find out that there were humans who worshiped people like us, or large animals... I mean... really?

Gods? Us?

"Oh indeed! Most used to be, until the churches grew so powerful. The church has slowly been proselytizing this world, and probably will get us all someday," Lughes said.

The bearded goat chuckled, as if he himself had nothing to do with any of it. Not even the world, which he so obviously lived within.

"Most the wars lately have been over religion," Amber said.

"Ah, they have been. In fact right now is some kind of siege, down south. Over a kidnapped saint," Lughes said, as if remembering something he had just talked about with someone. Probably had.

"Saint?" I asked.

"My mother was a saint," Amber said, with a cookie in hand.

Frowning, I wondered what that meant.

Lughes nodded, getting my attention. "A holy woman. The church uses them to display their power, or grant wealth," he explained.

"For her it was a curse," Amber though said.

I wanted to ask far more, but could tell by the way Amber bit into the next cookie that I shouldn't. She hadn't even chewed that one.

"So... how many of our kind are there? Or how many do you know?" I asked Lughes.

The goat scratched his beard, and I heard the odd sound as he did so. It really was more wool than anything else.

"Hm..." he pondered something for a moment, but before he could decide on what to say Amber grumbled something.

"Wait... you haven't explained the society to her yet?" Amber then asked, nearly dropping her newly grabbed cookie.

"Oh! Oh... no, I'm so sorry," Lughes startled, and I wondered why he was so odd. I hadn't thought goats, or sheep, to be so... air headed.

"He's been busy," I said for him. I admit I was growing impatient and wanted to know all about it... but I also knew I had time. We all did.

Or well, those like us did.

"She's been here for a month already," Amber spoke with a harsh tone, which told me she was annoyed not just for my sake but because this happened often.

Lughes was bad. He seemed to not only be scatterbrained but also forgot the urgency of stuff, sometimes. For a human, it was probably worse and far more annoying when he did so.

"Yes, well... We belong to the Non-Human Society," Lughes then said.

"We do?" I asked.

"Well, you should. I don't know if you belong just yet," Lughes said with a sigh.

"Do I need to pay or something?" I asked, smiling. I knew that wasn't the case, but it was a funny thought.

Amber snickered as she chewed another cookie. There were only a few left.

"No! Nothing of the sort... we just need to get you written into the ledgers. The tomes," he said happily.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Just books. That have the names of those like you," Amber said.

"Names..."

Lughes coughed, and went to grab a cookie. Before he could, Amber grabbed another. Lughes hesitated before he picked up his first cookie, and I smiled as he wearily took a bite of it. As if unsure if she'd snatch it from his hand or not.

Maybe she would, when taking into account that glare she had.

"It sounds fancy, but all it is are a bunch of your kind keeping in touch with each other. Writing letters, and stuff," Amber then said.

"Are you part of it too?" I asked her.

"I am, but I'm a human," she said plainly.

A human, in a supposed non-human group. Quaint.

"Most live alone. Families who live out in the middle of no-where. Others live like us, blending in. Some also live in whole villages. Not too far from here is a large village of foxes, one of my friends lives there. Kathrene," Lughes said.

"Whole villages?" I asked, and was shocked to hear it. I hadn't thought it possible.

"There are a few villages with predators, but I'll be honest I don't know of any cats. You'd think there'd be quite a few of you, but in the end you are still predators," Lughes said with a sigh.

Frowning, I wondered why he would say it that way. "What do you mean?"

"Predators die early, I guess. Something to do with the way you guys don't hide," Amber said.

"Predators fight back," Crane entered the room, carrying a plate. She placed it on the table, near Amber.

Another stack of cookies made Amber smile. It was a rare sight on her face, and I planned to eventually buy her similar snacks later. She'd probably give me such a smile if I brought them when she least expected it.

"You mean to the humans, don't you?" I asked.

"Well, yeah? What else will you fight with?" Amber asked.

"There used to be other things to fight," Crane said as she took a seat at the table.

Amber's look told me she didn't know anything about it, and it didn't seem Crane or Lughes were in any mood to tell her.

"Those like us have an easier time blending in, and also living with the humans. Predators find it difficult, especially if they have to be subservient," Crane explained.

"Ah... That does make sense," I agreed. My parents had hated humans to the point that they had chosen death over asking them for help.

Those like me had a tendency to either live in solitude, or ended up with their backs to the wall.

We didn't run and hide when that happened. We stood and fought. We held our ground.

And obviously, like my parents...

We always lost.

"Which is why it's rare to see you. It's a sad thought, but you may be one of the last of your kind Renn," Lughes said.

"Probably," I said. It was a sad thought, but nothing that I wasn't used to thinking.

Amber groaned, sitting back to stretch. Did her stomach hurt? "Vim should be here soon. Just ask him. These two are too air headed to be of any use," Amber then said.

"Oh! He will be won't he?" Lughes grew excited as he nodded, remembering.

"Him?" I asked.

"Vim," Crane corrected. "The society's protector. He travels around checking in on everyone, and it's about time he comes here... in fact, he might even be a little late," she said.

"He's not. He usually shows up as the snow begins to pile," Lughes said.

"It has been. For a month," Amber complained.

Lughes waved her comment away, which told me he hadn't actually noticed the snow yet.

Was he that old?

"How old are you?" I asked him.

"Hm? Hm..." His eyes went dull, as Crane snickered.

Sitting patiently, I wondered if he was older than me. He looked like it, but looks really didn't mean a whole lot when it came to our kind. Sometimes we looked young forever, other times we aged quickly...

"He's nearly four hundred years old," Crane answered finally, when we all realized he wasn't going to remember.

Lughes tilted his head, as if he was wondering if she was correct or not.

"Is he really?" Amber groaned, staring at the old man sitting next to her.

"I must be. Shelldon is older. Probably why he sleeps so much," Lughes said after a moment. I could tell by the way he smiled that he had abandoned all effort in remembering his actual age.

"Is he sleeping now?" I asked. Maybe that was why I hadn't met him yet.

"No," was all Crane said.

Great. That meant he's been talking to them. He was just hiding from me.

Was I that scary?

"It's not really you, Renn. I've only met him once, and I'll be twenty in a few months," Amber said.

"Twenty! So old!" Lughes said happily.

Amber smiled, but shook her head.

"I do remember her when she was a baby. That wasn't that long ago," Crane said, nodding.

"Right! Vim brought her and her mother. All bundled up, wasn't she?" Lughes nodded, closing his eyes as if to relive the memory.

The one being talked about was silent, ignoring them both. She was more focused on the plate of cookies near her.

She couldn't possibly be...

She was able. It only took her a few bites to eat another.

Were they that delicious?

"So... Vim brought you here?" I asked her.

"He brought my mother. I was just a baby, not like I had a say in the matter," Amber said, as if annoyed over it.

Annoyed, yet still lived here. Still stayed here, with them.

Smiling at her, I watched her grab another cookie... but this time she didn't go straight to eating it. "He's okay. At least he's a little more normal than these two," she said as she pointed her cookie at Crane.

"Okay, she says. Don't let her lie to you, she absolutely hates Vim," Crane said.

I sat up a little, since the way Amber's face contorted told me that Crane was telling the truth.

"You hate him?" I asked, and wondered why. Amber was a little... prickly sometimes, but she seemed like such a good-hearted girl. If she hated someone, there was probably a good reason.

"I don't! Not really... he's just..." she sighed, and I realized this was something that was talked about before. Maybe even in length.

"She doesn't like how dangerous he is," Lughes said plainly.

"No! It's not that!" Amber tried to argue, and I wondered if she was blushing. It was hard to tell, with her skin tone.

"It's okay, Amber. He scares me sometimes too," Crane said, nodding in agreement.

"I said it's not that!" Amber's voice became a little higher, as she tried to defend herself.

"He's dangerous?" I asked, and wondered why Crane was scared of him. Granted she had been a little scared of me when we had first met too, but that had been for obvious reasons. She was worried I was here to hurt her, or her family.

"Vim's a predator. Like you. It scares us sometimes," Lughes said gently.

"Ah..." I understood, and wondered if that meant Crane and Lughes felt a small sense of discomfort around me.

That hurt more than Lughes saying I was the last of my kind.

"There's nothing to actually be afraid of though, he's our protector," Crane said.

Lughes nodded, as Amber sulkily lowered her head, as if she hoped she'd be forgotten amidst the conversation and left alone for a while.

"What... what do you mean by protector? I get the meaning of the word but..." I didn't know exactly what I wanted to ask, but I felt like I needed to know.

"He protects us. When we need help, he gives it. He's stronger than we are, so he's able to fight for us if needed," Crane said.

"If we needed a new home, he helps us find one. Or if someone needs protection, like if the church is trying to find them, he helps keep them safe and hidden," Lughes added. As he spoke, I noticed the way he smiled. It was a genuinely warm smile, full of happy memories. He wasn't speaking about people or scenarios long forgotten, but something he himself remembered. Maybe his own past.

The smile looked a little weird on him, since his beard was so woolly, but... he was obviously prideful. And happy to be so.

It was... odd to see, but it made sense.

Only a sheep could take so much pride in being protected.

"Do you have a painting of him?" I asked.

The three went silent, and then looked at one another. Even Amber, who gently put down the cookie she had been about to eat had gone quiet.

"Hm?" I wondered if I had asked something bad. Were they not painting me, the same way they painted others they met? For the same reasons? So that all throughout the years, we'd not be forgotten, not truly?

"Well... actually..." Lughes perpetually aloof demeanor became rife with worry.

"He destroys them," Amber said flatly.

She nodded as I looked at her. "If he sees any drawings or paintings of him, he burns or rips them up. He's very rude," she confirmed.

Rude, I noted. She spoke from experience. Maybe this was why she hated him. Or at least, why others thought she did.

"I see," I said, and decided to let it be.

Amber sighed, and then glanced at the two others at the table. "But... if you promise to keep it a secret," she then said.

"Oh?" I grew excited. She had a new smile on her face. One I'd never seen before.

That was the face of a mischievous child. The kind that did exactly what they were told not to.

Amber nodded, and stood. "I'll be right back," she said hurriedly.

The young woman hurried out of the room, and I heard her light footsteps as she climbed the stairs.

"So she has one, does she?" I asked, amused.

"Seems so. He really is adamant about not painting him, but I should have figured she'd have a few of him... if anything just to spite him," Crane said with a small laugh.

The three of us smiled at each other, and the moment filled my heart with joy.

How I loved this. How I longed for this.

Maybe a few more moments like this, and I'd forget the many horrible moments that have recently plagued my dreams.

"Still, I am sorry Renn. For not telling you earlier," Lughes apologized after a moment.

"It's fine. We have a lot of time, after all," I said.

"We do. Amber does not though, and you should stop forgetting that Lughes," Crane said with a warning.

The beard bobbed a little as he nodded gently.

"Is this society large? Are there enough of us... to last the years?" I asked.

"Almost enough. There are a little under a thousand, as far as I'm aware. Vim knows more. There are many who refuse to formally join the society so although they're a part of it, they're not known by others," Lughes said.

"Ah... that's why you asked if I was sent here, for a painting," I said.

He nodded. "Many of our older brethren come here, before their end, so that they can be remembered... one way or another," Lughes said gently.

It was a little sad to hear, but I had expected it. After all... what other point was there to such paintings?

Yet... I wonder if that meant that I had looked like that to him. When we met.

Had I looked like someone about to die? Or at least, someone who had accepted that fact?

"And it is not easy. The paints are hard to make. The paper even harder. So we need to make money to be able to afford it. Then we also need to keep trained artists nearby, in case we need them... It's always so hectic," Crane said with a huff, as if she hated how much effort it took.

"Thus the store," I said, understanding.

Lughes nodded. "Still, it is fun is it not? There's always something to do. Always another scene to paint. Always another brushstroke," Lughes said happily.

I agreed, but wondered if that was all it was. It was... a great purpose. A phenomenal lifestyle... but...

"Thank you. Both of you. For letting me in," I said to them gently.

The two silently smiled at me, but said nothing. After all, nothing else needed to be said.

"Remember, don't tell Vim I have these!" Amber came back, carrying several large papers.

"I won't," I promised, and watched with interest as she laid them upon the table. Crane had to move the few plates of cookies as she did, since she had practically dropped them.

Amber turned around the top sheet, which was a rather large drawing. It was done with a single color, and rather... rough. As if done hastily.

Studying the art, I watched as Lughes and Crane both grabbed other drawings, to study them themselves.

Most looked to be simple, but there were a few that were actually very detailed. Very well done. She was obviously a great artist, and it showed... even the most basic scene was...

Painted in dull colors, was the scene of a man sitting at what looked to be a windowsill. He was relaxed, and staring out the window at something. Only parts of the window, and the wall around it, were drawn... but the scene was obvious. He looked calm, and for all the world looked half asleep.

Another drawing, which was a little smaller, was similar. He was reading a book, lazily reading on a chair.

From sitting, to eating, to even shaving... her drawings all seemed to have a similar theme. The kind of theme that made it a little too obvious.

Was she infatuated with him? Maybe their earlier antics had been just that, simple teasing.

"Your tastes are obvious, Amber," Lughes said with a chuckle.

"I don't like painting him doing bad things! He looks ugly when he fights," Amber though didn't seem that embarrassed. If anything she seemed a little too calm.

Oh? Maybe she wasn't infatuated. Maybe this was just her method. Her taste in drawing rather than men.

Amber dug through some of the papers, and found what she was looking for. Pulling it out and placing it on top for all to see, I found the first heavily detailed scene I've seen of him.

It was a rather dark picture. Most of the drawing had been done in black paint, amidst darker grays and browns... and the bottom half of the painting was almost a solid color. Not because it was just a foundation, or border for another painting, but because of the things painted.

Corpses.

Carcasses. Of humans and beasts alike. They were mangled, and there were oddly graphic parts to the painting. The type that told me that she had most likely seen this scene herself. Most likely as it had happened. And it had left a lasting impression.

Standing on top of the pile of mangled bodies, was a smiling man. He bore a wicked smile, that somehow made my stomach churn.

It was the same man from all the other paintings, but there was something different about him. He wasn't drawn better, or worse, but...

"I remember this. Is that how he looked to you then? Fascinating," Lughes though didn't seem bothered at all about the scene, as we all studied it.

Going off this painting alone, I would have not questioned their earlier assessment of her feelings for him.

This looked like a haunting nightmare. This scene had bothered the painter, to the point they had to draw it... at least, that's what I felt upon looking at it.

However... as cruel and wicked his smile were... as graphic and detailed as the mangled mess that piled beneath him, I didn't really see a man that was terrifying.

He didn't look nice, at least not in this painting, but he didn't look as scary as some of the monsters he stood upon.

"So... his name is Vim?" I asked.

"Some just call him the protector. But that's kind of silly," Crane said.

"He... looks normal? Unless you chose to not draw his non-human characteristics," I said, but found that a little silly. After all, she had also painted the very beasts beneath him.

"He does. As far as I'm aware he looks perfectly human," Crane said.

Human indeed. He looked average. The kind of average that if I had passed him on the road, I'd never have noticed him. He could be just one of many.

"Then what is he?" I asked. Although some of us could look very human, I knew there was always something somewhere that was different. Like my ears and tail. Lughes' eyes and beard. Crane's odd neck, and the feathers beneath her clothes.

"No one knows," Lughes said plainly.

"What?" I asked, and wondered if they had forgotten, or maybe they had simply not ever cared to find out.

"They don't, Renn. Or at least, if they do it's the only secret in the whole world they can keep from me. They genuinely don't know, no one does," Amber said, sitting down. As she sat she rummaged through her paintings to look at them. To study them with a judgmental eye. As if they weren't even hers.

I frowned at them, and wondered how that was possible.

"Really. We don't. As far as I'm aware no one does. He's never told anyone, and no one's ever found out," Lughes said with a sigh.

"There are a lot of assumptions. Even bets, between some of us. But we really don't know," Crane said, adding her testimony.

"Huh... doesn't that seem a little odd?" I asked.

"Is it?" Crane asked.

"It is! But they don't think it's weird. All they know is he's a predator and they're happy enough knowing that," Amber complained.

Well... I wasn't.

Staring at one of the drawings... one where he was smiling at something, in the distance. Staring at something which he must have found precious. Maybe even a friend. He looked like how Nory had on occasion, when she looked at me.

I could tell they were telling the truth, if anything thanks to Amber's annoyance... but it bothered me.

They seemed to trust him. Called him their protector.

Yet didn't know what he was.

Did that mean he didn't trust them?

How was that possible?

"Can I keep this one, Amber?" Lughes asked.

"No! He'll find out, because you can't keep secrets, then he'll come find these ones," Amber stood, grabbing the thin paper from Lughes hand.

Lughes frowned, hurt a little, but said nothing. I could tell though, what he was actually thinking.

He'd get it later, once she was gone. Even if it took many years.

Running my fingers along one of the paintings, I smiled at the man.

She might hate him. She might love him. She might be scared of him...

But he was still someone she could paint so carefully. Draw so preciousy.

Which told me more than enough that he was worth meeting.

"I look forward to meeting him," I said.

"Hm. Me too. He owes me a coat," Amber said with a nod.

"Oh? Tell more," I said, enjoying the constant happy surprises.

A happy home. Full of friends, if not family in their own way.

A neat society. Of my own people.

And a protector?

What more could I ask for?