

Part I — Childhood in Kugane (Years 0-11)



Chapter 1: Snow and Lantern Light

On a winter night in Kugane, when the harbour mist rolled in thick and the lanterns turned every puddle into melted gold, a young *geiko* stepped onto a tiny stage in a cramped, overworked *izakaya* and accidentally nudged fate in the ribs. The tavern was full in that very particular Kugane way: low tables packed shoulder to shoulder, sake sloshing between careless hands, conversations colliding mid-air. Ronin in weathered armour pretended they weren't watching one another. Merchants argued over shipping routes in voices just loud enough to be overheard by anyone listening for secrets. A pair of *sekiseigumi* officers sat painfully straight in the corner, trying very hard to look like part of the décor instead of the law. Threaded through the crowd like dropped pebbles in a koi pond were the foreigners: sailors with sunburnt noses, traders who hadn't yet learned which alleys not to cut through, all of them busy pretending they didn't feel completely out of place.

Hanako Takeuchi glided through the noise as if it had parted for her on purpose. Her white kimono snared every flicker of lanternlight; her hair ornaments chimed softly when she moved. She had the posture of someone who'd grown up on a steady diet of *back straighter*, *Hanako-chan*, and the calm, practiced smile of a woman who could navigate any company from petty lordlings to drunk dockhands without ever letting her poise slip. When she took her place on the small raised platform and lifted her shamisen, the surrounding chatter didn't

so much fall silent as slowly lower its head; by the time her fingers brushed the strings, half the room had leaned in without realising it.

Her song wasn't flashy. It was an old Hingan piece, all clean lines and quiet sorrow, a story about snow on temple roofs and promises that survived the winter. Her fingers moved with efficient grace, her voice sitting low and sure, the kind that didn't need to raise itself above the crowd because it simply gave the room a better sound to follow. One by one, conversations faltered and softened; sake cups paused halfway to mouths; someone near the back forgot entirely that they'd been trying to read the menu.

That someone was Eldric Shipman—sailor, adventurer, and all-around amiable fool.

He was not, by any generous measure, a subtle man. Broad-shouldered, sun-browned, with honey yellow hair and a grin that looked like it had gotten him into as much trouble as it had charmed him out of, Eldric might as well have had *Limsa Lominsa* stamped across his forehead. His brogue sat on the air like a rowdy guest in a very polite room. He'd come ashore that evening with simple plans: drink something strong, brag about storms that hadn't quite killed him, maybe get punched once or twice for the principle of the thing. Being stunned into silence by a Hingan ballad had not been on the itinerary. Yet by the second verse he'd abandoned even pretending to study the calligraphy on the wall, and by the third he realised he was staring at the stage with his mouth slightly open and had the decency to close it again.

When the last note faded, the room let out a collective breath. Coins clinked into trays, a merchant barked a too-loud laugh as if to restart the noise, someone called for more sake. Hanako bowed, perfect and measured, and in that moment Eldric—moved by equal parts awe and poor impulse control—started to clap.

It was not the discreet finger-tap reserved for refined company. It was a proper Lominsan clap: loud, wholehearted, and just enough off-beat to make the nearest patron flinch. Heads turned to glare at the foreigner. Hanako's gaze followed the sound and found him. For a heartbeat, the invisible curtain between performer and audience thinned. She saw a sun-baked sailor whose shirt was one wash away from giving up entirely, with amused green eyes and a slouch that said he was more comfortable on a deck than on a tatami mat. He saw a woman so composed she made the lanterns look underdressed, with dark eyes that were sharper than her soft smile suggested. The moment stretched, then folded neatly away as she dipped her head in acknowledgment and moved on, while he remembered he had a sake cup and downed it in one go to disguise the fact that his heart was beating a little too fast.

Later, when the songs had turned livelier and the air had grown heavy with steam and drink, Hanako was summoned to his table. She approached with that same careful poise, kneeling with the efficient grace of a woman who had been critiqued on her posture more times than she could count. Eldric scrambled for the correct level of bow and landed somewhere between “respectful” and “nearly falling off the cushion.” “Your performance... very beautiful,” he said in halting Hingan, picking words like stepping-stones across a fast river. “Like, ah... quiet ocean. But less wet.” Someone at a neighbouring table audibly choked; Hanako did not. Her smile widened by a fraction.

“Your Hingan is very brave,” she replied in a smooth, silky cadence in her native tongue. “Like a man climbing a cliff in the wrong footwear.”

His eyes lit up at the sound of something familiar. “Oh, you speak proper,” he said, relief and delight fighting for space on his face. “Good. I was running out o’ metaphors that didn’t sound stupid.” “You had not yet left that territory,” she observed, voice mild but edged with unmistakable humour. That broke whatever stiffness remained between them. He launched into descriptions of Limsa Lominsa—of rope bridges and sea-slick stone, of markets that smelled like salt and spice and too many bodies, of pirates who’d mostly gone respectable and officers who mostly pretended to believe it. He spoke of a city where the sea was louder than any temple bell and the horizon seemed to stretch forever. In return, Hanako offered the officially approved portrait of Hingashi: a land of harmony and order, where duty was clear and beauty carefully arranged. Then, little by little, she let glimpses of the mess beneath slip through: cramped back corridors in teahouses, patrons whose smiles never reached their eyes, elders who could weaponise silence better than any swordsman.

“You would not like Limsa,” Eldric decided at some point, squinting as if testing the idea. “Too loud, too messy, too many folk swearin’ in three languages just to buy bread.” “I work nightly among men who forget which end of their chopsticks to hold when drunk,” she replied, arching a brow. “I believe I would manage.” He stared at her for half a beat, then laughed, bright and honest. “Aye,” he said. “Reckon you would, at that.”

When her break ended, Hanako rose with a last, neat little bow. “Thank you for your patronage, Shipman-san,” she said, slipping seamlessly back into professional cadence. “May the rest of your evening be peaceful.” “Doubt it,” he answered cheerfully, lifting his cup in salute, “but I’ll drink to the *idea* of it.” She glided away, folding herself back into the current of the room. He watched her go, then realised he was smiling like an idiot into his sake and tried, with mixed success, to look like he’d meant to all along.

To everyone else, it was just another night in Kugane: one more performance, one more foreign sailor with more confidence than sense. But fate, like any good cook, knows exactly how much of one ingredient will change the whole dish. Somewhere above the rattling shutters and the clink of cups, whatever power oversaw improbable meetings and worse decisions made a brief note: these two, together again later. And far off in a future neither of them could yet imagine, a girl in a red jacket would stretch dough in her flour-dusted hands and insist this was the moment the world put in its order.

After all, she'd say with a grin, if her parents hadn't met on an empty stomach, she wouldn't exist—and Hydaelyn would be a lot sadder and significantly less well-fed.

Chapter 2: The Girl Between Sea and Street

For all the grand speeches people liked to make about fate and the turning of stars, Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman arrived in the world in a very ordinary way: loudly, stubbornly, and at an hour deeply inconvenient to everyone involved. It was the Twenty-Fifth Sun of the Second Umbral Moon, the harbour fog thick enough to swallow the lower lanterns whole, when Hanako gripped the edge of the futon and informed the midwife, in very polite terms, that if this child did not emerge soon she would be personally relocating it by force. The midwife, who had heard far worse from far less composed women, told her to keep breathing. Eldric hovered in the next room, pacing furrows into the tatami, flinching every time Hanako's usually measured voice climbed into anything approaching a shout.

When the wail finally came, it cut through the little wooden house like a blade. The midwife slid open the door, expression softening. "A girl," she said, as if reporting on the weather. "Healthy lungs." Eldric very nearly fell through the frame trying to get in. Hanako lay pale and damp with sweat, hair loosened from its careful pins, but her eyes were clear. A tiny bundle lay in the crook of her arm, red-faced and furious at being separated from the previous arrangement. The sailor stopped dead. "She's... small," he said brilliantly. "Newborns are," Hanako replied, but there was a faint tremor of amusement under the exhaustion. "Would you like to greet your daughter, or shall I tell her you were too afraid of a baby?" That prodded him forward. He knelt beside the futon, calloused hands suddenly clumsy as he brushed a thumb along the baby's cheek. Dark hair already fuzzed the tiny head, and when the child cracked one eye open, he thought he saw the green of his own in the lamplight, though it might have been wishful thinking.

“She’s got your nose,” he murmured. “And your terrible sense o’ timing.” The baby, in response, grabbed his finger with surprising strength and refused to let go. “Strong grip,” the midwife observed. “Good sign.” “That will be a problem later,” Hanako said, but the way she looked at the child made it clear it was the kind of problem she already loved. “We will need a name before my aunties arrive to suggest thirty-seven unacceptable ones.”

Eldric had been waiting for that. He settled awkwardly on his heels, still letting the baby cling to his finger, and cleared his throat. “So, ah. I was thinkin’ o’ somethin’ I heard from a Garlean chart once. ‘Maris’—it’s old tongue for ‘of the sea.’ Seemed fittin’. Sea brought me here. Sea’ll take us back and forth. Maybe it can watch over her too.” He glanced up quickly, as if bracing for laughter. Hanako did not laugh. She turned the word over on her tongue, shaping it with care. “Ma-ri-sa,” she repeated, smoothing the syllables into Hingan speech. “Soft, but not weak. Easy to shout across a harbour. Acceptable.” She laid her hand lightly on the tiny chest. “Marisa, then.” Already her mind was moving through the characters. Later, she would choose 鞠, *mari*, for a child’s ball—round, bright, always bouncing back—and 紗, *sa*, for gauze, something light and fine that caught the light. Together, they would read “gossamer ball,” but when she said the name aloud, it tasted like sea-spray and shamisen strings.

The days that followed settled into a peculiar rhythm: half lullaby, half mild disaster. Marisa proved early that “healthy lungs” had been an understatement. If she was hungry, the household knew. If she was uncomfortable, the neighbours knew. If Eldric so much as tried to sneak out early to catch a tide without saying goodbye, she somehow sensed it and began wailing with such wounded outrage that even the hardened dockhands outside flinched. “She has your sense of drama,” Hanako informed him one bleary morning as he bounced a howling infant up and down, muttering, “Easy now, little wave, easy now,” under his breath. “She’s got your temper,” he shot back. “Don’t look at me. I never screamed like that in my life.” “No,” Hanako said primly. “You sing off-key instead.”

As Marisa grew from squirming bundle to unsteady toddler, Kugane became her first playground. She learned to walk by toddling along the polished floors of the house, grabbing at Hanako’s kimono hem and Eldric’s trouser leg in equal measure. The first time she managed three steps on her own, she made straight for the doorway and, if her parents hadn’t caught her, would have taken the front steps head-first in a bid to explore the street. “She wants out already,” Eldric said, half proud, half horrified, holding her firmly around the waist while she kicked and flailed in protest. “Of course she does,” Hanako answered, tying her obi with one hand and rescuing an overturned cushion with the other. “Her father is a sailor. Her mother works in houses where doors never stay shut. Did you expect her to sit quietly and contemplate pottery?”

On days when Hanako had afternoon engagements and Eldric's ship was in port, the three of them walked the harbour district together. Marisa rode on her father's shoulders, little hands tangled in his hair, shrieking with laughter whenever a gull swooped too close. She learned the smell of brine and tar before she could properly name them, the rhythm of rigging slapping against masts before she understood what it meant to leave. Dockworkers began to recognise the sight of a foreign sailor with a Hingan woman at his side and a small, shrill child perched up top like an overexcited figurehead. "She'll be runnin' this port by the time she's ten," one of them predicted as Marisa tried to grab a passing lantern. "Or climbin' it," another added, watching her attempt to scale Eldric's ear.

At night, when the lanterns dimmed and the city's clamour softened to a distant murmur, Hanako sat by the window with Marisa cradled against her shoulder, humming old songs under her breath. Sometimes she sang the temple-roof ballads; sometimes she tried out new pieces she was still polishing for the stage. On other nights Eldric took his turn, voice low and rough, spinning tales of cities built on cliffs and ships like floating fortresses, of a place called Limsa Lominsa where the sky was so big it made a person feel like a small, happy mistake. "We'll take you there someday, little wave," he would murmur, tracing circles on her back as her breathing slowed. "You'll see the bridges, and the market, and the sea when it's angry and when it's kind. You'll like it. It's loud and a bit stupid, just like your da."

Hanako listened from the doorway, folding away the day's kimono, saying nothing. Kugane was all she had ever known; its alleys and tatami rooms were stitched into her bones. The thought of taking a child across the world on the back of a promise and a sailor's grin was, to her more cautious mind, hovering somewhere between romantic and catastrophically irresponsible. But when she looked at Marisa—at the way the baby's expression settled peaceful at the sound of waves slapping wood, at how she calmed faster to the creak of ropes outside than to the temple bells—she admitted, if only to herself, that the sea already had its hooks in this child.

By the time Marisa was old enough to toddle unaided through their small house, she had two distinct modes: bright-eyed curiosity and weaponised stubbornness. If she wanted to investigate the kitchen, no amount of redirection would keep her from it. If she decided she liked a particular word, she repeated it until everyone within earshot regretted teaching it to her. When she tried to mimic her mother's Hingan and her father's Eorzean, the consonants tangled adorably; her *ls* drifted into *rs*, her *rs* turned into something else entirely. "Kugane," she announced proudly one day, little finger smushed against the windowpane as she pointed at the street. "Ku-gane?" Eldric corrected gently. "Ku-rane!" she insisted, delighted with her

own innovation. Hanako closed her eyes briefly and accepted that this, too, would be a long battle.

Still, for all the noise and the negotiations, their little house held a kind of precarious, patchwork peace. In the mornings, Hanako practised scales while Marisa banged a wooden spoon against the floor in accompaniment. In the afternoons, if Eldric wasn't at sea, he told increasingly embellished stories of far-off lands while Marisa tried to climb up his chest to see his gestures better. In the evenings, when the harbour fog rolled in and swallowed the streetlamps one by one, the three of them sat together around a low table, sharing simple food and complicated jokes in two languages. Outside, Kugane continued to bustle and barter and scheme. Inside, between shamisen and sea-salt and a baby's determined fist wrapped around two adult thumbs at once, something quieter was taking shape.

Marisa would not remember these years clearly. Later, they would sit in her mind as flashes: the sharp smell of soy and fish broth; the roughness of her father's stubble when he kissed her forehead; the way her mother's laughter sounded different at home than it did in the teahouses. But for everyone else, it was obvious long before she could form the words that this child belonged to both worlds and was already impatient to see what lay beyond them.

Chapter 3: A Taste of Kugane

By the time Marisa was three, it had become abundantly clear to everyone around her that this small child intended to taste the entire world one bite at a time—starting with Kugane. She attacked food with the same intensity other children reserved for toys. If it was on a plate, she wanted it. If it was *near* a plate, she wanted it. If it was not technically food but looked like it might be, she wanted to test that theory personally. Hanako learned quickly that anything left unwatched on a low table would vanish into a tiny, determined mouth; Eldric learned just as quickly that his attempts to sneak her “a proper sailor's snack” were redundant, because she was already halfway up his chair, reaching for the dried squid before he'd finished unwrapping it. “You're goin' to eat us into poverty, little wave,” he told her one afternoon as she sat in his lap, solemnly chewing a piece of grilled fish bigger than her fist. “Mmh,” she replied, which he chose to interpret as a fond affirmation rather than a threat.

Food followed her everywhere. When Hanako came home late from the teahouse or *izakaya*, smelling faintly of incense and sake, there was often a small parcel tucked into her sleeve: a leftover rice ball, a skewer of sweet soy-glazed dumplings, a slice of rolled omelette that

hadn't made it to a patron's plate. Marisa would sit cross-legged on the floor in her night-robe, eyes bright, hands held out like a tiny supplicant. "Only a little," Hanako would say, even as she split the treat neatly in half, one piece for the child, one for herself. "You will get a stomachache if you keep eating this late." Marisa, stuffing the entire portion into her mouth at once, would nod enthusiastically. "S'tummy ache ish worf it," she insisted around the mouthful. In the mornings, when Eldric walked her down to the harbour to "get some air" and absolutely not to loiter near sailors with interesting lunchboxes, she made a habit of staring directly at whatever anyone was eating until they buckled under the weight of her gaze. "You can't just *look* at folk like that," Eldric hissed once, as a red-faced Roegadyn handed over half a steamed bun without quite knowing why. "I didn't say anything," Marisa protested, clutching her prize. "You said it with your eyes," he muttered. "It's a crime, that's what it is."

Her hunger wasn't only for food; it was for words as well, though she mangled them just as cheerfully. Growing up with two languages woven through the house meant half her early sentences sounded like an argument between a dictionary and a tide chart. Hanako would give an instruction in Hingan, Eldric would repeat it in Eorzean, and Marisa would adopt whichever version she liked better—or, more often, both at once. "No run in *ro-ka*," Hanako told her once in the hallway, catching her mid-sprint. "You will fall." "No run in *ro-ka*," Marisa repeated dutifully, then added, "Da said no run in... 'corridor'." "That's the same thing," Hanako sighed. "So is 'dock' and 'pier' but folk still argue about it," Eldric said from the doorway, earning himself a glare. The letter L, in particular, refused to cooperate. When she tried to say "Lantern," it became "Rantern." "Limsa" came out "Rimsa." "Kugane" had long since been demoted to "Ku-rane," no matter how many times Hanako tried to coax the proper sound from her. "Lu," she would prompt, enunciating carefully. "Lu." "Ru!" Marisa replied, delighted. "Lu." "Ruuu." "We are doomed," Hanako informed the ceiling. Eldric, biting back a laugh, scooped Marisa up and spun her around. "Don't you worry," he told the giggling child. "In Rimsa Rominsa, they'll understand ye just fine."

Between her parents' worlds, Kugane itself became the backdrop to her double education. On days when Hanako's engagements were light, Marisa accompanied her through the quieter, more orderly districts: past merchant houses with swept stone steps; along corridors where voices stayed low and footsteps nearly silent; into back rooms where senior women fussed over fabrics and hairpins. There she was expected to bow correctly, sit with her knees together, and keep her hands politely on her lap instead of reaching for every shiny thing in sight. "A lady must move like a poem," one elder told her, tapping her back lightly when she slouched. "Not like a hungry cat." Marisa attempted to move like a poem for exactly three breaths before spotting a tray of sweets in the corner and drifting toward it with all the inevitability of the tide. On other days, when Eldric was not at sea, her lessons were of an

entirely different sort. He took her through the raucous harbour districts, where fishmongers shouted over one another, gulls screamed from rooftops, and someone was always unloading something they swore hadn't "fallen off a ship." He taught her how to judge the freshness of a catch by its eyes, how to tell when a wave was about to slap the dock hard enough to soak her shoes, how to swear just enough in Eorzean that other sailors knew not to try anything without getting her banned from the decent part of town. "You're encouraging bad habits," Hanako complained one evening as Marisa proudly demonstrated a new phrase that absolutely did not belong in a child's mouth. "I'm preparin' her for reality," he countered. "Reality can wait until she is tall enough to see over the table," Hanako snapped, but the corners of her mouth betrayed amusement.

Some of Marisa's earliest, clearest memories involved kitchens. The back room of Hanako's *izakaya* smelled of soy, *dashi*, grilled fish and the sharp, clean edge of pickled ginger. If she behaved herself and did not touch anything she had not been explicitly invited to touch (a rule she obeyed in spirit, if not to the letter), the cooks would let her stand on a crate and watch them. She was fascinated by the economy of their movements: the way knives flashed through spring onions, the way rice balls formed in practised hands, the way someone's flick of the wrist sent noodles from pot to bowl in one smooth motion. "Careful there, little sparrow," one cook told her as she leaned in too close to the steam. "You'll melt your eyebrows off." "Then I'll grow new ones," she replied, squinting through the fog. At home, she tried to imitate what she'd seen with whatever was available: kneading imaginary dough out of thin air, "serving" pretend dishes to her parents with the solemnity of a seasoned hostess. "This one ish... fish stew with... um... 'cheese'," she declared one evening, setting down an empty bowl with a flourish. "A bold combination," Hanako said gravely. "Very avant-garde," Eldric added. "You have no idea what 'avant-garde' means," Hanako murmured. "No, but it sounded appropriate," he replied.

For all her clumsiness and her tendency to wander toward anything that smelled interesting, there was an undeniable, budding instinct in the way Marisa moved around food. If a bowl was going to tip, she seemed to sense it before it did and shoved it back from the edge. If a piece of fish was about to burn, she wrinkled her nose and called out, "Smell ish wrong!" just in time for someone taller to adjust the heat. She began to distinguish flavours with unnerving specificity. "Too much shoy," she announced, frowning at a sauce dish one evening. "Soy," Hanako corrected automatically. "Shoooooy," Marisa insisted, then added, "Need... mm... 'herbs'." Eldric watched her with the wary pride of a man who recognised a family resemblance in an entirely new form. "You mark my words," he told Hanako later, as they watched their daughter lick the last trace of *miso* from her chopsticks. "This one's goin' to feed half the star someday." Hanako looked at the small, determined figure on the floor, face

smudged, hair a mess, humming tunelessly as she stacked bowls into precarious towers, and tried—and failed—to imagine her as anything other than exactly what she was in that moment: a hungry child in a too-big robe, trying to see over the edge of the world.

Years later, when Marisa would stand in a tiny red parlour on the coast of La Noscea, stretching dough under a foreign sky, she would not be able to draw a straight line from those early Kugane days to her life in Limsa. Memory would condense them into flashes: the heat of a kitchen in summer; the clack of shamisen plectrum against strings; the taste of grilled fish stolen from her father's plate; the sound of her mother's voice correcting her consonants while her father laughed in the background. But anyone watching closely could already see it taking shape—this girl between sea and street, between tea-house and dockyard, testing the world with teeth and tongue and stubborn curiosity. Long before she knew what a pizza was, Marisa Takeuchi was already, in her bones, a child of food and motion, of two languages and one endlessly hungry heart.

Chapter 4: The Girl Who Collected Horizons

By six, Marisa had begun to realise that Kugane was not the whole world—it was the place where the rest of the world briefly paused to catch its breath. Ships came and went with the tide, flags rising and falling like coloured birds on the masts, and she decided, very early on, that if she couldn't go with them yet, she would at least learn their language.

It started with a game. Eldric sat her on an upturned crate near the harbour one clear morning, the smell of fish and brine thick in the air, and pointed with a calloused finger toward the forest of masts. "Right," he said, squinting. "Lesson time, little wave. See that one there? Red, with the big black longboat facin' east?" Marisa leaned forward, eyes narrowing, hair whipping in the sea breeze. "Mmh. The one with the... dragon head?" "That's Limsa Lominsa's colours," he told her. "My home. Our home, when we're done muckin' about over here." She tasted the name carefully. "Rimsa... Rominsa," she tried. "Lominsa," he corrected, then sighed as her tongue tripped straight back into *r*. "Close enough. Anyway. That one there, gold and black, with the fancy scales? That'll be Ul'dah—desert folk, more coin than sense. Over there, stark yellow, with the twin snakes? Gridania. Forest types. Nice enough if you're not an axe." He rattled off each pennant with the ease of practice: Eorzean city-states, distant ports, traders from places Marisa couldn't yet imagine. She soaked it up like warm broth, matching each pattern to his stories: Limsa, where the wind smelled like salt and steel; Ul'dah, all glitter and grit; Gridania, where the trees themselves supposedly judged you. "What's that one?" she

asked once, pointing at a stark, imperial-looking standard in the distance, all white and black chains with a red link in its centre. Eldric's face shuttered for a heartbeat. "That," he said, voice flattening a little, "belongs to folk we don't drink with if we can help it. You don't need to worry about 'em. Just remember the shape. If you ever see that flag and I'm not around, you walk the other way, savvy?" Marisa nodded, filing the pattern away with utmost seriousness. Flags, she decided, could tell you who to run to for sweets... and who to avoid entirely.

The more flags she learned, the more she wanted to keep them. Not the cloth itself—no one was going to hand a child a city-state's colours to drag through the mud—but the idea of them, the patterns. One afternoon she appeared at the low table with a stolen brush and a scrap of old wrapping paper and declared, "I'm drawin' them." "You are getting ink on the *tatami*," Hanako replied without looking up from her sewing. "I'm drawin' them *carefully*," Marisa insisted, tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth as she scratched unsteady shapes onto the page. Her lines wobbled, her colours bled, but the intent was there: a crude object that was shaped *vaguely* like a longboat, a lopsided golden scale, two snakes that looked suspiciously like little ramen noodles. Soon she had a stack of such papers. Eldric, impressed in spite of himself, found her an actual little notebook from a ship's scrap store—half its pages already used for numbers and doodles, the rest clean. That became her treasure. She carried it everywhere, adding new designs whenever a foreign sail appeared in the harbour or a sailor told a story that came with a crest. Underneath each flag she wrote its name in a chaotic tangle of Hingan characters and Eorzean letters. The spelling was creative. The enthusiasm was not. "What's this one?" Hanako asked one evening, turning the notebook around. The lines were surprisingly straight; the layout looked almost... formal. "That one ish the *shiryay*..." Marisa frowned, trying to recall Eldric's words. "Sharlayan," she finally managed. "They have books and... and 'univercities'. Da says if I go there, I could read *all* day and never finish." Hanako's brows lifted. "And would you like that?" Marisa considered it seriously, then shook her head. "No. I'd get hungry."

School and neighbourhood life only underlined how much she sat between worlds. Among Hingan children in the narrow streets behind the house, she was the girl with the foreign father and the Eorzean swearwords she wasn't supposed to know. Some days they accepted her as one of theirs, especially when she shared snacks or invented new chase games that involved elaborate rules and loudly shouted penalties. Other days, one of them would wrinkle their nose and say something like, "Your *otō-san* talks funny," and Marisa would go stiff-backed and say, "He understands ships better than *you* understand your homework," in a tone she'd clearly inherited from Hanako. With the foreign sailors, she was something else entirely: "that little Hingan kid with the good tongue," the one you could ask to translate basics if you didn't want to embarrass yourself in a shop. She darted between them with ease,

switching languages mid-sentence, carrying gossip and overheard phrases without quite meaning to. It was exciting—to belong to everyone a little bit—but it also meant there was nowhere she felt entirely like she fit. When this thought grew too loud, she pushed it down with food or flags or the next new story.

Food and far-off places fused in her mind until she could no longer think of one without the other. If a ship flew Limsa's banner, she remembered Eldric's tales of hearty stews and crusty bread and fish pulled from the water moments before it hit the pan. Ul'dahn crests meant spiced nuts and dried fruits so sweet they made her teeth ache; once, a merciful merchant had handed her a single golden date and her world had briefly narrowed to that one indescribable taste. Domans brought pickles and noodles that reminded her of home but not quite; distant traders from places she couldn't pronounce carried bottles of strong-smelling sauces she begged to sniff until she sneezed. In her notebook, beside certain flags, she began to add tiny notes: "salty," "sweet," "smell like smoke," "taste like fire but good." Hanako shook her head when she saw it. "You are mapping the world by flavour," she said, amused in spite of herself. "I am map... map... 'map-making'," Marisa said proudly. "But for tummy."

Even within the house, the tug-of-war of expectations intensified. Hanako, ever the professional, began trying to teach her the basics of polite posture and refined speech—how to pour tea without spilling, how to kneel without fidgeting, how to smile and say very little while learning everything. "A lady listens more than she talks," she instructed one evening as Marisa practised carrying an empty tray back and forth without dropping it. "But what if she has a lot to say?" Marisa asked, concentrating so hard her tongue stuck out between her teeth. "Then she waits for the right moment," Hanako replied. "And chooses which words are worth spending." Later that same week, Eldric took her back down to the docks and taught her the names of parts of a ship in Eorzean and Hingan both, laughing when she mixed them up. "If ye shout 'mind the *hashira*' at a Lominsan," he warned, "they're just going to stare at ye while the mast falls on their head." "Then I'll shout in both," she said matter-of-factly. "Someone has to listen." He tousled her hair. "That's my girl."

One evening, as the sun bled slowly into the harbour and painted the ships' hulls copper, Marisa sat on the pier with her notebook open on her knees and a stub of borrowed charcoal in hand. Eldric sat beside her, boots dangling over the water, flicking pebbles idly at a passing jellyfish. A Limsa-flagged vessel had just weighed anchor, its sails swelling as it turned toward the open sea. The red banner snapped in the wind, bright against the darkening sky. Marisa watched it for a long moment, then bent over the page and carefully drew its shape yet again, even though she already had it recorded three times. "Da," she said quietly, without looking up, "when I'm big, I wanna see Rimsa Rominsa for real. Not just in stories." Eldric's

hand stilled. For a second she thought she'd said something wrong. Then he sighed softly and nudged her shoulder with his. "Aye, little wave," he said, forcing lightness back into his voice. "I reckon you will. You'll hate some bits, love others, complain about the smell, and eat everythin' that isn't nailed down." She finally looked up at him. "You promise?" He hesitated, just a fraction, then met her gaze. "On the sea," he said. "And on my very stupid head." She seemed satisfied with that. She turned back to her notebook, adding one last note under the familiar flag: *home*? She didn't know yet which "home" she meant—Kugane's alleys, Limsa's promised bridges, or something that only existed in the space between—but the word felt right. The horizon line glowed, the ship grew smaller, and somewhere in the humming, crowded, fragrant sprawl of Kugane, a girl with ink-stained fingers and an endless appetite quietly began to want more.

Chapter 5: The House That Couldn't Sit Still

By the time Marisa was nine, the little house in Kugane had developed moods. When Eldric was at sea, it settled into a careful, tidy quiet: *tatami* swept, cushions exactly where Hanako liked them, meals at regular hours, shoes lined up in obedient rows by the door. The only real chaos came from Marisa herself—books and flag-notebooks left open on the floor, half-finished "experiments" in bowls on the low table, the occasional sticky fingerprint on a *shoji* panel. When Eldric returned, the air changed. The house seemed to lean toward the door; laughter spilled from the rooms; someone tripped over boots that had been kicked off in a hurry. Hanako sighed more, smiled more, frowned more. The house, like its inhabitants, couldn't quite decide whether it wanted stability or adventure. It tried to do both and creaked at the seams.

Eldric's voyages started stretching further. At first his absences had been counted in days: three nights gone, then back with stories and strange-smelling snacks. Now he left for weeks, sometimes over a moon, and came home with shoulders more tense and a new notch in the lines around his eyes. "Work's changing," he told Hanako one evening, thinking Marisa was too busy pretending not to listen in the corner. "More Garlean ships in the trade lanes, more inspections, more 'papers, please' from folk who don't own the sea. Pay's good if you keep your head down." "Your head has never in its life gone down at the right time," Hanako replied, pouring tea with a steadiness that gave away nothing. Marisa watched the steam curl and filed that sentence away with all the others she didn't fully understand yet but might grow into later. She had begun to realise that when adults said "work is changing," they rarely meant anything good.

If the harbour was Eldric's domain, the kitchen slowly became Marisa's. She had long since graduated from banging a wooden spoon against the floor to more useful tasks. At home, Hanako let her wash rice in the basin, small hands swirling the grains in the water until it ran mostly clear. Marisa took this responsibility extremely seriously, squinting at the cloudiness like it had personally offended her. "Again," she would declare, tipping out the water. "It's still dirty." "If you wash it any more, we will be eating paste," Hanako warned, but she didn't stop her. Before long, Marisa was trusted to chop scallions with a small, sharp knife, tongue poking out in concentration as she sliced carefully under supervision. The first time she managed a neat bowl of evenly cut rings, Hanako made a thoughtful noise. "You have good hands," she said. "Clumsy mouth, good hands." "Mouth is good too," Marisa protested. "Mouth does important work." "Your mouth does... a lot of work," Hanako conceded.

In the back rooms of the *izakaya*, staff began using her as an extra pair of legs when she wasn't in the way. Someone would shove a tray of empty bowls into her arms with a brisk, "Back to the kitchen, little one," and she would navigate the narrow spaces between tables with all the solemnity of a shrine attendant. The cooks let her watch them work, and sometimes, when no one important was looking, one would nudge her forward. "Here," said a burly man with arms like tree trunks one humid evening, pressing a ladle into her hand. "You stir. Keep it moving, slow circle, no splashing." The pot was nearly bigger than she was, the steam a wall of heat in her face, but she planted her feet and stirred, shoulders aching, eyes stinging. The smell—broth, *miso*, something rich and savoury—wrapped around her like a blanket. "Good," the cook grunted after a while. "You listen better than half the apprentices we get." Later that night, when Hanako returned home, Marisa greeted her with, "I stirred the soup and nobody died," which she clearly considered the pinnacle of culinary success.

Outside the house, the easy blur of early childhood friendships sharpened into something more complicated. Neighbourhood children who had once played tag with her without a thought now began to notice what their parents noticed. One boy scrunched up his nose and said, "Your skin's funny, not like ours," and Marisa stared at her own hands afterward as if they'd changed colours without telling her. Another girl, emboldened by listening at too many doors, parroted, "My mother says foreign men can't be trusted," casting a wary glance down the street where Eldric was teaching someone to tie a proper mooring knot. "Your mother says a lot of things," Marisa shot back hotly, little jaw jutting forward. "My father brings home good fish and your father buys it. So maybe she should say 'thank you'." It earned her a shove, then a scuffle, then a lecture at home when both parents found out. Hanako scolded in Hingan about composure and reputation; Eldric, in Eorzean, told her that if she was going to pick fights, she should learn when not to throw the first punch. It was confusing, infuriating, and

weirdly comforting: two different codes of behaviour, both contradictory, both clearly delivered out of a sort of crooked love.

She heard more than she was supposed to. Children always do. On nights when she was meant to be asleep, she lay still on her *futon* with her eyes closed and her ears open. She heard the low murmur of her parents' voices through the wall: Hanako's soft and precise, Eldric's rumbling and uneven. "She needs stability," Hanako would say, not for the first time. "Friends who will still be here in ten years, teachers who can train her properly, a craft that will feed her." "I'm not arguin' with that," Eldric replied. "I'm just sayin' the world's bigger than this street, Hani. Bigger than this city. She should see it. Feel it under her feet." "You want to take a child across the world on a sailor's wages," Hanako countered. "On promises. On stories. What if your ship does not come back one day?" There would be a pause, a longer one than usual, before Eldric answered. "Then you tell her I went down doin' what I'm good at," he said, forcing a laugh. "And that she's free to be good at somethin' else." Marisa didn't understand all the implications, but she caught the important parts: stability, craft, not coming back. In the dark, she clutched her thin blanket in both fists and decided very firmly that all ships her father sailed on would be obedient and sensible and not do anything dramatic at all.

Still, the house betrayed its restlessness. On Eldric's last night before a voyage, he paced more, bumping into furniture, knocking into cushions, tapping rhythms on the table with his fingers. Hanako tidied longer, refolding things that were already folded, straightening items that were already straight. Marisa orbited them, pretending not to see the way their eyes slid to the window every time a distant ship's bell rang. "How long this time?" she asked once, sitting cross-legged on the floor, flag notebook open in her lap. "Two weeks? Three?" Eldric hesitated, then ruffled her hair. "Depends on the winds," he said. "And how stubborn the cargo is. I'll be back before you've eaten all the sweets in Kugane." "That could be *any* time," she pointed out. "Exactly. Keep me on my toes." Hanako cut in with, "He will be back when he is back. In the meantime, you will focus on your studies." It sounded reasonable. It also sounded like both of them were lying a little, if only to themselves.

On a still, sticky night that smelled like rain and old fish, the argument shifted from half-jokes to something harder. Marisa, lying in her room, heard her name in that tone adults use when they are talking very seriously. "You cannot keep saying 'someday I will take you to my home' if someday never comes," Hanako said quietly. "She is not a story to be strung along until the last page fails to be written." "I *know* that," Eldric replied, more sharply than usual. "You think I like this? In and out, always with one foot on the deck and one in the house? If the world would hold still for five bleedin' minutes, maybe I could make a plan that lasts longer than a tide." There was a brief clatter, as if someone had set a cup down too hard. "She asks me,"

Hanako continued, and now there was something raw in her voice Marisa had never heard there before. “She asks when she will see this Rimsa Rominsa you talk about. She asks why we stay if your heart is somewhere else. What am I supposed to tell her?” There was a silence so thick even the house seemed to be holding its breath. When Eldric finally answered, his voice was lower, rougher. “Tell her the truth,” he said. “That her father is a coward who can’t decide whether he’s more afraid of leaving or staying.” Marisa didn’t know the word *coward* in Hingan, but the Eorzean version landed heavy through the wall.

Later, when the lanterns were out and even the harbour seemed to have quieted, Marisa lay on her back and stared into the dark, wide awake. Somewhere beyond the window, she could hear the distant creak of ships at anchor and the slap of water against stone. The sounds that had once been a lullaby now felt like questions. In her head, she walked through two futures. In one, she stayed here in Kugane, grew taller, learned to kneel without pins and needles, worked her way up from stirring pots to running a respectable kitchen where nothing unexpected ever happened. In the other, she stood on a deck under a flag she had drawn a hundred times, wind pulling at her hair, carrying dishes she hadn’t even invented yet to people whose languages she didn’t speak but whose hunger she understood. Both paths felt real, in the fuzzy, unmapped way of a child’s imagination. Both felt slightly wrong when she tried to imagine *only* one of them.

The house creaked as it cooled for the night. Somewhere in the next room, Hanako shifted in her sleep; somewhere farther off, Eldric muttered nonsense in his dreams, no doubt arguing with the sea even there. Marisa rolled onto her side, pulled her blanket up to her chin, and whispered into the dark, “If the house won’t sit still... maybe I don’t have to, either.” It wasn’t a decision, not yet. But it was the first time she’d thought of movement not just as her father’s curse or her mother’s threat, but as something that might one day belong to her.

Chapter 6: When the Tide Stopped Asking

By eleven, Marisa had stopped being “the noisy little one underfoot” and became “the girl who can actually be trusted not to drop the tray.” It was a subtle promotion, but she felt it keenly. At home, Hanako let her do more than just wash rice and chop scallions; Marisa could now be trusted to watch a simmering pot and add ingredients *at the correct time*, not just whenever she got bored. At the *izakaya* and adjoining teahouses, she ran errands between the back rooms and the kitchen, ferrying notes and teapots and, occasionally, a forgotten shamisen plectrum. Older women who had once patted her vaguely on the head now sent her

off with specific instructions and expected them to be followed. She still got shooed away from the main rooms, but there were more doors she was allowed to pass through now, and that felt like something.

Hanako's own life, for the first time in years, seemed to be climbing rather than balancing on the spot. Her work was changing—no longer just entertaining half-drunk ronin in smoky taverns, but performing in more refined spaces where the air smelled like cedar and expensive incense instead of spilled sake. Invitations had begun to arrive from better houses: private gatherings for merchants with serious money, suppers where minor officials and visiting dignitaries wanted to see “genuine Hingan refinement.” There were even, whispered among her peers with envy, rumours that she might soon be asked to play in front of actual court officials—maybe not the *shogun*, but certainly people who sat in the same building as people who sat in the same building as the *shogun*, which was close enough. “If this continues,” one of the senior *geiko* told her, half congratulation, half warning, “you will not have time for low houses. No more tavern smoke. Serious patrons expect serious commitment.” Hanako bowed and said all the right things, but when she walked home afterward, she felt lighter. Years of training, of smiling and bowing and playing the same songs until her fingers went numb, were finally showing returns. For the first time, the path under her feet in Kugane did not end at a teahouse door; it stretched ahead in a straight, dignified line.

The city around them, however, was contracting. Even a child could feel it. There were more imperial colours in the harbour now, more ships flying the kind of white-and-black standard Eldric had once told Marisa to avoid. She noticed long, tense conversations between captains at the docks, watched as routes that had once been busy slowly thinned. Some traders stopped coming altogether; others arrived with stories they hurriedly swallowed when they saw who was listening. Occasionally, a Garlean official would stroll through the harbour with a little entourage and a clipboard, and the air seemed to go brittle until they left. Eldric came back from voyages more tired, and his stories leaned more on weather and less on wonder. “How was it?” Marisa would ask, flag notebook ready, expecting new ports, new foods. “Wet,” he'd say, forcing a grin. “And annoyin'. Folk in uniforms askin' a lot of questions about whose cargo is whose. Nothin' for you to worry about.” She worried anyway, because when adults insisted like that, it usually meant the opposite.

It was after one of those longer voyages that the tide stopped asking and started pulling. Eldric returned later than planned, his ship limping into harbour with a sail patched in three different colours and a crew that looked like they'd all lost a fight with a storm and a tax collector at once. He came through the house door at an in-between hour—too late for afternoon, too early for evening—salt still in his hair, a new scar peeking from under his collar,

and an expression that tried to be cheerful and didn't quite make it. Marisa ran to meet him, as she always did, and he scooped her up with the familiar grunt, but there was a hesitation in his arms, a tension in his shoulders. Hanako watched from the doorway, her gaze sweeping over him in one long, assessing line. "You are late," she said, and it was not about the hour. "Storms," he replied. "And... other delays. I'll explain once I've washed most of the sea off."

That night, after Marisa had been told she was going to bed, and had obediently gone to her room and then just as obediently not slept, the serious voices began. They were quieter than usual, pitched low, but the house was small and her ears had practice. "We cannot keep doing this," Hanako said, and there was no exasperation in her tone this time, only a flat, tired edge. "Every voyage is longer. Every return, later. The men in your crew looked like they had seen ghosts." "Ghosts would be kinder," Eldric answered. The floor creaked as he shifted his weight. "We got rerouted twice. Imperial patrols takin' more interest than they used to. New taxes. New rules. Money's not worth the risk on half the lanes anymore." There was a rustle as he set something on the table. "Got offered somethin' else." "Offered by whom?" Hanako's voice sharpened. "And what did you agree to before speaking to me?"

He sighed, and even through the wall Marisa could hear the sound of someone rubbing his hands over his face. "An old mate o' mine from Limsa," he said. "Moved up in the world a bit, workin' with one o' the bigger companies. They're puttin' together a small line runnin' out of Lominsa, farther from imperial patrols, more under Maelstrom eye than Garlean. They need seasoned sailors, folk who know more than just one coast. Steadier work, less dancin' to imperial pipes. He said if I can get there by next season, there's a place for me." The silence that followed was unlike the others—heavy, yes, but also oddly hollow, like a room just after someone opens a window and all the warm air rushes out. When Hanako spoke again, her voice had lost its softness. "So that is it, then? You vanish for weeks, return half-drowned, and your solution is to drag your family across the world because an old friend waved a coin purse in your direction?"

"It's not just a purse, Hani," Eldric protested. "It's a chance at somethin' better than waitin' for the wrong flag to show up and tell us the rules have changed again. I can't keep runnin' imperial lanes like this. One wrong look, one wrong word, and they'll have us inspected to death, or worse." "And you think Limsa is a land of gentle mercy?" she snapped. "You have told me stories of that city, remember? Pirates pretending to be officials, officials pretending not to be pirates, drunken brawls in the street. That is where you want to take your daughter?" "Better a city full o' honest thieves than a port where one wrong answer gets you on a list," he shot back, then immediately softened his tone. "Look, it's not just for me. You've seen Marisa. She's already half Eorzean in the way she moves. She deserves a place where

she doesn't have to fight every rumour and sideways look just for existin'. You said yourself she doesn't sit neatly in the boxes folk have for her here."

"She is Hingan," Hanako said, and now her voice wobbled for the first time. "She was born here. Her name is registered here. She has family here—my aunties, my teachers, the people who helped raise her when you were at sea. I have spent years building a reputation, Eldric. I am no longer playing smoky taverns full of wandering swordsmen. I am being invited to *proper houses*. Do you understand?" The words began to spill faster, as if they'd been waiting at the back of her throat for a long time. "I am finally being paid what my training is worth. I am being considered for court performances. No more *izakaya*—soon, I will be called to play behind screens in rooms you would never be allowed to see. My life is not just pouring *sake* for men who forget my name by morning. It is just now... just now... beginning to climb." She sucked in a breath. "And you come home with salt in your hair and say, 'Pack everything, we leave for the place with knife-fights and shouting.'"

Marisa, curled under her blanket, blinked. She had heard her mother talk about work being good, about new patrons, but she had never heard that raw edge of pride and fear mixed together like this. Her picture of Hanako had always been... fixed, somehow. A quiet, steady line. Hearing that line describe itself as "just beginning" unsettled her in ways she couldn't quite name.

Eldric didn't answer immediately. When he did, his voice was lower. "You think I don't see that?" he asked. "You think I don't know how hard you've worked to get there? I'm not askin' you to throw it away on a whim. But you know as well as I do this city doesn't love folk like me. It tolerates me as long as I'm useful and polite and don't ask for too much. And it looks at Marisa and sees everythin' it's nervous about wrapped up in one small person. How long before that starts closin' doors for her? How long before your patrons smile and say the right words but quietly suggest their guests would be... more comfortable with a *different geiko* who doesn't go home to an Eorzean sailor and a half-blood child?" The words hung there, ugly and true.

"You are very free with other people's assumptions," Hanako murmured, but she didn't sound convinced by her own objection. "Maybe I am," Eldric agreed. "But I've been watchin'. And I've been watchin' the sea. Things are turnin' sour out there, Hani. I don't know what it's goin' to look like in five years. I just know I'd rather face that from behind Limsa's guns than in somebody else's harbours." Another pause, then, more quietly: "And I'm tired of leavin' you two behind every time the tide goes out."

On the other side of the wall, Marisa lay rigid, trying to sort her feelings into neat piles and failing. Limsa had always been a story, a picture in her notebook, a word that meant “someday” in her head. It was where Da’s voice went soft when he spoke about home, where the red flags came from, where the food sounded hearty and messy and wonderful. The idea of *going* there made her heart jump in her chest, a fizzing excitement that felt like the first bite of something hot and fresh and perfectly salted. But the thought of leaving Kugane—its crooked alleys, the familiar clatter of the harbour, the kitchens that smelled like soy and broth, the aunties who fussed over her hair—made her throat tighten. Could a person have two homes and not be betraying one of them just by choosing where to sleep?

“You are asking me to give up everything that is finally beginning to reward me,” Hanako said, more quietly now, as if her anger had burned down to coals. “My work, my language, the respect I have fought for. You ask me to go somewhere I will be the foreigner, where my face is strange and my words are funny, where my daughter will be teased not for having an Eorzean father, but for having a Hingan mother. And you say it is for her then, too.” “I’m askin’ you,” Eldric said, “to come someplace where the three of us might have a chance at somethin’ that isn’t just waiting for the next patrol or the next rumour. I can’t promise it’ll be better. I can promise it’ll be ours to try.” He hesitated, then added, “But if you say no... I will stay. You know that, right? I won’t leave you here alone. I may be a fool, but I’m not *that* kind o’ fool.”

That silence was different again—longer, stretching thin like pulled sugar. Marisa held her breath without meaning to. Finally, Hanako spoke, and there was a small crack in her voice that frightened Marisa more than any shout would have. “If I say no,” she said, “you will stay. And every time you look at the sea, you will think of the life you turned down for us. Every story you tell will grow teeth, and I will wonder if the person you should have been is standing somewhere on a dock in Limsa, waiting for a ship that never left Kugane. I will not have my daughter live with that ghost in the house.” She drew in a sharp breath. “So here is what I say, Eldric Shipman: do not make this choice for me and call it sacrifice. Put the choice on the table, honestly. Admit you want to go. Admit I do not—and that I am still willing to follow.”

There was a chair scrape, a soft thump that might have been someone sitting down hard. When Eldric spoke again, his voice sounded like it had been dragged through gravel. “Fine,” he said. “Fine. I want to go. I am tired o’ bein’ a polite guest in a place that’ll never quite claim me. I want my daughter to know my home the way she knows yours. I want to stand on a deck and see Lominsa’s arches and know I’ve brought the two of you there with me. I am scared shitless o’ what that means,” he added, almost conversationally, “but I still want it.” Another

breath. “There. Choice on the table. If you come, we go together. If you don’t, I stay and put all this in a box at the bottom o’ my heart and sit on the lid.”

The house waited. Marisa waited with it, eyes burning.

When Hanako answered, her voice was very quiet, and very steady. “I will not be the one who tells my daughter she must never see half of who she is,” she said. “Nor will I insult you by pretending I do not hear how much you want this. So. We will go.” The word landed like a dropped stone. “Not tomorrow,” she added quickly. “I will call in favours. I will end my contracts properly. I will see my aunties. I will not sneak away like a thief in the night from a life I have bled for. But when you are ready to sail for Limsa Lominsa... we will be on that ship.”

In her room, Marisa’s heart performed a very complicated manoeuvre involving leaping, sinking, and trying to occupy two places at once. They were going. The far-off red flags, the stories of rope bridges and stone arches, the markets by the sea—all of it had just stepped out of “someday” and into “soon.” She pressed the heel of her hand over her mouth to keep from making a sound. Beneath the excitement, grief pooled quietly; she thought of the street near their house, of the fishmonger who always gave her an extra sliver of salted mackerel, of the kitchen where she had stirred her first pot, of her mother’s shamisen echoing down narrow corridors. Going to Limsa didn’t erase any of that. It just meant they would be on the other side of the sea instead of the other side of town.

Later, when the house had gone properly still and both her parents’ breathing had settled into the heavy rhythm of exhausted sleep, Marisa crept from her futon to her low table. Her notebook lay there, flags and hastily scrawled notes filling most of the pages. She flipped to the one where she’d drawn Limsa’s banner over and over in different attempts: some neat, some smudged, one with a doodle of a fish wearing a hat in the corner because she’d gotten bored during a lecture. Beneath the last, cleanest version, there was the small word she’d written years ago: *home*? She stared at it for a long time, then reached for her brush, dipped it carefully in ink, and, after a moment’s hesitation, added another word next to it: *soon*.

Chapter 7: Westward, Ho

In the end, leaving Kugane did not look like a single dramatic moment so much as a hundred small threads being carefully unpicked. There were weeks of it: Hanako making the rounds of teahouses and *ochaya*, bowing to proprietors who suddenly found her schedule “regrettably

difficult to replace”; aunties clucking and scolding and quietly slipping her packets of dried plum and admonitions to write; neighbours coming by with gifts that were either heartbreakingly practical (good needles, tougher thread, travel charms) or entirely useless on a ship but too sentimental to refuse. Eldric spent his days in the harbour and his nights with ship manifests spread out on the low table, muttering about tides and cargo and how much of a person’s life could fit into three sea chests and a bundle. Marisa watched it all with the dazed feeling of someone standing in the doorway of a familiar room while all the furniture slowly rearranged itself. Every day something left: a kimono sent to a cousin, a stack of old ledgers given to a neighbour, a favourite chipped bowl gifted to the cook who’d once let her stir his soup. The house grew barer, more echoing, even as its occupants tried to pretend nothing had changed.

The day itself arrived with the kind of bright, brittle weather that made the harbour look like a painting: sky clear, water sharp and blue, ships bobbing gently at their moorings as if they weren’t about to tear people’s lives into before and after. Hanako dressed more carefully than usual, not because anyone in Limsa Lominsa would care about the exact drape of her sleeves, but because the aunties would, and this was as much their farewell as hers. She wore a kimono in deep, formal indigo with a pattern of cranes in flight; her hair was done properly, pins placed with the same ritual precision as on the nights she played for her most important patrons. When she stepped out into the street with her shamisen case in one hand and a small, tightly packed bundle in the other, a cluster of women was already waiting. They swept her into a flurry of fussing that barely left room for air—straightening collars, smoothing invisible wrinkles, adjusting a hair ornament by a single hair’s breadth. “Write to us,” one insisted. “Send word when you arrive,” another added. “Do not trust Eorzean men to carry letters properly,” a third warned, glaring sideways at Eldric, who wisely kept his mouth shut. Hanako endured it all with composed patience, bowing, smiling, promising what could be promised. Only when one of her oldest teachers took her hand in both of hers and murmured, “You were almost ready for the courts, little Hanako. Remember that your skills do not vanish just because you cross water,” did the mask crack, just for a moment. “I will remember,” Hanako said, voice slightly rough. “Even if they only wish to hear drinking songs, I will play them as if they were court music.”

Marisa’s goodbyes were messier. She had insisted on doing some of them alone, or as alone as a girl flanked by hovering adults could manage. At the fishmongers’ row she hugged the woman who had been slipping her extra pieces of salted mackerel since she could chew. “You come back with tales of strange fish,” the woman commanded, shoving a wrapped bundle into her hands. “If the fish in Limsa do not behave, you tell them Kugane is watching.” In the alleys behind their house, she found the knot of children who had once been her pack of

co-conspirators and more recently her sparring partners in both word and fist. They were suddenly shy, scuffing their sandals, saying things like, “It’s just the sea, you know. Not the moon,” as if she were the one who needed comforting. One boy thrust a ragged paper fan at her and muttered, “For when you get too hot over there,” then immediately looked away as if he’d done something embarrassing. “I’ll wave it at Rimsa’s pirates,” Marisa promised solemnly. “Strike fear into their hearts.” They snorted and rolled their eyes, but when she turned to go, there was a chorus of awkward “Oi, don’t forget us,” and “Come back and brag properly,” that made her throat tighten more than any formal farewell.

The worst, strangely, was the kitchen. She slipped in through the back entrance of the *izakaya* one last time, dodging barrels and storage jars like she always had. Inside, the heat and steam wrapped around her, smelling of soy and broth and grilled fish, the scent that had been the background of her childhood. The cooks looked up as she entered, and for once, no one pretended she was just some kid underfoot. “So. Off to become a foreign chef,” the burly man with arms like tree trunks grunted, wiping his hands on his apron. “I’m going to be a *whatever I want*,” Marisa corrected automatically, then immediately realised how grand that sounded and flushed. “But... maybe also a chef.” He snorted, then reached behind him and produced a small, well-worn wooden spoon. “You stirred your first pot with this,” he said, holding it out. “Take it. So when Eorzean food tastes strange, you can pretend it’s just because your spoon is homesick.” She laughed, then surprised herself by bursting into tears as she took it. Someone pressed a cloth into her hand. “If you cry into the *miso*, it will be too salty,” another cook told her. “Save it for the harbour.”

The harbour, when they finally reached it, seemed to have shrunk and expanded at once. The familiar lines of the docks, the shouting of workers, the seagulls wheeling overhead—all of it was there, but sharper, edged with the knowledge that this was the last time they would see it from the quay instead of the rail of a departing ship. Their vessel waited a little away from the busiest pier: a sturdy, salt-scarred thing with Eorzean design and a name Marisa sounded out twice under her breath before committing it to memory. It flew a neutral merchant flag; Limsa’s colours would greet them on the other side. Trunks and bundles were already being loaded; the pier was a tangle of sailors, porters, and knot-undoing aunties who had appeared somehow to supervise the tying-down of the family’s belongings. Eldric moved through it all with the brisk, confident stride of a man in his element, shouting greetings to shipmates, checking lines with practised eyes. Hanako walked with straight-backed calm, hands folded neatly around the handle of her shamisen case, but her gaze lingered on the city skyline, memorising corners of rooftops and the way the morning light hit certain tiles.

At some point, almost without realising it, Marisa found herself standing between them at the edge of the pier, the water lapping softly against the pilings below. Hordes of aunties and neighbours and curious onlookers behind, looming ship ahead, the horizon a thin, bright line. Her flag notebook—already packed—felt like a phantom weight at her side. She clutched the wooden spoon in one hand instead, fingers digging into the smooth handle. “Last call for tears before they start chargin’ extra,” Eldric said gently, trying for humour. “Once we’re on the gangplank, you’ll have to fill out the proper paperwork.” “If you make me laugh right now, I’ll push you into the sea,” Hanako replied, but there was no real heat in it. She turned to face the small crowd one last time and bowed, deep and formal, as if this were a performance and they were patron and audience both. “Thank you for your kindness all these years,” she said. “Please look after one another in our absence.” There were murmurs of good wishes, a few sniffs quickly disguised as throat-clearing, one loud sob from an auntie who had sworn she wouldn’t cry.

They boarded at last. The gangplank creaked under their feet; the ship’s deck felt simultaneously wrong and right beneath Marisa’s sandals. Ropes were cast off, shouts went up, sails creaked and bellied with the wind. As Kugane began to drift slowly away, its neat lines and familiar cranes shrinking into the distance, a hush fell over the passengers clustered at the rail. It was Eldric, unsurprisingly, who broke it. He cleared his throat, glanced once at Hanako—who rolled her eyes but did not stop him—and then began to sing in his rough Lominsan baritone, the way he did when the air on deck felt too tight.

It wasn’t a temple song or a refined court piece; it was a working shanty, simple and meant to be bellowed over wind and creaking wood. But he softened it a little, for Hanako’s sake, and for Marisa’s.

“Raise up the rope and let her swing,
White wake curlin’ like a wedding ring,
East wind laughin’, westward we go,
Carry our hearts where the red flags blow.

Heave, lads, heave, let the old port fade,
Stones stay standing but the choice is made,
One hand on home and one on the foam,
Sing for the day we can call both home.”

The crew picked it up almost out of habit; a few passengers joined in shyly on the second verse. Marisa didn’t know all the words, but the rhythm sank into her bones. She gripped the rail, watching the city she’d known all her life slide backward, its edges blurring into mist.

Beside her, Hanako stood very straight, lips pressed together, fingers white-knuckled around the shamisen case. After a moment, Marisa reached out and hooked her arm through her mother's. Hanako glanced down, and whatever she saw in her daughter's face made her shoulders soften just a fraction. She didn't sing, but she hummed, picking out a harmony under the sailors' rough chorus that made the whole thing sound less like a march and more like a promise.

As Kugane dwindled to a smudge on the horizon, the ache in Marisa's chest did not lessen, but something else rose alongside it: a sharp, bright thread of anticipation. Somewhere ahead lay the arches and bridges she'd drawn a hundred times, the markets full of voices she only half understood, the chance to feed people who had never tasted anything like the dishes already forming in the back of her mind. She pressed the wooden spoon against her palm, felt the deck move beneath her feet, and let the shanty's beat fill the space where words failed. For the first time in her life, the flags in her notebook weren't just pictures of far-off places. They were waymarks on a road she was finally walking.

Part II — Limsa Lominsa (Years 11-14)



Chapter 8: The City of Red Banners

Marisa had seen Limsa Lominsa's colours before, back in Kugane. She'd watched the red banners come and go in the harbour there more times than she could count, sketched them into her notebook until the black longship and its flaring oars were as familiar as her own name. But seeing them in Limsa itself was like recognising a face from a woodcut and then meeting the person in the flesh.

The ship came in on a clear morning, the sea a restless blue-green under a sky so bright it made her squint. At first Limsa was only a suggestion on the horizon—shapes that might have been rocks, or clouds sitting too low. Then the details sharpened: stark white stone rising out of the water, arches punched clean through whole chunks of cliff, bridges and walkways clinging to them like stubborn barnacles. The city stacked itself up in layers: ships below, decks and streets in the middle, towers and rigging above.

And everywhere, catching the light, snapping and curving in the wind, was the flag she knew: crimson field, black longship, gold trim picking out the dragon prow and the neat row of round shields, oars flared like sunrays.

“There,” Eldric said, not for himself—he could have found Limsa blindfolded by the smell of the sea alone—but for the two people at his side. “That’s her. City o’ bridges and bad ideas.” Marisa leaned so far over the rail she almost lifted off her heels. “It looks like someone piled too many cities on top of each other,” she breathed. “And then forgot which one was on the bottom.” “That’s not entirely wrong,” he admitted. Hanako said nothing at first. She stood very straight, one hand tight on the handle of her shamisen case, the other resting lightly on the rail. Her gaze traced the arches and towers, the chaotic sprawl of rope and stone and sails. Kugane’s skyline had always felt composed to her, lines drawn with a careful brush. Limsa’s looked more like a sketch made in a hurry and then never properly cleaned up. After a long moment, she murmured, “It is... very bold.” In Hanako-speak, that covered a multitude of sins and virtues both.

Docking in Limsa was not the orderly process Marisa was used to. In Kugane, even the busiest days followed a rhythm; here, the harbour sounded like a dozen different songs being played at once, all of them loudly. As their ship threaded between others toward a free berth, bell-clangs and shouted orders bounced off stone and water. Maelstrom warships with severe lines and tightly furled sails sat further out, crimson pennants snapping in exact unison; fat-bellied traders flaunted every colour of paint and cloth; fishing boats bobbed in the gaps like stubborn ducklings. Ropes arced overhead, crates swung out over the water on creaking pulleys, gulls screamed at everything indiscriminately. The black longship emblem watched over it all, stamped on banners and shields and the occasional very alarming tattoo.

When the gangplank dropped and they were finally funnelled down onto Limsa’s stone, the city hit Marisa in three ways at once: sound, smell, and movement. Voices crashed over her in thick Lominsan brogue and quicker, cleaner city Eorzean; someone swore creatively about a crate and a misplaced ledger; someone else sang a snatch of a sea-song wildly off-key. The air was full of salt and tar, fish and smoke, spilled ale, hot oil from some nearby stall, and the sour-sweet tang of too many people living on too little space. The ground itself felt different underfoot—less neat than Kugane’s streets, more worn in warped places by boots, hooves, and wheels.

“Stay close,” Hanako said quietly, tightening her grip on Marisa’s shoulder. Her kimono, simple by Kugane standards and far too formal for this crush, stood out among the leather vests, worn coats, and rolled-up sleeves around them. People stared—not all unfriendly, but curious, assessing. Marisa felt those looks prickle along her skin, but here the stares slid off more easily than they had in Hingashi. No one here looked entirely out of place, because everyone did. Roegadyn in Maelstrom red jostled shoulders with Lalafell porters carrying loads three times their size; Elezen in polished mail picked their way around puddles while broad-shouldered Hyurs in fishermen’s gear sloshed straight through them. Compared to that, one Hingan woman and her half-blood daughter barely registered.

Eldric cut a path through the crowd like someone who’d never forgotten the currents of this place. He waved to a dockhand here, shouted a greeting there, occasionally switched to a more formal register when someone in a uniform strode by. “Right, you two,” he said over his shoulder, raising his voice just enough to cut through the noise. “Customs, lodgings, and then food. Keep your purses in front o’ you and your eyes open. If anyone tries to sell you ‘genuine pirate treasure’ out here, it’s absolutely not genuine and very likely wasn’t theirs to sell.” “How comforting,” Hanako murmured, but she kept pace, sandals whispering against the stone.

They climbed from the piers up into the city proper, the air cooling slightly as the wind caught better between the arches. From a wider bridge, Marisa looked down and saw Limsa in cross-section: ships rocking below, dinghies threading between them; the bustle of the middle walkways, where stalls spilled colourful cloth and hanging fish over railings; and above, silhouettes crossing upper bridges against the sky where crimson banners flared. The black longship emblem was everywhere up here—not just on ships, but hammered into shields, painted on walls, framed in carved wood. In Kugane, it had always been attached to vessels that came and went. Here, it seemed baked into the place itself. This wasn’t just a port that hosted Lominsans. This was Lominsa, and the sea answered to it more than the other way around.

Their first lodgings were not impressive, but they were solid, and that counted for much in a city where half the streets were technically above air. The flat in the Lower Decks clung to the side of a rock like a barnacle with opinions: a narrow building wedged between a chandlery and a shop full of tools that looked like they might be for repairing ships or disassembling enemies, depending on the day. Their rented room had a low ceiling that made Eldric duck and a narrow window that looked out over a startling drop to the surf below. The wooden floor sloped just enough that anything round would slowly migrate to one corner.

Still, the beams were thick and well-maintained, and the Roegadyn woman who ran the place had the same no-nonsense air as the better landlandies in Kugane. She gave Hanako a long, appraising look, then said, “You keep your things neat and don’t bring home fools who can’t hold their drink, and we’ll get along fine.” In Limsa, that apparently counted as an embrace.

That evening, Eldric insisted on taking them out onto one of the open terraces overlooking the harbour. “Not the Bismarck yet,” he warned. “That’s for proper introductions. This place is for gettin’ your legs under you.” They squeezed onto a bench at a long communal table, pressed between strangers who already smelled like they’d spent the day arguing with the ocean. Plates arrived: thick slices of bread with a crust that crackled under Marisa’s teeth, grilled fish slick with lemon and herbs, a stew so dense it might have qualified as building material. The flavours were bigger, louder than what she was used to—more salt, more smoke, more everything. She chewed thoughtfully, tongue mapping the differences. “Well?” Eldric asked, eyebrows raised. “How’s Lominsa treatin’ your tastebuds?” She swallowed, considered, then nodded. “It’s like Kugane’s food, but if someone turned the volume up,” she said. “It’s very... shouty. In a good way.” Hanako hid a faint smile behind her cup. “The fish is fresh,” she conceded. “And someone has at least heard of vegetables.”

Later, as the sky darkened to deep blue and ship-lanterns pricked out across the water like low stars, they picked their way back to the inn. The noise never quite dropped; it only changed pitch, from daytime commerce to evening laughter, songs, and the occasional slurred argument. In their room, Eldric’s snores began almost as soon as he lay down. Hanako took longer to settle. Marisa watched her in the dim light as she opened her shamisen case and touched the instrument’s neck lightly, as if reassuring herself it had survived the journey intact. She plucked a few strings, adjusting the tuning with minute movements. The tune she coaxed out was not one Marisa recognised—a slow, thoughtful melody that had the cadence of home and not-home at once. Limsa’s sounds filtered through the shutters: gull cries, distant shanties, the slap of waves against stone. Hanako’s music threaded through it all, fine as silk.

Marisa lay on her side, blanket pulled up to her chin, and stared at the rough-hewn beams above. Behind her eyelids, the day replayed itself in flashes: red banners against white stone; the dizzy sight of three levels of city stacked above water; the innkeeper’s appraising look; the taste of grilled fish and lemon and too much salt; the way Eldric had smiled like a man whose lungs finally matched the air again. Somewhere in their luggage, her notebook waited. Tomorrow she would open it and add

details to the Lominsan flag she already knew: how the red looked in this light, how the longship emblem seemed to move when the cloth snapped, how it felt to stand under a banner instead of watching it from another country's shore.

For now, she just listened—to the city breathing, to her mother's music, to the faint, constant thunder of the sea far below. Kugane sat behind them across months of water; ahead lay a city that did not yet know what to do with a Hingan girl who loved flags and food and the spaces between languages. Marisa felt the nervous flutter in her chest steady into something else: not quite belonging, not yet, but the first hint of what it might feel like. Limsa Lominsa, she thought, tasting the words in her mouth as the longship flag flickered in her mind. *All right. Let's see what you've got.*

Chapter 9: Rooms That Smell of Salt

Their first few weeks in Limsa felt less like living in a city and more like learning to walk on a ship that never stopped listing. Their little flat became the centre of a small, chaotic orbit. In Kugane, their home had smelled of tatami, tea, and whatever Hanako had cooked that evening; here, the air held salt that never quite left the walls, even with the shutters closed. Damp crept into corners and stayed there. Marisa woke most mornings with the faint taste of the sea on her tongue, even when she hadn't gone outside yet.

The room itself was a puzzle of space. The bed was big enough for all three of them if they slept like sardines; a narrow pallet on the floor solved that problem when they insisted, over the innkeeper's snort, that they did not mind squeezing. Their chests fit along one wall if you shoved them together and accepted that the lid of the last one would never open properly. Hanako's shamisen case occupied the one clear patch of floor near the window, as if staking a little Hingan claim on the room. When the wind came in strong off the sea, the whole building groaned, and Marisa had a recurring fear that one day the inn would simply unhook itself from the rock and slide neatly into the water. "If it hasn't fallen in yet, it's not going to start just because you arrived," Eldric told her when she mentioned it. "The place has survived worse than us." "That is not as comforting as you think," Hanako said, eyeing the slanted floor.

Language settled around them like a fog Marisa could almost see through, if she squinted. She had learned plenty of Eorzean in Kugane, but the way Limsa spoke it was like taking familiar words and shaking them in a barrel. Vowels stretched; consonants dropped off the end of words like sailors falling off a gangplank; idioms collided in mid-air. The first time a market woman shouted, “Hoy, girl, mind ye don’t take a swim off that lip, tide’ll gut ye,” Marisa had to replay it in her head twice before she understood that the woman was warning her about a slippery edge, not threatening to drown her personally. Hingan was rare here, cultivated like an exotic plant. Hanako’s careful speech drew polite curiosity and the occasional indulgent smile from people who treated her words like music rather than communication.

It meant, almost by accident, that Marisa became the bridge. Her Eorzean was better than Hanako’s; her Hingan, despite the occasional childish slip, was clearer than Eldric’s. In the mornings, she helped her mother bargain in the markets, turning “This price is somewhat steep for fish with eyes that cloudy” into something brisk and Lominsan enough that the fishmonger actually listened. “She says yer trout’s old enough to charge rent,” Marisa translated cheerfully once. The fishmonger laughed and knocked a few gil off; Hanako gave her a look that said, *I heard that*, even if she hadn’t caught every word. In the evenings, she reported back to Eldric: which merchants seemed honest, which corners of the Lower Decks felt safe, which stalls were charging “tourist prices” and which were simply expensive because everything was.

The Lower Decks themselves were a maze of narrow paths, sudden stairs, and half-forgotten corners where the sea whispered too loudly beneath the planks. Marisa learned quickly that maps were for visitors; residents navigated by habit and gossip. She traced routes in her head the same way she had once sketched flags: from the inn to the market, from the market to the well, from the well to the pier where a particular ship docked. She discovered shortcuts—rattling wooden stairs that cut ten minutes off a trip, rope bridges that swayed enough to make her stomach lurch but spared her three flights of steps, alleys that smelled like fish guts but had the best view of the sunset between buildings. Eldric taught her the dangerous routes, too: places to avoid at night, corners where drunken tempers flared too often. “If you can hear folks arguin’, walk the other way,” he said. “If you can’t hear anything at all, walk faster.”

Neighbours came with the room, as inevitable as damp. On one side lived a weary-looking Hyuran family of five whose youngest child had a daily routine of bursting into tears exactly at dusk for reasons known only to him and the Twelve. On the other was a single Roegadyn man who worked odd hours and owned too many boots; they could tell when he came home by the thud of

footwear against the wall. Above them, someone practised the same three bars of a fife tune until Marisa could have played it on Hanako's shamisen herself. Below, the inn's common room pulsed with noise until late: clattering dishes, bursts of laughter, the occasional crash that made Hanako close her eyes and inhale slowly. It was all maddening. It was all oddly comforting. Limsa did not let you forget it was there, the way Kugane sometimes receded into a distant hum behind sliding doors.

One afternoon, when Eldric was out chasing down the details of his new contract and Hanako had gone to speak with a Hingan cloth-seller about possible mending work, Marisa found herself sitting on the low wall outside the inn, watching the harbour from a slightly higher vantage point. A pair of local children—barefoot, sun-browned, hair in varying states of rebellion—paused on their way past, sizing her up with the effortless entitlement of native street urchins. One, a boy with a gap in his front teeth, jerked his chin at her. "You the Hingan lass what moved in with the sailor?" he asked. His accent blurred half the consonants, but she caught enough. "Maybe," she said cautiously, trying to match his tone. "You the boy what can't close his mouth?" His friend snorted. The boy blinked, then grinned, revealing the gap in all its glory. "She bites," he said approvingly. "Good. Name's Bran. This is Lise. Don't fall off the wall. Tide's rough today." "I wasn't planning to," Marisa replied. "If I fall, I'll drag you with me." Lise laughed outright. "She'll fit in," she decided, and just like that, Marisa had her first Lominsan acquaintances.

They became her unofficial guides to the more child-sized side of Limsa. Bran taught her which gulls were bold enough to steal food from your hand and which ones were cowards; Lise showed her where the best skipping stones collected in a hollow near the water. In exchange, Marisa told them stories of Kugane's lantern festivals and drew little versions of Limsa's flag and the Maelstrom's symbol in the dust, explaining what Hanako had told her about the way flags meant different things at home. She mixed Eorzean and Hingan without thinking, hands sketching shapes in the air as she talked. "You talk funny," Bran said once, not meanly, just observing. "Like you're chewin' two different meals at the same time." "I am," she answered. "I just haven't decided which one to swallow yet." They didn't understand the metaphor, but they liked the way she said it.

At night, when the inn quieted enough that she could hear more than just the nearest laughter, Marisa lay awake and sorted the day into piles in her head. There were things that already made sense—how to duck under a swinging crate without thinking, the exact feel of the stone stairs under her sandals, which way the wind tended to blow off the sea in the mornings. Then there were the things that still felt foreign: the way people swore by Thal's balls and Byregot's hammer instead of local spirits; the casual way strangers clapped each other on the shoulder; the lack of sliding doors, replaced by hinges that creaked instead of whispering.

Somewhere in the middle sat the pieces she had started to claim as hers: a certain corner where the sunset turned the water molten gold, the inn's particular smell of stew and sea air, the sound of her mother practising new songs and her father humming shanties under his breath.

If Kugane had been the place where she learned that the world was wide, Limsa became the place where she started to understand that she might belong to more than one part of it. Some days she missed the neat lines and familiar routes of her old home so fiercely she could barely stand it. Other days, leaning over a railing with Bran and Lise, shouting nonsense at gulls while crimson flags snapped overhead, she felt something in her chest settle into a new shape. The room that smelled like salt and damp and overcooked stew was too small, too loud, too slanted—and when she crept in at night, bare feet cold on the boards, it felt, more and more often, like hers.

Chapter 10: Tongue Like a Tidal Current

By the time Marisa was thirteen, the words in Limsa stopped feeling like rocks being thrown at her and started feeling like water she could swim in—choppy, unpredictable water, but water all the same. At first, Lominsan speech had been a blur of swallowed consonants and vowels dragged out like rope; she'd stand in the market, staring at someone's moving mouth, and think, *I know all those words separately, why do they sound like that together?* Now, more often than not, she found herself answering without having to replay the sentence twice in her head first. The language changed shape depending on where she went—the rough bellow of dockworkers, the sharper bark of Yellowjackets, the smoother cadence of merchants trying to sound respectable—but underneath it all, there was a rhythm she'd begun to catch in her bones.

Her own tongue stumbled less, though it still had opinions about consonants. The L that had bedevilled her in Hingan speech remained unreliable in Eorzean; “Limsa Lominsa” came out as “Rimsa Rominsa” more often than not, to Bran and Lise's enduring delight. “You live here and you still can't say it,” Bran cackled one afternoon as they loitered on a bridge, watching a ship come in under Maelstrom colours. “It's your city too now, you know.” “It's my city even if I call it ‘Rimsa’,” Marisa retorted, flicking a pebble

at him. “It knows what I mean.” Lise, more charitable, pointed out that plenty of grown sailors mangled Hingan names without even trying. “If anyone gives you shite about it, ask them to say ‘Hingan’ words properly,” she advised. “Half of them think Kugane is pronounced ‘Kug-anne.’” Armed with that, Marisa felt a little less defensive about her traitorous consonants.

Hanako’s progress in Eorzean was slower and more deliberate. She approached the language the way she’d approached her shamisen training: methodically, note by note, phrase by phrase, repeating until every syllable fell exactly where she wanted it. In private, she practised sentences under her breath while folding clothes or preparing tea; in public, she spoke sparingly, choosing her words like stepping-stones over an uncertain stream. Marisa became her buffer in situations where nuance mattered less than speed. At the cloth stall, when a merchant tried to quote a price that would have been high even for a festival kimono back in Kugane, Marisa stepped in with a rapid volley of Lominsan-flavoured Eorzean: “She says that’s robbery and she can get better over on the next bridge, also your dye-job’s runnin’ in the corners.” The merchant spluttered, Hanako raised a very slight eyebrow, and the price dropped to something almost reasonable. Later, Hanako said in Hingan, “You enjoy this too much,” and Marisa replied, “If I have to learn three ways to say ‘too expensive,’ I might as well use them.”

Eldric watched his daughter’s growing fluency with a strange mixture of pride and something like bewilderment. To him, Lominsan had always been the default; he’d learned enough Hingan to avoid embarrassing himself in Kugane, but his thinking still ran in the rough cadences of his home port. Seeing Marisa flip between the two without slipping felt, on certain evenings, like watching somebody tie knots in the air. “You’re twistin’ your own brain into pretzels,” he told her once as she tried to explain to him the difference between two very similar Hingan honorifics and when you could safely use either without offending someone. “My brain is fine,” she said, tapping her temple. “It just has more rooms now.” He laughed, then sobered slightly. “Good. You’ll need ‘em. Folk listen different when you talk the way they do. Remember that.” She did. The power of it quietly thrilled her—this ability to shift just enough that the person opposite relaxed, thinking, *Ah, she’s one of ours*, even when they were wrong on several counts.

As her tongue adjusted to Limsa, so did her feet. Errands expanded beyond the immediate neighbourhood. Word got around that the Hingan girl from the slanted-room inn knew her way around the Lower Decks and could be trusted not to wander off with whatever you gave her. Soon she was carrying baskets of bread to a baker’s cousin whose oven had gone out, ferrying parcels wrapped in oilskin from one warehouse to another, delivering covered bowls of stew to dockhands on the late shift. The work paid badly but regularly, in coin or leftovers or occasionally in information. “That step there’s rotten,” a sailor would tell her as she

handed over food near a creaking stair. “Skip it or you’ll go through the plank.” “Don’t cut through that alley after dark,” a shopkeeper warned. “Last week some bastard tried to set up a toll there. Yellowjackets chased him off, but his friends still sulk in the corners.” She built a mental map on top of her earlier one—this time, marked not just with routes and landmarks, but with the intangible currents of safety and risk.

Her favourite runs were to the Yellowjacket posts. The first time a harried corporal flagged her down—“You there, girl, know your way to the west watchtower?”—she almost snapped that she had a name, then remembered that being useful was more important than being properly addressed. “I do,” she said. “If I don’t get turned around halfway by your stupid city.” He shoved a sack into her arms. “Three loaves and a pot o’ stew for the lads up there. I’ll square it with the cook. Mind you don’t let anyone nick anything.” “If they try, I’ll bite ‘em,” she replied, setting off at a trot before he could decide she was joking. The watchtower, when she reached it, was little more than a reinforcement of stone and wood overlooking a narrow channel, but the guards’ faces lit up at the sight of food. “Bless Thal and that cook,” one said, inhaling deeply. “And you too, I suppose, since you brought it.” “I’ll take the blessing second-hand,” Marisa said. “Just don’t drop the pot.” On her way back, she took a different route on purpose, seeing which side-paths connected and which dead-ended in somebody’s laundry.

At home, the inn room remained cramped, but the edges softened as they made it theirs. Hanako hung a small scroll on one wall, its inked characters a quiet echo of a world across the sea. Eldric found a discarded crate lid, planed it smooth, and turned it into a low table so they didn’t have to balance bowls on their knees. Marisa tucked her flag notebook into the safest corner of her trunk and, when the light was good, added new entries: not just national banners now, but guild signs, company symbols, the Maelstrom’s crimson-and-black, even the little painted emblem on the side of a fishmonger’s stall that promised “No bones left behind.” Between these, she jotted down new words and phrases she wanted to remember. “*On the lip*” = *on the edge*. “*Mind yer step*” = *danger ahead, maybe literal, maybe not*. It made her feel less like she was drowning in language and more like she was compiling her own tide chart.

Sometimes, in the evenings, she still missed Kugane so fiercely it startled her. The curve of a rooftop in the dusk would remind her of some faraway angle of lantern light; the scent of soy in a Lominsan sauce would make something in her chest ache for the izakaya kitchen where she’d stirred her first pot. When that happened, she’d sit by the window, knees drawn up, and listen to the harbour’s layered noise. It wasn’t the same as the distant rumble she’d grown up with—but it had its own patterns, and she was

beginning to recognise them. She'd hear the particular clank of a certain ship's gangplank and know Eldric would be home soon. She'd catch the laugh of the innkeeper downstairs and guess someone had tried, and failed, to argue about their room rate. She'd hear, faintly, the start of a shanty in the distance and think, *I know this one now. I could sing along if I wanted to.*

On one such night, Hanako set her shamisen across her lap and, instead of the old Hingan tunes, began picking out the melody of a Lominsan song she'd heard in the common room downstairs. The rhythm was wrong at first, too regular for a work song, but she adjusted, letting it loosen, adding little flourishes that made it her own. "You're stealing their music," Marisa observed quietly from the floor. "Borrowing," Hanako corrected. "They steal our fish names. It is only fair." Eldric, stretched out on the pallet, one arm over his eyes, chuckled. "Give it a year and you'll have the Yellowjackets hummin' Hingan festival songs on late watch," he said. "Stranger things have happened." Marisa listened as the foreign melody turned familiar under her mother's fingers and thought, with a certainty that surprised her, *This is what we are now. Pieces from both sides, stitched together until they fit.*

Limsa still felt enormous, unruly, and occasionally hostile. Some days she came home with skinned knees and bruised pride from a misjudged step or a sharp remark. But more and more often, when she lay down in the slanted little room that smelled of salt and stew and incense, the last thought before sleep was not *I don't belong here*, but *I know how to say goodnight in three different ways, and all of them are mine.*

Chapter 11: Supper Run

By fourteen, Marisa had discovered that if there was one thing Limsa respected almost as much as a well-swung axe, it was a meal that arrived hot, on time, and in the right hands. It happened slowly at first, almost by accident. She was already running little errands for market vendors and neighbours, carrying parcels across walkways and climbing too many stairs a day. One evening, the inn's cook—a grizzled Highlander who spoke mostly in grunts—thrust a covered pot into her arms with a harried, "Girl. West dockside watchpost. They're late for their supper and I've no time to send a proper boy." Marisa blinked at him. "I'm a

proper girl,” she said. “Good enough,” he replied, already turning back to his stove. “Don’t spill, don’t dawdle, and if the Yellowjackets complain it’s cold, tell ‘em the tide’s to blame.”

The pot was heavier than it looked, sloshing dangerously as she picked her way down the steps. The air outside was turning sharp with evening, sunset reddening the water between the arches. She muttered the directions to herself—second stair, left turn at the anchor sign, across the short bridge with the cracked rail, follow the smell of men who hadn’t been allowed to leave their post all day—and found the watchpost tucked under an overhang of stone, its small entrance marked with the familiar crossed-axe emblem. A pair of Yellowjackets in battered shirts looked up as she approached, hands resting casually on their weapons until they saw the steam rising from the lid. Their entire posture shifted. “Bless the cook,” one said fervently. “And bless... er, you.” “Marisa,” she supplied. “The cook’s too busy to come himself, so he sent me. If you complain it’s cold, I’ll tell him it’s your fault for breathin’ too slowly.” The other guard laughed, already taking the pot from her. “You tell him we said he can send you any day. Here.” He pressed a few gil into her hand—more than the cook was likely paying her for the errand. “For your trouble.” She pocketed it with the professional air of someone who had just discovered a viable niche.

After that, it seemed everybody needed something taken somewhere *right now*. The inn cook started using her regularly. A small canteen that supplied food to dockworkers on the far side of the harbour caught wind of “the Hingan girl who doesn’t get lost” and began offering her odd jobs. Sometimes it was bundles of bread and cheese wrapped in cloth; sometimes pots of stew with lids that rattled ominously; sometimes packets so carefully wrapped and tied that she suspected they contained more coin than food. “You don’t open them, you don’t ask, you don’t get robbed,” the canteen owner told her, counting out payment with thick fingers. “You get there fast and in one piece, you get more work.” “And if I do get robbed?” she asked. “Then you run faster than whoever’s behind you,” he said, perfectly serious. “And if that fails, aim low. Men scream louder when you kick ‘em in the knee.” She filed that away under “practical advice.”

Running food for people stuck on duty gave her a view of Limsa that travellers rarely saw. She learned which Yellowjacket posts had the best jokes and which ones were perpetually dour. She saw tired fishermen slumped on crates, their gratitude for a hot meal covering all manner of gruffness. She ducked into cramped lighthouse outposts where the air smelled of oil and salt and stayed just long enough to hand off bowls before the wind knifed through her clothing. She brought provisions to outlying piers where ships moored for repairs, climbing down steep, narrow steps at low tide and scrambling back up when the swell surged too

high. Her legs burned more often than not by the end of the day, but the ache was the good kind—the kind that said she'd gone somewhere and done something.

It was different from helping in Kugane's kitchens, where the people she fed were rarely more than a door or two away. Here, there was a gap between cook and eater, sometimes a long one, and she was the bridge over it. She discovered she liked that. There was a particular moment she began to crave: the second when a door opened, a tired face took in the sight of her and the smell of stew or fresh bread, and something in their eyes relaxed. "There you are," an exhausted Arcanist said once, parchment ink smudged on his cheek as he accepted his supper near a lamplit overlook. "I was beginning to think I'd have to eat my carbuncles." "I don't think they're part of the recommended diet," Marisa replied. "Stew's better. Less crunchy." He laughed, the kind of short, surprised bark that sounded like it hadn't had much practice lately, and that tiny victory carried her through the wind on the way back.

Not every delivery went smoothly. There were wrong turns when the city's twisting levels defeated her mental map and she had to double back, cursing and sweating, as soup sloshed dangerously close to the rim. Once she arrived at a pier only to discover the ship had put out ten minutes earlier and her intended recipients were somewhere in the middle of the bay, probably wondering what smelled so good. "Not your fault," Eldric said when she complained that night, glaring at the wall as if it had done her a personal wrong. "Ships leave when they're told, or when they see somethin' on the horizon they don't like. Tide waits for no one, and neither do captains." "Bread does," she muttered. "Bread waited. It's probably still waiting on the counter, lookin' betrayed." He laughed so hard he nearly fell off the pallet.

Balancing the deliveries with life at home and Hanako's expectations required a careful, sometimes clumsy dance. Hanako had agreed to Limsa in part because she believed Marisa could build something more stable here, not spend her life running up and down stairs like a glorified errand girl. When Marisa came home one evening flushed with stories about outrunning a sudden squall to get bread to a ship before it cast off, Hanako listened, then said in Hingan, "I am glad you did not fall into the sea. Again." Marisa coughed. The one time she'd misjudged a slick step and gone waist-deep in cold water had apparently entered the family chronicles. "It was knee-deep," she protested. "At most." "The water does not get shallower if you lie about it," Hanako replied. Then, more gently, "You enjoy this." It wasn't quite a question. Marisa fiddled with the hem of her sleeve. "I like... bringing things to people," she said finally. "Not just food. Letters, parcels, stew that smells like home when they're stuck somewhere that doesn't. It

makes them... less tired, for a bit.” Hanako’s expression softened. “There are worse things to be, than someone others are glad to see at their door,” she said. “Just promise me you will not confuse ‘being needed’ with ‘having no choice’.” Marisa didn’t entirely understand, but she nodded anyway.

It was during one of these runs that the Bismarck proper began to drift into her orbit, like a ship coming into view out of fog. She’d known of it, of course—only the most oblivious newcomer could miss the Culinarian’s Guild perched proudly on the upper level, its signboard promising meals better than anything an inn like theirs could manage on its busiest day. Eldric had pointed it out early on. “There’s where Lominsa keeps its serious cooks,” he’d said. “If you want to learn how to burn things professionally, that’s the place.” But the Bismarck was also where she was told to pick up a crate of provisions one blustery morning for a supply run to a small Yellowjacket outpost farther along the coast. “You’ll meet a man named Lyngsath,” the inn cook grunted. “Big fellow, arms like hams, voice like gravel in a barrel. Don’t let him scare you. He only bites apprentices.”

The guild’s kitchen was a revelation even before she stepped fully into it. Heat rolled out through the doorway in a wave; the air was thick with the mixed smells of fish, frying fat, spices she couldn’t yet name, and something sweet lurking behind it all. Inside, it was organised chaos in a way that tugged at something deep in her chest. Cooks moved around each other with the precision of dancers, calling for knives, pans, ingredients. Pans hissed as liquid hit hot metal; knives thudded rapidly against cutting boards. At the centre of it all stood a Roegadyn who could only be Lyngsath: thick-armed, square-shouldered, towel over one shoulder like a general’s sash. He was bellowing about salt content to a trembling apprentice when the inn’s order was announced.

Marisa edged in, clutching the chit with the inn’s mark on it. “Scuse me,” she ventured, raising her voice just enough to be heard over the sizzle. “I’m here for the Yellowjacket crate? From Kett’s.” Lyngsath’s head swivelled in her direction. His gaze swept her from top to toe, taking in the Hingan features, the too-big borrowed coat, the stubborn set of her jaw. “Inn runner?” he rumbled. His accent chewed some of the vowels, but she caught every word. “Yes, sir,” she replied. “I won’t drop it.” One corner of his mouth twitched, as if against his will. “We’ll see. Crate’s by the back door. Mind your feet, girl—this kitchen’s no place for drifters and daydreamers. You get in the way, you’ll go out with the slops.” “I’ll only drift in the right direction,” she said, then immediately wondered if that sounded cheeky. His snort might have been disapproval. It might also have been the sound of someone not entirely displeased.

The crate was heavy, filled with loaves, smoked fish, and jars of pickled vegetables that would keep on the road. As she hoisted it, an older Miqu'te woman chopping herbs nearby gave her a quick once-over. "First time in a proper kitchen?" she asked. "First time in *this* proper kitchen," Marisa admitted. "It smells like if every meal I've ever had got together and threw a festival." The woman smiled faintly. "Come back when you're not carryin' half the pantry and take a closer look," she said. "If the head man hasn't scared you off." "He's only got one head," Marisa said. "I've dealt with worse." The woman laughed, and that, more than anything, made Marisa straighten her shoulders under the weight.

She delivered the crate without incident—no falls, no broken jars, only a minor argument with the wind. The Yellowjackets at the outpost greeted her like a returning hero, mostly because she came bearing food and the last messenger hadn't. On the way back, the road curved along a cliff where she could see Limsa spread out below, banners bright, ships ant-like at this distance. Somewhere in that white stone tangle, the Bismarck's kitchen was still buzzing, feeding people who had never thought twice about what it took to get a hot meal on their table. She thought of the heat, the rhythm, the way Lyngsath's voice had cut through the noise like a cleaver.

That night, sitting cross-legged on the slanted floor of their inn room, she told Eldric and Hanako about the guild kitchen in a rush of overlapping details. "There were so many stoves," she said, hands flung wide. "And they all knew exactly what they were doing, like a crew on a deck, but with knives instead of ropes. And this Roegadyn—Lyngsath—he yelled at everyone but they listened, and no one looked scared enough to run. I want to go back." Eldric arched a brow. "To get more crates?" "To get more... everything," she said. "Food and steam and... learning. I could bring the food *and* make it." Hanako watched her, fingers resting thoughtfully on the shamisen in her lap. "You are already bringing meals to people who need them," she said. "If your feet have found work, perhaps it is time your hands did too."

Marisa glanced down at her palms, currently ink-stained and nicked. They weren't the hands of a proper culinarian yet—not the way Hanako had once described the court chefs of Kugane, or the guild masters here in Limsa. But they were strong, calloused from crates and railings, steady enough to carry hot stew across a swinging bridge without spilling. She curled them into fists, then opened them again. "Then I'll do both," she decided aloud. "I'll be the one who makes the food and the one who gets it where it needs to go." Outside, somewhere distant, a ship's bell rang, marking the change of watch. In the cramped room that smelled of salt and stew and incense, the idea settled between the three of them like something quietly, irrevocably decided.

Chapter 12: Through the Bismarck's Door

Eventually, the Bismarck had stopped being just a place Marisa ran to and from with crates and started looming in her mind the way Dalamud would, years later, loom in the sky—always there, always watching, impossible to ignore. Every delivery that took her up to the guild's deck left a line of heat on the inside of her ribs. She began timing her runs so she'd arrive when the kitchen was at full roar, lingering just long enough at the back door to feel the slap of hot air and hear the rapid-fire rhythm of knives and orders. The inn cook noticed, of course. "You moonin' over their ovens again?" he grunted one morning when she returned a little flushed. "If you stand too close, they'll rope you in to wash pots for free." "If they try, I'll charge them," she said, but there was less bite and more longing in it than she meant to show. He squinted at her for a moment, then shook his head. "Talk to your folks," he muttered, turning back to his stew. "If you're gonna haunt that place, might as well be as an apprentice and not a stray."

That evening, she brought it up at the low table in their slanted room, where the three of them were eating a respectable but unremarkable fish stew. The inn's kitchen had begun to feel too small to her; everything they ate now looked like a sketch of a meal she wanted to paint in full colour. "The Bismarck's taking apprentices," she said, trying for casual and failing. "Proper ones. Not just lads who wandered in and never left. They train culinarian guild members there. With certificates and everything." Eldric, who had learned the hard way that words like "proper" and "certificate" often came from Hanako's side of the family, glanced over at his wife. "Mm," he said cautiously. "And how d'you know that?" "Because I asked," Marisa replied. "And I listened. And somebody left the guild notice posted near the fishmonger's longer than they meant to. They're looking for people who can follow orders, keep their hands clean, and not faint in the heat. I can do all of that." Hanako set her chopsticks down with care. "Guild work is not like running stew to an outpost," she said. "You will have a master. You will be yelled at. You will be expected to be on time even if your father's ship comes in at dawn and you have not seen him in weeks. This is not an excuse to loiter near a famous kitchen."

"I don't want an excuse," Marisa said quickly. "I want to belong there the way I belong on the streets when I'm delivering. I like bringing food to people. I want to be good at making it, too, not just carrying other people's work. You said there were worse

things than being someone folk are glad to see at the door. Imagine if they knew the food you brought was your own.” Eldric leaned back, chewing thoughtfully. “Lyngsath runs a tight ship,” he said. “I knew him years ago. He’s not the sort to take on a lass ‘cause she bats her eyes at the stewpot. He’ll work you hard. You sure you want that instead of the freedom o’ runnin’ your own routes?” Marisa hesitated, then nodded. “Freedom doesn’t mean much if all you’re doing is running other people’s errands forever. If I learn from them now, maybe later I can do both. My way.” Hanako studied her daughter for a long moment, assessing not just the words but the set of her shoulders and the tilt of her chin. “If you do this,” she said slowly, “you do it properly. You will still help me at home. You will remember that your studies are not finished simply because you have a guild apron. And you will accept that there are days when you will fail and be scolded and have to do it again.” Marisa’s heart thudded. “Then... is that a yes?” “It is a ‘we will go and ask,’” Hanako said. “If the guild says no, we will not camp outside their door until they change their minds.” “Not even a little?” Marisa asked. Eldric choked on his stew, laughing.

Two days later, she climbed the steps to the Bismarck not as a runner but as a suppliant, which felt far more terrifying. The guild’s main doors were open to the sea breeze, the signboard hanging proudly overhead, the smell of cooking more intense than usual this close to the lunch rush. The dining hall was a riot of noise—customers talking over clattering plates, guild members weaving between tables with practised grace. Hanako walked beside Marisa, every line of her kimono arranged with deliberate dignity; her expression was neutral, but Marisa could feel the tension in her hand when their fingers brushed. Eldric trailed a half-step behind, looking as if he’d much rather be anywhere else than asking favours from an old acquaintance. “You remember,” he murmured to Marisa as they edged around a table, “if he tells you no, that’s not the end o’ the world. Plenty of kitchens, plenty o’ ships.” “I know,” she lied.

A guild attendant, a harried Miqu’te with ink-stained fingers, intercepted them before they could drift too far into the chaos. “Dining or business?” she asked briskly, eyes flicking over them. “Neither,” Hanako said in careful Eorzean. “We wish to speak with your master. About an apprenticeship.” The Miqu’te’s gaze shifted to Marisa, taking her in with quick interest. “That so?” she said. “We’ve no shortage o’ hands who think they can cook. Shortage o’ hands who can listen. Wait here.” She disappeared into the back before any of them could decide whether that was encouraging.

A few minutes later, Lyngsath himself appeared in the doorway between kitchen and hall, towel slung over one shoulder like a banner. Up close, he was even larger than Marisa remembered, his apron dusted with flour and dotted with the scars of old spills.

He looked at Eldric first. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he rumbled. “If it isn’t Shipman, back from draggin’ his luck across the seas. I heard you washed up in my city for good.” “For good or ‘til the sea gets bored and sends me elsewhere,” Eldric said, offering a half-smile. “Lyngsath. You’re lookin’... floury.” “Better than lookin’ hungry,” Lyngsath snorted. His gaze shifted to Hanako, and he inclined his head with an unexpected, if rough-edged, courtesy. “Ma’am.” Then his eyes landed on Marisa, and lingered. “So. This the one thinks she wants to cook instead o’ just carryin’ stew.” Marisa’s mouth went dry. “Yes, sir,” she managed. “I mean—I don’t mind carrying, I like carrying, but I want to learn how to make it worth carrying.” He grunted. “You talk like a pamphlet,” he said. “Can you follow orders?” “Yes, sir.” “Can you keep your hands clean and your knives sharp?” “I can clean and I can learn to sharpen,” she said honestly. “And I don’t faint in heat.” One of the nearby servers snickered; Lyngsath silenced them with a glance.

He jerked his chin toward the kitchen. “You ever worked a line?” he asked as he led them through, not waiting for an answer. The shift from dining hall to kitchen was like walking into another element. Heat rose in a visible shimmer above the stoves; steam hugged the ceiling. Apprentices darted to and fro with bowls, ladles, bundles of chopped herbs. Knives flashed. Someone cursed as oil spat. Lyngsath moved through it the way Eldric moved on a deck—without hesitation, expecting those in his path to get out of the way. “We train guild members here, not tavern fry-cooks,” he said over his shoulder. “You’ll start with peelings, stockpots, scrubbing. You’ll move up to sauce and service only when I’m convinced you won’t poison my customers. You take criticism, you take care, and you don’t cry in the pantry. Cry on your own time. That clear?” “Yes, sir,” Marisa said, trying not to stare at everything at once. The organised chaos of it throbbed under her skin like a second heartbeat. She wanted to be in the middle of it so badly her fingers itched.

They stopped near a counter piled with vegetables, where a diminutive Lalafell man with sharp eyes and a sharper nose was berating an apprentice for slicing onions unevenly. He broke off mid-harangue to peer up at Marisa with undisguised scepticism. “What’s this, then?” he demanded. “Another stray? We’re not a kennel, Lyngsath.” “New candidate,” Lyngsath said. “Says she wants guild training. We’re full o’ lads who can swing a knife and burn a steak; we could use someone who knows how to show up on time.” The Lalafell’s gaze narrowed. “We could use someone who can count,” he sniffed. “And who knows there’s more to sauce than drownin’ everything in salt. You.” He jabbed a finger at Marisa. “Name.” “Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman,” she said. “From...” She glanced at her parents. “From Kugane and Limsa, both.” His eyebrow twitched. “Too many syllables,” he said. “We’ll see if you last long enough for me to bother rememberin’ them.” To Lyngsath, he muttered, “If she can’t cry in the pantry, she’ll cry in the

alley instead. You know how they get.” But there was less venom in it than performance, and Marisa caught the faintest nod that might have meant, *We’ll try her*.

Lyngsath turned back to Hanako and Eldric. “We don’t have formal ‘terms’ like the Sharlayans,” he said. “She comes in the mornings, six bells sharp, three or four days a week to start. She’ll scrub, peel, listen, and learn. If she’s still standing after a few moons, we’ll talk about formal registration with the guild and real duties. If she turns out to be a disaster, we’ll send her back with all her fingers and a note sayin’ we tried.” His eyes dropped to Marisa again. “You understand—this is work. Not story-time in a famous kitchen.” “I understand,” she said. Her heart felt like it was going to claw its way up into her throat, but her voice stayed steady. “Thank you for the chance.”

Back outside, the air felt strangely thin after the dense warmth of the kitchen. Hanako exhaled slowly, as if she’d been holding her breath for the entire tour. “He is... loud,” she said, which, for her, was the equivalent of calling Ifrit “a bit warm.” “He’s fair,” Eldric said. “For a man who thinks butter is a food group.” He clapped Marisa lightly on the back. “You did well. Didn’t faint, didn’t bite anyone. Good start.” Marisa barely heard them. Her mind was already racing ahead to the first morning she’d report at six bells, apron tied, hands ready. She imagined the feel of a proper chef’s knife in her hand, the rhythm of chopping, the pride of plating something that would go out into the hall and make someone’s shoulders drop in relief when they tasted it.

That night, she lay awake a long time in their slanted room, listening to the inn settle and the harbour murmur. Her fingers traced patterns on the blanket unconsciously—chopping motions, stirring circles. She thought of Kugane’s kitchens, where she’d been allowed in only as a helper, always someone’s daughter, never the one whose name was on the menu. She thought of the Bismarck’s blazing stoves and Lyngsath’s gravelly bark and the way the kitchen had seemed, under all the noise, to hum with purpose. “You are sure?” Hanako asked quietly from the pallet, as if reading her thoughts. “It will be hard.” “So’s carryin’ hot stew across the whole city,” Marisa replied, lapsing into Lominsan without thinking. “This just means I get to make the stew, too.” There was a small pause, then the rustle of cloth as Hanako turned over. “Very well,” she said. “Then we will buy you stronger shoes.”

When dawn came and the bells rang six, Marisa stood in the Bismarck’s kitchen doorway, apron borrowed, hair tied back, hands scrubbed so clean they almost squeaked. The heat hit her like a welcome challenge. Somewhere in the room, Lyngsath’s voice rolled out over the clatter: “All right, you lot, less natterin’, more cookin’. And somebody show the new girl where we keep the

peelers. If she survives the turnips, we'll see what else she can do." Marisa stepped forward, heart hammering in rhythm with the chopping, and for the first time, crossed that threshold not as a runner or a visitor, but as an apprentice.

Chapter 13: Fire, Steel, and Flour Dust

Marisa's first week as a Bismarck apprentice taught her three important lessons. One: no matter how clean you think your hands are, they are not nearly clean enough for Lyngsath. Two: there is always one more pot to scrub. Three: if you stand still for more than ten heartbeats in a working kitchen, someone will hand you something heavy, sharp, or on fire.

The day started early and hot. By the time the bells finished chiming six, the kitchen was already fully awake. Fires had been coaxed into proper flames, stockpots were muttering on the back burners, and the first wave of apprentices were being shouted at for sins ranging from "cut that onion like it owes you money" to "that's not how much salt you put in unless you're tryin' to pickle a Maelstrom private." Marisa arrived in a borrowed apron that hung a little too big on her, hair tied back in a messy knot, hands scrubbed raw. The moment she stepped through the threshold, the heat folded around her like a second skin.

"New girl!" someone barked before she could even finish looking around. A lad with flour up to his elbows thrust a bucket and a brush at her. "Floor behind the prep tables. Quick. If you get in the way, they'll trample you and then you'll have to clean yourself up too." She bit down on the instinct to bristle at being treated like furniture and took the bucket. The stones back there were slick with a fine dusting of flour and vegetable peelings; she scrubbed until her arms burned, dodging the boots of cooks who flowed around her without breaking rhythm. By the time Lyngsath lumbered past to inspect the morning's progress, she had acquired wet knees, a sweating brow, and a healthy respect for just how much mess a kitchen could produce before most of Limsa had even finished yawning.

"Seen worse," Lyngsath grunted, flicking a bit of peel off the floor with the tip of his boot. "Seen better. Don't let it get away from you. Dirt on the floor leads to dirt on the plate, and dirt on the plate leads to me havin' to listen to nobles complain. I'd rather

swallow a pan whole.” Marisa, who had never seen a noble up close and wasn’t sure she ever wanted to, nodded. “Yes, sir.” “Don’t ‘sir’ me,” he said, already moving on. “Just don’t make me regret lettin’ you in.”

Once the floors passed muster, she graduated to peelings. A mountain of turnips, carrots, and onions loomed on one side of a prep table; a line of apprentices made slow, resentful progress along it. A Lalafell woman with a no-nonsense bun and an expression like a sharpened paring knife slapped a peeler into Marisa’s hand. “You’re right-handed,” she said without preamble. “Good. You start on the turnips. You keep your fingers. You don’t throw the peelings on the floor or you’ll answer to Lyngsath, then to me, and I am worse.” “Yes, ma’am,” Marisa said. Her wrist quickly discovered new muscles it had never met before. Turnips, it turned out, had infinite corners.

The hours blurred into a pattern: scrub, peel, chop, fetch, stir. She washed greens in water so cold it made her knuckles ache, sorted herbs by scent until her head swam, and learned that there was a correct and very specific way to stack clean pans so they didn’t topple and kill someone you actually liked. The older apprentices watched her with the wary curiosity reserved for anyone new who might either collapse or outperform them. Some were friendly, some indifferent, one or two openly sceptical. “Guild’s soft,” a lanky Midlander muttered under his breath as she took up her place at the chopping board. “Used to be you needed years o’ tavern work before they let you in here. Now they let anyone with a steady walk and two hands.” “If you’re worried I’ll take your job,” Marisa replied without looking up, “maybe chop faster.” The Lalafell overseer barked a laugh; the boy flushed and focused on his onions.

Not all the guild’s teachers were as gruffly approachable as Lyngsath. Midway through her second week. Pagoda Buligoda had been part of the Bismarck’s landscape for as long as Marisa had been running crates through its back door—a sharp-eyed Lalafell with a moustache too precise to be entirely trustworthy and an apron that somehow never seemed to get as dirty as everyone else’s. In her runner days, he’d been just one more terrifying adult who could spot a crooked dice of onion from across the room and make an apprentice cry about it.

Once she put on a guild apron, though, he stopped being background scenery and became a looming fact of her daily life. He moved through the kitchen like an inspector sent by the Twelve, pausing at stations just long enough to find something wrong.

When he reached Marisa's corner one morning, she was elbow-deep in mirepoix, trying to make her carrots and onions behave. He watched in silence for a few breaths, then tapped one cube of carrot with the tip of a spotless knife.

"This carrot," he said, his Gridanian-accented Eorzean clipped and precise, "is not the same size as its neighbours." Marisa stared at the offending cube. It looked, to her untrained eye, exactly like the others. "They will cook unevenly," Pagoda continued, in the tone of someone delivering tragic news about a noble house. "Your stock will be an insult to the very idea of balance. Do you wish to serve insults?" "No, instructor," she said, cheeks heating. "Then cut them properly," he replied. "And remember: the knife is not a club. It is a pen. You are writing flavour with it." He moved on, leaving her to re-evaluate every piece of vegetable she had already chopped. It was maddening. It was also, she had to admit, vaguely exhilarating—the idea that precision here meant something more than neatness, that someone could tell when a stock had been made with lazy hands.

Fire, steel, flour, water: they became the elements of her new world. The ovens roared from dawn till late, breathing out waves of heat that left the skin flushed and hairline damp. Pans screamed when cold ingredients hit hot oil. Knives bit into flesh—fish, fowl, onions, and occasionally fingertips. She learned exactly how far to pull back to avoid blood in the batter and how much pressure to use so the blade did the work instead of her arm. Flour drifted in fine clouds, dusting aprons and eyelashes, turning everyone into ghostly versions of themselves by midday. She went home each evening smelling so strongly of garlic, smoke, and yeast that even the inn's resident alley cats trailed her up the stairs, hopeful shadows at her heels. Eldric joked that if she ever fell overboard, the fish would season themselves out of respect.

Despite the grind, there were moments of unexpected joy. The first time she was trusted to season a stock on her own, Lyngsath hovered over her shoulder like a storm cloud. "Remember," he said, "you can put more in, but you can't take any out. Don't cook like you're makin' up for all the times in your life you couldn't speak your mind." "That's most of the times in my life," she muttered, but she held her hand steady. She added salt, tasted, added a touch more, then a sprig of thyme and a scrap of bay. The difference between "almost" and "there" was subtle, but she felt it happen. Lyngsath grunted. "Not bad," he said. "You're a hair heavy on the salt. Next time, think of who's eatin' it. Yellowjackets? They've been sweatin' all day, they'll forgive you. Nobles? They'll write letters." She stored the note away, pleased despite herself.

Pagoda was less generous with praise. When she plated a simple fish dish under his supervision, he stalked around the plate as if it might confess its crimes if he glared long enough. “You have taste,” he conceded grudgingly after a mouthful. “But you have no respect for geometry. The sauce is a puddle. The garnish is an afterthought. This is... rustic.” He said the word as if it were a disease. “Some of us quite like rustic,” she said before she could stop herself. His eyes snapped to hers. “This is a guild-acknowledged establishment,” he said frostily. “We do not ‘quite like rustic.’ We elevate it.” Later, in the dish pit, one of the older apprentices elbowed her and whispered, “If he says ‘elevate’ one more time, I’m puttin’ bricks under the plates and callin’ it done.” Marisa snorted, tension easing. Even tyrants could be gently mocked.

Outside the Bismarck, her delivery work slowed but didn’t vanish. There were still people who needed food carried from one side of the city to the other, and now, increasingly, there were people who sought her out because they’d heard she had a guild apron tied over her coat. “So you’re a proper cook now,” one Yellowjacket said, accepting a loaf of guild bread with both hands. “Does this mean we can complain about the crust?” “You can complain,” she said. “Whether I listen is another matter.” The pride that prickled under her skin when people said “Marisa from the Bismarck” instead of just “the Hingan girl” was a dangerous, lovely thing. Hanako noticed it too. “Be careful,” she said one night as they sat with tea in their cramped room. “Names are heavy. They can help you stand taller. They can also crush you if you forget you are more than one.” Marisa nodded, tracing a damp ring on the table. “I’ll remember,” she said, hoping she would.

On the worst days, when she burned herself twice and dropped a ladle and Pagoda made a noise at her sauce that suggested it had personally offended his ancestors, she stumbled home so exhausted she could barely untie her apron. On the best days, when the kitchen moved as one body and she found herself in step with it—passing plates, catching orders, adjusting seasoning by instinct—she felt as if she’d finally found the right volume for the world. Limsa’s chaos made sense here. Every shout had a purpose. Every clang of pan and knife belonged. When she stood at the back door at the end of a long shift, watching the harbour through the steam, the red banners of the city flickering beyond the haze, she thought, *This is it. This is part of who I am now. Not just the girl who brings supper, but the one who helps make it worth bringing.*

She didn’t know it yet, but these long, hot days at the Bismarck—the burn scars, the callouses, the lectures about geometry and salt—would be the bedrock of everything that came after. When she eventually traded guild counters for a tiny parlour in the Mist and a ridiculous red chocobo named Rocceto, the rhythm in her hands would still be the Bismarck’s. For now, she wiped sweat

from her brow, reached for another knife, and leaned into the roar of the kitchen, letting the fire and steel and flour dust work her into the kind of culinarian who could one day call herself, without flinching, a pizzaiola.

Part III — Later Teens (Years 15-16)



Chapter 14: Goodbye, Little Wave

When Marisa turned fifteen, exactly one year after she tied on her first Bismarck apron, Eldric's absences began to stretch like low tide—longer, barer, leaving more of the sea floor exposed than anyone was comfortable seeing. At first it was subtle: instead of being gone three or four days on a short coastal run, he'd be gone a week. Then ten days. Then two full weeks, returning with a little more coin than usual and a lot more tiredness around the eyes. When he came through the inn door, smelling of salt and tar and other people's cargo, he still swept Marisa up in a hug, still ruffled her hair and teased her about smelling like garlic and burnt bread. But there was a new tightness around his smile, and the way he glanced reflexively toward the window, as if checking the sea hadn't moved in his absence, made something in her chest knot.

Work filled most of the hours while he was gone. The Bismarck demanded everything she had from dawn until the lunch rush died down; apron strings dug into her back, knife callouses toughened the sides of her fingers, and her brain ended most days full of measurements and timing charts instead of thoughts. After her shift, if she wasn't falling face-first into bed, she still ran the occasional delivery for the inn or a few of her regulars. The routes through the Lower Decks and the surrounding piers had become almost an extension of her own body; she knew exactly where the planks warped underfoot and which corners collected puddles after rain. It meant she could throw herself into motion when thinking hurt. When someone at a Yellowjacket post asked after her father—"Your da still sailing for Westwind? Haven't seen his rust-heap in a bit"—she could laugh and deflect. "Oh, him? He's probably flirting with a gale somewhere; he'll be back when the storm gets bored." It was easier than admitting she'd stopped being able to predict his returns.

Hanako watched the lengthening gaps between visits with a different kind of attention. She had always kept the household books with the same careful precision she used to tune her shamisen, but now the ledger pages began to show little hesitations—columns of figures where her pen paused slightly longer, as if weighing more than numbers. The rent, the cost of rice and fish, the small contributions Marisa could make from her apprentice's pay and delivery coins: they added up, but not comfortably, not if anything went wrong. When Eldric came back with extra gil, he usually slapped it down on the table with a breezy, "See? Told you I'd sort it." Hanako would press her lips together and say, "At what cost, Eldric?" in a tone that pretended to be about money but carried more than arithmetic.

The first real argument Marisa overheard was on a night when the fog came in thick and the flat felt smaller for it. She'd come back from a long day of chopping and stock-stirring with a dull ache in her shoulders and a head full of Pagoda's scathing remarks about her sense of "geometry." Eldric had returned only a bell earlier, bringing with him a damp cloak, a tired grin, and a bag of oranges from some far coast that made the whole room smell faintly of sunshine. They'd eaten in relative peace at the low table, the stew stretched with bread and a few generous slices of guild-quality cured meat he'd "liberated" from somewhere. After supper, Marisa had retreated to the corner of the room under the window with her notebook, pretending to be engrossed in sketching a new variant of the Maelstrom flag she'd seen painted on a hull. Hanako began to stack bowls with unnecessary care; Eldric lounged on the pallet like a man who believed the day's worst work was behind him.

“So,” Hanako said at last, in Hingan. Her voice was soft, which was never a good sign. “These new voyages. They are longer.” Eldric made a non-committal sound. “Wind’s fickle this time o’ year. You know how it is.” “I know enough to tell the difference between the wind and a change in route,” she replied. “Westwind Company does not suddenly decide to stretch a short run into a fortnight. Not unless someone is paying them very well to do something... extra.” Marisa’s pen stalled mid-stroke. Eldric sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “You’ve been talking to the other wives.” “I’ve been listening,” Hanako said. “There is a difference. ‘Private contracts,’ they call it. Cargo that does not go through proper ledgers. Ships that sail with more guards than usual.” She set the bowls down with a soft clack. “You told me you were done with taking risks.”

He sat up a little, frowning. “I told you I was done with *stupid* risks,” he said. “This isn’t smugglin’ gunpowder into a Garlean blockade. It’s just... takin’ on jobs that pay enough we’re not countin’ every grain of rice before we eat it. You’ve seen the books. We’re keepin’ afloat, but only just. The guild doesn’t pay her enough yet to feed three mouths and a ledger full o’ debt I didn’t ask for.” “No one asks for debt,” Hanako said. “It arrives all the same.” She drew in a breath, steadied it. “Eldric, my career in Kugane was finally becoming something solid when you asked me to leave. I chose to trust you; to trust that whatever instability waited in Limsa would be less than the joy of a family together. Now you grow shadows around your stories again. You come home with more coin and less honesty. How am I meant to feel?”

He flinched, just a little. “You’re meant to feel that I’m doing what I can,” he said, switching to Eorzean as if distance in language might lessen the weight. “There’s work that needs folk who know these waters and don’t scare easy. I fit the bill. That’s all.” “Who does this work for?” she asked quietly. “And against whom?” He hesitated a fraction too long. “Merchants who can’t be bothered with extra ink,” he said finally. “Folk who want to avoid paying every bloody tax that some Maelstrom pen-pusher invented last week. Nobody’s being harmed.” “Until they are,” Hanako murmured. “And then your captain will say, ‘We could not have known,’ and your name will be on a list of the lost and I will be left explaining to our daughter why her father chose a quick purse over a slow life.”

Silence fell thick in the little room. Marisa kept her eyes glued to the flag she was shading, but her ears strained. She knew she shouldn’t listen; she also knew her parents had grown too used to thinking of her as a child at the edges of adult talk, even when she was elbow-deep in guild kitchens these days. Eldric exhaled heavily. “*Watashi no Sakura*,” he said, slipping back into Hingan for the pet name only he used, making it both ridiculous and earnest. “If I don’t take the work, someone else will. Someone less

careful, more desperate. At least if I'm there, I know what I'm doin'. I'm not sailin' under Garlean colours, I'm not runnin' slaves or poison. I'm just... skippin' a few signatures. You think Limsa's built on clean paper?" "I think," Hanako said, "that I have lived long enough to know the difference between necessary compromise and sliding back into the same patterns that nearly got you killed before."

Marisa's hand tightened around her pen. Nearly got you killed before. He'd told stories, of course—brawls in far ports, ships caught in storms, that one time a cannon misfired and everyone lost their hearing for a day. He'd never spoken much about jobs that had gone truly wrong. She glanced up through her fringe. Eldric had turned his head slightly, so she could see only his profile; the lines at the corner of his mouth were deeper than she remembered. "I'll be careful," he said, but it sounded automatic, a phrase worn smooth from overuse. "You always say that," Hanako replied. "One day you will be wrong."

The argument didn't end with shouting; it ended with exhaustion. Eventually, Hanako rose and began to clear the table, movements clipped. Eldric lay back down, staring at the ceiling, as if counting the knots in the wood might provide answers. Marisa slipped her notebook closed and said, as lightly as she could manage, "I'm going to wash up; the Bismarck will have my head if I turn up lookin' like I slept in the stockpot." Hanako gave a tight smile. "They will have your head for much less than that," she said. "Go. Sleep if you can." As Marisa moved toward the little washstand in the corner, Eldric reached out and, with a gentleness that didn't quite fit the hard edges of the conversation, tugged at the edge of her sleeve. "Hey," he said. "You know I'm proud o' you, yeah? Guild work's no small thing."

She hesitated, then nodded. "I know," she said. "I just... would like you to be there to taste the things I learn to make." It slipped out truer than she meant. He winced—not because she'd struck below the belt, but because she'd hit something he'd been trying not to look at. "I will," he said, with the stubbornness of a man bargaining with fate. "You keep climbin' in that kitchen. I'll be the loudest bastard in the dining hall when they let you put your name on a dish." "You already are," she muttered, but she smiled. He ruffled her hair again, and for a moment they were back to the easy warmth she remembered from the earlier months in Limsa. Then he looked toward the window again, to where the harbour lay unseen in the fog, and the shadow returned.

As the weeks rolled on, the pattern repeated. He'd be gone a little longer each time, come back with more coin and more silences. Hanako would test the weight of his purse with one hand and the weight of his stories with the other, and find them increasingly

unbalanced. Marisa, trapped between them like a rope pulled taut, learned to read the air the way she read the oven's heat. There were days when the room felt light, filled with laughter and shared meals and harmless bickering over whose turn it was to fetch water. There were others when the unspoken hung heavier than steam in the Bismarck, pressing against her ribs until the only relief was motion. On those days, she volunteered for every errand, every extra hour at the guild, anything to stay busy enough that her thoughts couldn't catch up.

In the kitchen, at least, things made a kind of reliable sense. A pot left unattended burned. A knife held wrong cut you. Salt too heavy or too light ruined a dish, and everyone could agree about where the line was. Pagoda might sneer and Lyngsath might bark, but their rules were clear. At home, the rules were shifting, and no one was writing them down. One evening, as she kneaded bread dough in the Bismarck under the watchful eye of the Miqu'te journeyman, she realised that the thing she hated most about Eldric's new absences wasn't the worry—it was the uncertainty. The sense that the man who'd once made her promise to “never vanish without a goodbye, little wave” was now making bargains with the same currents he'd warned her about.

Limsa's harbour reflected it all too well. On calm days it glittered, the red flags and painted hulls bright and reassuring. On others, fog clung to the arches so thick you could barely see from one tier to the next. Marisa caught herself, more than once, staring out at the ships and wondering which of them carried her father and his half-truths, which horizon he was chasing, and whether the city would ever give her a straight answer about what it took—and what it cost—to belong to both land and sea.

Chapter 15: The Last Lantern on the Docks

Marisa was sixteen the night Eldric left for his “one last job.” It started like any other long day in Limsa: with Marisa coming home smelling of stock and smoke, shoulders aching, fingers nicked in half a dozen places, and her hair frizzing slightly from the steam that never quite left the Bismarck. The sky outside the inn's tiny window was already dimming, the line between sea and cloud blurring into one long smear of grey-blue. Hanako was tidying away the last of the washing when Marisa slipped in, untying her apron with stiff fingers. “You are late,” her mother said, but there was no rebuke in it, only the habitual worry that came from

counting the number of bells between “she left” and “she returned.” “Pagoda decided geometry applies to carrots,” Marisa muttered, hanging the apron on its peg. “It took him half a bell to tell us how wrong we were.” Hanako’s mouth twitched. “I did not know vegetables needed an architect,” she said. “Apparently they do.”

Eldric was not in the room, but his presence hovered in the small space like the faint smell of salt that clung to his clothes long after he’d washed. A bundle sat near the door: weather-worn sea chest, rolled blanket, coil of rope, the battered oilskin coat he favoured for bad weather. Marisa’s stomach tightened. “Da’s takin’ another run?” she asked, though the answer was obvious. Hanako wiped her hands on a cloth, then folded it with more precision than the fabric required. “He has a departure at moonrise,” she said. “A fast job, he says. In and out. He is to be on the docks within the bell.” There was something brittle in the way she relayed it, as if she had wrapped the words in paper to keep them from cutting either of them too deeply.

As if summoned by their thoughts, the door creaked open. Eldric ducked inside, already half-dressed for the sea: coat slung over one arm, shirt laced but not yet buttoned to the throat, boots damp from the ever-present spray that collected on the Lower Decks after dark. “There’s my little wave,” he said, his smile finding her first, as it always did. “Smell that—” he sniffed theatrically near her shoulder, then made a face. “No, wait, that’s you. Smell like someone set fire to a bakery and then tried to put it out with garlic.” “That’s the smell of honest work,” she shot back, but she stepped into his hug with a gratefulness she tried not to show. His arms closed around her, solid and familiar, the faint creak of leather and the soft rasp of stubble against her hair.

“Hanako,” he said, loosening his hold but not quite stepping away, “they’ve moved the tide table on me. If I’m not on that gangplank inside the bell, they’ll either leave without me or rope me in double shift to make up for it.” “It must be very urgent,” Hanako said coolly, “if they cannot wait long enough for you to finish a proper meal with your family.” Her eyes flicked to the bundle near the door. “Or perhaps it was you, and not the tide table, that moved.” He winced, but didn’t argue. Instead, he shifted his gaze back to Marisa. “Walk me down?” he asked. “Since you’re already dressed for a kitchen fire, you might as well get some air.” Marisa glanced at her mother. Hanako hesitated, fingers tightening briefly on the folded cloth, then inclined her head. “Go,” she said. “But do not linger so long that the Maelstrom has to fish you out of the harbour because you forgot where the edge is.”

The walk to the docks was one Marisa could have made with her eyes closed by now. At night, though, it felt like a different city. Lanterns burned in iron brackets along the walkways, their light throwing wobbling patches of gold onto wet stone. The air was

full of the layered smells of the harbour at rest: tar, damp rope, fish guts that some unlucky apprentice would be scrubbing away in the morning, the faint trace of spice from a late-closing stall. Ships creaked and shifted against their moorings, rigging rattling gently whenever the wind gusted. Voices carried thinly over the water—snatches of shanties, the low murmur of watchmen trading stories to stay awake, the occasional sharp bark of laughter that sounded too loud in the relative quiet.

They walked side by side, Eldric carrying his sea chest as if it weighed half what it actually did. Marisa stuck her hands into the sleeves of her coat to keep them warm, watching the way the lantern light caught in the lines worn into his face. “What kind of run is this?” she asked after a stretch of silence. “Short,” he said. “West and back. Nothing fancy.” “You always say that,” she replied. “Then you come back with more coin and more new scars.” He huffed. “That happen twice and suddenly it’s a pattern? I’ll have you know there were plenty o’ voyages where the most dangerous thing aboard was the captain’s breath.” “That sounds like a story you’re not telling,” she said. “You could tell it instead of dodgin’ my question.”

He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You’ve got your mother’s ears,” he said. “And her way o’ makin’ a man feel like he’s been caught nickin’ pastry from the counter.” For a few steps they listened to the hollow knock of their boots on the boards. Then he sighed and let some of the pretence drop. “It’s another private contract,” he said quietly. “Cargo that wants to be somewhere else without a lot o’ questions asked on the way. Pay’s good. Too good to ignore when I’ve got ledgers breathin’ down my neck and a girl who deserves better than watered beer bread and stew made of regrets.”

Marisa chewed on that. “Mam doesn’t like it,” she said. It wasn’t an accusation, just a fact hanging between them. “No,” he admitted. “She’s got every right not to. She’s seen what happens when men chase ‘one last big score’ and don’t know when to stop. But this isn’t that. I know these waters. I know the folk I’m sailing with. I’m not about to sign on to some doomed voyage because a man with too many rings says the word ‘opportunity’ and bats his eyelashes.” She snorted. “If a man with too many rings batted his eyelashes at you, you’d push him overboard.” “Exactly,” he said, and she could hear the relief in his voice at having coaxed even that much humour out of her.

They reached the wider stretch of dock where the larger ships moored for loading. The one he was bound for loomed against the dark like a piece of the night torn loose and tied down: three masts, hull scarred from years of service, its name picked out in chipped white paint. Men moved across her deck, silhouettes outlined against lanterns swinging from the rigging. A gangplank

sloped from ship to shore, its boards damp and faintly slick. A Maelstrom watchman, cloak drawn tight against the chill, leaned on a pike near the foot of the plank, yawning. Eldric set his chest down with a soft thud, flexing his fingers.

“Here we are,” he said. The words felt too small for the moment. Marisa swallowed. Questions jostled in her throat—Where exactly are you going? Who hired you? How long will you be gone?—but she knew the answers would either be vague or lies, and she wasn’t sure whether hearing them would help. Instead, she asked, “Will you be back before Lyngsath lets me touch sauce unsupervised?” He laughed. “I bloody well hope so. I want to be there the first time you serve something under your own name so I can complain loudly about it and get thrown out.” “You’ll get banned from the Bismarck for heckling,” she said. “I’ll have to pretend I don’t know you.” “You could try,” he said. “You’re a terrible liar, though.”

He reached into his coat pocket and fished something out, closing his hand around it for a moment before holding it up. It was a coin, but not one she recognised—a Garlean piece, by the look of it, stamped with the *catēna frāternitātis* on one side and worn smooth on the other from years of fingers worrying at it. “Picked this up in a port I shouldn’t have stayed in,” he said. “When you were just a squalling bundle and your mam still thought I’d grow out of bad ideas if she glared at me enough.” He pressed it into her palm, folding her fingers over it. “It’s useless in Limsa. No one with sense’ll take it as currency. But it’s got weight, and it’s saved my life more than once when I needed something to fidget with instead of punchin’ someone. Keep it. For luck. Or to remind yourself not to do half the things I’ve done.”

The metal was cold against her skin, edges dulled. She curled her hand tighter, as if she could force it to fuse with her bones. “You could just... not go,” she said, the words slipping out before she could dress them in humour. “Or go on a different run. A boring one. With proper paperwork.” He looked at her then, really looked, the way he had when he’d stood on a pier in Kugane and asked them to come with him into a life none of them fully understood. “If I don’t go,” he said, voice low, “someone else will. Maybe some lad who thinks he’s invincible. Maybe someone with a family who doesn’t have the extra coin to patch the holes if things go sideways. I’m not sayin’ it’s noble. I’m just sayin’ I know how to dance with this kind of trouble. And... I need to know I did what I could.”

She hated that the logic made sense. She hated that Limsa’s whole harbour seemed built on compromises like this, on people choosing between bad options because the good ones were already promised to somebody else. She looked past him, over his

shoulder, at the ship, then back at the longship flags snapping overhead in the night wind. "If you die," she said, forcing herself to keep her voice steady, "I will be very cross with you." His mouth twitched. "If I die, I'll be too busy bein' dead to notice," he said, "but I'll try not to, all the same."

The watchman near the gangplank shifted, calling out, "Shipman! Tide's turnin'. Captain says if you're not aboard in the next five minutes, he's findin' another pair o' hands." "Aye, aye," Eldric called back, then turned back to Marisa. For a moment he seemed to search for something grand to say, some fatherly wisdom that would fit in one neat sentence. Whatever he found, he discarded. Instead, he put a hand on her shoulder, squeezed once, and said, "Keep feedin' people. However you end up doin' it. World needs more o' that and fewer fools like me."

She nodded, unable to trust her voice. He bent and pressed a quick, rough kiss to her forehead, then straightened and slung the sea chest up as if it weighed nothing. As he walked up the gangplank, he didn't look back, and she understood, in some distant part of her mind, that if he did, he might not go at all. She watched his back as he disappeared over the rail, watched the crew move like shadows, watched the lanterns on deck shift as the ship adjusted to the changing tide. The gangplank came up with a groan. Lines were cast off. Sails unfurled, pale ghosts against the dark.

The ship eased away from the dock, turning slowly toward the open sea. Marisa stayed where she was, coin clenched in her fist so hard it left an imprint. The longship flags above her flapped and snapped, indifferent to who came and went beneath them. The harbour's noise seemed muted for once, as if even Limsa were holding its breath. She stood there until the ship's lanterns were just a scattering of pinpricks and then no more, swallowed by the horizon. Only then did she realise her face was wet. She wiped at her cheeks with the heel of her palm, angry at herself for crying, angry at him for making her cry, angry at the world for needing men like him to make choices like that.

Later, she would replay this night in her head so often she could have drawn every lantern's reflection in the water from memory. She would remember the weight of the coin, the exact sound of his boots on the boards, the offhand way he'd said "short run." In the years to come, every time she stepped onto a ship's deck, some part of her would flash back to that long stretch of dock and the feeling of being left standing on the edge while someone she loved sailed into a darkness she could neither see nor follow.

For now, she only knew that when she finally turned back toward the city, Limsa's walkways felt different under her feet. The path home was the same, the lanterns in the same brackets, the same gulls arguing over scraps on the railings. But every sound seemed sharper, every shadow deeper. She slipped the Garlean coin into the inner pocket of her coat, over her heart, and walked back up into the tangle of arches and bridges, the smell of salt and smoke and stew meeting her halfway, unaware that this had been the last time Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman would ever see her father's back disappearing into the dark.

Chapter 16: Holes in the Hull

At first, Eldric's absence felt like all the others. He'd been gone for ten days before; twelve, once, when a storm had pinned his ship in some nameless cove halfway to Vylbrand's western edge. When he didn't return on the day he'd roughly promised, Marisa told herself the same stories he always had: the wind turned, the cargo delayed, the captain decided to follow a better current. She turned those explanations over in her head like shells in a pocket as she chopped onions at the Bismarck, as she carried pots of stock across the steamy kitchen, as she threaded her way through Limsa's walkways with baskets of bread and parcels tucked under her arm.

The first week after that night on the docks came and went. The second followed, bells piling into days piling into a shape that made her uneasy. Hanako did not say, *He is late*. She simply laid out two sets of chopsticks at the table instead of three, then added the third back again, as if realising mid-movement that giving the absence too much acknowledgement might make it more solid. Marisa pretended not to notice the hesitation. She filled the gap with talk of the Bismarck: Lyngsath's latest rant about under-seasoned stock, Pagoda's horror at a misaligned sprig of parsley, an apprentice who had nearly set his hat on fire leaning too close to the stove. Hanako listened, smiled in the appropriate places, and then, when she thought Marisa wasn't looking, turned her gaze toward the window where the harbour lay somewhere beyond the white walls and tangled bridges.

By the end of the third week, the explanations started to fray. Ships sailed in and out under Maelstrom watch, some flying company colours Eldric had worked for in the past, others strangers. Each time a Westwind Company pennant appeared on the

horizon, Marisa felt her chest tighten. She found excuses to run errands that brought her near the piers when those ships docked, pretending she needed to check prices on certain ingredients or see a vendor about flour. She scanned faces disembarking—sunburned sailors, harried quartermasters, passengers clutching their belongings too tightly—but none of them were him. When she finally mustered the nerve to ask a stevedore if he'd seen Eldric Shipman among their crew, the man frowned, scratched his beard, and said, "Not on this run, lass. You sure he's still signed with Westwind? Heard they've been sharin' contracts more lately." The nonchalance made her stomach turn.

The first knock on their door that wasn't a neighbour or an inn maid came on a rain-heavy afternoon, walls damp enough to make the floor smell faintly of rot. Marisa was rubbing the last traces of flour from her hands, having escaped the Bismarck early after a morning spent up to her elbows in dough. Hanako was mending one of Eldric's shirts that had lost a button weeks earlier and never been claimed from the "fix this eventually" pile. The rap on the wood was brisk, impatient. Marisa went to answer it, wiping her palms on her trousers. On the other side stood a man she didn't recognise: narrow-shouldered, cloak a little too fine for the Lower Decks, hat pulled low to keep off the drizzle. He held a leather folder in one hand like a shield.

"Afternoon," he said, giving her a quick once-over. His Eorzean had a trader's singsong cadence. "I'm lookin' for Eldric Shipman. This the right room?" Hanako had risen, needle and thread still in hand. "This is his home," she said. "He is... at sea." The man's lips pursed. "Aye, that's what I heard," he said. "Name's Dalmert. I handle accounts for a couple o' shipping partners down on the lower piers. Your husband's done work for some o' our clients. Good worker, from all reports. Reliable. Which is why it's a bit of a puzzle that certain payments he was supposed to make on his end o' things never quite came through."

Marisa felt the room tilt slightly. "Payments?" she said. "What payments?" He glanced at her, then back at Hanako. "He didn't tell you?" he asked, sounding not surprised at all. "We extended him some credit—repairs, supplies, little advances here and there to keep things runnin'. Standard arrangement. He said he had a contract comin' in that would square everything. Then he signed on to that last voyage, and..." He spread his hands. "No word. No coin. It leaves us in an uncomfortable position." Hanako's jaw tightened. "If you are here to collect, you are a little late to speak with the person who agreed to your terms," she said. "We do not have your coin."

Dalmert made a sympathetic noise that didn't reach his eyes. "I understand that," he said. "Thing is, the harbour doesn't run on understandin'. It runs on ledgers. And right now, those ledgers have 'Shipman' written in them more often than is healthy. I'm not here to throw you into the brine over it. I'm here to... discuss options." Marisa hated the way he said that word. It reminded her of Pagoda describing "acceptable variations" in plating with the tone of a man permitting sin. "We didn't take those loans," she burst out. "We didn't sign anything." "You shared the roof," Dalmert said gently. "The city tends to see that as the same thing."

They sat at the low table, the three of them, while the rain tapped at the shutters. Hanako's back was straight, hands folded neatly in her lap. Marisa sat with her fists clenched on her knees, wishing Dalmert were a cut of meat she could tenderise. He laid out the situation with the practised ease of someone used to delivering bad news without getting punched: Eldric owed more than they could reasonably pay on her apprentice's wages and Hanako's sporadic mending work. Some of the debt was formal; some was written in the kind of side ledgers that never saw official inspection. None of it was going to evaporate because its owner had sailed off without a forwarding address.

"We can work out a schedule," he said. "Small payments, regular, to show goodwill. I'm not an unreasonable man. I don't send collectors to break bones over a bit o' bad luck." His smile sharpened. "As long as the people involved are honest with me." Hanako met his gaze levelly. "We will pay what we can," she said. "But if you seek to take food from my daughter's mouth to cover your ledgers, we will have a different sort of conversation." Something in Dalmert's expression flickered, a brief acknowledgement that he'd underestimated her. "Point taken," he said. "Start with what you can manage at the end o' the next moon. I'll come back then. Hopefully with better news about your husband from the harbour as well."

He left them with a sheaf of notes that made Marisa's eyes swim. After he was gone, the room felt smaller, the walls closer. Hanako stared down at the ink for a long time, then set the papers aside with a care that looked almost like contempt. "He had no right," she said in Hingan, voice low. "No right to sign his recklessness over our lives." "We'll pay it," Marisa said, too quickly. "The Bismarck's wages, the runs I do after... if I ask Lyngsath for more shifts—" "You will not work yourself into the ground to fix what he broke," Hanako snapped, the sharpness of it making Marisa flinch. Then she closed her eyes, drew a breath, and softened her tone. "You are my daughter, not my co-debtor. I will find work where I can. You will continue your training. We will manage." The last three words sounded less like a promise and more like a spell she was trying to cast on the room.

The managing was ugly, inelegant work. Meals grew simpler: more rice stretched with broth, less meat, vegetable trimmings brought home with the quiet complicity of sympathetic kitchen workers. Hanako took in more mending and, eventually, more demanding work—alterations for wealthier clients up on the Upper Decks who saw her skill and didn't bother to look closely enough at the woman bent over their silks to realise she was not one of their own. Marisa extended her delivery routes, taking on runs that meant sprinting from the Bismarck to outlying posts and back with barely a bell between shifts. The innkeeper, who had seen plenty of families go under in slower, messier ways, knocked a little off their rent with gruff remarks about "good tenants" and "not wantin' to deal with new fools." It all helped. It was not enough to erase the numbers in Dalmert's folder, but it kept him from returning with sharper teeth.

What hurt more than the knock of debt collectors was the silence from the sea. Whenever a ship limped into harbour with torn sails or scorch marks on its hull, rumours flew ahead of it like gulls: Garlean patrols spotted in this or that stretch of water, pirate crews clashing over spoils, sudden storms tearing rigs to splinters. Marisa learned more about the dangers of Eldric's world from half-heard snatches of sailors' talk on the Bismarck's terrace than she ever had from his stories. Someone mentioned, in passing, a vessel taken by privateers off Vylbrand's western coast. Another talked about a ship that had simply not arrived—a name spoken, then shrugged off with the fatalistic acceptance of people accustomed to the sea's appetite. None of the names were his, but each tale pushed a little harder on the same raw spot in her chest.

She started checking the lists at the Maelstrom offices almost without thinking. At first, she told herself she was there to deliver food to clerks too busy to leave their desks. A tray of rolls and a pot of strong tea earned her a place at the edge of the room, close enough to read the boards where arriving and missing ships were recorded. Her eyes flicked down the columns, scanning for his ship's name, then his. Sometimes she found nothing. Sometimes she found unfamiliar names marked "overdue" in a neat, merciless hand. One day, she saw a notice pinned to the edge of the board: a partial crew list from a ship that had gone down in a storm, those rescued and those not recovered. She read it twice, throat tight, even though she knew Eldric hadn't been on that route. It felt like rehearsing for the possibility that one day, there would be a list where she did know every name.

In the kitchen, she worked harder. Pagoda's barbed comments about the thickness of her sauce or the rusticity of her plating slid off more easily when she was too tired to care. Lyngsath noticed the set of her shoulders one afternoon as she slammed a pan down a little too hard. "You're cookin' like you're havin' an argument with the stove," he said. "Stove won't answer. It'll just burn

everything.” She ground her teeth. “Maybe that’d be an improvement on some o’ the people I’m dealin’ with.” He raised an eyebrow. “City givin’ you trouble?” “Harbour,” she said. “And ghosts.” She didn’t elaborate. He didn’t push. Instead, he handed her a new task—sauce work, more delicate than anything he’d trusted her with before. “Here,” he said. “If your mind’s goin’ to chew itself to bits, put it to use. This needs concentration. You let it stick or split and I’ll haunt you worse than any dead sailor.”

So she concentrated. On the heat under the pan, the way fat took on a sheen at just the right temperature, the moment when herbs released their scent, when wine reduced to a shine instead of a burn. There was something perversely comforting about a world where cause and effect worked, where effort led to visible change. At home, she could do everything right—work long hours, bring home every stray coin, hold her tongue when Hanako sat staring at Eldric’s unused pillow—and still be unable to pry any news from the sea. In the kitchen, at least, if she stirred clockwise instead of aimless, the sauce turned out smooth. It was a small, stubborn kind of control.

Months went by. The ache of Eldric’s absence didn’t dull so much as it settled, a constant presence like the background smell of salt that she could no longer imagine the city without. People stopped asking when he’d be back and instead switched to careful, softened phrases. “Any word?” became “Still no word?” became, eventually, the quiet, loaded silence where they didn’t ask at all but looked at her with that particular Lominsan combination of pity and practicality that said *we have all lost people to the water; you are not unique in this*. Hanako began lighting a stick of incense near the window at dusk, a Hingan habit she had left behind in Kugane and now resumed without comment. The thin curl of smoke seemed to carry unsaid prayers out toward the harbour.

One evening, after an especially long day that ended with Pagoda muttering about “potential, tragically wasted on blunt instruments,” Marisa returned to their room to find Hanako sitting at the table with a sheet of paper in front of her. It was not one of Dalmert’s notes; the paper was too fine, the ink too precise. “What’s that?” Marisa asked, shrugging off her coat. Hanako looked up, eyes red-rimmed but dry. “A letter from a woman I knew in Kugane,” she said. “She heard, through channels, that a ship matching Eldric’s description did not arrive where it was meant to. That is all. No wreck found. No survivors confirmed.” She pressed her lips together. “No list of dead. Just... absence.”

Marisa sank down opposite her. The word felt heavier than any debt ledger. *Absence* did not give you a funeral to attend, a name to read, a grave to visit. It gave you empty docks and an unused coat hanging on a peg and a coin in your pocket that suddenly

weighed ten times more than before. “So he might still be out there,” she said, the words sounding thin. “Or he might not,” Hanako replied. “The sea is a very large place. And it does not send apologies.”

They sat together in the lamplight, the city’s distant noises filtering up through the floor—the murmur of the common room below, the clink of bottles, the occasional bark of laughter. Marisa took the coin from her inner pocket and turned it over in her fingers, tracing the worn *catēna* with her thumb. “I’m not forgivin’ him,” she said, surprising herself. “For the debts. For... leaving us with this.” “Good,” Hanako said quietly. “You do not have to make him a saint just because he vanished. He was a fool. He was also your father. Both things can be true.”

In the days that followed, the practical work of surviving took over. They adjusted, bit by bit, to life without Eldric’s boots by the door, without his jokes thrown into conversations like stones into still water, without the sound of him humming half-remembered shanties as he shaved. Grief settled into the corners of the room and the spaces between words. Marisa found herself becoming fiercely, almost obsessively reliable in response. If she said she would be somewhere at a certain bell, she was there. If she promised to deliver a meal to a tower or a distant pier, she would run herself breathless to make it happen. The idea of being the one to break a chain—to let someone down the way she felt let down—turned her stomach.

Limsa, indifferent and alive, moved on. Ships came and went. The Bismarck’s ovens stayed hot. The Maelstrom posted new notices, and old ones yellowed at the edges. Eventually, the harbour clerks began referring to Eldric Shipman’s file in the past tense, even if no one had written “lost” beside his name. There was no funeral. No wake. Just the quiet understanding that a man had gone to sea and not come back, as so many had before him. In the space he left, a girl with flour under her fingernails and a coin over her heart tightened her apron, squared her shoulders, and kept moving—because if she stopped, even for a moment, the holes in the hull of the life he’d left behind would swallow her whole.

Chapter 17: Finding Puku

Marisa met Puku on a night when Limsa smelled like wet rope and fried fish and the kind of rain that never quite commits to falling. She'd just finished a late shift at the Bismarck, the sort where the ovens felt more like rival suns than appliances, and Lyngsath had finally waved her off with a gruff, "Go home before you fall into the stock." The apron around her waist was stiff with flour, her hair stuck to her neck, and her feet had reached that special stage of ache where they no longer hurt in specific places, just in one long, throbbing complaint. She could have gone straight back to the inn and collapsed, but one of the Yellowjacket posts down on the Lower Decks had sent word down: a patrol heading out late wanted something hot to take with them. The Bismarck had a pot of stew left and a loaf that hadn't sold. "You're already pointin' in that direction," Lyngsath had said, pushing the wrapped bundle into her hands. "Take it along. Maybe they'll remember us kindly next time they're decidin' who gets first crack at fresh catch."

So she trudged up through the tiers with the warm package tucked against her ribs, the harbour's damp breath creeping through her coat. The streets were quieter at this hour, most honest folk inside and most dishonest folk too busy to bother with a small, purposeful girl carrying something that smelled of onions and beef. At the post, the Yellowjackets received the food with the kind of gratitude only cold men on a long watch could muster. "You're a saint, lass," one said, shoving gil into her hand and already reaching for a bowl. "Tell Lyngsath we'll sing his praises next time some drunk complains about his portions." "Sing 'em quietly," she replied. "He gets nervous if anyone says anything nice." They laughed, and she turned back toward the stairs, already thinking about the fastest route home that avoided the worst of the wind.

Halfway down a narrow side alley that cut between two storage sheds, she heard it: a thin, furious sound that somehow managed to be both a mewl and an accusation. She stopped, one foot hovering over the next step, listening. There it was again—a high, reedy wail followed by the faint rattle of something knocking against wood. Every sensible instinct she possessed, the ones honed by months of running deliveries through backstreets where trouble sometimes lounged in doorways, told her to keep walking. Whatever it was probably belonged to someone else. It was definitely not her problem. She sighed, closed her eyes briefly, and turned toward the noise. "This is how horror stories start," she muttered. "Girl goes into dark alley after weird sound, never seen again. 'At least she died doing what she loved,' they'll say. 'Being nosy.'"

The alley narrowed and then opened onto a small, grimy courtyard that existed mainly as a place for crates to feel abandoned. Lantern light from the main street didn't quite reach it; shadows pooled in the corners like stale water. Near the far wall, a lopsided

wooden box sat tipped on its side, something inside battering at it with tiny, uneven thumps. As she stepped closer, the wailing sharpened into an outraged screech. "All right, all right," she said, holding her free hand up as if negotiating. "You're not exactly sellin' yourself as harmless, you know." The crate had once held oranges; she recognised the faint, sour-citrus smell clinging to it. The lid had been tied with twine and then hastily cut through, blades leaving shallow grooves in the wood. Whoever had left it had done so in a hurry, or while feeling guilty, or both.

She crouched, setting the wrapped stew down beside her, and tilted the crate just enough to peer in. Two enormous golden-brown eyes glared back at her from a smudge of orange and white fur. The kitten inside was all curves and indignation: round head, round belly, round paws braced against the wood as if he fully intended to kick his way through it eventually. His ears were too big for his face, his tail stuck up like a flag, and his whiskers vibrated with the effort of hissing. "Well," Marisa said softly. "Hello there, disaster." He hissed again, but the sound wobbled at the end, more exhaustion than threat. She could just make out the edge of a worn blanket under him, and the corner of a paper scrap someone had tossed in—a torn handbill advertising some tavern's ale. No food. No water. Just a box to be angry in.

She reached a hand toward him and immediately thought better of it when he swatted, claws flashing. "Right," she said. "So we're not friends. That's fair. But you can't stay in there, because this is Limsa, and if the rats don't get you, the rain will." She glanced around, half-expecting to see someone watching from a doorway ready to shout at her for touching their property, but the courtyard was empty. The kitten stared at her, sides heaving with each tiny breath. Under the bravado, she saw the tremor in his limbs, the way his fur clung in uneven clumps that suggested he'd been damp not long ago. Something in her chest, already bruised from months of absence and worry, squeezed. "Let me guess," she murmured. "You belonged to someone until you didn't, and when things got hard, they put you in a box and hoped the city would deal with you."

It was, uncomfortably, a familiar shape of story. Debt collectors, missing sailors, people quietly slipping away when responsibility grew too heavy. Her hand drifted to the pocket where the Garlean coin rested, then back to the crate. "All right," she said. "Here's the deal. I'll get you out, you don't shred my hand, and we'll figure out the rest later." The kitten did not look convinced, but he also didn't have much energy left to protest. She untied what remained of the twine, prised the lid away, and carefully tipped the crate on its side so he could walk out on his own. For a moment he clung to the blanket, claws digging in as if the familiar prison was better than the unknown. Then, with a little grunt, he tumbled forward and landed on the stones with a soft plop.

Up close, he was somehow even rounder. His fur was a rich, marmalade orange with faint tabby stripes, his belly a smudge of cream that looked as if someone had dipped him in milk. He blinked up at her, pupils blown wide in the dim light, and let out a noise that sounded halfway between a question and a complaint. "Yeah, I know," she said. "World's terrible. Congratulations on finding that out early." She extended a finger cautiously. This time, instead of swatting, he sniffed it, gave it a tentative lick, and then headbutted her hand with surprising force. "Oh, don't you start," she warned, even as her fingers curled around his tiny skull, scratching gently behind one ear. "We are not bonding. I cannot afford to bond with anything that eats."

The kitten purred anyway, a rusty engine that rattled against her skin. When she pulled her hand back, he tottered after it and planted one paw on the wrapped parcel of stew, as if claiming it by proximity. "That's not for you," she said. "That's rent money." His eyes grew impossibly wider, the picture of tragic hunger. She groaned. "Fine. A little gravy. But if I get yelled at for shorting the Yellowjackets, I'm tellin' them it was you." She unwrapped the parcel just enough to dip a fingertip in the rich sauce, then offered it to him. He latched on like a man lost at sea finding fresh water, tongue rasping frantically. "Easy, easy," she murmured. "You'll drown in it."

By the time she'd convinced herself to rewrap the stew and stand up, he was already attempting to follow her, stumbling on unsteady legs. When she walked toward the alley mouth, he trotted after her with single-minded determination, wobbling but unwilling to be left. "No," she said, spinning on her heel. "Absolutely not. You stay here and... haunt whoever dumped you." He stopped, sat, and let out a plaintive sound that, if translated, was probably something along the lines of *how dare you abandon me when I have only just decided you are mine*. Rain began to patter more earnestly on the stones, the first warning drops of a heavier shower. He blinked as one hit his nose, sneezed, and shook his head, looking personally offended by the weather.

Marisa pinched the bridge of her nose. "This is a terrible idea," she told the universe. "I live in one room above an inn with a mother, a ledger full o' debt, and exactly zero spare space for a walking stomach." The universe, in the form of an orange kitten, answered by wobbling to his feet again and toddling forward until he bumped against her boot. He stared up at her with an expression that said, *You have opposable thumbs and access to food. This is destiny*. She sighed, the sound half-laugh, half-resigned groan. "Fine," she said. "You can come home for tonight. Just tonight. I'll find somewhere sensible to take you tomorrow. An Arcanists' familiar office or a kindly fishmonger or... something." She scooped him up, expecting claws; instead he melted against her chest, all warmth and tiny heartbeat, and promptly began purring so loudly she felt it in her ribs.

On the walk back, she tucked him inside her coat to shield him from the rain. His head popped out near the collar, whiskers tickling her chin. A passing sailor glanced at her, did a double-take, and laughed. "Got yourself a captain, have you?" he called. "Looks like he'll have you swabbin' decks in no time." "He's just ballast," she called back, but the words didn't have much conviction. The kitten kneaded at the fabric, making little biscuits over the place where the Garlean coin rested in her inner pocket, two pieces of unlikely cargo pressed together.

Hanako was already blowing out the lamp when Marisa eased the door open with her shoulder, trying to keep the bundle in her coat from squirming free. "You are late," her mother said automatically, then paused as she took in the damp hair, the tired eyes, and the suspiciously cat-shaped bulge under Marisa's jacket. "What have you brought home?" she asked, in the tone of someone whose evening had just become more complicated. "Before you say anything," Marisa said, shutting the door with her hip, "it's temporary." She opened her coat. The kitten poked his head out and blinked at Hanako with saintly innocence. "Someone dumped him in a crate in an alley," Marisa went on. "No food, no water. I couldn't just leave him."

Hanako stared. The kitten, sensing his audience, deployed a tiny, questioning "mrrp." Something in her expression softened despite herself. "You bring home strays now," she said quietly. "First the debts, now the creatures they throw away." Marisa flinched, then forced herself to straighten. "I'll feed him from my own pay," she said. "He can eat scraps. I'll keep his mess clean. If it doesn't work, I'll find him a proper home. I just... couldn't walk past." There was a long pause. The only sound was the kitten's purr, rumbling like distant thunder. Finally, Hanako sighed. "You have your father's eyes when you say 'I couldn't just.'" She reached out and, with two fingers, stroked the kitten's head. He leaned into it as if he'd been waiting his whole short life for that exact touch. "Very well," she said. "For tonight. We will see after that."

That night, Marisa improvised a bed for him out of an old towel and the bottom half of a broken crate she'd convinced the innkeeper to give her. She set it near the foot of her pallet, telling herself that distance would prevent attachment. The kitten listened politely to her explanation, then ignored it entirely; as soon as the room went dark and the breathing settled, he scrambled up the thin blanket with surprising tenacity and curled into a tight, warm ball directly against her throat. "You are not staying," she whispered into his fur. He responded by purring louder.

By morning, he had a name. It came to her as she watched him tumble after a loose thread, round and relentless. “Puku,” she said aloud, testing the sound. A little play on *pukupuku*—plump, chubby—like the dumplings Hanako sometimes made on special days. He paused, looked up at her, and meowed as if in agreement. “Puku, then,” she said. “Temporary. Absolutely temporary.” She stood, stretched, and reached for her apron, already planning how she’d smuggle a bit of fish skin home from the Bismarck without Pagoda having a fit about “wasted product.”

Years later, when people asked why her pizza parlour was named after a cat, she would laugh and say, “Because he showed up first and refused to leave.” She wouldn’t always mention the crate in the alley, or the way his purr had filled a hole left by boots that never came back up the gangplank. But that first night, with rain on the window, grief in the walls, and a small, stubborn life pressed against her heart, Marisa understood that she had taken in more than a stray. She had acquired, entirely against her better judgement, a tiny orange promise that the world still had room for things that were hungry and loud and determined to be loved.

Chapter 18: Love At First Slice

It happened on a day when Limsa smelled like everything she loved and everything she hated all at once: sea brine, frying fish, wet rope, spilled ale, and somewhere, beneath it all, the warm, yeasty promise of bread in an oven. Marisa was cutting across one of the narrower streets in the Middle Decks, a shortcut she’d adopted purely because it shaved three minutes off the walk between the Bismarck and home. The shortcut happened to pass by a row of small, stubborn businesses wedged between warehouses—taverns too unfashionable for the upper tiers, a cooper’s shop, a stall that sold nothing but pickled vegetables, and one tiny place that always made her slow down without quite knowing why. It had no signboard, just a painted plank above the door with a faded river and a stone bridge, and open windows that bled heat into the cool evening air. Whatever they were baking in there didn’t smell like anything she’d grown up with in Kugane or learned at the guild. It smelled... round, somehow. Rich and simple and complete.

Puku rode in her satchel that day, head poked out like a captain surveying his domain, making small approving chirps whenever they passed a food stall. “You’re not getting any of it,” she informed him, shifting the strap on her shoulder. “We’re broke, and you already stole half my breakfast.” He yawned in her face, unimpressed by fiscal responsibility, then settled with his chin on the edge of the bag. They were three steps past the little river-sign place when a shout burst out of one of the open windows, followed by the unmistakable sound of something soft and wet hitting something it was never meant to hit.

“*Atténdite!*” someone bellowed in a thickly accented voice. “Look out below!”

Marisa barely had time to register that the warning was in heavily Corvosi-flavoured Garlean and also approximately two heartbeats too late before something pale and circular slapped her full in the face. One moment she was walking, the next she was wearing raw dough. It adhered with the clingy determination of a toddler and the weight of her worst culinary failures, covering her eyes and nose, flour puffing into the air like she’d been personally smitten by an angry baker god. Puku let out a strangled “mrrRP?!” as a fold of dough sagged over the satchel, and the two of them staggered in a blind, sticky wobble toward the opposite wall.

She managed to get a hand under the edge and peel it away, blinking flour out of her lashes. The offending object flopped over in her grip like a wounded jellyfish: an uncooked round of dough stretched to a near-perfect circle, slightly too thin in the middle where the light shone through. “What in the seven hells—?” she began, only to be cut off by the arrival of a man at the window above her, leaning out so far she worried he might come tumbling after his handiwork.

He was in his middle years, maybe, with the kind of face that had been built to smile even when it was trying to look serious. His hair, once black, had given up the fight at the temples and retreated into iron-grey; a neatly kept mustache framed a mouth currently frozen somewhere between horror and hilarity. Flour dusted his forearms up to the elbows and left ghostly handprints on his dark apron. Behind him, heat shimmered, and the orange glow of a stone oven painted his cheeks. “Ah,” he said, spotting the dough in her hands and the state of her face. “*Maledictum*. I see my *pĩtsa* has made a new friend.”

Marisa wiped a smear of flour off her nose with the back of her wrist, dignity hanging by a thread. “Is that what you call this?” she demanded. “Because from where I’m standin’, it looks like assault with intent to bake.” Puku popped fully out of the satchel, dough

still half-draped over his head like a tragic cap, and emitted a mournful chirp. The man's eyes widened. "And I have assaulted a cat, too," he groaned, pressing a floury hand to his chest. "This is how the Twelve punish hubris—ah, but of course, you Eorzeans and your gods. Never mind that. Little *amīca*, little *amīcus*, I am so very, very sorry."

"Apology accepted," Marisa said, trying to scrape some of the dough off Puku's whiskers. "On one condition." He tilted his head. "Name it." "You explain," she said, holding up the sagging circle, "why you're flinging bread at pedestrians."

He winced theatrically and thumped his fist against the window frame. "Because I am a fool who misjudged his spin," he said. "I was tossing the base—like this, you see." He mimed a graceful flick of the wrists, fingers spread, the movement surprisingly elegant for a man built more like a sturdy barrel than a dancer. "Up, up, around, so it stretches just enough. I have done it ten thousand times. But today my good apprentice decided to shout in my ear while my hands were occupied, and—" He gestured to her flour-splattered self in apology. "The window was in the way. You were in the way. Gravity did the rest."

"Your apprentice should be the one apologising," Marisa muttered, thinking of all the times she'd been distracted at a crucial moment and paid for it in burns. Puku finally shook the last of the dough off and began cleaning his paws with offended dignity. The man eyed the cat, then her, curiosity flickering behind his contrition. "You are from the Bismarck, yes?" he asked. "I have seen you carrying baskets in the mornings. Little Hingan girl with the big stride."

"Half," she corrected automatically. "Half Hingan. Half Lominsan. And I'm not that little." Then, suspicious: "Why were you watchin' me?"

He spread his hands. "Because I love food, and I love the people who carry it, and I am nosy. Also, you run like someone who thinks other people's hunger is her personal problem. That tells me something." His accent rounded the consonants, Garlean vowels softened by something more musical underneath. "My name is Marcus Corvinus. I am from Locus Amoenus, where the river is wide and the ovens are always hot. This—" he jerked his chin toward the doorway below the window "—is my little corner of Limsa. And you, *signorina*, are now part of my tragic tale of wasted dough."

"Marisa," she said, because he'd offered his name and anything else would have felt rude, even after being assaulted by carbohydrates. "Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman. Apprentice culinarian, part-time delivery girl, full-time victim of flying food." She

glanced past him toward the interior. The smell wafting out around him was stronger now: not just bread, but something richer—tomato, herbs, a faint smoky tang that reminded her of the grills at the Bismarck but gentler somehow. “What exactly were you tryin’ to make when you nearly blinded me?”

His face lit up, the previous guilt swept aside by the enthusiasm of a man who had been given permission to talk about his obsession. “*Pĩtsa*,” he said, savouring the word. “Proper Corvosi *pĩtsa*. Not the sad flatbreads some people pass off as such because they have heard the name once in a tavern and think they can improve it by piling half a market’s worth of ingredients on top.” He shuddered theatrically. “No. This is simple. Honest. Dough, tomato, cheese, a little oil, maybe some basil if the gods—if fortune is kind. Crisp on the bottom, soft in the middle, eaten hot enough that it burns the roof of your mouth and you bless it for the pain.”

Marisa blinked. “You’re makin’ it sound like a religious experience,” she said. “It *is*,” he replied solemnly, then caught himself and softened it with a grin. “Forgive me. Old habits. Come inside. Let me show you what my poor dough was meant to become before it chose your face over my oven.”

Every sensible instinct once again told her to decline. She was tired, she had just enough gil from the Yellowjacket delivery to cover two days of rice, and Hanako would worry if she dawdled too long. But the smell curling out of the open door was doing unspeakable things to her self-control, and there was something about Marcus that reminded her of sailors she trusted: loud, open, with the easy confidence of someone who had already decided you were welcome and was simply waiting for you to realise it too. Puku made the decision for her by hopping out of the satchel and trotting toward the doorway, tail high, as if he owned the place. “Traitor,” she muttered, scooping up her bundle again. “All right, just for a moment. If you try to charge me, I’ll send Pagoda Buligoda round to critique your knife work.”

The interior of the pizzeria was small but warm in a way that seeped straight into her bones. A single long counter dominated the space, scarred wood polished by years of elbows. A few simple tables clustered near the front, each draped in cloth patterned with faded Corvosi motifs—waves, river stones, stylised olives. The oven at the back was the heart of everything: a curved stone mouth glowing orange, its heat reaching even the doorway. An apprentice, a lanky Hyur boy with sweat-darkened hair and a

smudge of flour on his cheek, was busy spooning bright red sauce onto another circle of dough, eyes wide as he watched them come in.

Marcus ushered her behind the counter with the fussiness of a host welcoming royalty. “Stand here,” he said, positioning her at a safe distance from the oven. “Close enough to feel, not close enough to die. Puku—ah, Puku, yes?” He’d caught the name when she grumbled at the cat outside. “You may sit wherever you like, little prince, as long as you do not jump in my ingredients.” Puku, clearly understanding the general sense if not the words, hopped lightly onto a nearby stool and curled his tail around his paws, eyes fixed on the work surface with predatory intensity.

Marcus snatched a fresh ball of dough from a wooden tray and set it down. His hands became something different around it—deft, almost delicate, as he pressed, stretched, and spun. “You see?” he said, glancing at her. “It is not enough to mix flour and water and hope. You must convince it. Coax it. Tell it what shape it wants to be. Too rough and it sulks, too gentle and it remains lazy.” He flattened it with his fingers, then lifted it onto his knuckles and began to turn it, a smooth, practiced motion that made the dough balloon and thin in graceful arcs. This time, the window stayed well clear of the trajectory. “At the guild, they make bread, *sí*?” he asked. “Good, serious loaves. But do they make anything like this?”

“Not like that,” Marisa admitted, watching. “Pagoda would have a fit, he saw you throwin’ dough in the air.” “Then I consider it a sacred duty,” Marcus said gravely, “to continue.” He laid the round on a peel, then ladled on sauce from a nearby pot. It wasn’t like the sauces she knew from the Bismarck—this one was brighter, flecked with herbs, smelling of sun and acidity rather than long, slow simmer. A simple scattering of cheese followed: not the crumbling cheeses she’d seen served with wine upstairs, but a soft, yielding thing that tore into strips. A drizzle of oil, a few torn leaves of something green. That was it. No elaborate garnishes, no tower of extra ingredients. Just red, white, and green on pale dough, like some flag she didn’t yet know she would one day hang in her own shop.

He slid the peel into the oven with a practised jerk of the wrists. Heat washed over her, making her eyes sting. “Now we wait,” he said, stepping back, wiping his hands. “Not too long. *Pĩtsa* is like a good joke—timing is everything. Too soon, it is raw. Too late, everyone is chewing resentment.”

They talked while the edges of the dough began to blister and brown. He asked about her work at the Bismarck, about Lyngsath (“Ah, the big one with the soft heart and the hard lectures. I know his type.”), about Pagoda (“Short, sharp, looks at you like you are a crime against cutlery?”), about how a Hingan girl had ended up running deliveries in Limsa. She deflected some questions, answered others; it was strangely easy to talk to someone who knew nothing about Eldric and debt and missing ships, and only cared whether she put enough salt in her stock. In turn, he told her about Corvos in quick, vivid strokes: narrow streets, bright markets, river wind, long tables where families crowded elbow to elbow over food that smelled like this oven felt. He spoke of it with a fondness that made her chest ache with recognition.

“Why’d you leave?” she asked, before she could stop herself. He shrugged one shoulder. “Because sometimes the place you love does not love you back,” he said lightly. “Because there were people in Locus Amoenus who believed that joy should be rationed, and I was not inclined to live on their measure. Because the Empire and I had... disagreements. And because a man with my talents cannot resist a city that smells like the sea and trouble.” His smile took the sting out of the words, but she filed them away: *disagreements with the Empire*—an entire story in seven casual syllables.

The *pītsa* came out of the oven in what felt like no time at all and forever. Marcus slid it onto a wooden board and turned it toward her with a little flourish. The dough had puffed at the edges into a ring of blistered, leopard-spotted crust; the centre was a glossy pool of molten cheese and bubbling sauce, steam wisping from tiny craters where the heat had broken through. It looked simple, almost modest—no piles of garnish to hide behind, nothing to distract. Just a circle of intention.

He cut it with a curved blade, each slice rocking away from the centre with a satisfying crunch of crust. “Hot,” he warned, spearing a piece on the end of a knife and holding it out. “You will burn yourself if you are foolish. Be foolish; it tastes better that way.”

Marisa took the slice, fingers stinging where the crust scorched them. She waited just long enough not to humiliate herself by yelping, then bit in. For a moment, the world narrowed to salt and smoke and tomato and the way the cheese stretched, elastic, clinging like the dough had clung to her face outside, but in a way that made sense. The crust was crisp at the edge, but soft underneath, supporting everything without collapsing. The sauce was bright where most of the Bismarck’s were deep; it tasted of something sun-ripened and crushed by hand, not boiled into submission. Oil slicked her lips, basil hit the back of her throat, and then the heat bit, sharp and immediate, making her eyes water.

She swallowed, blinked, and laughed. “Gods,” she said hoarsely, fanning her mouth with her free hand. “That... that’s ridiculous.”

“*Ridikolo es buono*,” Marcus said smugly. “Ridiculously good. I will accept this as payment for the dough I threw at your head.”

“It’s like...” She groped for a comparison and came up empty. “It’s like if a sandwich decided it was tired o’ being folded and wanted to be a circle instead. And somehow that made it taste better.”

“You wound me with your poetry,” he said, but his eyes were bright. “But you understand. It is simple, *sí*? Simple and honest and warm. You can eat it at a table, on a street corner, on a ship deck in a storm. It travels. It comforts. It is food that does not ask you to change your clothes before it lets you have a piece.”

She thought of the Bismarck, with its polished counters and carefully arranged plates, and of the way some of the guild’s regulars looked at her like she was an interesting stain that hadn’t been scrubbed off yet. Then she thought of the Yellowjacket post, of tired men lighting up when she arrived with stew; of caravaners passing shared bread around a fire. “This would make a good delivery food,” she said slowly. “Better than stew. You wouldn’t have to worry about it sloppin’ everywhere. You could wrap it and run.”

Marcus’s eyebrows shot up. “Delivery,” he repeated. “*Pítsa* delivery. Not just the tavern boys carrying leftovers to their friends, but... proper. You bake it here, you carry it hot to where people are hungry. People who cannot leave their posts, their ships, their stalls. Hm.” He rubbed his chin, looking at her as if she’d just suggested adding a new spice to an old dish. “And you would run with it, little runner?”

“I’m already runnin’,” she said, taking another bite despite her blistered tongue. “Might as well run with something better than cold bread and regret.”

He laughed, a full, delighted sound that bounced off the oven stones. “Ah, you see it,” he said. “You see what it could be. Good. I knew the dough hit the right person.” He tapped the side of his head with a floury finger. “Think on it, Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman, half Hingan, half Lominsan, all stubborn. You have quick feet and a guild apron. I have recipes and an oven. Between us, we could change how this city eats when it is too busy to sit.”

She hadn't meant to stay long, but by the time she and Puku finally left, the sky outside had deepened into true night and the lamps along the walkways had been lit. Puku's whiskers still smelled faintly of tomato; her fingers still tingled with heat and the memory of crisp crust. Marcus saw them to the door, one hand braced on the frame, the other flicking stray flour from his mustache. "Come back," he said simply. "We'll talk more. About dough. About routes. About what you want to feed the world."

On the walk home, Marisa felt oddly lighter, as if someone had shifted the weight of her day from one shoulder to the other. The debt, the missing father, the endless grind of kitchen work—they were still there. But now there was something else too, something hot and round and simple lodged just under her ribs. "Delivery *pītsa*," she said aloud, testing the phrase. Puku, riding in the satchel again and licking his paws, purred as if this was the most brilliant idea he'd ever heard.

Years later, when customers asked where she'd gotten the idea for Puku Pizza, she would point, laughing, to the nearest oven and say, "It started when a Corvosi idiot threw a raw pizza at my face." She would not always mention the way that first slice had tasted like possibility, or how a man from Locus Amoenus had given shape to a half-formed thought she hadn't known she was carrying. But that night, as she climbed the stairs to the little room where Hanako waited with her mending and her quiet worries, Marisa knew one thing for certain: the city's food would never taste quite the same again, now that she'd met a dish that wanted to run.

Chapter 19: A Tale of Two Kitchens

It did not take long for "I'll just visit once more" to turn into a rhythm. Mornings still belonged to the Bismarck: the clang of pans, Pagoda's barked corrections, Lyngsath's booming orders and occasional, grudging praise. Marisa would roll out of bed while the sky over Limsa was still more grey than blue, tuck Puku back under the covers when he tried to follow, and hurry up through the tiers to the guild kitchens. There, her world was rows of identical cutting boards and exact measurements, of sauces that needed to be stirred at the same pace every time and loaves that were scored with the same precise angle. The Bismarck valued discipline

above all; you could set a clock by the way the ovens were loaded. “Consistency,” Pagoda would say, rapping the back of her knife if it wobbled. “Our patrons do not come here to be surprised. They come to be assured.”

She did learn. Under Pagoda’s sharp eye, her knife work grew cleaner, her sense of portioning sharper. She could now dress a plate so every slice lay at the same angle, every drizzle of sauce matched its neighbour. Lyngsath trusted her with more than scut work; she found herself stirring stocks that would later be served to half the city, tasting and adjusting under his gruff guidance. “Trust your tongue,” he’d tell her, shoving a spoon into her hand. “If it says it’s flat, fix it. Don’t wait for someone else to say so.” The Bismarck was a machine that never truly stopped, and she was learning to be one of its working parts—necessary, dependable, if not yet irreplaceable.

Afternoons, though, began to belong to Marcus. Once the worst of the lunch rush had passed and the guild released its apprentices like tired birds, Marisa would grab whatever small tasks she could—an extra delivery here, a quick errand there—to pad her purse, then angle her feet toward the little Corvosi shop with the painted river sign. Puku had decided, after only two visits, that Marcus’s place was on the official list of Approved Territories; he took to riding in her satchel until they turned onto that street, then leaping out and trotting ahead like he owned the cobbles. Marcus greeted them every time as if they’d been gone for months. “Ah, my little runner and my little inspector,” he would cry, flinging his arms wide, apron already dusted in flour. “Come in, come in. The dough misses you. It told me so.”

His kitchen was chaos compared to the Bismarck and yet somehow made more sense to her heart. Recipes were guidelines rather than commandments; he would hand her a ball of dough and say, “Feel it. It will tell you if it needs more water, more rest, more persuasion.” Where Pagoda weighed herbs to the gram, Marcus encouraged her to sniff and pinch, to learn the difference between “enough” and “too much” by aroma and instinct. She ruined several early attempts. One day she undercooked a base so badly that the centre sagged like a hammock; another time she oversalted the sauce until it puckered the mouth. Instead of barking at her, Marcus laughed, cut the failures into small pieces, and fed them to the city’s gulls. “They will eat anything,” he said. “But even they deserve a little enthusiasm.”

“Pagoda would have my head if I served that,” Marisa said once, watching the birds tear into her mistake.

“Pagoda,” Marcus replied dryly, “would probably have your head if you breathed too loud on an Earthsday.” He clapped a hand lightly to her shoulder. “You learn different lessons here, *ragazza*. At the Bismarck, they teach you how not to fail. I teach you how to fail and not die of embarrassment.”

The more time she spent between the two kitchens, the more she began to see where they overlapped and where they diverged. The Bismarck prized craft, tradition, the assurance that every dish matched the memory of the last. Marcus valued joy, surprise, the way someone’s face changed when they tasted something they hadn’t known they wanted. Both, she realised, wanted to feed people well. Both believed food mattered. They simply drew the lines in different places. That thought settled somewhere deep in her, a quiet understanding that there was room for more than one way to do the work she loved.

It was Marcus who started turning idle talk into actual plans. One evening, after the dinner crowd had thinned and the last customers had wandered out licking grease from their fingers, he leaned against the counter, watching Marisa box up a few leftover slices. Puku sat on the counter’s far end, batting lazily at the corner of a napkin as if testing gravity. “You run, *sì*?” Marcus said. “You know all the little paths and ladders in this city better than half the Yellowjackets.”

“I trip over fewer crates than most,” she conceded. “Why?”

“Because I have been thinking,” he said. “A dangerous habit, I know. There are people who would love my *pītsa* but cannot come here when it is hot. Dockworkers who cannot leave their posts. Guards on the upper walkways. Poor souls chained to their counting tables in offices with no windows. If they want to eat from my oven, they must wait until their shift ends. By then, the *pītsa* is tired. Cold. It has lost its soul.” He gestured with a floury hand. “But *pītsa* travels. You said so yourself. It wants to run. It needs someone who can carry it.”

“Someone like me,” she finished slowly.

“Someone exactly like you,” he agreed. “You are already a delivery girl, *signorina*. But what if, instead of stew and stale bread, you carried something that makes people close their eyes when they bite it? We could start small. One route. One evening. See if the city is ready.”

She traced a finger through a stray sprinkle of flour on the counter, drawing a crude map of Limsa's tiers. "The Bismarck already has some regular deliveries," she mused. "The Yellowjackets at the lower posts, a few merchants. They know me. If I showed up with boxes instead of bowls..."

"They would remember," Marcus said. "And tell their friends. And then we would have more mouths and more routes. You could run them. I would bake. We would both sleep less, but we are young."

She snorted. "I'm young. You make the noises o' an old man every time you bend."

"Old dough makes better crust," he retorted. "I am simply well-proofed."

The idea lodged in her mind like a seed falling into an unexpected crack. She didn't act on it immediately; there were still bills to pay, shifts to manage, and the constant background hum of worry over Eldric that had not gone away just because she now had a cat and a Corvosi mentor. But over the next few weeks, she found herself testing the concept in small, almost accidental ways. When Marcus had a pie come out slightly misshapen—"Still perfect inside, just looks like it lost an argument with the peel," he'd say—she would volunteer to take it down to a nearby watch post rather than let it go to waste. The first time, the guards blinked at her suspiciously as she arrived, breathless, with the warm box in her hands.

"What's this then?" one asked. "We didn't order."

"Consider it a... trial run," Marisa said. "*Pĩtsa* from Marcus's place. He's tryin' something new."

They exchanged a look that said *free food* far more than it said *suspicion*, then opened the box. A few minutes and several delighted noises later, one of them slapped a coin into her palm. "You tell that Corvosi we'll pay full price next time," he said. "And you'd better be the one to bring it. You run faster than the rest."

"Flattery will only make me run slightly faster," she replied, but the way her chest swelled at the words surprised her. People had called her quick before, necessary, useful. Being wanted specifically—you'd better be the one—was something different.

Word spread in the way it always did in Limsa: sideways, on the backs of gossip and offhand remarks. A dockhand whose friend in the Yellowjackets had mentioned “that new flat thing with the cheese” came by Marcus’s shop after his shift. A clerk from a shipping office, sent to fetch supper, asked if any of it could be wrapped to go “because we’re up to our ears in manifests.” Each time, Marcus would nod at Marisa, and she’d tuck the boxes under her arm and sprint out, testing new routes, learning where the wind tugged hardest at the corners, where stairs were worn smooth enough to be treacherous at speed.

Back at home, Hanako watched this new pattern with a blend of caution and quiet pride. “You are never here,” she observed one night as Marisa stumbled in, hair smelling of smoke and flour, Puku draped bonelessly over her shoulder like a stolen shawl. “It is either the Bismarck or the river shop. Or the streets between them.”

Marisa slumped onto the pallet, tugging at her boots. “I’m makin’ gil,” she said. “And... something else. I don’t know. It feels better than sittin’ still and waitin’ for letters that never come.”

Hanako set aside her sewing and studied her daughter for a long moment. “You look more yourself,” she said at last. “Tired, but less... hollow. If this Corvosi man uses you well, I will not complain. If he does not, I will pay him a visit with my hairpins.”

“He’d probably offer you a discount,” Marisa muttered, but she smiled. She thought of Marcus’s face when he watched someone take their first bite of his *pītsa*, of the way he said *cibus est ars cordis* when he thought she wasn’t listening—food is the art of the heart. There was something there she could believe in, something that made sense in a world where ships vanished and ledgers lied.

By the end of that season, her days had settled into a pattern that would shape the rest of her life: early mornings at the Bismarck learning how to keep a kitchen running, afternoons and evenings at Marcus’s learning how to chase a dream with both hands. She ran more than ever—between ovens, between tiers, between expectations. Somewhere in all that motion, two ideas began to fuse: that food could be both craft and comfort, and that maybe, just maybe, a girl who’d spent her life caught between places could build something of her own, one hot, round promise at a time.

Part IV — Puku Pizza (Years 16-17)



Chapter 20: Crusts and Crossed Wires

The morning the trouble started, the Bismarck was humming at just the wrong pitch—too much brass in the clatter of pots, too much edge in the clink of knives on boards. Marisa felt it as soon as she stepped into the heat: the way apprentices kept their voices low, the way even Lyngsath's jokes sounded like they've been left too long on the grill. Pagoda Buligoda was in one of his moods. You could tell from the way he stood on his crate, arms folded, moustache bristling like a warning flag over a reef. "Timing," he snapped, watching a line of young culinarians slice vegetables. "Precision. You are not dicing turnips, you are carving reputation. If you insist on hacking them into submission, I suggest you take up woodcutting instead." Marisa slid into her place at the board with the practised ease of someone used to working in a storm. Puku had been left at home under strict orders to guard

Hanako and not eat her embroidery thread; Rocceto was still a rumour in a distant stead. For now it was just her, her knife, and the familiar rhythm of the Bismarck's kitchen.

She'd been practising dough at Marcus's shop the previous evening, and the feel of it was still in her fingers: the way a well-rested ball yielded and pushed back at the same time, the satisfying spring when it caught the air. Without thinking, she rolled the small lump of bread dough assigned for staff meals into a neat round and flipped it up, just a little, letting it arc from one hand to the other. It wasn't even a full toss—more a bounce, a test of elasticity—but in the corner of her eye she saw Pagoda's head swivel with the precision of a cannon finding a target. "What," he said, voice dropping to the sort of dangerous calm that made apprentices straighten instinctively, "was that." Marisa caught the dough and flattened it hastily onto the board, cursing her own muscle memory. "Just checking if it was rested enough," she said, aiming for nonchalance and landing somewhere closer to guilty. "It stretches more evenly if you let it hang a bit. Helps the gluten relax."

Pagoda hopped down from his crate, each step on the ladder like a drumbeat, and came to stand opposite her. From this close, the lines around his eyes looked carved rather than etched, each one a tally of some culinary sin witnessed. "Dough," he said, "belongs on the table. Not in the air, not on your fingers, and certainly not performing acrobatics while you daydream about... whatever it is you daydream about when you are not paying attention to my instructions." His gaze flicked to the dough in her hands, then back to her face. "This is not a playhouse, girl. This is the premier culinarian's guild in Limsa Lominsa." She fought the urge to point out that a premier guild would have better ventilation. "I am paying attention," she said, aware her jaw was tightening. "We're to have the first service ready by third bell, no substitutions on the noble's table, extra portions set aside for the Admiral's men, and the new soup can't go out until you've checked the seasoning yourself. I just—" she hesitated, then plunged on, "—I just thought there might be another way to handle the dough is all."

"For staff bread," he said, as if the concept personally offended him, "it may not matter. For anything that leaves this kitchen, it matters very much. Our patrons expect consistency. Control. Not... rustic improvisation." He lingered on the last word as if it tasted of unwashed hands. "Throwing food around is for street vendors and circus performers." Her cheeks heated. She thought of Marcus spinning *pītsa* bases with that easy, laughing confidence, of the way customers leaned over his counter to watch. "Street vendors still feed people," she muttered before she could stop herself. "Sometimes faster than guild kitchens." A few nearby

apprentices went very still. Lyngsath, stirring a pot of stock at the back, glanced over with the wary look of a man watching a pot he knew was about to boil over.

Pagoda's eyes narrowed until they were little more than slits. "Do you imagine," he said softly, "that you could feed this city armed only with some... flattened dough and sauce? That is what you have been playing with, yes? I have heard rumours. Corvosi street food. Cheap peasant fare you help some foreigner hawk in your spare time." The words landed like blows. Marisa straightened, fingers pressing into the soft dough until they left clear impressions. "It's not cheap," she said, stung. "Not in the way you mean. It's simple, but it's good. People like it. Dockworkers, Yellowjackets, even some of the clerks in the Maelstrom offices. It's hot, it travels, it—" she swallowed, feeling every eye in the kitchen on her, "—it makes them happy."

"Happy," Pagoda repeated, as if she'd said "infested." "We are not in the happiness business, Miss Takeuchi-Shipman. We are in the excellence business. The Bismarck does not chase the palates of dock rats. We set standards to which others aspire." He plucked the dough from her hands with fastidious fingers and slapped it back onto the table. "Leave this... 'pizza' nonsense in the alleyways where it belongs. While you are under my tutelage, you will cook as the guild cooks."

She might have let it go there on another day, swallowed her resentment and nodded and gone back to slicing carrots into perfect, obedient planks. But months of running between Marcus's shop and the Bismarck had stretched her world wider; she'd seen too many faces light up over a hot slice in a cold watch post to pretend it didn't matter. "With respect, chef," she said, and there was enough edge on the word *respect* that several people nearby winced, "people are already eating it. And they're paying for it. It's not just alleys. I've taken boxes into offices on the upper decks. To captains who don't have time to sit through six courses. To merchants who want something they can eat while counting coin. They don't seem to think it's beneath them."

Pagoda's mouth thinned. "Of course they do not. The public will eat anything if you cover it in enough cheese. They are not the arbiters of taste—we are. That is why we exist." He turned away as if to dismiss her, then glanced over his shoulder. "And if you insist on moonlighting for some Corvosi exile, I strongly suggest you do not bring his bad habits into my kitchen."

The comment hit a nerve she hadn't known was exposed. Marcus's jokes about "disagreements with the Empire" were always wrapped in humour, but Marisa had seen the way his eyes hardened when he spoke of home, the quiet calculation when he

checked windows at night before closing. “He’s not just some exile,” she snapped, forgetting herself. “He’s a better cook than half the people who eat here, and he actually cares whether the boys on watch have something warm in their stomachs. Not just whether the Admiral’s plate looks like a painting.”

The room went very quiet. Lyngsath put his ladle down with exaggerated care. Pagoda turned fully, expression smoothing into something colder than fury. “Out,” he said. The word was soft, but it carried to every corner. “If you are unable to separate your sentimental attachments from your duties, you will leave my kitchen until you remember why you are here.”

Marisa opened her mouth, then closed it again as Lyngsath stepped between them, wiping his hands on a towel. “Easy, Pagoda,” he rumbled. “Girl’s tired. Been doing double duty for weeks now. Let me talk to her, aye?” Pagoda didn’t take his eyes off Marisa. “You may talk,” he said. “But she does not touch a single dish bound for the dining room today. Staff meals only. I will not have my work contaminated by whatever riverfront experiments she has been indulging in.” With that, he stalked back to his crate, barking new orders with even more venom than usual.

Lyngsath waited until the noise of the kitchen rose again, conversation buzzing back in to fill the silence Pagoda’s outburst had carved. Then he jerked his chin toward the storage alcove. “You. With me.”

The storeroom smelled of spices and onions and old wood. Marisa perched on an upturned crate, hands knotted around her apron, while Lyngsath leaned against a sack of flour that looked in danger of splitting under his weight. He regarded her for a long moment, bushy brows knitting. “You want to tell me what that was,” he asked eventually, “or should I guess?”

She stared at the floorboards, tracing a knot with the edge of her boot. “He started it,” she muttered automatically, then caught herself and huffed out a humourless laugh. “Gods, listen to me. I sound like I’m six.”

“You sound like someone who’s been running too hard in too many directions,” he said. “Look, lass. I know about the Corvosi. Hard not to, the way he talks.” His moustache twitched. “And I know you’ve been helping him. Word gets around when a girl is chargin’ up and down the decks with mystery boxes that smell like tomatoes.”

Marisa’s head snapped up. “If you wanted me to stop, you could’ve just said so.”

“I didn’t say that.” Lyngsath folded his arms. “Pagoda’s a good chef. He’s kept this place respectable for longer than you’ve been alive. But he forgets sometimes that there’s more than one way to feed a city. You think I’ve never eaten from a street stall? Never grabbed a bowl of stew from some fellow with a pot on a brazier because I needed food faster than the Bismarck could plate it?” He snorted. “Half the time, those bowls are better than anything a noble sees in a week.”

“Then why let him talk like that?” she demanded. “About Marcus. About the people who eat his food. It’s not a crime to want something simple.”

“It’s not,” Lyngsath agreed. “But there’s a time and a place to argue philosophy. In the middle of a busy kitchen, in front o’ apprentices who still can’t tell salt from sugar? Not it. You embarrassed him. He retaliated. Now we’re wedged between his pride and your temper, and I have to make sure neither of them ruins lunch.”

She sagged a little. “So what, then? I shut up and do as I’m told? Pretend I don’t see another way?”

He sighed, deep and long. “What you do,” he said, “is learn what you can from every kitchen you’re in. Pagoda can teach you discipline. Knife skills. How to run a brigade without it collapsing into chaos. Your Corvosi friend can teach you improvisation, heart, whatever it is he’s putting into those pies that has you glowing like a hearth every time you come in. But you can’t serve two masters in the same space. Not without someone losing their patience, or a thumb.”

Marisa thought of Marcus’s kitchen: the messy joy, the laughter, the freedom to ruin a base and feed the gulls. She thought of the Bismarck: the satisfaction of plating something perfectly, the weight of the guild’s history. Both felt real. Both felt hers. “So I pick?” she asked, throat tight. “Already?”

“Not today,” Lyngsath said firmly. “Not yet. Today you take a breath, you go back out there, and you make staff bread so perfect that even Pagoda can’t find fault with it, and you keep your talk of *pītsa* for after his shift ends. When the time comes to choose, you’ll know. Don’t rush it just because one Lalafell can’t handle the idea o’ sauce on dough.”

She managed a small smile. “He really does hate it,” she said. “Marcus calls him ‘*el piccolo inquisitore del pane*’ in Corvosi. The little bread inquisitor.”

Lyngsath barked a laugh before he could stop himself, then coughed to hide it. “Don’t let him hear that,” he said. “He’ll come after you both with a rolling pin.” He pushed off the flour sack, dusting his hands. “All right. Back to work. And, Marisa—” he waited until she met his eyes, “—whatever you end up doing, remember this: guild or no guild, fancy plate or street corner, if you’re feeding folk honest and you’re not poisoning anybody, you’re doing something worth the trouble.”

Back on the line, the air felt heavier but clearer somehow. Apprentices avoided her gaze at first, afraid proximity might draw Pagoda’s ire, but the work itself was the same: peel, slice, stir, taste. Marisa focused on the dough in front of her, keeping it firmly on the table this time, pressing and shaping with careful, even hands. When the loaves came out of the oven, their crusts were glossy and even, their crumb tender. Pagoda examined one, tore it open, sniffed, and grunted. “Acceptable,” he said, which from him was practically a wedding proposal.

She didn’t thank him. Instead, as she arranged the bread on a tray for staff meals, she let herself imagine it cut into circles, topped with sauce and cheese, still warm as she ran it out into the streets. The Bismarck’s rules wrapped around her like an apron: useful, necessary, but not the only thing she would ever wear. Out there, in a little riverfront shop with a painted sign, Marcus was probably spinning dough and swearing in Corvosi at a stubborn batch of tomatoes. The wires between her two kitchens might be crossed, but somewhere in that tangle, a new path was forming—one that led, she suspected, not to choosing one world or the other, but to building a bridge only she could run.

Chapter 21: Routes Drawn in Red

The first map wasn’t drawn on parchment or proper guild charts, but on the back of an old flour sack Marcus had cut open and pinned to the wall with skewers. It sagged a little in the middle, the way cheap canvas always did, but it held steady enough for the lines she started to carve into it in charcoal. “This is Limsa Lominsa, apparently,” Marisa said dryly, squinting as she tried to capture the tangle of bridges and tiers from memory. “Behold its majestic resemblance to... a smashed crab.”

Marcus leaned back against the counter, arms dusted with flour and folded loosely over his chest, watching with the indulgent patience of a man who excelled at two things: kneading dough and letting people talk themselves into ideas. “Most maps look like smashed crabs if you are honest,” he said. “Or like someone dropped ink on a table and decided to name the splatter. Keep going. Where is your home?” She marked a small X on the lower right with the charcoal. “Here. The inn. Our room’s just up from the common room.” Another mark. “The Bismarck’s over here. Guild kitchens in the back, terrace on this side, place where Pagoda lurks when he wants to judge the entire city from a single vantage point... somewhere around here.”

Puku supervised the entire process from his chosen command post atop a flour bin, tail twitching lazily as he tracked the movement of her hand. Every now and then he would extend a paw to tap at the sagging canvas as if to test its structural integrity. “Do not help,” she told him, batting his paw aside without looking. “Last time you helped, I had to redraw half of Western La Noscea because someone thought the charcoal stick was food.” He blinked slowly, wholly unbothered by slander.

Marcus stepped closer, tapping the wall with a knuckle beside one of the smudged lines. “And here?” he asked. “These little circles?” “The regulars,” Marisa said. “Yellowjacket posts, a couple offices that order from the Bismarck on busy days, that merchant who keeps sending boys to fetch food and then complaining when they come back late. If anyone’s likely to pay for proper deliveries, it’s them.” She drew a line linking a few of the circles, tracing the route her feet already knew by instinct. “If I start here at your oven, hit the lower posts first, then cut up through the middle tier... I can make all of these within, say, fifteen, twenty minutes if I don’t get stuck behind some drunk Roegadyn singing on the stairs.”

Marcus made an appreciative noise. “You have been thinking about this,” he said. “Good. I was afraid I would have to start the lecture about efficiency and you would fall asleep halfway through like my cousin did when we were boys.” “You have cousins?” she asked, more surprised than she meant to sound. He shrugged. “Had. Have. The details are complicated and involve the Empire, so we will put them aside for now. Today we think only of routes. And of not letting my precious *pĩtsa* die a cold, lonely death on some office desk because we took a romantic detour.”

They spent the next while arguing with the map. For every straight line she drew, Marcus would lean over and point out a shortcut he’d seen some other courier take; for every alley he suggested, she’d shake her head and say, “No good, smells like old fish and regret, slows you down.” They debated stairs versus ramps, open walkways versus covered ones when rain was likely. Every so

often, Marcus would glance toward the oven as if gauging the time by how much heat it was throwing. “We will need a rhythm,” he said eventually, tapping his chin. “Bake, box, send, bake, box, send. How many can you carry at once?”

“On foot?” she mused. “Two full pies, three if I don’t mind losin’ the use of my arms. Four if you want me to risk dropping one every time someone’s elbow gets ideas.” “Two, then,” he decided. “We start with two. We test your pace. I will make the first pies, because I am vain and wish the experiment to be impressive. If it works, we see how much we can trust these hands of yours.” He caught one of her wrists lightly, turning her palm up, inspecting the callouses. “*Manosi beni*,” he murmured. “These are runner’s hands and kneader’s hands. They will serve.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re laying it on a bit thick there, Marcus.” “If I do not praise the tools of my trade,” he said solemnly, “who will?”

When the first trial run began, the sky outside was sliding from afternoon to evening, the kind of liminal light that made the white stone of Limsa’s arches glow from within. Marcus had two Margheritas in the oven and a third base resting just in case; Marisa bounced on the balls of her feet near the counter, empty boxes stacked beside her, Puku winding figure-eights around her ankles like a furry, determined curse. “You’re stayin’ here,” she told the cat. “Someone has to supervise him.” Marcus placed a hand over his heart as if wounded. “You choose the orange tyrant over me?” he asked. “I am crushed.” “Someone has to keep an eye on the cheese,” she said. “You’ll get distracted telling a story and burn half of it.”

The pies came out beautifully—crusts blistered and golden, cheese bubbling, sauce scenting the air with basil and heat. Marcus moved with reverent speed, sliding each onto a board, cutting, and boxing with a practised rhythm that made the whole thing look like a ritual. “First box,” he said, snapping the lid shut. “Yellowjacket post by the lower watchtower. They eat anything, so they will be honest.” “Rude but fair,” Marisa said, taking the box and holding it against her side. The warmth sank through her coat into her ribs. He handed her the second. “For the desk-slaves in the shipping office you told me about. The ones chained to their ledgers. If they survive, they will send us gossip as tribute.”

She balanced both boxes, testing their weight, then adjusted her satchel strap. “If I drop these, I’m emigratin’ to some place where nobody’s ever heard of bread,” she muttered. Marcus grinned. “If you drop them, we learn. That is all. Now go. Remember: you are not just carrying food. You are carrying my reputation. No pressure.” “Oh, none at all,” she shot back, but there was more excitement than fear crackling under her skin as she pushed through the door and out into the street.

Running with hot food turned out to be a different sort of challenge than her usual errands. The boxes shifted if she let her stride get too long; wind tugged at the lids whenever she cut across open walkways. She quickly learned which corners to take tight and which to swing wide, where the cobbles betrayed her with uneven edges, which patches of boardwalk groaned underfoot in ways that made her instinctively adjust her balance. People turned to stare as she wove through them—some annoyed at the sudden flash of red coat and cardboard, others curious, nostrils flaring as the smell of tomato and cheese trailed in her wake.

The Yellowjacket post heard her coming before they saw her. “Here she is!” one of the guards called from his usual position leaning against the railing, helmet askew. “The red courier of mercy!” “You lot are getting dramatic,” she told them, skidding to a halt and thumping the box down on a barrel. “It’s just dinner.” “Just dinner, she says,” another guard scoffed, already prying open the lid. Heat rolled out, steam curling in the cool air. For a moment, the usual banter died as they stared at the perfect circle of pītsa inside. Then the room filled with low, appreciative noises. “By the Navigator,” someone muttered. “Looks even better than last time.”

“You were timing me,” Marisa said, holding out a hand without bothering to hide her smugness. “Well?” The first guard fished a battered sandglass out of his belt pouch and flipped it, then compared it to a mark scratched on the table. “Fourteen minutes,” he said. “From the river sign to my stomach. Faster than stew, hotter than the slop downstairs, and the crust’s still crisp. I’d say that’s a win.” He dropped gil into her palm without counting it aloud; she’d learned by now that some customers preferred to pretend it was generosity rather than payment. She weighed the coins with a flick of her fingers, nodded once, and tucked them away. “Enjoy,” she said. “Try not to get cheese on your incident reports.”

The shipping office was a different test. It lurked up three flights of stairs and along a narrow parapet that always seemed one strong gust away from launching unwary clerks into the harbour. By the time she reached it, her arms were starting to burn, but the box was still warm against her side. Inside, men and women hunched over ledgers, ink-stained fingers moving in restless little patterns even when they paused to stretch. The air smelled of parchment, sweat, and the faint, bitter tang of cheap tea. When she set the box down on a central table with a soft thump, heads lifted like hounds catching scent. “What’s this?” one of them asked, blinking owlishly behind his spectacles.

“Compliments of Marcus Corvinus, Riverfront Pizzeria,” Marisa said, trying out the phrase. It felt too big for her mouth and exactly right at the same time. “He’s tryin’ out deliveries. I’m the poor soul he roped into running.” “We didn’t order—” another clerk began, but curiosity got the better of them. The lid came up, and the room filled with sound: appreciative whistles, low curses that somehow sounded impressed, someone murmuring, “Is that basil?” as if encountering a minor miracle. “If you like it,” she added casually, “you can order proper next time. For now, consider it... research.”

She stayed long enough to see the first slice vanish into someone’s mouth and their expression soften in that particular way she was starting to recognise—a mix of surprise, relief, and sudden, greedy pleasure. That look might never make it into any guild ledger, but it felt like the truest kind of review. “All right,” she said, backing toward the door. “I’ve got to get back to the oven before Marcus decides to test delivery speed himself and keels over halfway up the stairs. Don’t let the ink get into the cheese.”

By the time she jogged back into the little shop, cheeks flushed and hair sticking to her temples, Marcus already had another base in the air. Puku, on the counter, watched him as if judging his technique. “Well?” Marcus called, eyes flicking her way even as his hands kept moving. “Did they throw the boxes at you? Did anyone die? Are we famous?” “Yellowjackets say fourteen minutes and want more,” she puffed, leaning against the doorframe for a moment. “Clerks looked like they were about to propose marriage to the cheese. Nobody died. Yet.”

He slid the dough onto the peel and grinned. “Then we have something, *ragazza*. Routes. Customers. Proof that your legs and my oven can work together without setting the city on fire.” He paused, considering, then added, “On purpose, at least.”

They fell into a rhythm over the next few weeks that felt, in its own way, like learning a dance. Marcus learned how many pies he could bake before the oven needed to rest; Marisa learned exactly how long it took her to cover each loop at different times of day. They kept informal times on scraps of parchment pinned beside the flour-sack map: Yellowjacket Post A – thirteen to sixteen minutes depending on traffic; Shipping Office – fifteen if all the stairwells were clear, twenty if she had to elbow past a gaggle of visiting merchants; Dockside Warehouses – variable, determined mostly by how many crate-maze shortcuts she dared risk while balancing hot food.

Puku inserted himself into the operation with the effortless entitlement of a cat who believed the world and all baked goods in it were his by right. He learned very quickly that the sound of the oven door opening meant a fresh opportunity to steal crusts; that the rustle of boxes meant Marisa was leaving and needed to be supervised to the door; and that returning with empty boxes and pockets full of coin was an event that clearly required celebration in the form of treats. Marcus claimed he disapproved of feeding the cat scraps, but his hand was always the first to “accidentally” flick a corner of cooled crust off the counter.

Not everyone was immediately on board. One afternoon, Marisa tried to interest a pompous minor functionary from the Admiral’s office in “hot, portable lunch that doesn’t require three footmen to carry,” only to be told that the Bismarck’s set courses were “quite sufficient, thank you, and far more presentable.” She smiled tightly and took his coin anyway when he grudgingly paid for the slice he’d already half eaten. Another day, a rival food seller eyed her boxes with open suspicion and muttered about “foreign fads” and “stealin’ honest trade.” Marisa shrugged it off as best she could, but that night, as she wiped down her small, beloved section of Marcus’s counter, the weight of all those glances settled on her shoulders.

“Second thoughts?” Marcus asked, reading her face far too easily.

“Second, third, and fourth,” she admitted. “Some folk look at me like I’m some silly girl with a hobby. Others act like I’m tryin’ to take bread out of their mouths because I’ve got boxes instead of bowls. And Pagoda...” She trailed off, making a face. “I can’t talk about any of this in the guild without him snapping a vein. He thinks what we’re doing is an insult.”

Marcus considered her for a long moment, then reached for the charcoal and added a new mark to the edge of the flour-sack map. It wasn’t a route or a customer, just a small circle with nothing attached. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Room to grow,” he said simply. “Right now, there is you, there is me, there is one oven and a city that has not decided yet whether it loves or hates us. That is fine. It takes time to teach people there is another way to eat. You will make enemies, yes. Anyone who does something new does. You will also make friends you have not met yet.” He smiled, the lines around his eyes deepening. “And if some guild chefs think this is beneath them? Good. Let them have their silver platters. We will have the streets.”

She looked at the map again, really looked this time—not just at the lines and circles, but at what they meant. Each mark was a person whose name she knew now; each route was a path her feet had memorised, a thread tying her to the city in a way that felt different from ledgers and debt. “Do you ever miss it?” she asked quietly. “Home, I mean. Corvos.”

“Every day,” he said without hesitation. “And some days not at all. Because sometimes, when I see someone bite into a slice and close their eyes like you did the first time, I think: *ah. Here. This is mine now.* Not the Empire’s, not the guilds’, not the *domus de aristocrati*. Just mine. And theirs. You will have that too, one day. Maybe in a little room in the Topmast with a broken sign. Maybe in a dozen cities. Who knows?”

She snorted. “A dozen cities. Listen to you. One thing at a time. For now, it’s just pies and these few routes.”

“For now,” he agreed. “But look how far your feet already carry you.” He tapped the map once more. “You are drawing your own lines, Marisa. Not just running along the ones someone else laid out. Remember that when the little men with big titles tell you what is and is not ‘proper.’”

That night, as she finally headed home with Puku half-asleep in her satchel and the afterimage of oven-glow still burned behind her eyelids, she traced her usual route through the arches with new awareness. Every corner she turned, every stair she climbed, had a memory attached now: the guard who’d slipped her a little extra coin “for the cat,” the clerk who’d proudly tried to pronounce *pĩtsa* and ended up inventing a new vowel, the dockhand who’d told her, with his mouth full, that her delivery had been the best part of a week spent unloading someone else’s cargo.

Limsa had always been a city of routes—ship paths, trade lines, patrol circuits. For the first time, she felt like she was carving some of her own, not with ink on charts but with footsteps and warm boxes and the quiet, stubborn belief that there were as many ways to matter as there were streets in this impossible, beautiful, infuriating place.

Chapter 22: Marisa’s Choice

The day it finally snapped, Limsa was in one of those rare moods where the sky stayed clear from dawn to dusk, the sea a flat sheet of polished steel beyond the arches. It should have been a good omen: calm weather, steady trade, less shouting from captains whose ships had been knocked sideways by surprise squalls. Instead, the Bismarck's kitchen felt like it was balancing on the edge of a knife. Orders had come in thick and fast since morning—merchant captains celebrating closed deals, a Maelstrom officer hosting a small, loud gathering, half a dozen dockside regulars squeezing into whatever corner they could afford. The ovens roared, the air was a haze of steam and smoke, and Marisa had been moving for so many bells that she could feel the pattern of the floorboards in her bones. Somewhere between plating a tower of grilled fish and running a tray out to the terrace, she'd made a decision that seemed harmless in the moment: she'd tucked a small ball of spare dough aside near the back of the prep table, covered it with a bowl, and told herself she'd use it later to practise tosses when things quieted down.

By the time "later" arrived, her shoulders ached and her fingers had lost the fine tremor that came from running on too much adrenaline and too little sleep. The lunch rush had finally tapered off; the guild's apprentices sagged against counters, trading quiet jabs while they scrubbed down their stations. Pagoda had retreated to the far end of the kitchen to log inventory, quill scratching like an annoyed insect over parchment. Lyngsath had stepped out to argue with a supplier about the quality of a recent fish delivery. For the first time in hours, there was space enough around Marisa to breathe. She glanced at the bowl with its little secret lump of dough, then around the room. No one was watching. Puku would have called this the perfect moment to steal something. "Just a few," she murmured to herself, lifting the bowl. "No harm in practisin' on staff bread. Can't get better if I never try."

The dough had rested well, developing that slight puff and elasticity Marcus had taught her to look for. She dusted her hands with flour, pressed the ball flat, then slid her fingers under it, knuckles taking the weight. The movement came more easily now, muscle memory from the riverfront shop guiding her wrists. Up, turn, catch. The little circle of dough lifted, spun once, twice, the light catching its stretched centre before it settled back into her waiting hands. It felt good—right in a way that had nothing to do with guild standards and everything to do with a quiet thrill in her chest. She tried it again, a little higher, grinning despite herself when it landed perfectly. "Hah," she whispered. "Take that, gravity."

"What, precisely, do you think you are doing."

Pagoda's voice sliced across the kitchen like a knife through pastry. Marisa froze, dough sagging in her fingers, and turned slowly. He stood a few paces away, ledger under one arm, quill still in his hand, ink blotched on his cuff. His eyes were wide, not with confusion this time, but with the particular, incandescent outrage of a man who has caught someone committing what he considers a holy sacrilege. "Practisin'," she said, because lying would only make it worse and her brain had chosen this exact moment to abandon her entirely. "Just on scrap dough. For staff bread."

"Practising," he repeated, coming closer. Each step seemed to make him grow taller, though she knew that was just her perspective collapsing. "Practising what? Street tricks? Juggling?" His gaze flicked to the dough, then to her flour-dusted fingers. "I told you once. I will tell you again. Dough does not belong in the air. It belongs on the table, under control. We are not Corvosi hawkers flinging food for spectacle."

"It's not spectacle," she snapped before she could swallow the words. "It helps it stretch even. Marcus showed me—" She bit down too late on his name. Pagoda's expression sharpened.

"Ah," he said softly. "Marcus. Again. Tell me, Miss Takeuchi-Shipman—do you plan to bring every bad habit that man has ever taught you into my guild? Will you be serving his little peasant discs in the Admiral's dining room next? Perhaps we can replace the traditional roast with something you can eat with your hands while leaning over a rail." A few apprentices nearby snickered nervously, eyes darting between them. Marisa felt her ears burn.

"It's not peasant food," she said, voice low but steady. "And even if it were, peasants still need to eat. Dockworkers, guards, sailors—they don't have time for five courses and three wines. They need something hot they can hold and keep moving. That's what we're doing. Feedin' people who otherwise get cold stew and crusts—"

"We," he cut in, pouncing on the word. "Yes. We. You and your Corvosi patron saint of mediocrity." He jabbed the quill at her chest, a dark fleck of ink landing on her apron like a stain. "You come into my kitchen, wearing my guild's colours, and you bring in outside notions as if you know better than centuries of tradition. As if a girl who has barely seen sixteen summers understands cuisine better than men who have spent their lives perfecting it."

Anger flared, hot and sudden, burning away the last of her caution. “I never said I knew better than anyone,” she shot back. “I said there might be more than one way. The Bismarck feeds folk who can afford to sit here. Good. Fine. I’m proud of the work we do. But what Marcus and I are tryin’—that feeds people who can’t. That matters too. If you can’t see that, maybe your idea of ‘tradition’ is too narrow.”

The room went quiet in stages. A pot stopped clanging. A spoon stopped stirring. Even the oven seemed to hush, its roar shrinking to a low, steady growl. Pagoda’s face went still in a way that was far more alarming than his usual bluster. “You stand in my kitchen,” he said, each word carefully enunciated, “and you accuse me of not understanding the value of feeding people? Me, who has spent my life ensuring that nothing substandard leaves this door? You dare to suggest that greasy alley food and this—” he jerked his chin toward the dough in her hands, “—this... vulgarity deserve to stand beside the work we do here?”

“I’m sayin’ there’s room for both,” she insisted, heart hammering. “Guild food and street food. Fancy plates and hand pies. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

“For you, perhaps,” he said coldly. “For me, there is only one standard. Excellence. Discipline. Respect for the craft. You may call it narrow if you like. I call it a spine.” He drew himself up, the ledger under his arm like a shield. “I will not have my kitchen tainted by divided loyalties. If you wish to play delivery girl with your Corvosi friend, do so. But you will not do it while claiming to be my student.”

The words hit like a physical blow. For a moment, all Marisa could hear was the rush of her own blood in her ears. She thought of pre-dawn walks to the Bismarck, of the first time Lyngsath had trusted her with a sauce that mattered, of the satisfaction of seeing a plate leave the kitchen looking exactly as it should. She thought of Puku Pizza as it existed only in her imagination and on flour sacks—routes and boxes and the glow on a guard’s face when she arrived right on time. She had been trying, desperately, to keep both worlds in her hands like balanced plates. Now, it seemed, one of them was being taken away.

Lyngsath’s return went almost unnoticed until his voice cut through the tension. “What in the hells is goin’ on here?” he demanded, taking in the tableau: Pagoda rigid with fury, Marisa white-knuckled around a sagging circle of dough, apprentices frozen like rabbits in a hawk’s shadow. Marisa opened her mouth, but Pagoda spoke first. “Your apprentice,” he said, infusing the

word with acid, “has decided that my instruction is insufficient. She wishes to import the habits of some back-alley peddler into the Bismarck. I have informed her that she is welcome to pursue such low ambitions elsewhere.”

Lyngsath’s gaze flicked to Marisa. “That true?” he asked. “You tell him the guild’s beneath you?”

“No,” she said quickly, throat tight. “I never said that. I just... I told him what Marcus and I have been doing. The deliveries. The pizza. He called it peasant food. Said it doesn’t belong in a place like this. I said maybe both could matter. He... objected.”

Lyngsath rubbed a hand over his face, leaving a streak of something unidentifiable in his beard. “Navigator preserve me from artists,” he muttered. Then, more clearly, “Pagoda, no one is sayin’ you need to start throwin’ dough at nobles. But the girl’s not betrayin’ you by learnin’ more. I thought that was the point of an apprenticeship.”

“The point of an apprenticeship,” Pagoda snapped, “is to learn properly. Not to dabble. Not to pick and choose which parts of the craft you obey and which you discard because some foreigner with a charming accent tells you it is ‘fun.’ She cannot serve two kitchens and claim to honour both. If she wishes to be a street vendor, let her go. I will not have her half in, half out, disrespecting this guild with every word.”

The phrase “let her go” hung in the air like a thrown knife. Marisa swallowed hard. “So that’s it?” she asked quietly. “All the work I’ve done here, all the shifts, the burns, the cuts—none of it matters because I won’t pretend Marcus’s food doesn’t exist?”

Pagoda’s mouth tightened. “What matters,” he said, “is whether you are willing to commit fully. To this. To the standards we uphold. If you are, then you will cease this nonsense. No more deliveries. No more *pĩtsa*. No more divided attention. You will be a culinarian of the Bismarck or you will be nothing at all.”

Silence pressed in. Marisa felt the eyes of every apprentice on her, felt Lyngsath’s gaze like a weight at her shoulder. For a moment, she imagined saying yes. She saw herself nodding, dropping the dough, scrubbing her hands clean, letting the plans on the flour sack fade into “once upon a time.” She could make a life here. Stable, respectable. She’d be good at it. In a few years, maybe, she’d be the one rapping knives with a spoon, telling some younger girl not to get ideas above her station.

Then she thought of Marcus standing in his little shop, hands deep in dough, talking about Corvos and rivers and the way food could travel. She thought of Puku Pizza scrawled in the margins of her notes; of Hanako's careful approval when she'd described the first trial routes; of the feeling in her chest every time she ran a box up a stairway and saw someone's face light up. She thought of Eldric and his promises of distant horizons that had never quite materialised. Somewhere in all that mess of grief and hope and stubbornness, a small, clear truth surfaced: she could not let another man's fear of change dictate the shape of her life.

"I can't," she said, voice shaking but loud enough to carry. "I can't pretend it doesn't matter. I love this kitchen. I've learned so much here. But what Marcus and I are building—that's mine. It feels like... like somethin' I'm meant to do. I won't give it up."

Pagoda's expression didn't change, but something like satisfaction flickered behind his eyes, the grim relief of a surgeon whose diagnosis has been confirmed. "Then you have made your choice," he said. "Clean your station. Return your apron. You are dismissed from my tutelage effective immediately."

A low murmur rippled through the apprentices. Lyngsath stepped forward, frowning. "Now hold on," he began, but Marisa lifted a hand. "It's all right," she said, surprising herself with the steadiness in her own voice. "He's right about one thing. I can't keep my feet in two kitchens forever." She looked at Pagoda, meeting his gaze head-on. "Thank you for what you taught me. Truly. Even if you think I'm wastin' it."

He sniffed. "What you do with your training after you leave these doors is no concern of mine," he said. "Go make your... pizza. The Bismarck will endure."

She turned away before he could see the way her eyes stung. Stripping off her apron felt like peeling away a layer of skin; the strings caught on her fingers once, and she had to take a steadying breath before they came free. She folded the fabric carefully—habits drilled into her would not die just because her position had—and set it on the edge of the nearest table. The knife she'd grown used to, its handle worn smooth under her grip, went beside it. For a moment she hovered there, fingers resting on the metal, then let go.

Lyngsath followed her to the back door, his heavy steps softer than they had any right to be. "You don't have to do this," he muttered, low enough that Pagoda couldn't hear over the rattle of pans. "We could find a way around him. Shift you to another station. Keep your head down 'til he cools off."

She shook her head. "I'd just end up sneakin' around," she said. "Lyin' to you. To him. To my mum. I'm tired of pretendin' I'm not thinkin' about dough and boxes every time I look at a loaf. This way... at least it's honest."

He grunted, then sighed. "You're a damn fool," he said. "But you're my kind of fool." He reached into his pocket and pressed something into her hand. When she looked down, it was a small, battered metal spoon, its handle worn thin at the neck. "First tasting spoon I ever bought when I came up from the docks," he said. "Nearly melted it in a pot of stock once. Don't laugh. Thought I'd lost it years ago, but it keeps turnin' up in my drawer. Consider it a... down payment on whatever trouble you're about to cause."

Her throat tightened. "Lyngsath..."

"Don't thank me yet," he said gruffly. "I expect free pizza when you're famous. And if that Corvosi bastard doesn't treat you right, I'll come down there and steal you back. Now get out of here before Pagoda thinks I've gone soft."

Outside, the air felt colder than it had an hour ago. Limsa's terraces stretched out before her, bright and busy, the city oblivious to the small earthquake that had just rearranged her world. She stood for a moment on the steps of the Bismarck, watching gulls wheel over the harbour, feeling the weight of the tasting spoon in her palm. Then she tucked it into the same inner pocket where Eldric's Garlean coin rested, alongside the folded scrap of paper where she'd once scribbled delivery routes with Marcus. Three tokens, three lives: the sailor who'd left, the chef who'd taught her discipline, the Corvosi who'd thrown a pizza at her face and changed everything.

When she reached Marcus's parlour, Puku was already in the window, as if he'd known she was coming, amber eyes bright, tail flicking. Marcus looked up from the counter as the door's bell chimed, saw her expression, and went very still. Flour dusted his mustache, making him look older and softer at once. "Ah," he said quietly. "So. It has happened."

She nodded, closing the door behind her. "He made me choose," she said. "So I did."

For a heartbeat, something like guilt crossed his face. “I did not mean for you to lose your place,” he said. “The guild is security, respect. I know what it is to walk away from such things.”

“I haven’t lost anything I didn’t give up myself,” she replied. “And I’ve still got what they taught me. They can’t take that. Besides—” she managed a small, crooked grin, “—I’ve got you. And a cat. And a head full o’ bad ideas.”

Marcus stared at her for a long moment, then smiled, slow and warm, like an oven coming to temperature. “Then,” he said, “perhaps it is time we gave those bad ideas a home. A proper one. Not just a corner of my counter and a flour sack on the wall.” He gestured around the cramped shop. “You wanted something of your own, sì? A place where you decide what goes on the menu. Where you choose how the food runs through the city.”

She felt the ache of the loss sitting beside the sharp, fizzing excitement of possibility. “I did,” she said. “I do.”

“*Bene*,” he replied. “Because I know a landlord in the Topmast with a small room he cannot keep rented. Too cramped for most folk to live in. Just enough space, perhaps, for an oven and a girl with quick feet.”

Marisa looked down at her flour-dusted hands, at the faint ink stain on her apron where Pagoda’s quill had struck, at the faint outline of dough still clinging to her fingers. The fear was still there—of failure, of debt, of disappointing everyone who had ever believed in her. But underneath it, stronger now, was something else: the stubborn, unmistakable sense that this was a moment she would look back on one day and think, *That was when it really began*. She drew a breath, straightened her shoulders, and met Marcus’s eyes. “All right,” she said. “Show me this room. Let’s see if we can turn it into a place where the pizza’s so good, even a guild chef would secretly order a slice.”

Chapter 23: Room 77

The Topmast didn't look like destiny when Marisa first saw it. It looked like a building that had ideas above its station: a pale stone block rising from the Mist's cliffside like a chunk of Limsa Lominsa that had drifted slightly offshore and decided to stay there. The ferry ride over had been choppy, the wind slapping spray into her face hard enough that even Puku had given up complaining and retreated fully into her satchel, just a pair of offended amber eyes peering over the edge. Marcus stood at the prow as if he were on the deck of some grand Corvosi galley instead of a stubby shuttle boat, coat flapping, hair ruffled into further disarray. "See?" he called over the creak of rope and the slap of waves. "Already we are exotic. A seaside address. Very fashionable."

Marisa wiped her face on her sleeve, squinting at the district ahead. The Mist was still relatively new, a cluster of whitewashed buildings and narrow lanes clinging to the cliff like limpets, half-empty even now. The Topmast towered over its neighbours, all clean lines and square windows, with banners hanging from its upper floors that fluttered in the sea breeze. "Looks more like one o' those fancy tenements in Ul'dah," she muttered. "You're sure we can afford even one o' those windows?"

"Not a whole window," Marcus said cheerfully. "But perhaps a corner of one. A tasteful slice." He made a cutting gesture with his hand, as if portioning glass the way he did dough. "Do not worry. The landlord is a pragmatic man. He would rather have tenants who pay on time than rooms full of ghosts."

The landlord, as it turned out, was a Roegadyn whose shoulders barely fit through his own doorframe. He had the weathered look of someone who'd spent his youth at sea and his later years making sure other people paid for the privilege. His name was Hrodvyn, but he introduced himself as "Hrod" and then immediately clarified that this was not an invitation to familiarity. "Mister Hrod'll do," he said, eyeing Marisa and Marcus as they stood in the building's small, echoing lobby, seawater still dripping from their boots onto the polished stone. "You're the culinarian?"

"That would be me," Marcus said, bowing with a flourish that somehow managed to look sincere rather than mocking. "Marcus Corvinus, formerly of Locus Amoenus, currently of your humble neighbourhood, and this—" he gestured grandly, nearly clipping Puku's ears as the cat poked his head further out of the satchel to investigate, "—is my associate, Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman. Future scourge of hunger and patron saint of late-night cravings."

Hrodvyn's gaze slid to Marisa, taking in the flour-stained coat, the calloused hands, the cat glaring at him as if he owed it money. "You run the little delivery thing," he said. "Pizza." He pronounced it carefully, as if tasting the word to see if it agreed with him. "Had some up at the watch post last week. Wasn't half bad."

"Thank you," Marisa said, heart doing a small, absurd flip. "We're hopin' to, er... make more 'not half bad' things. If we can find a place to put an oven that won't burn down the whole district."

Hrod's mouth twitched—just once, but enough to suggest he possessed a sense of humour he kept under lock and key. "Come on, then," he said. "You can see the room. If you still want it after, we'll talk gil."

The climb up the Topmast's stairs felt longer than it should have. The building's interior was surprisingly clean, all pale walls and neatly swept steps, but the echo of their footsteps bounced around like it was trying to keep ahead of them. Puku wriggled in the satchel, clearly unimpressed with the verticality. "If you throw up in there, I'm not cleanin' it," Marisa muttered under her breath. "You can explain it to Mum."

Room 77 was on one of the middle floors, with a small brass plaque screwed crookedly into the wall beside the door. Hrodvyn fished out a key that looked like it could double as a cudgel, turned it with a squeak of protest from the lock, and shoved the door open. "There," he said. "Home sweet holes-in-the-wall."

It was, technically, a rectangle. A small one. The main room took up most of the space: bare wooden floorboards, a low ceiling, and a few windows that looked out toward the sea, their shutters currently half-open to let in a sliver of grey light. A narrow alcove on one side hinted at a future kitchenette; a second, even narrower door led to what was generously described as a "water closet" and could more honestly have been called "a space for one person to reconsider their life choices while washing." There were no furnishings beyond a battered shelf and a rickety table that looked like it had lost an argument with a particularly vindictive crate. The room smelled faintly of salt, dust, and the ghosts of other people's dinners.

Marisa stepped inside, the floor creaking under her weight, and turned slowly in a full circle. It didn't take long. "It's... cosy," she managed, which was the politest word she could find for "small enough that Puku could probably touch both walls if he stretched."

“Cosy is good,” Marcus said, stepping in after her. Somehow, in the cramped space, his presence made the room feel less like a box and more like a stage that had been waiting for someone to step onto it. “Less to heat. Less to clean. More excuse to spend time outside, bringing food to people instead of sulking in the back.” He crossed to the window and shoved the shutters fully open. The view wasn’t grand—the Mist’s lower walkways, a sliver of churning sea, the curve of the cliffs—but the light that rushed in softened the room’s edges. “Besides,” he added, “you are not opening a palace. You are opening a kitchen. Kitchens are meant to be warm, not vast.”

Puku leapt out of the satchel with the air of an inspector arriving on site. He padded around the edges of the room, sniffing corners, scratching once experimentally at the floorboards, then hopped onto the lone table with a thump. From there, he surveyed the space, tail flicking meditatively. Marisa watched him, then looked around again, trying to see the room through eyes that weren’t cataloguing every repair it needed. She imagined an oven in the corner, the glow of its fire pushing back the gloom; imagined a counter along one wall, flour dusting the surface; imagined shelves lined with jars of sauce, stacks of boxes, a hand-painted sign leaning against the window. The space didn’t get bigger in her mind, but it did get fuller, less empty. Less lonely.

She turned to Hrodvyn, who was watching her with arms folded, expression unreadable. “What’s the catch?” she asked bluntly. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the view, but nobody rents out a place in Mist without somethin’ wrong with it.”

“No catch,” Hrod said. “Just reality.” He jerked his chin toward the walls. “Place was meant to be a holiday room for some Ul’dahn fop. He ran out of coin before he could finish furnishing it. Been sittin’ empty ever since. Most folk want more space if they’re livin’ here full-time. Families, Free Companies, rich bastards who like to hear themselves echo. This—” he gestured around, “—is too small for them, too far from the main city for merchants, and too much trouble for someone who just wants a bed and a wash basin. But you...” His gaze flicked to the satchel, where the edge of a pītsa box was still visible, then back to her. “You don’t need much. Just heat, shelves, and a door that opens. You make noise, it draws people in. People in the building buy from you, I look like a clever man for lettin’ you rent cheap rather than leave it empty. Everyone wins.”

“How cheap,” Marisa asked, because dreams were one thing and ledgers another.

Hrod named a number. Her stomach did a small, uncomfortable flip. It was not unreasonable for Mist, not by any stretch, but it was still more gil than she'd ever had in her hand at one time without immediately handing it to someone else. She thought of the crumpled notes and coins in the little box under her bed at home, of the careful columns in her ledger book, of the debts that still clung to her mother's name like barnacles. "I can't pay that all at once," she admitted, throat tight. "Not yet. I've got some saved, but..."

Marcus stepped in before Hrod could respond. "What if," he said lightly, "we made an arrangement? I front some of the initial cost as an investment. Not charity," he added quickly, raising a hand when Marisa's head snapped around, eyes flashing. "Investimento. I put in gil now, I get a small share of the profits later until I am paid back. After that, it is your ship to sail."

"I am not lettin' you buy my life," she said, bristling. "I'm not some apprentice you can just... keep."

"I have seen your ledger," he replied, unruffled. "You are doing well, sì, but not so well you can conjure rent and an oven and ingredients out of thin air. Let me help you start. Not as your padrone. As your partner. Temporarily." He tilted his head. "Do you trust me?"

She hated that the answer was immediate. "Yes," she said, before she could talk herself into any of the more complicated truths that came with it. "But I don't want to owe you forever."

"Good," he said. "Then you will work hard to pay me back quickly, and we will both be happy." He turned to Hrodvyn. "We will take it," he announced, as if he were ordering another round of drinks rather than tying their futures to a small, slightly damp room. "On the condition that my young associate here is allowed to pay in stages. First and last month up front between us, the rest as her business grows."

Hrodvyn considered them both for a long, heavy moment, then shrugged. "So long as the gil arrives when it's supposed to, I don't care whose hand it comes from," he said. "You burn the place down, though, we're going to have a different conversation." He jabbed a thumb toward the window. "And any complaints from the neighbours about noise, smoke, or that cat screaming at odd hours, I come knockin' on your door, lass. Not his."

Marisa straightened, feeling a strange, fierce pride bloom under her ribs. “That’s fair,” she said. “It’ll be my oven, my mess, my responsibility.”

They signed the necessary papers at the rickety table, Hrod’s handwriting surprisingly neat for such a large man. Marisa’s own signature looked small beneath his, but steady, the strokes of her name clearer than they had been on any guild form. When Hrod finally tucked the contract away and handed her the key, it felt heavier than it should have, the cool metal warming quickly against her palm. “Welcome to the Topmast, Miss Takeuchi-Shipman,” he said. “Make it worth the trouble.”

When he left, the room felt different. The bare walls were still bare, the floor still creaked, the window still rattled faintly in its frame when the wind gusted, but now there was a key in Marisa’s pocket and her name on a piece of paper that said this space was hers. Hers and Puku’s, she amended, as the cat strutted from one corner to the other like a surveyor, tail high. Hers and Marcus’s, at least for a while, as he began immediately measuring the kitchenette alcove with his hands, muttering about oven dimensions and ventilation.

“You really think we can fit a proper oven in there?” she asked, half sceptical, half hopeful.

“With some creativity,” he said. “And perhaps a favour or two from a friendly blacksmith. I know a man who once turned an old boiler into a perfectly respectable bread oven. If he can do that, he can manage this.”

“Bordbraena Aldahrsyn,” she said automatically, thinking of the smith whose daggers rode at her hips. “He owes me for all the times I fed him when he forgot to eat.”

“Perfect,” Marcus said. “We trade steel for heat. Everybody wins.”

The next few weeks blurred into a strange, exhausting montage of labour that somehow never quite tipped into misery. When she wasn’t running deliveries or helping Marcus at his shop, Marisa was at Room 77 with her sleeves rolled up, scrubbing, painting, hauling. Hanako came by the first afternoon, lips pursed, hands folded tightly in her sleeves as she inspected the space. “It is small,” she said finally, voice carefully neutral.

“It doesn’t need to be big,” Marisa replied, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her wrist, leaving a streak of white paint across her skin. “Just big enough for an oven and a counter and maybe one table. People won’t be here long. They’ll grab a slice and go. The streets are the real dining room.”

Hanako stood by the window, looking out at the narrow strip of sea and the curve of the Mist’s lower walkways. “It is far,” she murmured. “From Limsa. From home.”

“There’s a ferry every hour,” Marisa said quickly. “And it’s still Lominsan. Just... a little less noisy. You can hear yourself think out here.” She hesitated, then added, “And you could sing, if you wanted. Maybe. Sometimes. People might like it.”

Her mother’s expression flickered, something like old yearning surfacing and then retreating. “This is your dream,” Hanako said at last. “Not mine. If this is what you wish to build, I will not stand in your way.” She turned, smoothing her hands over her sleeves. “But I will bring you proper food when you forget to eat. And I expect you to come home at least sometimes to sleep, until you can afford a bed that is not stuffed with straw and stubbornness.”

“Deal,” Marisa said, and that night, when she lay on the floor of Room 77 with Puku curled into the hollow of her shoulder, staring up at the ceiling’s uneven planks, she felt less like she’d left home and more like she’d expanded it.

The oven arrived in pieces on a cart that rattled the entire way from Limsa. Bordbraena Aldahrsyn himself came with it, grumbling about “never thought I’d be buildin’ a forge for bread” even as his eyes gleamed with the challenge. He and Marcus argued cheerfully over bricks and flues while Marisa ferried mortar and tried not to think about how much of her future was being stacked, stone by stone, against one wall of a room she hadn’t known existed a month ago. When the last brick was laid and the first small test fire coaxed to life, the warmth that seeped into the room felt different from the Bismarck’s roaring heat—less overwhelming, more intimate. This wasn’t a machine serving a crowd. It was a hearth waiting for a story.

The last piece, oddly, was the sign. Marcus suggested something ornate in Corvosi script, all curves and flourishes; Hanako argued for a more traditional Hingan calligraphy; Bordbraena offered to hammer out a metal plaque that could double as a shield if necessary. In the end, it was Marisa who picked up a brush, her handwriting still more practical than pretty, and painted three words on a salvaged plank of wood: Puku Pizza Delivery. The letters were a little uneven, the paint slightly too thick in places, but

when she propped it in the window and stepped out into the corridor to look back in, her heart did a strange, lurching thing. The room with the key and the oven and the cat now had a name.

Puku jumped up onto the inside ledge beside the sign, tail curling neatly around his paws, and looked out at the world with the air of someone inspecting their domain. From the corridor, with the window framing him and the letters just visible, Marisa suddenly saw what passersby would see: a flash of red coat if she moved behind the counter, a warm glow from the oven, a fat orange cat keeping watch. A little square of life carved into the stone.

“Well,” Marcus said softly from behind her, following her gaze. “There it is. Not just an idea. A place.”

She nodded, throat tight, fingers worrying the edge of the key in her pocket. “A place,” she repeated. “With rent. And responsibilities. And a landlord who will murder me if I burn his building down.”

“Pah,” Marcus said. “You will not burn it down. You will scorch a few pies, perhaps. You will forget a delivery once or twice and feel terrible. You will have days where no one comes and days where you cannot keep up. You will make mistakes. And you will keep going.” He nudged her shoulder gently. “That is what you do, yes? You run. You fall. You get up. You run again.”

She let out a shaky laugh. “You make it sound simple.”

“It is simple,” he said. “Not easy. Never easy. But simple.” He looked at the sign again, at Puku blinking solemnly. “You know, one day they will tell this story and make it sound very grand. ‘The legendary Puku Pizza, founded in a tiny room with one oven and a girl who smelled perpetually of basil.’ They will forget the part where the plaster fell on your head twice and your first customer tried to pay you with a live chicken.”

“Let’s hope that doesn’t actually happen,” she said. “I don’t have anywhere to keep a chicken.”

“Yet,” he replied. “Give it time.”

That night, long after Marcus had gone home and Hanako had taken the last ferry back to Limsa with a stern reminder that “opening day is not an excuse to forget to sleep,” Marisa stood alone in Room 77. The oven’s fire had died down to a gentle bed of coals, casting the room in a soft, flickering glow. The new counter smelled of fresh wood and flour; the air was thick with the lingering perfume of baked dough and tomato. Puku lay sprawled on the warmest patch of floor, paws twitching in some private dream, whiskers twitching as if chasing phantom crusts.

She turned slowly, taking in the whole of it: the oven, the shelves, the sign in the window, the key in her hand. It was small, imperfect, precarious. It was also more hers than anything had ever been. For the first time since Eldric’s disappearance, since debt collectors and guild lectures and falling stars, she felt something like solid ground under her feet—a foundation she had chosen, one brick, one delivery, one burnt tongue at a time.

“Okay,” she said softly, more to herself than to the sleeping cat. “We’ve got an oven. We’ve got a name. We’ve got... absolutely no idea what we’re doin’ beyond ‘make pizza and run very fast.’” She smiled, the expression crooked but real. “Could be worse.”

Puku cracked one eye open, regarded her for a heartbeat, then gave a small, approving “mrrp” before tucking his head back under his paw. Marisa crossed the room, knelt beside him, and rested her hand gently on his warm fur, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing. Somewhere outside, the sea hissed against the rocks, the city’s distant noises muffled by distance and stone. Tomorrow, there would be customers—she hoped. Routes to run. Dough to knead. Mistakes to make. Successes to celebrate.

Tonight, there was just this: a girl, a cat, an oven, and a key on a string she’d tied around her neck so she wouldn’t lose it. It wasn’t much, not compared to the grand tales in her beloved adventure novels. But as she lay down on the floor beside Puku and let the warmth from the oven seep into her bones, Marisa decided it was enough. It was a beginning. And for someone who had spent so long running someone else’s routes, the simple fact that this path started at her own door felt, in its quiet way, like the bravest thing she’d ever done.

Chapter 24: A Door, a Bell, a Beginning

The morning Puku Pizza Delivery opened its doors, the Mist woke slow and grey, as if the weather itself were unsure whether this experiment deserved sunshine yet. Marisa was up before the bells, blinking blearily at the ceiling of Room 77 and, for a disoriented moment, wondering why the air smelled like char and dried basil instead of home. Then Puku shifted on her chest, stretching luxuriously and planting a paw squarely on her chin, and the memories snapped back into place: the oven, the sign, the key on its string against her collarbone. “Right,” she muttered, gently relocating the cat to her shoulder so she could sit up. “Big day, Puku. Try not to set anything on fire that isn’t supposed to be.” He answered with a throaty purr that could have meant anything from *I believe in you* to *feed me or perish*.

The oven was nothing but cold bricks and ash when she shuffled over to it, bare feet whispering on the boards. Marisa knelt, fingers moving automatically: clearing last night’s remnants, stacking kindling, coaxing a new fire into being. This was a different sort of waking than she’d grown used to at the Bismarck. There, the ovens were usually already lit by the time she arrived, roaring and ready, some other apprentice having drawn the first heat from the morning. Here, it was on her. If the fire didn’t catch, there would be no pizza. If there was no pizza, there would be no customers. If there were no customers—she cut that thought off sharply and focused on the flicker of flame as it caught, feeding it carefully until a steady glow filled the oven’s small belly. The warmth spread into the room, pushing back the chill that had lingered even under her blanket, and she let herself breathe a little easier. One problem solved. Several hundred to go.

Hanako arrived just as Marisa was pulling the first test base from the oven. Her mother’s knock was polite but firm, the sort of sound that suggested she would simply keep tapping until the door surrendered. When Marisa opened up, flour on her cheek and hair hastily tied back with a red ribbon, Hanako stood in the corridor with a covered basket looped over her arm and an expression that mixed worry and pride in equal measure. “You did not forget to eat,” she said by way of greeting, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation. “Because I have brought breakfast in case you did.” She set the basket on the lone table and unveiled neat parcels: rice balls wrapped in seaweed, pickles in a small jar, a thermos of tea that scented the air with roasted barley. “Mum, I can’t eat all that on my own,” Marisa protested, though her stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly. Hanako’s lips quirked.

“Who said you had to? That cat eats like a grown man, and I know a certain Corvosi will appear as soon as he smells food, no matter what he claims about being ‘too busy’ to fuss.”

As if summoned by the observation, Marcus turned up not long after, coat already dusted with flour, cheeks pink from the sea breeze. He poked his head through the open door like an overeager uncle. “Am I late? Did you sell out already? Are we famous?” he asked, then paused, sniffing. “Is that... tea?” Puku, who had been pretending not to care about the rice balls, abandoned all pretence and launched himself at Marcus’s legs, twining around them with shameless enthusiasm. “Traitor,” Marisa told the cat, then waved them both in properly. “You’re just in time. Oven’s hot, dough’s rested, my nerves are a mess. Perfect conditions, apparently.”

They ate standing up around the table, the way they always seemed to, chopsticks and fingers passing food back and forth while Marisa checked the oven’s heat every few minutes. Hanako watched her daughter’s constant motion with a small, affectionate sigh. “You move like your father did before a voyage,” she said quietly. “As if sitting still too long might jinx something.” Marisa shrugged, trying to ignore the twist in her chest that mention of Eldric still brought. “If I sit down, I might realise what I’m actually doing,” she said. “Better to keep busy until it’s too late to back out.” Marcus chuckled, reaching for another rice ball. “This is the secret of all great ventures,” he said. “Begin before you are ready. By the time you think to be afraid, you are already in the middle of it.”

By mid-morning, the room had been transformed from makeshift bedroom to functioning—if modest—parlour. The pallet was rolled up and shoved into the alcove; the table wiped down and pushed near the window to serve as the lone dine-in surface; the counter cleared and lined with neat stacks of parchment, wooden peels, and the first tower of plain cardboard boxes. The sign in the window caught the weak light, the letters of *Puku Pizza Delivery* casting a faint shadow across the glass. Marisa wiped her hands one last time on her apron, adjusted the red bandana at her throat, and turned to her two unofficial advisors. “All right,” she said. “Rules. One: no fightin’ in my shop. That includes you two.” “I am a man of peace,” Marcus said, hand on heart. “I fight only with bad dough.” Hanako raised both brows and poured herself another cup of tea. “I promise not to stab any customers,” she said mildly. “Unless they insult you.”

The first knock on the door wasn't dramatic. It was a tentative tap, as if the person on the other side wasn't entirely sure they were allowed to disturb whatever mysterious rituals might be happening within. Marisa's heart lurched anyway. "Right," she muttered, wiping invisible flour from the counter. "Here we go." She pulled the door open to find a familiar face blinking back at her: one of the Yellowjackets from the lower watch post, helmet tucked under his arm, dark hair still damp from sea spray. "Hells," he said, relief plain on his face. "It is you. Wasn't sure I had the right door. Whole place looks too fancy for the likes of me."

"It's just stone and paint," she replied, stepping back to let him in. "You're not gonna break it by breathin' near it. Besides, you're my first customer. That makes you fancy by default." "First?" he echoed, glancing around at the empty room, the single table, the cat already creeping toward his boots. "Huh. Thought I'd be fightin' half the Maelstrom for a spot." "Give it time," Marcus murmured from behind the counter, already reaching for dough. "Word travels."

They worked almost without speaking, the way they had practised: Marisa took the order—"Two Margheritas, one with extra cheese if you please, we're starvin' down there"—and called it back, Marcus's hands moving with calm, practised precision as he stretched, sauced, and topped. The oven swallowed the first pie with a low, contented roar; the second followed a minute later. While they baked, Marisa poured the Yellowjacket a cup of tea at Hanako's insistence and leaned on the counter, answering his questions about the new place. "You're really livin' out here now?" he asked, looking toward the window. "All the way in Mist?" She shook her head. "Not yet. Still got a bed at home. But this is... where I'll be most of the time." She paused, searching for the right words. "Feels strange," she admitted. "I've always worked in someone else's kitchen. Guild, tavern, Marcus's shop. If things went wrong, there was always someone above me to blame."

"And now?" he asked.

She glanced at the oven, at the boxes waiting to be filled, at the sign in the window with her handwriting on it. "Now if I burn your pizza," she said, "I can't yell at anyone but myself." He grinned. "Good thing you're fast, then. We'll forgive a few burnt pies if you keep bringin' 'em hotter than the competition."

The first pizza to leave the Puku Pizza oven did not burst forth in a blaze of glory. It emerged with a slightly uneven crust, one side a shade darker than the other where the heat had been stronger, the cheese bubbled in irregular patterns. Marcus inspected it

critically, then glanced at Marisa. “Not perfect,” he said. “But good. Honest. And hot.” He slid it into a box with a practiced flick, followed quickly by the second pie, then handed both over. “First official order,” he said. “Remember this moment, ragazza. The next ones will all blur together.” Marisa took the boxes, their warmth seeping into her palms, and handed them to the Yellowjacket. For a heartbeat, she was absurdly afraid he’d drop them or change his mind. Instead, he hugged them to his chest like something precious. “We’ll tell everyone down there you’ve opened,” he promised. “You’ll be sick of us before long.”

When he left, the door clicked shut behind him with a finality that made the room seem oddly quieter than before. Marisa stood staring at the space he’d vacated, listening to the receding echo of his boots on the corridor stairs. Somewhere deep in the building, another door opened and closed, voices rising and falling as the Mist went about its business, oblivious to the tiny milestone that had just passed on the middle floor. “Well,” she said at last, exhaling. “We did it. We sold pizza. Legally.” Marcus clapped his hands once, flour puffing into the air. “See?” he said. “Already you are a successful businesswoman. One order. That is all it takes to go from ‘dream’ to ‘reality’.” Hanako, who had been watching from her seat by the table, smiled softly. “Now,” she said, reaching for the teapot, “you only have to do it a thousand more times.”

The second customer was not a friendly Yellowjacket or a neighbour from the building, but a stranger: a Miqu’te woman in a merchant’s vest, ink stains on her fingers and a faint crease of perpetual concentration between her brows. She hesitated in the doorway, eyes flicking from the sign to the oven to Puku, who stared back with the unblinking intensity of someone trying to decide if this newcomer was likely to drop food. “Is this the place?” she asked. “The... pizza girl?” “That’s me,” Marisa said, stepping forward. “Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman. Pizzaiola, deliverer, occasional cat wrangler. What can I get you?” The woman relaxed a fraction. “I read about you in a note someone left at the office,” she admitted. “Said you brought hot food to the docks faster than any kitchen in Limsa. I’ve got clerks who haven’t left their desks in six bells. They’re startin’ to chew the quills.”

By midday, the rhythm had begun to form: take an order, assemble, bake, box, run. Marcus handled most of the dough, muttering under his breath in Corvosi as he adjusted to the quirks of the new oven—“Too hot at the back, we must turn faster, sì, like dancing with a partner who wants to lead”—while Marisa bounced between front and back, half guild-trained cook, half delivery girl. Hanako slipped out at some point to catch the ferry back to Limsa, leaving behind a neatly folded note on the table: *Do not forget to stretch your legs. And your back. And to drink water. – Mother.* Marisa found it, smiled, and stuck it to the wall behind the

counter with a spare tack, where it joined the flour-sack map of routes and a crude sketch Puku had “helped” with by walking across the parchment at an inopportune moment.

Of course, not everything went smoothly. In the early afternoon rush, trying to juggle a pair of walk-in orders with a delivery run to the Maelstrom offices, Marisa misjudged the oven’s temper and pulled out a pie with a blackened edge that would have made Pagoda weep. She stared at it, horrified, while Marcus sniffed and declared, “Congratulations, you have discovered charcoal as a topping.” “I can’t serve that,” she protested. “It looks like it lost a fight with Ifrit.” “Then we do not,” he said calmly, already reaching for more dough. “We learn. This one goes to the gulls.” He cut the ruined sections away, setting aside the salvageable middle. Puku eyed the discarded crust with polite but intense interest until Marisa relented and flicked him a small piece. “Don’t get used to it,” she warned. “Burnt pizza is not a menu item.”

There were awkward moments with customers too. One older Lominsan woman peered at the menu chalked on the wall and sniffed. “No fish?” she demanded. “What kind of Lominsan shop doesn’t have fish?” “We’ve got anchovies,” Marisa offered, pointing to the one concession she had begrudgingly allowed per Marcus’s suggestion. “Salted. Very traditional.” The woman sniffed again, clearly unconvinced, but ordered a small pie anyway “just to see.” She left without much comment, and Marisa spent the next half-bell convinced she’d never see her again. When the woman returned the following week with her brother in tow, however, she announced loudly to the room, “This is the place. The one with the strange bread that actually tastes like somethin’.”

By the time the light outside began to bleed into evening, Marisa’s legs ached in that deep, familiar way that meant she’d been on her feet all day. The stack of boxes by the counter had diminished noticeably; a small, comforting pile of coins and notes had begun to accumulate in the tin she’d set aside as a till. Puku had claimed a new favourite spot atop the oven’s warm brick arch, sprawled like a smug, drowsy dragon guarding hoarded crusts. Marcus, wiping down the counter with a damp cloth, looked tired but satisfied, the lines at the corners of his eyes softened by genuine contentment. “Not bad for a first day,” he said. “No fires. No fights. Only one pĩtsa sacrificed to the gods of impatience.”

“Could’ve been worse,” Marisa agreed, leaning her elbows on the counter. “Could’ve been no customers at all.” She thought of the Yellowjackets, the clerks, the curious neighbour from two floors up who’d come in “just to see what the smell was,” the Miqu’te

merchant promising to spread word among her colleagues. It wasn't a flood, not yet. But it was more than a trickle. "Do you think..." she began, then trailed off, unsure how to phrase the question without sounding foolish.

Marcus seemed to understand anyway. "I think," he said slowly, "that you have given this city another way to be fed. That counts for something. And I think we will have many more days like this. Some better, some worse. The important thing is that when they knock on this door, someone answers." He tapped the counter lightly with his knuckles. "You did that today. *Brava.*"

After he left, taking the ferry back toward Limsa with promises to return in the morning, the parlour felt oddly large again, the single table and counter swallowed by shadows at the edges of the lamplight. Marisa banked the fire, swept the floor, and tallied the day's earnings with a care that would have made any Sharlayan accountant nod approval. Hanako would want to see the numbers, she knew—not to criticise, but to reassure herself that her daughter's mad venture was at least financially sustainable. When the last coin was counted and the tin tucked safely into its hiding place, Marisa stood in the middle of Room 77 and let the quiet settle around her.

Through the window, the Mist glowed with scattered lamplight, the narrow lanes between buildings lit here and there by lanterns. Somewhere below, laughter drifted up from a group of neighbours sharing a drink on a balcony; somewhere above, a door slammed and footsteps hurried past. The district was no longer just a name on a dockside notice or a distant view from Limsa's upper walkways. It was home to her business, her oven, her cat. To a space where people had come today, sat at her table, and left with full hands and, she dared hope, slightly fuller hearts.

She crossed to the window and rested her palm against the cool glass, looking out at the darkening sky. "We did it," she said softly, mostly to herself, partly to the city. "One day down." Puku hopped onto the sill beside her, pressing his warm side against her arm, eyes half-lidded. She scratched under his chin, feeling the rumble of his purr vibrate through her fingers. "What do you think?" she asked him. "Reckon we can do it again tomorrow?" He yawned, showing a pink tongue and needle teeth, then pushed his head more firmly into her hand, as if to say, *So long as there's crust.*

Marisa laughed, the sound easing something in her chest that had been wound tight since dawn. "All right then," she said. "Tomorrow. More dough, more deliveries, more chances not to drop things." She stepped back from the window, blew out the

lamp, and let the dim glow from the banked oven guide her across the room. As she lay down on her pallet, the key cool against her collarbone and the day's aches settling into something almost pleasant, she realised that the fear which had haunted her that morning—the whisper that she'd made a terrible mistake, that no one would come, that the city would shrug and move on without her—had quieted. In its place was something simpler, steadier: not certainty, not yet, but the beginnings of trust. Not in the whims of fate or the mercy of gods, but in her own two hands, her own two feet, and the little bell on the door that would ring again tomorrow, calling her back to the counter, the oven, and the ever-hungry world beyond.

Chapter 25: Taming Rocceto

Red Rooster had always been one of her favourite places to deliver to, mostly because it felt like the rest of the world had decided to relax for half a bell. The path out there wound past low stone walls and terraced fields, gulls wheeling overhead, the smell of earth and animals replacing the salt-heavy air of the city. That feeling of peace and tranquility never wavered when Marisa found herself there again at seventeen summers.

The stead itself was a collection of weathered buildings and fenced paddocks that managed to look both perpetually busy and deeply content: chocobos clucked and bobbed in their pens, farmhands shouted to one another over the crowing of ill-tempered roosters, and somewhere a lute was always slightly out of tune.

On this particular afternoon, she arrived leading a borrowed cart piled with goods they'd ordered from her—flour, salt, oil, a mountain of vegetables—part of a new “provisions and pizza” arrangement she'd struck with the stead's foreman. If they let her hitch rides on their wagons and spread word about Puku Pizza, she'd bring out supplies when their usual middleman was late. Two pies, strapped carefully in a box on the back “for morale,” completed the load. Puku peered over the cart's side like a small, orange figurehead, whiskers twitching at every new smell.

She'd barely rolled past the first paddock when she realised something was wrong. Red Rooster was loud on its quietest day, but this was a harsher din: shouting layered over panicked squawking, punctuated by the solid *thud* of hoof against wood. One of the

senior farmhands, a Roegadyn woman with arms like tree trunks and a braid thick enough to moor a ship, waved frantically when she spotted Marisa. “Keep to the main path, pizza girl!” she called, half warning, half greeting. “We’ve got a live one in the outer stalls!” Another crash followed her words, the kind that spoke of a carpentry bill being born. “And I mean that in the worst way.”

Curiosity tugged on Marisa harder than common sense. After dropping the cart where she was told and ensuring the pizzas made it safely into the farmhouse kitchen, she followed the noise toward the far edge of the stead, Puku padding at her heels with his back arched and tail puffed. A cluster of hands had gathered in a loose semicircle around one of the end stalls, ropes and pitchforks in hand, all of them wearing the look of people who had run out of good ideas three mishaps ago. The stall itself shook with each impact from within, dust drifting down from the rafters. “What in the seven hells are you keepin’ in there?” Marisa asked, skidding to a stop beside the Roegadyn. “A goobbue?”

“Worse,” the woman muttered. “Dalmascan red. We thought he’d be a prize bird—stud fees, show entries, the lot. Turns out he’s ten fulms of wrath on two legs.” She jerked her chin at the shuddering door. “Can’t sell him on without lyin’, can’t put him down without feelin’ like villains, and every time we try to get close, he tries to separate us from somethin’ we’d rather keep.”

Marisa crept closer, ignoring the hissed, “Careful!” from one of the younger hands, and peered through a narrow gap in the wood. The chocobo inside was like nothing she’d ever seen up close: feathers the colour of a sunset set on fire, muscles knotting and uncoiling along his legs and shoulders, eyes rolling white as he spun in the small space, hooves lashing at the walls. Scars showed pale where the feathers didn’t quite cover—old welts, patches where the plumage grew in wrong, the rough mark of a harness that had never been properly fitted. He slammed into the back wall with a scream that sounded more fury than fear, and the stall shuddered.

“Gods,” she breathed. “He’s beautiful.”

The Roegadyn snorted. “You can have him, if you like,” she said. “He’ll eat your hand by way of thanks. Bastard’s had a rough history. Came in on a Dalmascan trader’s wagon not long ago, half wild even then. Seller talked pretty about his speed and his bloodline and kept real quiet about the fact they’d treated him like a bladed weapon instead of a beast. We’ve been payin’ for that ever since.”

Marisa's jaw tightened as she watched the chocobo throw himself against the door again, beak snapping at the air as if trying to bite through the memory of a hand. She recognised the pattern even if the form was different: hit, lash out, hit again, just to feel like you were the one choosing where the pain landed. She'd done the same with words when Eldric vanished and the collectors came knocking, lashing out at teachers and guildmates because she couldn't punch the debt itself. This bird had never been given anything but violence. No wonder he saw enemies everywhere. "You can't just leave him in there," she said, before she could stop herself. "He'll lose his mind."

"You think he hasn't already?" one of the other hands scoffed, rubbing a bandaged forearm where a recent bite had left its mark. "We can't turn him loose; he'd terrorise half of Lower La Noscea before the Yellowjackets brought him down. Can't put him with the others; they spook whenever he so much as sneezes. So we keep him penned, feed him, clean the stall, hope he doesn't decide to kick through the wall and make more work for the carpenters. It's not ideal, but it's what we've got."

Marisa watched the bird for a long moment, chewing the inside of her cheek. She could walk away. This wasn't her problem. She had a parlour to run, routes to manage, a mother who already worried she was juggling too many things. But as the chocobo spun again, eyes wild, she caught a flicker of something under the fury—confusion, maybe, or the bone-deep anticipation of a blow that never quite came. "What if," she said slowly, "you tried... not yelling at him?"

A chorus of sceptical looks met that suggestion. The Roegadyn crossed her arms. "You've got a better plan, pizza girl?"

"Probably not," Marisa admitted. "But I've dealt with scared animals before. And scary people. Yellin' never made any of them calmer." She hesitated, then added, "Let me try. Properly, I mean. Not with ropes. Just... me and him and some greens."

"That bird will chew you up and spit out the bits," one of the men said flatly.

"Maybe," she said, meeting his gaze. "But I've been chewed up before. I got better." She turned back to the stall before anyone could argue further, slipping a hand into her satchel. Puku, who had been observing all of this with saucer-wide eyes and his tail puffed to double size, made a disgruntled sound as she fished around under him for the bundle of greens she'd picked up earlier. "Don't look at me like that," she told the cat. "You had breakfast. This is for him."

The first few attempts were not promising. She edged close enough to push the greens through the gap in the door, hand trembling just a little despite herself. The chocobo's head snapped around, eyes fixing on the movement with unnerving intensity. For a heartbeat he froze—then lunged, beak striking with such speed that she barely had time to yank her fingers back. He tore the leaves from her grasp and retreated to the far corner, shredding them with offended vigour. When she tried again, he went for her hand as much as the food, scraping her skin hard enough to raise a welt. “All right,” she muttered, flexing her stinging fingers. “So we’re startin’ from ‘hates everything.’ Good to know.”

The farmhands watched her with a mixture of morbid fascination and unease as she persisted, offering one small handful after another, speaking in low, steady tones even when he scored her knuckles. “You’re not a monster,” she told him, more to spite the muttered “devil bird” comments behind her than anything. “You’re just sick of bein’ treated like one. I get it. I do. But you keep slammin’ yourself into those walls and you’re going to break somethin’ that doesn’t grow back.”

Eventually the others drifted away, muttering about chores and fools with a death wish. The Roegadyn stayed a little longer, arms still folded, but even she had to go check on the other strings eventually. When the steady background noise of the stead settled back into its usual cadence, it was just Marisa and the chocobo and the quiet shuffle of his talons in the straw. Her hands hurt. She was going to have little beak-shaped bruises along the heel of her palm by morning. Somehow, that only sharpened her resolve.

“Look,” she said at last, leaning her forehead briefly against the rough wood. “I can’t fix what they did to you. I can’t change the fact that the world’s full of idiots who look at somethin’ rare and wonderful and think, ‘Ah, yes, I’ll beat that into the shape I want.’ But I can give you food that isn’t thrown at your head. And I can stand here bein’ an idiot with sore fingers until you start to believe me.” She pushed one last handful of greens through the gap. This time, when he snapped them up, his beak brushed her skin without quite closing. It wasn’t gentleness, not yet. But it was restraint.

On the way back to the ferry she couldn’t stop thinking about him. The run that would normally have emptied her head and left only the pleasure of movement passed in a series of replayed images: red feathers, white-rimmed eyes, the violent snap of his neck as he lunged for her hand. Underneath all that, an echo of the same wrongness she’d felt when the debt collectors stood on their doorstep all those years ago with polite threats and stamped papers. The world had decided what he was—weapon, showpiece, problem—and then punished him for living up to it. No one had ever given him a chance to be anything else.

Back in Room 77 that evening, while the oven's warmth wrapped the parlour in a gentle glow and Puku sulked on the counter with a bandage around his tail (he'd gotten too close to a cutting board in his outrage over losing the greens), Marisa pulled out a scrap of parchment and sketched a crude chocobo silhouette in the margin of her route map. Beside it she wrote, in small, neat letters, *Red Rooster – angry bird – try again*. It wasn't a plan, exactly. But it was a promise.

She kept it. Every trip to the stead after that—whether she was dropping off provisions or delivering a couple of pizzas to the hands who'd saved tips for a treat—she carved out time for the red chocobo. Sometimes it was only a few minutes; sometimes she ended up staying long enough that she had to sprint back to Limsa to make her next delivery. The pattern remained the same: watch his body language, offer greens, talk in that same calm, wry tone she used with jittery customers who weren't sure whether pizza counted as real food. Gradually, something shifted.

He still snapped, still tested, still tried to catch her off guard with sudden lunges, but the wild panic faded from his eyes, banked into something more like wary curiosity. He began to recognise her step; when she approached the stall he would come to the door instead of hurling himself away from it. The farmhands noticed too. "He screams less when you're around," one commented grudgingly, scratching at his beard. "Still bites like a bastard, mind you, but there's... less murder in it."

One evening, as the sky behind the paddocks burned orange and the air smelled of hay and cooling earth, Marisa leaned on the stall door and watched him tear viciously at his hay net. "You need a name," she decided out loud. "Can't keep callin' you 'oi' and 'you feathery menace.'" The chocobo flicked an ear without pausing in his chewing. "Somethin' grand, maybe. 'Inferno.' 'Bloodwing.' No, that's too dramatic even for you." She tapped her chin, thinking of the way he launched himself across the stall when startled, all explosive speed and barely contained power. "You move like one o' those things I read about in a magazine once. What was it again? 'Roketto'?" Her Hingan tongue wrapped around the foreign word, softened it, turned it into something that felt like her as much as him. "Rocceto," she said, tasting the sound. "Yeah. That fits."

He paused, hay hanging out of his beak, and regarded her for a long moment. It could have been coincidence. It felt like consideration. "Rocceto it is," she decided. "If you hate it, you can kick me later. But you were going to do that anyway."

By the time she left that night, fingers aching and hair full of straw, she'd added another note to her map. *Rocceto – not a monster. Just needs someone as stubborn as he is.* It was, she reflected as she jogged back toward the ferry with Puku riding in the satchel and grumbling about the lingering smell of chocobo, probably the worst idea she'd had since the day she decided to quit the Culinarian's Guild and open a pizza parlour in a room barely big enough to stretch in.

But the bell on Puku Pizza's door had rung steadily all week. The oven held its heat. People were beginning to refer to "the pizza girl in the Mist" like she was a known landmark rather than an experiment waiting to fail. She'd taken one huge, terrifying gamble on herself and somehow, against the odds, it had held. As she ran, the wind tugging at her red jacket and the sea throwing up spray against the rocks below, Marisa found herself grinning.

"If I can win over half of Limsa's taste buds," she told Puku, who blinked up at her with grave, unblinking eyes, "I can win over one angry chocobo." The cat yawned in a way that suggested he reserved judgement. Still, he didn't try to leap out when she broke into a sprint, and that, she decided, counted as support.

Chapter 26: Three Beats to a Gallop

Rocceto's trial as "not just a problem, but a possibility" began on a day when the sky over Red Rooster Stead looked like it couldn't decide whether to rain or to shine. Low clouds dragged lazy shadows over the paddocks, the air smelled of wet straw and garlic from somebody's lunch, and Marisa arrived with two pizzas for the hands and a bag full of pilfered greens, feeling like she was about to attempt something halfway between a business decision and a personal act of madness. The Roegadyn forewoman met her at the fence with her usual scowl softening into something almost like respect as she said that if the pizza girl was still determined to risk life, limb, and future children on that red devil in the far stall, then the stead was prepared to see what happened. "On trial," she added firmly, explaining that Rocceto would stay housed at the stead for now, that she'd work with him under their eyes, that if he killed her they would at least be on hand to hose down what was left. Marisa laughed a little too loudly at that, said she appreciated the vote of confidence, and wondered whether she should have written a will.

Inside the stall, Rocceto watched her with the calm, murderous interest of someone who had not yet decided whether the visitor was food, threat, or tolerated background furniture. He no longer hurled himself at the walls when she entered; that counted as progress. Today, the rope halter lay draped over the rail, the leather saddle pad folded nearby like a question. Marisa slipped in, offering the usual handful of greens, talking all the while, telling him about the Yellowjacket who had tried to pay in seashells that morning and the Sharlayan tourist who had asked if pizza was “a local ethnographic curiosity.” The bird listened the way he always did, head cocked, feathers twitching, snapping up food with practised efficiency. When she reached for the halter he tensed, but did not rear; when she slid the strap over his beak and behind his head, murmuring, “There, see, just like yesterday, nothin’ new,” he only snorted once in protest. The farmhands leaning on the fence outside traded looks that said they hated how impressed they were.

The first step outside the stall felt like stepping off the edge of a roof. Rocceto planted his claws and tested the worn packed earth with suspicious toe taps, while Marisa, keeping one hand on the rope and one on his neck, coaxed him forward, reminding him that the sky had not fallen the last time he’d seen it. The open light made his feathers glow, molten red against the dull browns and greys of the stead; other chocobos in neighbouring pens muttered and backed away, unsure what to make of this burning comet on legs. “Ignore them,” she told him, though her own heart was pounding. “They’re just jealous of your good looks.” He gave a short, derisive chirp that sounded exactly like disagreement, but he walked, and that was the important part. Round and round the nearest paddock they went, first in cautious circles, then in larger loops as his stride lengthened. Every time a shout went up from the yard or a bucket clanged, he jolted, muscles bunching to spring, and every time she felt that surge she matched it with calm hands and nonsense talk, asking him what he thought of seaweed, whether he thought Puku could be taught to ride on his head, promising there would be more greens if he did not bolt.

Mounting him for the first time was not so much a decision as a moment where fear and necessity collided and she realised backing away now would undo weeks of slow trust. The Roegadyn muttered that they could wait, that there was no rush, that learning to lead was already miracle enough, but Marisa shook her head and said that Rocceto’s world had been a door and four walls for too long and if she didn’t show him what else existed, someone else might show him something worse. She slid the old, well-oiled pad across his back, felt him stiffen under the unfamiliar weight, and waited until his breathing settled before easing the light training saddle into place. His skin twitched, muscles rippled, but he did not explode; she took that as permission to

continue. Then, in one smooth movement honed from watching sailors board skiffs in rough waters, she grabbed a handful of feathers and leather, set her foot in the stirrup, and swung up.

For a heartbeat everything stopped. The stead seemed to hold its breath. Rocceto froze with one leg lifted, head high, ears pinned, as if the universe had played a horrible joke and turned his persistent annoyance into a permanent fixture. Marisa, suddenly very aware of how far the ground was and how little bone separated her delicate midlander body from it, forced her knees to relax and leaned forward until her chest brushed his neck. "It's just me," she told him, voice low and steady. "Same idiot. Just taller. You start kickin' and I swear I'll haunt you." His response was a snort hot enough to ruffle her bangs and one experimental hop in place that jolted her teeth together. She rode it out, hands light on the rope, thighs screaming, wondering how anyone stayed on a chocobo long enough to ride into battle.

The first halting steps felt like walking on top of a rolling barrel. Rocceto shifted his weight, paws—no, claws, she corrected herself hastily—sinking into the dirt, and took a single step forward as if testing whether gravity still worked. Another followed, then another, the rope warm under her fingers as she guided him along the inner edge of the fence. Her whole body buzzed with the effort of balancing, finding the rhythm of his gait, learning when to move with him and when to brace. Around them, the farmhands tracked every motion with the kind of attention usually reserved for primed explosives. Someone murmured that she was mad; someone else said she was brave; both felt interchangeable.

Then something shifted—subtle as a change in the wind—and his walk stretched into a trot. The change nearly unseated her; she let out an undignified yelp, clung with her legs, and then, because there was nothing else to do, laughed. The air bounced in her lungs with each step; dust kicked up around them; the world narrowed to the three-beat pattern of his feet, her heartbeat hammering along on its own frantic counterpoint. "That's it," she called, unable to keep the grin out of her voice. "Look at you, you bloody show-off. You like this, don't you?" If chocobos could smirk, Rocceto would have. He tossed his head, shook his crest, and trotted a little faster, as if to prove he could.

They did not go far that day, nor fast. Every few laps she slid down, legs trembling, to walk beside him until feeling returned to her knees; every time she did, he circled back toward the stall, insisting on the safety of the familiar doorway until she coaxed him away again with promises of more greens and fewer idiots wielding whips. There was one bad moment when a crate dropped off

the back of a wagon with a crash; he flinched, spun, and tried to flee, eyes showing more white than iris. She could have clamped down on the rope and hauled his head around the way she'd seen other handlers do. Instead she loosened her grip, let him move in a tight circle, and repeated, "Easy, easy, nobody's hittin' you, nobody's shoutin' at you, breathe, you daft bird," until his panic burned itself down to nothing more than a shiver. Later, when she was picking splinters out of her palms from where she'd slammed into the fence post, the Roegadyn admitted quietly that if anyone else had been sitting up there, the day might have ended with broken bones and a mercy killing.

By the time the sun was dragging long gold lines across the fields and the smell of supper drifted from the farmhouse, they stood in the yard together, both of them lathered with sweat, both breathing hard. Rocceto's feathers lay flatter than she had ever seen them; he had that loose, satisfied stance of someone who had finally been allowed to use his muscles for something other than slamming the same four walls. Marisa's thighs felt like wet noodles and her lower back ached in new and interesting ways, but under the exhaustion sat a fierce, heady joy. "You did well," she told him, rubbing the bridge of his beak as he tolerated the contact with only a token grumble. "You could've killed me twelve different times, but you didn't. Proud of you, Rocceto."

On the ride back to the ferry—this time on her own two feet, because she was not yet brave or foolish enough to attempt the cliff paths with him—she replayed the day over and over in her mind: the first step, the first trot, the moment when he had chosen to listen instead of explode. The wind coming off the water smelled sharper, cleaner; the sunset over the bay seemed brighter. In the satchel, Puku snored like a tiny saw, utterly worn out from a long afternoon of yelling from fenceposts and nearly being squashed when Rocceto had decided his tail looked suspicious. "You were very helpful," she told him dryly, adjusting the strap on her shoulder. "All that operatic screeching really set the tone."

Back in Puku Pizza, while the oven's embers glowed low and the last of the day's dishes dried on the rack, Marisa spread her route map on the table and traced new, longer loops across La Noscea with an ink-stained finger. The Mist to Summerford; Red Rooster to Camp Bronze Lake; Aleport, maybe, if she could convince Rocceto that boats were not secretly carnivorous. The little notes she'd made in the margins—"Rocceto – angry but listening," "stead willing to humour madness"—blurred into something larger, a network of possibilities she could barely keep up with. "We're doing it," she murmured, more to herself than to Puku, who was busy trying to drown a balled-up scrap of parchment in his water dish. "Not just runnin' to the same few watch posts. Real routes. Real distance. With help."

She thought of Eldric then, suddenly and without warning, of the way he had talked about the sea—how it could be both grave and gateway, how you were never really done with it once it had gotten into your blood. She wondered what he would say if he could see her now, half-grown, standing over a hand-drawn map and planning delivery runs like trade routes. Probably something infuriatingly smug about “the apple not fallin’ far from the tree.” She smiled despite herself, picked up the quill, and added one more note near the sketch of a stylised chocobo: *Rocceto – not just a problem anymore. A partner, maybe.*

Outside, the Mist settled into its usual night sounds: distant laughter, the creak of timbers, the faint echo of waves beyond the sea-wall. Inside, in the small, warm room that smelled of char and herbs and cat, Marisa let herself imagine a future where the red bird in the far stall wasn’t just a dangerous curiosity, but the heart of her delivery work—a streak of colour against the cliffs, a familiar silhouette racing the gulls. The idea scared her. It thrilled her even more. “Three hearts in this little business now,” she said softly as she banked the oven and Puku climbed onto her pillow like a furry, judgemental crown. “Mine, yours, and a bloody-minded chocobo who doesn’t know it yet, but he’s going to make us famous.”

Chapter 27: Red Feathers on the Long Road

It had been long enough since that first shaky ride at Red Rooster that Marisa’s inner thighs no longer felt personally insulted every time she so much as looked at a saddle, but not so long that she’d grown complacent. Rocceto still had his moods—days when he tolerated her with sullen dignity and days when he decided a fluttering scrap of cloth was clearly an omen of doom—and every new step had to be earned with patience, greens, and the occasional firm reminder that attempted homicide was not an acceptable form of feedback. Even so, the line between “problem animal” and “partner” had begun to blur. He came to the stall door when he heard her whistle now, feathers smoothing ever so slightly; he let her run a brush along his neck without flinching; once, when a clumsy stablehand had dropped a sack of feed with a bang, he’d jerked, then looked to *her* first instead of exploding, as if checking to see how terrified he was supposed to be. “That’s trust,” Marcus said when she told him about it over a late-night bowl of stew in Room 77, gesturing with his spoon for emphasis. “Tiny, fragile trust, like a soufflé. You must not slam the oven door.” She snorted into her broth and said, “If either of us’s a soufflé, it’s him. I’m more of a burnt crust sort of girl.”

The first proper test of that fragile trust came on a sodden afternoon when Limsa's skies decided to empty themselves all at once. Rain hammered on one of Puku Pizza's windows hard enough to turn the outside world into a vague grey smear; the oven's warmth fought a valiant but losing battle against the damp that crept into the corners. Business had been slow all day—only a handful of diehard regulars were brave enough to slog through the downpour for a hot slice—and Marisa was contemplating the merits of inventing a “Storm Special” when the bell above the door jingled with frantic energy. A Yellowjacket in a dripping coat stumbled in, helmet under his arm, water running off him in small rivers to pool on her floor. “Take a towel before you drown my parlour,” she said automatically, tossing him one from the hook. “What's got you lookin' like a drowned coeurl?” He wiped his face, breathing hard. “Southern outpost past Bronze Lake,” he said. “Road's gone to mud and worse. Last supply wagon turned back. We've got eight poor sods stuck there on half rations and salted cod. If they have to eat that another night, they'll mutiny. Heard you're the one to call when food has to get somewhere stupid in a hurry.”

Marisa glanced at a window, at the sheets of rain, at the slick, treacherous routes she could picture in her mind between the Mist and the hills above Bronze Lake. On foot, she might make it there and back before dawn if she left right this instant and didn't break her neck on a washed-out path. By chocobo... she thought of Rocceto's stride when he forgot to be afraid, the way the world had blurred around them that day in the paddock, the sheer reckless joy of speed. Beside the oven, Puku sat on the counter with his tail fluffed, ears flat, clearly voting “no” on any plan that involved leaving a warm room. “You realise I'm a pizza girl, not the Maelstrom's emergency canteen,” she said slowly, even as she was already reaching for her order pad. “I don't do hazard pay.” “We scraped what we could from petty cash,” the Yellowjacket replied, slapping a pouch onto the counter with a clink that made Puku's ears twitch. “Ain't much, but we'll throw in whatever we can scrounge from the stores when this is over. Just... if anyone can get hot food out there, it's you.”

The sensible thing would have been to say no, to point out that her profession did not include “braving landslides for the sake of hungry guards.” Instead she found herself nodding, heart already beating faster in that familiar, reckless way that always preceded decisions she would later describe as “character building” and everyone else would call “daft.” “Fine,” she said. “Four large—two pepperoni and cheese, one mushroom and olive, one plain cheese in case someone's fussy. I'll need twenty minutes to bake and another ten to get to Red Rooster. After that...” She hesitated, picturing Rocceto's stall, the mud-slick fields, the ruined road. “After

that, we pray my bird's as fast as he looks." The Yellowjacket blinked. "You're takin' a chocobo?" She shot him a look. "What, you think I'm sprintin' all the way to Bronze Lake with four pizzas and a cat under my arm? Go dry off. You're drippin' on my floor."

The next half-bell passed in a blur of urgency. Dough stretched and spun under her hands; sauce streaked across bases in quick spirals; cheese fell in generous handfals. Marcus, who had appeared halfway through the first bake with an uncanny knack for showing up whenever events threatened to turn interesting, took over managing the oven with brisk efficiency. "We must not underbake," he said, peering into the heat as the first pie bubbled. "They need the comfort. But we must not overbake, or it will be cold by the time it arrives. Timing, ragazza. This is all timing." Puku, realising resistance was futile, stationed himself by the door like a tiny, judgemental bouncer, yowling whenever the Yellowjacket paced too close to the counter. By the time the last pizza slid into its box, steam curling from the gaps, the parlour smelled like basil and determination.

At Red Rooster, the rain had turned the yard into a churned mess of mud and feathers. Rocceto stood under the overhang of his stall's roof, feathers plastered close to his body, looking personally offended by the weather. When Marisa arrived with the stack of boxes strapped into a specially rigged carrier and Puku wedged indignantly in the crook of her arm, the forewoman took one look at her face and didn't bother with any of her usual warnings. "You're really doin' this," she said, disbelief and reluctant admiration sharing space in her tone. "In this muck." "If I don't, eight lads get to dine on cold cod and despair," Marisa replied, already checking the saddle straps, fingers moving with a practised speed that belied the flutter in her stomach. "And I'd never live with the guilt. Besides, this is as good a test as any." She turned to Rocceto, meeting his sharp, dark eye. "What d'you say, featherbrain? Fancy a run?"

He snorted, stamping one taloned foot, but when she brought the saddle pad he only flared his feathers once before settling. The training they'd done in better weather paid off; he accepted the weight on his back, the cinch around his barrel, the loop of rope at his halter without more than a token toss of his head. Puku, having made his displeasure known with a series of grumbles that translated roughly to "this is a terrible idea," finally scrambled up and wedged himself between Marisa and the pizza carrier, claws hooked firmly into her red coat. "If you jump off mid-gallop, I'm not comin' back for you," she warned him as she swung into the saddle. "You can explain to the Yellowjackets why their dinner's got claw marks." The forewoman walked them to the edge of the stead, mud sucking at her boots. "Road's half washed out past the old stone bridge," she said, voice grim. "Stick to the higher

ground where you can. And if he panics—” “He won’t,” Marisa cut in, more confident than she felt. “He’s got more sense than he acts.”

The world beyond the stead had been rearranged by the storm. Rivulets cut new paths down the hillsides; stones that had been solid underfoot a week ago shifted treacherously under Rocceto’s claws; puddles masked hollows that threatened to turn ankles. The chocobo’s first few steps were stiff and distrustful, wings twitching as he tested the treacherous ground, but once he realised it held, that his own strength could handle the give, his stride lengthened. Marisa leaned forward, hands light on the rope, letting him choose his path as much as she guided it. “All right,” she murmured into the damp feathers of his neck, rain stinging her face. “You pick the ground, I’ll worry about the idiots at the end. Deal?” Behind her, Puku let out a long, baleful “mrrraaaow” that sounded like a curse.

They found the first washout not far beyond the old stone bridge, where the road simply ceased to exist, replaced by a gouged channel of churning brown water and exposed rock. On foot, she’d have had to pick her way along the edge, heart in her throat, hoping the sodden soil didn’t crumble under her. From the saddle, the perspective was different. She could see the higher ridges, the faint paths where goats and chocobos had trodden safer lines before the worst of the storm. She could also feel every tension in Rocceto’s body as he took in the gap, the water, the unstable edges. He danced sideways, hooves splashing, eyes rolling white. “Hey, hey, none o’ that,” she said quickly, tightening her knees just enough to remind him she was there, not enough to pinch. “You’re faster than any flood, yeah? We don’t fight the hole. We go around it.”

For a few terrifying moments she wasn’t sure he’d listen. His muscles bunched under her like coiled springs, every instinct screaming to flee from the roaring water. Then, perhaps sensing the steadiness of her weight, perhaps remembering the circles in the paddock and the way she had never once raised a hand to him, he blew out a breath and turned, picking his way up the slope toward the higher ground. The climb was rough, mud slick under his claws, but once they reached the ridge the going smoothed. The land rolled out ahead in a series of soggy humps and dips, the broken line of the washed-out road below them like a scar. Rocceto’s pace shifted again, from wary trot to something freer. The wind, smelling of wet grass and distant salt, rushed past Marisa’s ears; rain stung her cheeks; she squinted into it and laughed, wild and breathless. “That’s it!” she shouted over the drumming of his feet. “Show me what you’ve got, you overgrown drumstick!”

For the first time since she'd known him, Rocceto truly ran. Not the panicked lunge of a trapped beast or the constrained circles of a training yard, but a full, stretching gallop that ate the distance in great, glorious strides. The world narrowed to motion and sound: the three-beat thunder of his gallop, Puku's outraged caterwauling muffled against her back, the slap of rain and the rasp of her own breathing. She tucked herself low over his neck, trusting his balance more than her own, and let him choose the line—around a fallen tree here, over a narrow ditch there, across a stretch of grass that sprayed droplets under his claws. Every now and then he tossed his head or gave a sideways hop, as if surprised and delighted by his own speed. "You like this," she gasped into his feathers, grinning like an idiot. "Told you you were wasted in a box."

By the time the outpost came into view—a cluster of half-drowned tents and a sagging palisade perched above the lake's steaming waters—their little procession was drenched, mud-spattered, and utterly unforgettable. Yellowjackets on the makeshift watch platform gaped openly as a streak of red and brown hurtled up the last rise, a girl in a soaked scarlet coat crouched low over the chocobo's neck, a fat orange cat clinging to her shoulders like a second collar, and four steaming pizza boxes strapped behind them like a treasure chest. "Navigator's tits," one of the guards blurted as she hauled Rocceto to a skidding, mud-splashing halt. "They actually sent the pizza girl on a warbird." Marisa slid down, legs wobbling, and nearly went to one knee before she caught herself. "Not a warbird," she panted, patting Rocceto's neck as he snorted clouds of breath into the damp air. "He's a delivery specialist. Now somebody tell me where to put these before my hard work turns into soggy bread."

The reception that followed was absurdly grand for four pizzas and a drenched Hyur. The outpost's commander, a harried Midlander with dark circles under his eyes, shook her hand with both of his and declared her "the true hero of the Maelstrom," which she found deeply worrying on several levels. Guards clapped her on the back, pressed mugs of watered wine into her hands, and insisted she take the first slice from each box "for quality control." Puku, finally coaxed down from his perch and wrapped in a dry rag, accepted crust tributes with great solemnity. Rocceto, tethered under the lean-to where the outpost kept its own mounts, picked disdainfully at the hay offered to him until Marisa slipped him a handful of greens from her satchel; then he ate with gusto, eyes half-lidded in what might, just might, have been contentment.

On the ride back, the rain eased to a fine mist, the kind that clung to eyelashes and turned the world soft at the edges. Marisa's body ached in a way that promised tomorrow would be interesting, but the exhaustion sat under a buoyant, humming satisfaction. Rocceto's earlier wildness had settled into a steady, ground-eating lope, his breathing even, his feathers drying in ragged clumps.

Puku, having spent the outward journey in a state of affronted terror, had resigned himself to the indignity of travel and curled into a damp, grumbling loaf between her shoulder blades. “We did it,” she said quietly into the cooling air, scratching gently at the base of Rocceto’s neck. “Our first real run. Not just showin’ off in front of farmers. Actual lives improved, cod avoided, history made.”

Rocceto flicked an ear, then, with the perverse timing of a creature who understood comedy far too well, chose that moment to stumble slightly in a patch of mud, sending a cold splash up her leg. She yelped and swore; Puku dug his claws in and hissed; the chocobo snorted what could only be described as a laugh. “All right, all right,” she grumbled, adjusting her seat. “Don’t let it go to your head. You may be fast, but I’m the one who knows how to keep cheese from slidin’ off the crust.” Still, when the lights of the Mist came into view at last and the smell of the sea grew stronger, she leaned forward and pressed her cheek briefly against his damp feathers. “Thanks, Rocceto,” she murmured. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

By the time she led him back into his stall at Red Rooster, the sky had deepened into that peculiar blue-grey that comes just before true night. The forewoman met them at the gate, eyes flicking over horse and rider, taking in the mud, the looseness in Rocceto’s stance, the tired grin on Marisa’s face. “Well?” she asked. “Kill anyone? Get yourself killed?” “Only thing slain was a crate o’ salted cod,” Marisa replied, patting the chocobo’s flank. “He did brilliantly. Took to the hills like he was born to ‘em. Nearly lost my teeth twice, but that’s probably on me.” The Roegadyn grunted, something like approval in the sound. “We’ll keep up the arrangement, then,” she said. “He runs with you when you need him, rests here when you don’t. And if anyone asks, I’ll say I knew from the start he had it in him.”

Later, back in Room 77 with a blanket over her shoulders and Puku sprawled like a satisfied sun across her lap, Marisa updated the map on the wall. She drew a new line in careful, curving strokes from the Mist to Red Rooster, then up toward Bronze Lake, adding a tiny doodle of a red chocobo at the midway point. Beside it she wrote, *First long run – 8th Sun 1569. Rocceto: 1, cod: 0.* She stood back, studying the growing spiderweb of routes, the notes about customers and shortcuts and dangerous gull roosts, and felt that same quiet, growing pride she’d first tasted when she signed the lease on Room 77. Her world had once been a single city, then a district, then a handful of watch posts. Now, thanks to a furious bird who had every reason to hate the world and a cat with no self-preservation instincts, it was expanding again.

“Not bad for a girl who started out runnin’ bowls of stew up and down the Bismarck’s stairs,” she murmured, rubbing a smudge of ink off the corner of the map. Puku flicked an ear but did not open his eyes, too full of stolen crust to care. Outside, somewhere beyond the stone and spray, a chocobo with red feathers settled into his straw, perhaps dreaming of open hills and the feel of rain on his face instead of the claustrophobic press of four walls. Inside, the oven’s last embers glowed, the room smelled of herbs and ash and fur, and Marisa let herself believe, just for a moment, that this strange, improvised life she’d built—this little triangle of girl, cat, and bird delivering hot food through a wounded world—might actually be enough to carry her into whatever came next.

Part V — Into Eorzea (Year 17)



Chapter 28: Green Roads, Quiet Voices

Marisa first saw the notice in the Drowning Wench on a night when the tavern felt too small for her skin. She had just finished a long run out to Bronze Lake and back, legs still humming, cheeks flushed from the salt wind, when she wandered past the guild board with a mug of cider in hand. Most of the postings were the usual clutter—escort requests, monster culls, dubious “treasure maps”—but one neat slip of parchment stood out like a clean plate in a sink of dirty dishes. The script was tidy, almost painfully so: “Seeking foreign fare for a small gathering in Gridania. Reliable courier required. Compensation fair. Inquire with Baderon or send word via the Adventurers’ Guild.” She read it once, twice, then a third time, the word *Gridania* growing heavier every time her eyes passed over it. She had traced that name on maps in the back pages of *The Harbor Herald*, had heard sailors talk about the Black Shroud like it was a place myths went when they retired, but she had never once set foot anywhere that didn’t have La Noscea’s

cliffs somewhere on the horizon. “You’re starin’ at that like it owes you money,” Baderon said from behind the bar when she finally dragged herself over. “What, never heard o’ folk wantin’ to eat beyond sight o’ the lighthouse?” She blew out a breath and admitted, “I’ve never been off the bloody island, Baderon. Only reason I know Gridania exists is because the paper says so.” He chuckled, slid her a top-up unasked, and said, “Then mayhap it’s time ye see if the rest o’ the world eats as well as we do. Conjurer lass sent that through the guild. Wants to try this ‘pizza’ she heard about. I told her there’s a little red hurricane who could manage it—if she’s brave enough.”

The decision felt too big to make, so she made it the way she made all the biggest ones: quickly, before doubt had time to catch up. The next morning Room 77 turned into a planning den. Maps were unfurled across the table, weights set on corners to keep the coastal winds from turning Eorzea into a paper cyclone. “Boat to Vesper Bay, coach from there inland to the Shroud, another coach to Gridania proper,” Marcus said, tracing routes with a flour-dusted finger, his accent thickening as he slid into logistics mode. “You will have to time your baking very carefully. Too early and it will be cold; too late and you will be running through a forest the elementals would prefer you did not sprint in.” Hanako hovered in the doorway in her house kimono, arms folded, looking as though someone had just suggested her daughter go juggle bombs for fun. “Outside La Noscea,” she repeated, each word wrapped in disapproval and worry. “Through wilds. With bandits. And... trees. Very tall trees that do not like strangers.” Marisa, who until recently had considered “too many trees” to mean “more than three in a row,” tried on a smile that was more confident than she felt. “It’s a job, Ma. Good gil. Good exposure. I’ll be with proper coaches, not wanderin’ alone with a sign sayin’ ‘rob me’ stuck to my back.” Hanako muttered something in Hingan about foolish fathers and foolish daughters alike chasing horizons, but she kissed Marisa’s forehead all the same and slipped a little charm into her hand—polished wood, shaped like a tiny ship.

Leaving Limsa properly for the first time almost undid her. The morning she departed, the city was wrapped in a thin mist that made the stone arches look softer than usual, the gulls’ cries distant and strange. With her carrier strapped, Puku sulking in her satchel, and a single travelling bag slung over her shoulder, she stepped onto the ferry and felt the gangplank thump up behind her like a door slamming on the life she knew. As the ship eased away from the docks, the familiar pattern of white stone and red banners began to shrink, the lighthouse thinning to a line against the brightening sky. She had been on ships before, of course—short hops along the coast, the odd delivery across the bay—but never far enough that Limsa didn’t loom somewhere

behind her like a promise. Now the coastline pulled back and kept pulling, until it became a smudge and then nothing at all. Her stomach twisted, half from the swell and half from the realisation that there was no quick sprint home if she changed her mind. “Well,” she said to Puku, who had his face buried deep in the satchel as if refusing to acknowledge the betrayal, “too late to decide I’m a stay-at-home chef now.”

The farther they sailed, the more the sea changed. The swells grew longer and smoother, less cluttered with fishing craft, more open and indifferent. She watched flying fish burst from the water in silver arcs, spotted shapes in the distance that might have been whales or might have been her imagination, and listened to sailors swap stories about far ports as if they were discussing neighbouring streets. When one weathered Roegadyn asked casually where she was bound and she answered “Gridania” without flinching, he gave an approving grunt that warmed her more than the weak morning sun. “First time inland?” he asked, and when she nodded, he said, “You’ll miss the sea when the trees close in. But you’ll remember the smell o’ the Shroud for the rest o’ your life. Good or ill.” She leaned on the rail and tried to imagine a world where the horizon wasn’t a straight line but a wall of green. It made her feel very small and very alive all at once.

The coaches from the coastal waystation looked like they’d seen better decades, but the chocobos pulling them were steady and broad-shouldered, their feathers a practical dun. Marisa climbed into the back of one, wedging her insulated pizza carrier and satchel at her feet, and found herself sharing the cramped bench with a Gridanian merchant in green-trimmed robes and a pair of adventurers dozing against their packs. The merchant eyed her red coat, her carrier, and the faint smell of baked dough clinging to her hair. “Lominsan,” he observed, as if stating a minor fault in workmanship. “You will find the Shroud... different.” She almost fired back something flippant, then swallowed it and asked, “Different how?” He considered her for a long moment before saying, “Here, the land belongs to men. There, you walk by grace of older things. It is best to remember that.” The coach creaked into motion, wheels crunching on gravel that slowly gave way to softer earth, and the world began to change around them.

The transition from open country to forest happened so gradually she didn’t notice at first. A few scattered trees became a stand, then a copse; the road narrowed, the light shifted, and suddenly the sky was no longer a wide blue bowl but a patchwork of leaves stitched together overhead. The air cooled, but it didn’t feel like coastal cool—it was damp, heavy with the scent of moss and loam and something green and living that had no analogue in Limsa’s salt-washed streets. Sounds changed too: gull cries and ship bells gave way to birdsong in clear, strange patterns, the drip of water from branch to branch, the rustle of undergrowth touched by

things she couldn't see. Every now and then, the coach would slow for a Wood Wailer standing at the roadside, spear planted, eyes sharp under their helm; they would look over the passengers like stewards counting heads at a gate that wasn't really theirs to keep. Marisa had the unnerving sensation that even when the guards passed them along, something else—something in the roots and the trunk and the air itself—kept watching. For someone used to a world where danger came with a shout, a splash, or the clatter of armour, the quiet felt almost hostile.

Gridania revealed itself less like a city and more like a secret being reluctantly shared. One moment the road wound between trees whose trunks were as wide as her oven was tall; the next, the trunks had platforms grown around them, bridges arcing between branches, lanterns glowing softly in the understorey gloom. It was as if someone had taken the idea of a city and asked politely if the forest would mind wearing it. Marisa stepped off the coach and felt suddenly conspicuous in her scarlet coat, the only splash of loud colour in a crowd dressed mostly in greens and browns and whites. The aetheryte at the centre of the plaza pulsed with a deep, thrumming light that made the hair on her arms stand up; it was nothing like the brisk, businesslike crystals in Limsa, which always felt to her like tools. This one felt like a heart. Puku emerged from the satchel as she set the carrier down, eyes huge, nose working overtime as he tried to make sense of the layered smells: damp wood, herbs, a faint hint of smoke, the sharp tang of some sap she couldn't name. "Yeah," she whispered, more to herself than to him, "I know. It's like walkin' into the inside of a storybook."

Her contact found her there, still staring up like a tourist. The conjurer introduced herself as Eryne of the Stillglade Fane, bowing with a grace that made Marisa nearly topple over trying to match it. Eryne's staff was simple but well-used, the blue of her robes spotless despite the forest's humidity. "You are the pizz-... pizzaiola from Limsa Lominsa?" she asked, tasting the foreign word carefully. Marisa forced herself to switch back into professional mode and nodded, hefting the carrier. "That's me. Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman, Puku Pizza Delivery. Brought four pies and one extremely judgmental cat." Eryne's gaze slid to Puku, who was now sitting primly on the lid of the carrier like he belonged there, and the faintest hint of amusement softened her features. "Then you carry both sustenance and a familiar. The elementals should be pleased." Seeing Marisa's confused frown, she added, "They are fond of small creatures that know how to listen." Marisa, who had never in her life considered Puku an example of *listening*, wisely decided not to argue in front of the people who spoke to invisible forest forces for a living.

The "small gathering" waiting in a low, rounded hall off one of the inner walkways looked more like a serious council than a dinner party. A handful of conjurers and two Wood Wailers sat around a table grown from the living root of a tree, its surface polished to

a soft sheen. They had laid out dishes of their own: dark, nutty bread, bowls of wild mushrooms and herbs, a pot of tea whose steam smelled like rain. When Marisa set the pizza boxes down and flipped the latches, the smell of tomato and cheese and baked dough unfurled into the room like a flag. For a heartbeat nobody moved. Then one of the Wailers—a tall Elezen with a scar across his jaw—leaned forward slightly and murmured, “That is... potent.” Marisa grinned nervously and said, “In a good way, I hope. Gridania’s first pizza, yeah? No pressure.” Eryne took the first slice with ceremonial care, studying the browned crust, the gleaming cheese, the scatter of basil as if it were a particularly interesting new sprig. She bit in, chewed, and Marisa watched something in her face loosen. “It is loud,” Eryne said at last, choosing her words as though she were speaking in front of those unseen listeners outside, “but not unkind. Like a festival in the middle of a quiet glade.”

That seemed to be permission enough; the rest followed her lead with a mix of curiosity and caution that quickly turned to enthusiasm. Questions came between bites: how did she keep the bread so thin and yet strong, what kind of stone were her ovens lined with, did the sauce always have tomatoes, what was the exact ratio of herbs. She tried to answer without her hands flying everywhere, conscious of the way even her gestures felt too big for the room, and found herself explaining her timing, her routes, the little tricks she’d learned to keep toppings from sliding when she sprinted. One of the Wailers confessed in a low voice that he’d once tried to melt cheese over a campfire on a dare and nearly set a sapling ablaze; Marisa promised the tale would never see the inside of *The Harbor Herald* if he agreed to never call pizza “foreign flatbread” again. Puku wandered regally from lap to lap collecting crumbs and compliments, earning himself the title of “very polite little spirit” from an elderly conjurer who seemed convinced he was listening to the elementals when he was actually tracking the exact location of every stray piece of crust.

Walking back toward the aetheryte afterward with Eryne, the forest no longer felt quite as alien. It was still vast, still humming with a presence she didn’t fully understand, but the edges had softened; there were now tiny, human-sized anchors in her memory—this corner where someone had laughed with their mouth full, that bridge where a Wailer had nearly tripped over Puku and apologised to *the* cat. “Thank you for coming so far,” Eryne said as they paused near the plaza, staff resting lightly against her shoulder. “Many here speak of the outside world with suspicion. It is... instructive... to be reminded that it can also bring warmth.” Marisa shrugged, suddenly shy. “I just bring food. You lot are the ones talkin’ to invisible forces and keepin’ the trees from eatin’ people.” Eryne’s smile was small but genuine. “In the end, both are forms of caretaking. And caretakers are always welcome, so long as they tread lightly.”

On the coach back out of the Shroud, Marisa sat pressed against the window, watching the trees thin and the sky slowly open up again. The farther they went, the more she found herself wanting to look back, to catch one last glimpse of lanterns among branches, of bridges grown rather than built. “You’ll miss it when you’re back on your rocks and waves,” the merchant from earlier remarked, catching her expression. “First time away is always the sharpest.” She thought of Limsa’s white arches, of the way the sea wind slapped her awake every morning on the Mist, and realised he was right in a way she hadn’t expected. She missed home already, but she also knew now, in a way no map had ever quite conveyed, that the world outside those arches was real and complicated and waiting.

That night in a cheap coach-house room that smelled faintly of straw and someone else’s boots, she spread her map on the bed and, by the light of a single lamp, drew a thin line from Limsa to the Shroud. It was a small mark, barely more than a scratch of ink, but it represented ships and roads and strangers and a forest that had deigned not to spit her out. Underneath it she scribbled, a little messier than usual, *Gridania – where even the quiet places like pizza*. Puku, exhausted from too many new smells and the profound injustice of being asked to behave himself in sacred halls, climbed onto the map and collapsed right on top of the Shroud, tail flicking once before he slept. Marisa smoothed his fur, smiled at the sight of her world slowly gaining new lines, and thought, with a thrum of nervous excitement, that if this was what the first step beyond Limsa felt like, she was nowhere near done walking.

Chapter 29: A City of Sand and Steel

If Gridania had felt like walking into a cathedral where the walls were made of trees, Ul’dah felt like stepping into the open mouth of a furnace lined with coin. The journey out from Limsa started much the same—another pre-dawn ferry, another stack of pizzas packed in insulated boxes, another round of Puku protesting the indignity of maritime travel—but everything beyond that followed a different script. The ferry made landfall at Vesper Bay under a brutal, cloudless sky that turned the sea into hammered glass; the air already tasted hot, as if someone had decided to preheat the entire landscape. From there she joined a dusty line of chocobo-drawn wagons trundling toward Horizon, the wheels kicking up fine grains that crept into her boots, her satchel, even the

folds of Puku's fur. "This is a crime," she muttered as she shook sand out of her collar, and the Lalafell driver up front laughed and told her they hadn't even reached *proper* Thanalan yet. When the walls of Ul'dah finally rose out of the shimmering heat—huge, sun-bleached and crowned with towers like upturned candlesticks—it took her a moment to realise they weren't some mirage. She stared, mouth actually hanging open, as the city's outline sharpened: the great central dome, the clustered spires, the banners snapping in the wind in streaks of black and gold. No cliffs. No ocean. Just stone and sky and a kind of baked, buzzing energy she'd never felt in Limsa's salt-soaked air.

The first true shock came when she crossed the threshold and the sea was simply... gone. In Limsa, the ocean was a constant presence—underfoot, overhead, around every corner in the cries of gulls and the roll of waves. Here, inside Ul'dah's thick walls, the air felt denser, the sounds sharper: bootsteps on flagstones, the clink of coin, the overlapping calls of hawkers shouting their wares in accents from every corner of Hydaelyn. The smell hit her next—a layered assault of spices, sweat, incense, hot metal, roasted meat, and dust, all baked together under the relentless sun. She actually stopped in the archway like a tourist, eyes wide, while the flow of traffic grumbled around her. "Move along, miss," a Brass Blade muttered, nudging her gently with the butt of his spear. "City's not goin' anywhere." "Are you sure?" she shot back, half dazed, adjusting the strap of her pizza carrier. "Looks like it might just melt." Puku, poking his head out of the satchel, blinked at the light and let out a faint, affronted mew that translated quite clearly to, *too hot, take me home*.

Everywhere she looked there was gold. Not literal, though there was plenty of that glittering in jewellery stalls and in the rings on merchants' fingers, but gold as a *theme*: the trim on banners, the edges of awnings, the sun-flash off polished brass fittings. Near the bustling Steps of Nald, she caught sight of the city's standard hanging from a balcony—deep black framed in rich yellow, a great ornate set of scales balancing a faceted jewel on one side and a stylised flame on the other. Eldric had once described it to her in the damp kitchen of their Limsa flat, gesturing in the air with a half-empty bottle as he explained that Ul'dah worshipped the twin gods of trade and ambition; she had nodded along but not really pictured it. Seeing it now, enormous and gleaming in the hard light, she understood. Everything here felt like it was being weighed: coin against coin, favour against favour, opportunity against risk. Even her pizzas, she thought, as a Roegadyn in immaculate silks gave her a once-over that started at her boots and ended on the carrier, as if calculating profit margins. "New vendor?" he asked, voice smooth as oil. "Limited-time curiosity.

Interesting.” She smiled too brightly and replied that yes, she was very limited, in fact—limited to customers who didn’t treat her like a walking investment portfolio—and shouldered past him before he could make an offer.

The city climbed around her in layers. The Steps of Nald thrummed with commerce: stalls crammed together in chaotic rows, hawkers singing out the virtues of their spices, fabrics, trinkets, and “genuine Allagan relics recovered at great personal risk.” She squeezed through knots of adventurers in dusty armour, dodged a pair of laughing children chasing each other with sticks, and nearly walked straight into a thaumaturge in black robes who glared as if she’d stepped on his shadow. “Sorry! First time,” she said, ducking her head, then muttered under her breath, “Try doin’ this with four hot pizzas and a cat, see how you fare.” The heat pressed down like a physical weight, turning the metal fittings on her carrier into little brands whenever her fingers brushed them. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck, plastering wisps of hair to her skin, and she found herself fantasising about the chill spray off Limsa’s waves in a way she never had when she was actually home. Yet for all the discomfort, she couldn’t stop grinning. The sheer *density* of life here was intoxicating: languages she didn’t recognise drifting past her ears, glimpses of gear and glamour from half a dozen cultures, the steady thrum of deal-making happening all around her like a heartbeat.

Her first customer in Ul’dah was an adventuring party holed up in a cramped, oven-warm room above the Quicksand. The order had come via a chain of guild contacts—“a Lominsan girl who can get food anywhere,” someone had apparently assured them—and when she pushed open the door with her hip and announced, “Puku Pizza Delivery!” the four occupants stared as if she’d just dropped a meteor on their map table. A Highlander woman in battered plate mail recovered first, leaping to her feet so fast her chair skidded. “By Nald’s scales, you *actually* made it,” she said, wonder and hunger warring in her expression. “From Limsa? In this heat?” “Ovens don’t care about heat,” Marisa replied, setting the boxes down with ceremonial care. “If anything, they’re offended by competition. Two pepperoni-and-cheese, one mushroom, one plain. Plates are extra. Cat is non-negotiable.” Puku chose that moment to hop delicately out of the satchel and onto the table, tail high, inspecting the party’s spread of maps and coins as though appraising their worth. The Migo’te archer reached out a cautious hand to scratch him and promptly lost a crust; negotiations over slices began in earnest.

Sitting there in the hot little room, watching these strangers in sun-bleached gear argue good-naturedly over toppings and talk about their next delve into some ruin with a name she couldn’t pronounce, Marisa felt something in her chest twist and settle into a new shape. This was the life she’d only ever seen in books: maps, quests, coin purses spilling gil earned the hard way. And yet

here she was in the middle of it, red jacket streaked with dust, hair frizzed by dry air, handing over pizza as if she'd always belonged at tables like this. One of the adventurers, a Lalafell conjurer fanning herself with a folded chart, asked how often she made runs out this far. "Second time actually; was already in Gridania for a previous delivery," Marisa admitted, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. "Usually I stick to La Noscea. But word gets around, I guess. You'd be surprised how fast gossip travels when food's involved." The woman chuckled and said, "Give it a year and you'll have more work than you know what to do with. Folk like their comforts. Especially out here."

Down in the street again, the heat had dulled from brutal to merely insistent, like a hand on the back of her neck instead of a fist. Lanterns were starting to flare to life along the Steps of Nald, their orange light mixing with the last of the sun so that the stone seemed to glow from within. Food vendors rolled out their braziers and grills, the air thickening with the scents of sizzling skewers and unfamiliar spices that made her eyes water in a way she didn't entirely blame on the smoke. Somewhere a troupe of dancers in bright silks had claimed a corner, bells on their ankles chiming in time to a sharp, fast drum; a ring of onlookers clapped along, coins already changing hands in the shadows as bets were placed on who would tire first.

Marisa should have been heading straight back to the coach-yard, to find a cheap bunk in whatever travellers' flop the caravan master recommended. Instead she found her steps slowing, her eyes snagging on every little thing—the way the lamplight caught on a rack of cut gemstones, the hiss of a glassblower's pipe as molten colour became something delicate and fragile, the rise and fall of arguments over prices that sounded half like a fight and half like a dance. Limsa had noise, yes; Limsa had bustle. But this... this was commerce given form, a whole city built around the idea that everything could be turned into an exchange if you just argued long enough. It should have offended her. Instead it left her a little breathless.

She finally ducked into an inn off a narrower side street, choosing it mostly because it looked clean and the proprietor didn't flinch at the sight of a slightly travel-worn Hyur in a red coat hauling a cat and a stack of insulated boxes. The room she ended up with was small and airless and overlooked nothing more glamorous than an alley where someone had abandoned a cracked barrel, but when she unlatched the shutters a sliver of night-breeze slid in, carrying the muffled roar of the city: music, laughter, the constant shuffle of feet. Puku leapt onto the single bed, turned exactly three circles, and flopped down as if Ul'dah had been personally designed for naps. Marisa sat at the tiny desk, spread her map out, and traced with an ink-stained finger the line she'd taken from Limsa's docks to these sun-baked streets.

For the first time, the route didn't feel like a one-off fluke. It felt... repeatable. She imagined new arrows drawn from this city outward, toward Thanalan's mines and ruins, toward places she'd only ever seen as little labels in the margins of *The Harbor Herald*. If she could get pizza here hot, she could get it to Black Brush, to Camp Drybone, to whatever other dusty dots the guilds dotted their quest notices with. The thought made her stomach flip the same way it did before a big batch went into the oven: nerves, excitement, the sense that something important was about to rise if she didn't mess it up.

She didn't sleep easily—too much heat, too much noise, too many impressions jostling in her head—but when dawn finally seeped through the shutters in a thin, dusty stripe, she was already awake, boots pulled on, hair tied back, Puku stuffed reluctantly into the satchel. Ul'dah outside was quieter in the early light, merchants just beginning to set up, streets still being swept of the previous night's excess, but the bones of the city were the same: sharp-edged, sun-hungry, glittering. Today, she decided as she stepped out into the waking din, she would walk it not just as a courier with a job to do, but as someone taking the measure of a place she might be coming back to often. Yesterday she'd brought pizza to Ul'dah.

Today, she was going to see what Ul'dah might give back.

Chapter 30: Gold, Grit, and Glitter

Marisa woke to heat. Not the gentle, blanket warmth of an oven cooling after a night's work, but a heavy, baked-in heat that clung to the walls and settled in her lungs. For a panicked moment she forgot where she was and groped for the sound of waves; all she found was the distant metallic clatter of hooves on stone and a muffled argument in a language she didn't know, filtering in through the warped shutters. When memory caught up, she rolled onto her back and stared at the cracked ceiling of the Ul'dahn inn, listening to the city come awake: hawkers testing their voices in the street below, a Brass Blade barking orders, a child laughing somewhere far off. Puku was a warm, purring weight at the crook of her knees, stretched out like he'd personally conquered the desert in the night. "Morning, sun," she muttered, nudging his haunch with her heel. "Welcome to the furnace." He opened one eye, gave her a look that clearly said *you chose this*, then flopped his tail over his nose.

By the time she made it down to the common room, the heat had already begun its slow climb from “unpleasant” to “actively rude.” The innkeeper, a wiry Midlander with a moustache that deserved its own introduction, slid her a bowl of porridge studded with dried fruit and a small plate of something fried and savoury that crackled when she bit into it. “On the house,” he said, when she blinked at him in surprise. “Heard you’re the Lominsan what brought pizza up to those mad bastards on the Steps yesterday. One of ‘em came back down raving about ‘that flat thing with the cheese’ while he was payin’ his tab.” Marisa flushed, a little pleased despite herself. “Hope he raved with his mouth shut,” she said. “Would be a waste if the crumbs didn’t reach his stomach.” The innkeeper snorted, then jerked his chin toward the door. “If you’re plannin’ to walk the markets, do it before the sun’s high. After that, you’ll be roasted on both sides.” She thanked him, tucked Puku into the satchel—he protested, but not as violently as he had the day before; apparently the bed had earned Ul’dah a few points—and stepped out into the waking city.

Morning made everything look almost gentle. The harsh lines she’d seen yesterday under the noonday glare were softened by long, amber shadows; the stone still held the memory of the night’s relative cool, so that her boots clicked instead of sticking. Merchants were only just setting up their stalls, unrolling carpets, propping up crates, shouting greetings to neighbours in voices that hadn’t yet risen to full pitch. The air smelled of yesterday’s ash and today’s bread. She stood for a long moment at the edge of the Steps of Nald, just watching. Limsa woke sideways, with gulls and dockhands and the sea slapping the city awake from every direction; Ul’dah woke *up*, layer by layer, from the dusty alleys at the base of the walls to the gold-edged balconies of the rich. The flag over the arch—the black field, the ornate golden scales weighing jewel against flame—hung limp for now, its colours deep in the softer light, and she found herself staring at it like she had stared at Limsa’s first, years ago, when Eldric had pointed up and said, *That’s who we are*.

“First time?” someone asked at her elbow. She turned to find a woman in light, sand-coloured armour leaning against a pillar, helm tucked under one arm. Her skin was a deep, weathered brown, her hair braided back tight, and there was a short spear slung across her back that said Brass Blade without the need for insignia. “Is it that obvious?” Marisa asked, wince-smiling. Puku’s ears poked out of the satchel as if to confirm. The woman’s mouth tugged up. “You’re starin’ at the city like it’s about to bite you,” she said. “And you’ve got the look of someone who still expects to see the sea if she turns around fast enough.” Marisa huffed a laugh. “Guilty. Limsa born and bred. This is the farthest I’ve been from the water in my life. Feels like if I go any further, I’ll fall off the

world.” “Don’t worry,” the Blade said. “There’s plenty more world past those gates. Some of it even has fish again.” She nodded toward the teeming markets. “Go on, then. Let it bite. That’s how you learn.”

She let herself be carried by the city’s current. The Steps of Nald filled quickly, traders with handcarts and apprentices and shouting hawkers weaving around each other in a kind of organised chaos. Stalls bloomed like desert flowers after rain: bolts of cloth in colours so bright they made her eyes water, brass lamps and jewellery that caught the light and threw it back in fierce little sparks, pyramids of spices in reds and golds and deep browns that perfumed the air with heat and sweetness and smoke. A Miqu’te woman with gold leaf traced along her cheekbones sold skewers of marinated meat; a Hyuran boy barely older than Marisa had been when she first arrived in Limsa hawked chilled drinks from clay jugs, calling out blessings on anyone with enough gil to buy relief. She sampled more than was sensible—flatbread dusted with za’atar-like herbs, a deep-fried dumpling filled with something spiced and earthy that made her think of Marcus’s sausage experiments—and made mental notes about flavours. Ul’dahn heat wanted sour and salt and spice; Limsa’s damp wanted smoke and fat. Corvosi pies favoured heavy meats and olives. There was, she realised, a whole map you could draw of Eorzea in taste alone.

Not all of it glittered. The higher she climbed, the finer the clothes and the thicker the jewellery; the lower she drifted, following curious turns and shortcuts, the more frayed the edges of Ul’dah’s finery became. Near one of the inner gates she saw a line of people sitting with their backs against the wall, clothing clean but threadbare, eyes hollow with the particular fatigue of those who had been waiting far too long for something that might never come. Ala Mhigan refugees, if the rumours she’d read were true—folk who had lost their home once to Garlemald and then again to Ul’dahn bureaucracy. A Brass Blade ambled past, not unkind but not particularly interested either, and one of the refugees reached out with a hand that still had a soldier’s callouses, murmuring a request for work. The Blade shook his head without breaking stride. Marisa’s grip tightened on the strap of her satchel. Limsa had its own cruelties—pirates and poverty and the sharp edge of the Admiral’s justice—but at least the ocean never pretended it owed you anything. Here, the walls and the wealth gave the illusion that someone, somewhere, was in charge of fairness...and chose not to exercise it.

She bought a stack of cheap flatbread from a vendor and, after a moment’s hesitation, walked back to the line and wordlessly pressed pieces into the hands that reached up. It wasn’t much; it felt like trying to put out a furnace with a cup of water. But one older woman with a scarf tied tight around her greying hair squeezed Marisa’s fingers and said, in an accent roughened by

mountains, “The Twelve remember those who remember others.” Marisa wanted to say that she wasn’t doing it for the gods, that she just couldn’t look at hungry faces and walk away carrying food, but the words tangled somewhere between her throat and her tongue. Instead she mumbled something about having more dough than sense, and the woman laughed, a brief, surprising sound that cut through the dust and heat like a bell.

Later, she found herself in the shadow of the Goldsmiths’ Guild, squinting through a window at artisans bent over their benches under lamps bright enough to turn every speck of dust into a star. Another version of her, she thought, might have ended up there: hands steady, eyes sharpened, turning raw material into something people measured their worth with. Instead she turned flour and water into circles that vanished in minutes and left people licking their fingers. The thought should have made her feel lesser. It didn’t. Watching a goldsmith hold a tiny, perfect gem up to the light, she felt kinship instead—two different trades, both built on detail and timing and knowing exactly when to apply heat.

The real turning point of the day came not in some gleaming hall, but in a much less glamorous place: the Gate of Nald. She had wandered there almost by accident, following the pull of open space and the faint promise of air that wasn’t entirely second-hand. Outside the gate, the road unspooled toward the horizon in dusty ribbons, wagon ruts already carved deep. Dozens of chocobo teams milled in rough lines, their drivers shouting to one another as they checked harnesses and loads. Unlike the neat coaches that had carried her through the Shroud, these were working caravans: tarps patched, wheels scarred, drivers in mismatched gear that spoke of long miles and limited sleep. Crates were being loaded—textiles, ore, sealed casks, bales of something that smelled sharply medicinal. Trade, in motion.

Marisa stood just off the main throng, out of the way, and watched as one caravan in particular drew her eye. Its lead wagon was painted a weathered blue with the words *Happy Trails Caravan Company* stencilled along the side in flaking white. A Roegadyn man with his chestnut hair braided into a crown moved from wagon to wagon with a ledger, checking lashings, snapping at a pair of bickering porters until they straightened up. Beside him, a Lalafell driver trimmed the nails of a chocobo with brisk, efficient movements, humming a tune that sounded suspiciously like a Lominsan shanty flattened for Ul’dahn ears. There was something about the way they moved—the rhythm of people who had crossed this gate so many times it had become both doorway and ritual—that tugged at the part of Marisa that loved a good route map. These weren’t adventurers chasing glory or merchants chasing a quick profit; they were a line of arteries, quietly keeping the realm’s blood moving.

She edged closer under the pretext of getting out of the way of a cart, listening as the Roegadyn barked orders. “Horizon first, then on to Camp Drybone if the weather holds,” he said. “If the Brass Blades start their nonsense, you tell ‘em we’ve been cleared by the Syndicate’s own man, and if they still press, you come fetch me. No one pinches a single crate off my run.” His voice carried the rasp of decades spent shouting over wind and wheels, but there was warmth under it when she ruffled the feathers of a particularly nervous chocobo. Marisa could practically see the lines on her map reconfiguring, expanding: Limsa to Vesper Bay to Ul’dah... and from there, if you hitched yourself to the right wagon, all the way to the far-flung points she’d only read about. She imagined riding alongside that caravan, cooking over campfires, serving hot food under unfamiliar stars while the road stretched out in front of her like an invitation.

Puku shifted in the satchel, claws pricking through the fabric as if to remind her he existed. “I’m lookin’, not leavin’,” she murmured, scratching behind his ear. Still, even as she turned back toward the city proper, the image of the blue-painted wagon with its faded lettering stayed with her. Deliveries had always been sprints for her—short, sharp runs that began and ended with the same doorbell chime above Room 77. Watching the caravans queue up to cross the threshold of Ul’dah made her wonder what it would feel like to treat the whole road as her kitchen, not just the stretch between one street and the next.

The sun had swung high and brutal by the time she finally retreated back into the relative cool of the inn. She was dustier, sweatier, and considerably lighter of coin than she’d planned, having been unable to resist picking up a couple of small tins of spice and a packet of dried peppers Marcus would either love or declare a war crime. But her mind buzzed with more than heat. She had seen Ul’dah’s shine and its cracks, tasted its food and its air, watched the way trade and desperation wove around each other in the streets. It was messy and unfair and blindingly bright—and undeniably alive.

That night, by lamplight, she added a second set of notes to the line she’d drawn on her map the evening before. Beside *Ul’dah – first delivery*, she wrote, *Markets loud as cannons. Gold everywhere. Grit underneath. Caravans at Gate of Nald – road doesn’t end here*. Puku sprawled across the bottom edge of the parchment, his paw resting squarely on the sketched little wagon she’d doodled almost without thinking. She tapped the page with the butt of her pen, feeling the prickling sense that something had shifted again, quietly but permanently. Limsa was home, Gridania had shown her that the world could whisper, and Ul’dah had taught her that it could shout back with equal force. Somewhere between those three truths was a path she hadn’t quite found the shape of yet.

“Tomorrow we head back,” she told the cat, blowing on the ink to dry it. “Back to the sea. Back to the oven. But I’m comin’ here again, Puku. Not just as a one-off. There’s work here. Roads. Maybe people who need more than cod and hardtack.” Puku yawned enormously, unimpressed by either ambition or philosophy, and tucked his head under his tail. Marisa smiled, folded the map gently, and slid it back into her satchel. Outside, the city went on haggling with the night, every shouted offer and clink of coin another reminder that the world was bigger than she’d let herself believe. For the first time, the thought didn’t scare her. It just made her hungry.

Chapter 31: Happy Trails

Marisa had every intention of leaving Ul’dah that morning. She really did. She woke before sunrise, rolled up her map, stuffed Puku (grumbling) into the satchel, and told herself that she would go straight to the coach-yard, book passage back to Vesper Bay, and be on a ferry to Limsa before the desert remembered how cruel it could be. But her boots, traitorous things that they were, took her a different way: out through the Steps of Nald, past the sleepy hawkers yawning into their first cups of tea, toward the Gate of Nald where she’d watched the caravans the day before. “Just to look,” she told Puku as the great archway came into view, the black-and-gold flag hanging limp in the dawn stillness. “Then we go home. No detours. No bad ideas.” Puku responded by poking his head out, blinking at the gathering light over the desert, and promptly retreating; clearly, he trusted her promises about as much as she trusted Ul’dahn pricing.

The caravan yard beyond the gate was already stirring. Chocobos snorted clouds of steam into the cool air, wagons creaked as drivers checked wheels and harness, and the smell of dust and feed and last night’s campfire smoke lay over everything like another layer of canvas. Marisa spotted the familiar faded blue of the *Happy Trails Caravan Company* wagon almost immediately. It sat a little apart from the crush, its paint worn but cared for, canvas neatly tied, wheels blocked. The Roegadyn man she’d seen yesterday was there again, broad-shouldered and barrel-chested, his sea-green skin catching the first rays of sun in a way that made him look carved from some strange, polished stone. Today he wore his white coat open over a dark shirt, sleeves rolled, thick hands moving with brisk assurance over a ledger while he barked orders to the rest of the crew. Near him, a Lalafell in a

wide-brimmed black hat lounged on a crate, chewing something that might have been jerky, boots crossed at the ankles, his moustache given more attention than his hair. A Hyur man sat on a stool by the fire-pit, red jacket thrown open, jeans dusty at the knees, a mug cradled in his calloused hands while he stared into the embers with the steady, unhurried gaze of someone who had watched more dawns than he bothered to count.

Marisa meant to skirt around them—honestly, she did. But as she edged closer to get a better look at the caravan sigil painted on the wagon's side, the Roegadyn's gaze snapped up from her ledger with the reflexive awareness of someone who'd been ambushed too many times on the road to ignore movement. Their eyes met. There was a long, assessing moment in which Marisa considered pretending she'd just been admiring a nearby rock formation; then the Roegadyn snorted, closed the ledger with a clap, and rumbled, "You're the pizza girl." It wasn't a question so much as a verdict. Marisa bristled on instinct. "I have a name, you know," she said, adjusting the strap of her satchel. "Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman, proprietor of Puku Pizza Delivery, thank you kindly." The Lalafell barked a laugh and tipped his hat, revealing eyes bright with mischief. "Hear that, Hundbraena? We've got ourselves a proper business proprietrix. Real respectable-like. Better mind your tongue."

Hundbraena Toegfyrshyn—if Marisa remembered the name painted on the wagon correctly—ignored him with the practiced ease of someone who'd been ignoring him for years. He stepped closer, boots sinking slightly into the packed sand, and looked Marisa up and down in one sweeping, unimpressed pass. "You ran pies from Limsa to Ul'dah in one piece," she said. "In that heat, with that face." Marisa blinked. "What's wrong with my face?" The Hyur by the fire finally spoke, his voice low and dry. "She means you don't look half-dead. Most first-timers drag themselves through the gate like they lost a fight with the sun." He took a sip from his mug, nodded once as if that settled the matter, then added, "Name's Calder. That's Brynkin." He jerked his chin toward the Lalafell, who tipped his hat again with a flourish. "And you've met Hund already. He's the one with the loud voice and the soft spot for strays." "I do not have a soft spot for strays," Hundbraena said automatically, but the set of his mouth suggested this was an argument he lost often. "I have an eye for useful hands. There's a difference."

Marisa felt something in her ribcage straighten like a spine. Useful hands she understood. "Well, my hands can chop, knead, and carry," she said. "And my legs can run. The guild in Limsa thinks they're worth payin' for. Your lot headed out soon?" Brynkin hopped down from his crate, dusted his trousers, and wandered closer, squinting up at her as if trying to see how far she'd stretch under different conditions. "Soon as Hund finishes arguin' with herself over the manifests," he drawled. "Horizon first, then

Drybone, then gods know where if the Blade checkpoints ain't jammed. Could be a week. Could be ten days. Could be we get waylaid by ravenous coblyns and have to eat our own shoes. Very excitin' line of work." Calder rolled his eyes. "He's oversellin' it. We try not to lose people or shoes." He angled his head at Marisa's satchel. "That cat of yours handle long roads?" Puku chose that moment to poke his head out, squint at the Roegadyn, the Lalafell, and the Hyur in slow sequence, and then yawn so widely his tiny jaw creaked. Hundbraena's stern face cracked into the shadow of a grin. "Looks like he's seen worse."

They invited her—or perhaps simply failed to chase her off—into the loose circle around the fire while they finished preparations. Someone handed her a mug of something that tasted like weak tea and desert dust; she drank it anyway, more for the sense of inclusion than the flavour. Hundbraena quizzed her between shouted instructions to the drivers. "You done more than that one run?" He asked. "Or was this your big, glorious venture into the exotic lands beyond your harbour?" Marisa bristled again. "Gridania first," she said. "Through the Shroud. Conjurers. Elementals. Trees that look at you like they know what you had for breakfast. If I survived their glares, Ul'dah's just... loud." Calder's brows rose a fraction, respect slipping in around the edges of his usual calm. "Forest, then desert," he said. "Nice spread. You're gettin' the sampler platter of Eorzea." Brynkin snorted. "Sampler platter. That's one way to put it. 'Try our new *Terrifying Biomes of Hydaelyn* taster set: includes existential dread, sunburn, and reasonably priced souvenirs.'"

It didn't take long for the conversation to slide, as conversations around fires often did, toward stories. Hundbraena spoke of running ore between Thanalan and Coerthas before the Garleans shut the latter down, of outrunning bandits and sandstorms alike. Calder mentioned, in the tone of someone recounting a mild inconvenience, the time a goobbue had wandered across the road and refused to move until Brynkin bribed it with half their vegetable cargo. Brynkin himself contributed enthusiastic tales of near-misses and near-kisses, most of which Marisa suspected had grown taller with each retelling. In return, she offered up her own smaller-scale epics: racing storms to get hot food to Yellowjacket outposts, trying to keep dough from proofing too fast on a hot day in Upper La Noscea, the terrifying first delivery to Gridania where she'd been sure every twig snap heralded a spiritual eviction notice from the forest. "So your world's been cliffs, kitchens, and now a couple of city-states," Hundbraena said finally, summing it up with the bluntness of someone condensing a ledger. "And yet you've got the eyes of someone who's already lookin' at the horizon while she talks."

Marisa opened her mouth to deny it, then closed it again. Hundbraena watched her, sharp as a hawk. “Here’s the thing, pizza girl—Marisa,” he corrected herself. “We’ve been lookin’ for a quartermaster. Someone who can keep track of supplies, stretch rations, make sure the crew doesn’t mutiny when the stew gets thin. Someone who knows food and isn’t afraid of a bit of dirt on her boots.” He jerked her thumb at Brynkin and Calder. “These two can drive, fight, and haggle, but their idea of a balanced diet is ‘one hand for the reins, one for the jerky.’ We’re runnin’ longer hauls these days. Refugees, merchants, odd jobs. Folk eat better when there’s a proper cook. Folk fight better when they eat better. See where I’m goin’ with this?”

The air seemed to thin around Marisa’s ears. “You’re... offerin’ me a job,” she said slowly, as if tasting each word for authenticity. “On the road. Proper caravan work. Not just runnin’ pies to a camp and goin’ home.” Brynkin spread his arms wide as if introducing a stage. “Picture it: *Marisa, Mistress of the Mobile Kitchen*. Flames! Flour! Near-death experiences!” Calder smiled, faint but real. “Pay’s not glorious, but it’s steady, and we don’t stiff our people. You’d have to share a wagon with crates and chocobo feed, mind. And you’d be away from Limsa for moons at a time.” Hundbraena nodded. “I’m not askin’ for an answer now. You’ve got a business. A mother who’ll probably beat me with a ladle if I drag you off without warning. But we’re takin’ a run toward Vesper Bay in a fortnight. If you want to see what the work’s like, you come with us for that haul. Trial run. You cook, you count, you keep up. At the end, we sit down and talk proper.”

For a long moment, all Marisa could hear was her own heartbeat and the distant clatter of another caravan rolling through the gate. Limsa rose in her mind: white stone, red pennants, the smell of salt and baking dough, Room 77 with its cramped warmth. Gridania followed, green and hushed, a place that had let her in on sufferance. Ul’dah wrapped itself around them both like a ring of fire—hard, bright, unforgiving. Threaded through all of it now was the image of this blue-painted wagon rattling across all that distance, carrying her with it like a tiny, stubborn ember. Puku shifted in the satchel, as if sensing her indecision, and bumped his head against her side. “You’re right,” she murmured to him, not taking her eyes off Hundbraena. “This is one of those ‘change-your-life’ things, isn’t it?”

“I can’t say yes yet,” she told Hundbraena, voice steadier than she felt. “I’ve got Ma to think of. Marcus. The parlour. I’d have to make arrangements.” Hundbraena grunted, apparently satisfied. “Good. If you’d said yes without thinkin’, I’d’ve rescinded the offer. I’ve no use for fools who jump at the word ‘adventure’ like it’s a free drink. Go home. Talk. Decide. But know this, Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman—” he offered a hand like a shovel, and when Marisa took it, his grip was firm enough to feel like a contract,

“—the road’s not goin’ anywhere. It’ll still be here when you’re ready. Question is whether you want your line on the map to stop at the docks... or keep on goin’.”

As Marisa walked back toward the city, the sun finally breaking fully over the walls and turning the stone gold, the satchel at her hip felt heavier than before. Not in a bad way. More like a purse suddenly full of unexpected coin. Behind her, the Happy Trails wagons creaked and clattered into motion one by one, heading out onto the long, dusty road she might soon call workplace, proving ground, and temporary home. She didn’t look back. She didn’t have to. The sound of them followed her all the way to the Steps of Nald, a rough, rolling drumbeat that echoed somewhere deep under her breastbone and refused to fade.

Chapter 32: Terms, Tears, and Takeout

The trip back to Limsa felt shorter than it had any right to. Once the caravan offer had lodged in her mind, the world seemed eager to see what she would do with it. Marisa spent most of the ferry leaning against the rail, letting the salt wind scour Ul’dahn dust from her lungs while Puku used her satchel as a fortress against the spray. Every time she remembered Hundbraena’s blunt words—*trial run, fortnight, cook, count, keep up*—her stomach did a little flip that had nothing to do with the swell. By the time the lighthouse loomed and the patchwork of white stone, red pennants, and creaking masts came into view, the idea had risen in her chest like well-proofed dough, soft and insistent and impossible to ignore.

The Takeuchi-Shipman flat in the Lower Decks smelled of tea and river damp when she pushed the door open. It was small and narrow, its single window looking out over one of Limsa’s many canals where lantern light wobbled in the murky water. Hanako sat at the low table, kimono sleeves tied back just enough to work—never enough to look anything less than proper—trimming the stems off a bundle of mizuna she’d found at the market. “You are home,” she said without looking up, which in Hanako-speak meant *you are late and I have been counting the bells*. Marisa dropped her bag, prised Puku loose from the satchel—he slithered onto the floor like an exhausted noodle—and crossed the cramped space to kiss her mother’s cheek. “Delivery went well,” she

said, aiming for casual and landing somewhere near suspiciously bright. “No bandits, no coblyns, no desert meltin’ me into a puddle. Customer tipped, inn didn’t burn down. I even brought back spices.”

Hanako sniffed the small packets with wary curiosity, then narrowed her eyes at her daughter instead. “And yet you smell of... thinking too much,” she said. “Sit down. Before your thoughts leak all over the tatami.” Marisa sat opposite her, hands closing around a mug of hot tea that seemed to appear without her noticing, and tried to explain Hundbraena and the Happy Trails caravan without making it sound like she’d already packed. She talked about the blue wagon at the Gate of Nald, about Brynkin’s awful jokes and Calder’s steady, desert-slow voice, about the offer of a trial run toward Vesper Bay—*just to see if it fits*. “It’d be one route,” she said, tracing the rim of her cup with her thumb. “A fortnight, maybe a bit more. I’d cook, keep the stores, make sure they don’t live on jerky and sand. I’d be back before you got sick of the quiet.”

The knife went still in Hanako’s hand. For a long moment she stared at the neat pile of cut stems as if they might offer better answers than her daughter. When she spoke, her voice had the careful flatness Marisa remembered from Kugane stories—the tone Hanako used when pain knocked but she refused to open the door all the way. “A fortnight on the road,” she repeated softly. “With strangers. In wilds where there are no city walls. No Yellowjackets. Only sun and beasts and men with knives.” She set the knife down, fingers lingering on the handle. “Do you remember,” she went on, eyes still lowered, “what I told you about Kugane? About when your father asked me to leave?”

Marisa swallowed. She did remember: Hanako in painted white, a rising star among the *geiko*; Eldric then suddenly finding better work in Limsa, uprooting her from one life to set down in another halfway across the world. “You were just getting real work,” Marisa said quietly. “Not just the *izakaya*. The teahouses. Maybe even the courts, if things had gone right.” Hanako’s mouth tightened. “They were going right,” she said. “Then I chose a man and a dream instead of a home I understood. I do not regret *you*”—she glanced up, sharp enough that Marisa flinched—“but I regret many other things. Friends left behind. A language I had to teach myself not to think in so I would stop sounding like a foreigner. A career that turned to smoke as soon as I stepped on a foreign deck.” She exhaled slowly, the anger cooling into weariness. “So when you tell me you want to chase roads with caravans, forgive me if I hear my own foolish footsteps.”

Marisa reached across the narrow table and caught her mother's hand, tea forgotten. "I'm not runnin' off after some sailor with more charm than sense," she said. "This isn't leavin' forever. It's a job. A test run. I've got a parlour here, Ma. You. Marcus. I've got roots. I just... also want to know what's past the horizon without waitin' until I'm old and telling someone else not to go." She tried for a smile and only half managed it. "And I'll be cookin', not dancin' for idiots who can't hold their liquor."

Hanako studied her daughter's face as if it were a stage she was about to step onto. At last she sighed, long and quiet, and turned her hand palm-up to squeeze Marisa's fingers. "I will not be Eldric," she said. "I will not drag you from the things you love because I am afraid. But I will claim my right to worry." Her gaze sharpened. "So. Conditions. You will write to me from every major stop. Any place this Happy Trails goes where you sleep more than one night. You keep your linkpearl charged. You do not chase monsters into dark canyons because someone waves gil. You remember you have a home to come back to."

Marisa let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding and nodded so hard Puku, curled at her feet, startled awake. "Deal," she said. "All of that. I'll even get someone boring to read any contracts. Calder looks like the type who enjoys bein' painfully practical." Hanako sniffed, but the corners of her mouth softened. "And you bring me back something from everywhere you stay," she added. "A ribbon. A coin. A spice. So that, even if I never leave these damp little decks again, I can say I have seen the world through you."

The Riverfront Pizzeria was quieter than usual when she pushed the door open, the late-afternoon rush already faded into the clink of cutlery and the low murmur of a few lingering regulars. The place still smelled gloriously of roasted tomatoes and garlic, basil and charred crust—the particular perfume of Marcus Corvinus's cooking that had sunk so deep into the walls it would probably outlast the building. He stood behind the counter in his familiar spot by the brick oven, sleeves rolled past his elbows, salt-and-pepper hair tied back with a rag that had once been white and was now some dignified shade of grey. A half-finished pizza rested on the peel in front of him, arranged with the fussy precision of a man who'd built a new life one topping at a time. "Ah, *marilla*," he said without looking up, Corvosi vowels warm and lazy. "Back from corrupting the desert with our noble flatbread, are we? Tell me, did Ul'dah bargain your prices down to something respectable, or did you rob them blind as I taught you?"

She slipped behind the counter as naturally as if she still worked there every day, grabbing a spare apron and falling into place across from him to slice mushrooms. “They tried to haggle,” she said. “So I doubled the delivery fee. Consider it an educational tax.” He grunted approval, then glanced sideways at her, dark eyes sharpening. “Mm. And yet, there is something else in that head. Stronger than the garlic. You have the look you had when you first said ‘pizzeria in the Mist’ to me and nearly swallowed your own tongue.”

So she told him. It came out in pieces at first, tucked between the familiar rhythm of their work: dough stretched, sauce smoothed, cheese scattered. She described Hundbraena Toegfyrssyn—the big, green-skinned Roegadyn with the ledger and the voice like gravel in a wine cask—Brynkin with his awful jokes, Calder watching the horizon over the rim of his mug. She talked about the blue-painted wagons at the Gate of Nald, the offer of a trial run toward Vesper Bay, the idea of being a quartermaster on the road instead of in one fixed kitchen. When she finished, she shoved the loaded peel toward the oven with a little more force than necessary and folded her arms, bracing for him to laugh it off or tell her she was being ridiculous. “It’d just be for one route,” she said. “If I hate sand and bandits and sleepin’ in wagons, I come back and never speak of it again. If I don’t...” She shrugged, suddenly unsure what the end of that sentence should be.

Marcus wiped his hands on a towel and leaned back against the shelves, regarding her with the sort of fond, exasperated patience he usually reserved for customers who thought pineapples were a personal attack. “You want me to say no,” he said mildly. “So that when you ignore me, you can blame me later when your feet hurt and the stew burns.” Marisa spluttered, colour rising. “I—what—no, I—” He held up a floury hand. “*Calmati, ragazza*. Listen.” He crossed the small gap between them and set his broad, warm hands on her shoulders, the brick oven’s heat at his back. He pushed himself upright and stepped close enough to rest his large, warm hands on her shoulders, anchoring her like he had when she’d first started working dough instead of flinging it at the ceiling. “When I left Locus Amoenus,” he said, “it was because the Empire told me what I could cook, who I could feed, what prayers I could no longer say. Exile became a blessing in disguise, you see; it meant I could keep my hands and my heart my own. When I came to Limsa, I swore the next place I planted my feet would be a place I chose, not one chosen for me. This kitchen, this parlour, you—” he squeezed gently, “—they are all part of that choice.”

He tilted his head, eyes crinkling. “Now you are choosing in your turn. Not because some smooth-tongued sailor promises you the world, but because you have seen a piece of it and think: *maybe I belong out there too, for a while*. That is different. That is good.”

He let his hands drop, but his gaze stayed steady. "If you told me you were staying only because you were afraid, I would throw you out my door with a basket full of sandwiches and directions to the caravan yard. But if you go, you go with open eyes and a plan to come home. *Capisci?*"

He squeezed her shoulders, gaze softening. "Now you are choosing. Not because some sailor with pretty eyes waves a map in your face, but because you have seen a bit of the world and think, *perhaps I belong out there too, for a while*. This is good. This is how life should go. If you told me you were staying only because you were afraid, I would personally march you down to the caravan yard, throw you on the wagon, and send them off with a week's worth of sandwiches." Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes; she blinked them away with an embarrassed snort. "You make it very hard to cling to my comfort zone, you know that?" she muttered, reaching past him to pull the finished pizza from the oven. The crust had blistered perfectly; the smell that rolled out made her throat tighten for reasons that had nothing to do with hunger. "So. Trial run first," she said more firmly. "If I hate the road, I come back and complain about it until you beg me to shut up. If I don't... we figure out how to make Puku Pizza work with me gone sometimes."

Marcus pinched a slice straight off the peel with the shameless entitlement of a man who'd earned that right years ago. "*Così sia*," he said around a mouthful. "Bring this Hundbraena here before you go. I wish to look this caravan man in the eye and decide whether he is worthy of stealing my best pizzaiola, even for a fortnight. If he is not, I will season his boots with chili flakes and sell them as a specialty." He clapped her once on the cheek, half-affection, half-reprimand. "Go talk to your mother properly," he added. "Then come back and tell me what date I must start planning the 'Welcome Home, Still Alive, Grazie al Cielo' party."

Later, when the lamps burned low and the ovens ticked as they cooled, she stood alone just outside Room 77, leaning on the rail that overlooked the Mist's soft lights. The sea breathed below, familiar and vast, a sound that had tucked her to sleep every night of her life. Behind her, the parlour smelled of cheese and garlic and laughter. Ahead, somewhere beyond the dark shape of Vylbrand, roads she had never walked stretched under stars she'd only glimpsed from ship decks and story pages. She tightened the strap of her satchel, feeling the reassuring weight of her folded map inside. "All right then," she murmured to the night, Puku winding around her ankles. "One trial run. One little line on the map. Then we see if the world's ready for more than coastal deliveries."

Puku meowed as if to say the world had better be, or it would hear from him personally. Marisa laughed, the sound carried away on the wind, and for the first time the thought of leaving Limsa for longer than a day didn't feel like betrayal. It felt like the next step in a story that still had a great many pages left to turn.

Chapter 33: Bread Crumbs on the Trade Road

In the end, saying yes felt almost embarrassingly simple. There was no grand ceremony, no contract signed in blood, no thunderbolt from the heavens—just a ferry ticket bought with carefully counted gil, a satchel packed with more spices than clothes, and a promise to Hanako that she would write so often the postmoogles would start charging her rent. Marcus had pressed a worn wooden spoon into her hand at the docks—“for luck and for beatin’ sense into foolish caravan men,” he’d declared—and Puku had been bundled, grumbling, into his travelling satchel the moment they stepped aboard. The crossing to Vesper Bay blurred into a mixture of restless pacing and maps checked three times over; from there, the short overland hop back to Ul’dah felt surreal, like she’d somehow stepped into a loop of her own life and was walking it again, only this time with the knowledge that she wasn’t just passing through. By the time she climbed the familiar steps to the Gate of Nald, the desert sun already glaring down on the city’s black-and-gold banners, her palms were slick with more than just heat.

The caravan yard beyond the gate was busier than she’d ever seen it. Wagons jostled for space, chocobos stamped and snorted in harness, and drivers shouted to one another over the clatter of crates and the grinding of wheels. The *Happy Trails Caravan Company* wagon was exactly where she’d hoped—and feared—it would be: faded blue paint, white lettering half worn away by sandstorms and time, parked at a slight angle as if even at rest it was already leaning toward the road. Hundbraena Toegfyrssyn stood beside the lead chocobo, ledger in one hand, the other resting lightly on the bird’s neck. In the morning light his sea-green skin looked almost grey, his white hair pulled back into a thick tail, jaw shadowed with the kind of stubble that suggested late nights and early departures. Brynkin lounged on a crate nearby, wide-brimmed hat tipped back, boots crossed at the ankles, while Calder sat on an upturned barrel by the fire-pit, red jacket half-buttoned, long legs stretched out, a mug cradled in both hands. For a moment Marisa hovered at the edge of their little orbit, suddenly convinced that if she turned around and walked back through

the gate, no one would notice. Then Hund's head snapped up, dark eyes locking on her with the unerring precision of someone who'd taught himself to spot trouble, opportunity, and latecomers at fifty paces.

"You're on time," he said, which in Hundbraena's gravelled baritone sounded suspiciously like *I'm impressed and I would have left you if you weren't* layered together. "That's a good start." Brynkin slid off his crate with a theatrical groan. "Ah, our illustrious *culinary officer* returns," he drawled, sweeping her an exaggerated bow. "With cat and kit and all her limbs still attached. Calder, you owe me five gil—I said she'd show." Calder snorted into his mug. "I said she might get distracted by a particularly interestin' flag on the way," he replied. "Which, to be fair, is still possible. We haven't left yet." Marisa rolled her eyes, but the banter steadied something in her; this, at least, she knew how to handle. "Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman reporting for temporary duty," she said, throwing an overly crisp salute that made Brynkin cackle. "Where do you want me, and whose life do I have to save from scurvy first?"

Hund snapped the ledger shut with one large hand and jerked his thumb toward the second wagon in the line. "Back there," he said. "That's our pantry, your bunk, and the place you'll be swearin' at us from when we eat more than we should. We've got dry goods, water barrels, some salted meat, and a few crates of fresh produce that need to be used before Thanalan remembers it hates green things. You keep count, plan meals, and tell me when I'm askin' for miracles." He paused, eyeing the satchel at her hip as Puku's head emerged, whiskers twitching. "The cat's your problem. If he claws holes in the grain sacks, he becomes *everyone's* problem." "He knows better," Marisa said, even as Puku fixed Hund with a cool, appraising stare that suggested he was taking the Roegadyn's measure as much as the other way around.

The inside of the "pantry" wagon was a far cry from the cramped, carefully arranged chaos of Room 77, but it had its own logic. Sacks of flour and grain were stacked in the front half, lashed down with ropes that had clearly seen hard use; crates of onions, potatoes, and sturdier vegetables lined one side, while the other held bundles of dried herbs, jars of pickled something in cloudy brine, and a small space that had been cleared, almost apologetically, for a stove and a battered iron pot. A narrow pallet had been laid along the rear wall, thin mattress rolled and tied. Marisa stood in the doorway for a moment, getting her bearings. It smelled of dust, canvas, and the sharp promise of onion skins. Not a kitchen, not exactly—but it could be made into one. "All right," she murmured, more to herself than anyone. "Let's see what we can do with you."

They rolled out not long after: wagon wheels creaking, chocobos clucking and snorting, the city walls receding behind them as the road unfurled in long, dusty ribbons. The first bell was mostly noise and adjustment. Marisa lurched between the back of the wagon and the front bench, learning how to brace her knees so she didn't go flying every time they hit a rut, figuring out where Hund liked his ledger kept, how Brynkin took his tea (sweet as sin, naturally), and that Calder could drive with one hand and still catch a tossed bread roll with the other without spilling a drop of whatever was in his cup. Out beyond the caravan line, Thanalan stretched flat and bright, dotted with warped rock formations and the occasional stand of scrub. Heat lay over everything like a thin invisible blanket, not unbearable yet but promising cruelty later.

Her first test came at midday. They pulled off the main road into the meagre shade of a rocky outcrop, wagons forming a rough half-circle while chocobos were watered and reins checked. "Half-bell break, then we move," Hund called. "Feed them, feed yourselves, don't wander." Marisa stared at the supplies she'd hauled down from the wagon—hard bread, salty cured meat, a small sack of lentils, those stubbornly hopeful vegetables—and tried to picture them as something anyone would thank her for. In Limsa she'd had ovens, fresh fish, access to the Bismarck's larders when she'd been on good terms; here she had a single iron pot, a fire-pit, and a lot of hungry eyes waiting to see if the "pizza girl" was worth the space she took up. "So," Brynkin said, plopping down on a crate with his hat tipped back. "What's on the menu, Chef? Sand stew with a garnish of regret?"

She ignored him, more out of necessity than discipline, and set to work. Onions went into the pot first with a slick of precious oil, sizzling into sweetness while she chopped the tougher vegetables small enough to soften quickly. Lentils followed, then water, then slices of meat crisped at the edges to trick the tongue into thinking there was more of it than there was. She tossed in a pinch of one of the Ul'dahn spices she'd brought—smoky and warm without too much heat—and, on impulse, tore a few stale bread heels into rough croutons to fry in the fat and sprinkle on top. By the time Hund called for them to gather, the thin air around the camp smelled rich enough that even the most jaded driver's head turned. They ate sitting on crates and wagon steps, bowls cupped in rough hands, spoons scraping the bottoms clean. It wasn't the best thing she'd ever made, not by a long shot, but it was hot, filling, and tasted like more than the sum of its parts.

Hund finished his portion in thoughtful silence, then held the empty bowl out for seconds with a grunt that might have been approval. Calder, stretching his long legs out in front of him, said mildly, "If this is what you do with scraps on the first day, I'm curious to see what happens when we're not on a schedule." Brynkin licked his spoon with theatrical bliss. "I take back every

unkind thing I said about your profession,” he declared. “You have earned the right to boss me about regarding vegetables. Temporarily.” Marisa snorted, cheeks warm from more than the fire. “You’ll eat whatever I tell you to eat,” she said. “Or I’ll feed your portion to the chocobos out of spite.” One of the birds, as if understanding, let out a loud *kweh* and nosed hopefully at her elbow until Hund cuffed it gently away.

The road settled into a rhythm after that. Mornings were for breaking camp, checking straps and wheels, making sure nothing had crawled into the stores in the night that shouldn’t be there. Days were a grind of dust and distance, punctuated by brief stops where Marisa doled out water with a miser’s eye and tried to stretch their supplies in ways that wouldn’t get her murdered in her sleep. Evenings were her favourite: wagons drawn up in loose circles, small fires blooming like flowers in the gathering dark, stories trading hands as easily as coin. Calder proved to be a quiet but attentive audience, asking pointed questions that made her describe Limsa’s sea fogs and the Mist’s jumble of houses in more detail than she realised she’d noticed. Brynkin alternated between outrageous tales of near-misses with bandits and genuine insights into which Brass Blade sergeants were reasonable and which were likely to “confiscate” a crate just because they could. Hund mostly listened, interjecting now and then with a dry comment that suggested he was keeping track of who exaggerated and who didn’t.

There were moments of unease, of course. Once, in the distance, they saw a column of smoke that was too thin and regular to be a cooking fire; Hund altered their course slightly, eyes on the horizon until the plume sank behind the rocks. Another time they passed a small Brass Blade checkpoint where the soldiers’ armour sat wrong on their shoulders and their smiles showed too many teeth. Hund did the talking then, voice polite but edged, leaning on some writ or favour that kept them from having their cargo “searched” for more than a cursory inspection. Marisa stood on the wagon step with Puku tucked under one arm, watching the way Calder’s hand rested casually on the haft of an axe that had definitely not been part of the original manifest. When they rolled away unmolested, she let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding and made a mental note: danger on the road didn’t always look like monsters. Sometimes it wore a tabard and a bored expression.

At night, lying on her narrow pallet with the wagon rocking gently under her, Marisa listened to the strange quiet of the Thanalan sky. No waves. No creak of ship timbers. Just the occasional snort from a sleeping chocobo, the soft murmur of the last two drivers on watch, and the distant howl of something wild that had the sense to keep away from a cluster of fire and steel. She thought of Limsa—of Hanako in their Lower Decks flat, carefully folding letters as if the way she pressed the paper might somehow keep her

daughter safer; of Marcus closing up his parlour, counting the till with the same meticulous care he brought to topping a pizza. Guilt pricked at her, small and sharp. But alongside it was a fierce, almost giddy satisfaction. She had done it: stepped off the island, onto the road, into a life that didn't begin and end with the same half-dozen streets.

On the fourth evening, as they made camp a few bells' ride from Horizon, Hund wandered over to where she was stirring a pot of stew that had no business smelling as good as it did with so little meat in it. He watched her for a moment, arms folded, then said, without preamble, "You're keepin' up." She arched a brow. "That supposed to be a compliment?" "From me, yes," he said. "Nobody's gone hungry. We're underweight on water by less than I expected in this sun. And Brynkin hasn't managed to charm you into givin' him extra portions, which is a miracle." He scratched at his beard, studying her profile in the firelight. "When this run's done and we're back at the gate, if you decide you want more of this, there'll be a place on my roster for you. Not just as a favour. As crew."

The words settled on her shoulders like a cloak she hadn't realised she'd been trying on all along. Part of her wanted to answer immediately, to say yes and mean it. Another part flickered with the memory of Room 77, of Marcus's floury hands and Hanako's careful conditions, of Rocceto's impatient *kweh* when she was late with his grain. She stirred the pot, watching the surface ripple. "Let's get there first," she said, keeping her tone light. "If you don't die of my cookin' by Vesper Bay, maybe we'll talk." Hund snorted, a low, amused sound. "Fair enough, pizza girl." He turned away, then glanced back over his shoulder. "For what it's worth... you're doin' fine. World's bigger than one port. Good to see someone your age realisin' that before some beastkin or the Empire does it for you."

Long after the others had drifted off to their bedrolls, Marisa sat by the dying fire with Puku curled in her lap, staring up at a sky so thick with stars it looked like someone had spilled salt across dark velvet. Bread crumbs on the trade road, she thought, remembering Hanako's request for small tokens from every stop. She had none tonight—not yet—but she had the shape of the road under her feet and the taste of desert dust in her teeth and the knowledge that, somewhere behind her, the sea still waited. Somewhere ahead, the lights of Vesper Bay and, beyond that, Limsa. Between them, a girl with a pot, a cat, and a slowly unfolding sense of where she might fit in a world that suddenly felt far too vast to be contained by any one kitchen.

Chapter 34: Letters on the Wind

They reached Horizon just before dusk on the fifth day, rolling in under a sky the colour of cooled iron. The settlement was a scatter of stone and canvas clinging stubbornly to the edge of the desert: half-way stop, staging ground, and dust trap all in one. Brass Blades lounged at the gate, trying to look more alert than they felt; merchants shouted over one another for the best spot near the well; adventurers with sand in their hair and gil in their eyes argued over which tavern's beds were least likely to collapse. Hundbraena brought the Happy Trails wagons in at an easy pace, nodding to the guards like a man greeting old, mildly annoying acquaintances. Marisa stood on the wagon step with one hand wrapped around a strap, squinting past the bustle toward the west. If she leaned just right and ignored the buildings, she could see the faintest glimmer of the Rhotano where the land finally gave up and let the sea reclaim it. The sight hit her with a sharp, unexpected ache—home, just beyond reach, like a familiar voice in another room. “Don’t worry,” Brynkin said at her elbow, following her gaze. “You’ll get your precious damp back soon enough. Horizon’s just the bit where the desert decides if it’s done with you.”

They offloaded a portion of their cargo there—crates of tools for a mining crew, bundles of cloth for a trader with more optimism than sense, two passengers who’d paid in advance for the privilege of not walking—and took on a few new odds and ends bound for Vesper Bay. Hund gave Marisa an approving grunt when she presented him with a tally that matched his own ledger to within half a sack of flour. “You’re good with numbers,” he said, as if this were a mildly inconvenient surprise. “Good with food. If you were also good with cards, I’d have to fire you on principle.” Calder, lounging nearby, remarked that Hund was just bitter about the last time Brynkin had cleaned him out; Brynkin protested that he’d merely been using his “natural Lalafellian gifts of persuasion.” Marisa listened with half an ear, her mind already skipping ahead to the next stop: Vesper Bay, the ferry, the little postmoogles kiosk by the quay. She could feel the unwritten letters fluttering at the back of her teeth like caged birds.

Vesper Bay was not much to look at, if you ignored the constant flow of people and coin. A crooked line of buildings clung to the rocky shore, every surface coated in a fine patina of salt and sand; the main pier groaned under the weight of ferries, fishing boats, and the occasional grander vessel that had clearly taken a wrong turn on its way to somewhere more respectable. But to anyone who’d spent time in Limsa’s lower decks, it had a certain scruffy charm: the smell of tar and fish, the slap of waves against pilings, the way voices carried over water better than any city stonework. For Marisa, stepping off the wagon and onto the pier felt like

putting one foot back into a life she recognised while the other stayed planted firmly in the new one. “Feels smaller than I expected,” she said, watching the tide tug at the boats. Calder, hoisting a crate onto his shoulder, glanced over. “Most crossroads do,” he replied. “Doesn’t matter how big the buildings are. It’s the comin’ and goin’ that matters.”

They had a few bells before the caravan had to turn around and face the road back, enough time to confirm deliveries, settle accounts with a grizzled harbourmaster who looked at Hund’s papers as if daring them to be forged, and let the chocobos rest their legs. Hund gave Marisa a pointed look as he closed his ledger. “You said you had letters to send,” he said. “Go write ‘em. We pull out at last bell. If you miss us, you’re walkin’ to Ul’dah on your own.” She managed a salute only half in jest and escaped to the relative quiet of the pier’s edge, where a stack of empty crates made a serviceable desk. The postmoogler at the far end watched her with the solemn gravity of his kind, little satchel already bulging with other people’s homesick words. Puku hopped up beside her, tail flicking, as she pulled out paper, ink, and a hand that suddenly felt clumsier than any she’d ever used on a dough ball.

The first letter was to Hanako. The words came slowly at first, stilted and formal, all *I have arrived safely* and *the caravan is competent* and *the heat is tolerable*. Then she caught herself, snorted, and started again, this time letting the ink follow the shape of her actual days. She described the way the desert sky burned white at noon and spilled stars like lantern-oil at night; the way Brynkin could fall asleep anywhere, in any position, as long as his hat covered his face; how Calder’s quiet jokes landed like little pebbles tossed into a still pond, ripples spreading long after he’d fallen silent. She wrote about the stew she’d made from almost nothing that had somehow left grown men scraping their bowls, about the checkpoint where the Brass Blades’ smiles hadn’t reached their eyes, about the unexpected kindness of a stranger in Horizon who’d slipped her an extra flask of water “for the cat.” She did not mention the moment she’d woken in the dark, heart racing, convinced for one panicked instant that Eldric was out there somewhere on some other road, walking away again. Some things did not belong on paper, not yet.

When she finished, the page was crowded with her neat, slanted Lominsan script, smudged in places where her hand had lingered too long. She signed it with a flourish—*Your foolish, hungry daughter, Marisa*—and folded in a tiny scrap of dried herb from a plant Eryne had given her in Gridania, its scent faint but persistent. “So the flat smells less like canal and more like forest,” she muttered, tucking it inside before sealing the envelope. The second letter, to Marcus, was easier. She didn’t bother with formalities, opening instead with *You were right, you infuriating old exile*, and proceeding from there. She told him about the makeshift kitchen in the wagon, about experimenting with lentils and smoked peppers, about the way Hund’s face had

almost—*almost*—twitched into a smile when she'd managed to make a sauce that reminded him, very faintly, of something from Locus Amoenus. She sketched a little caricature of Brynkin being chased by an irate chocobo in the corner, ink lines quick and sure.

A third, shorter note went to Baderon at the Drowning Wench, mostly to confirm that she hadn't been eaten by antlions and to ask, with a sly twist of humour, whether there were any rumours yet of "that brilliant, daring pizza girl who brought hot food to the middle of nowhere." She hesitated over a fourth—one to leave at Puku Pizza for herself, perhaps, or for some future employee—but the idea felt too strange, too recursive. Instead she settled for drawing a narrow line on the creased map tucked into her satchel, extending the route from Ul'dah to Vesper Bay and back, then tracing it again until the paper grew soft under her fingertip. When she finally handed the stack of letters over, the postmoogler took them with a solemn nod and a muffled "kupo" that sounded suspiciously like a blessing.

The ride back toward Ul'dah felt different, though the road and the dust were the same. Marisa found herself looking at landmarks with a doubled gaze now: the practical eye of the quartermaster noting where water might be found, where ambushes could be laid, and the more private gaze of the letter-writer, filing away details for the next missive. That rock outcrop shaped like a bent finger; that lonely, wind-twisted tree that Brynkin claimed was haunted by the ghost of a very angry coeurl; the way the horizon shimmered like beaten metal when the heat really set in. She began composing sentences in her head as they rolled, catching particularly good ones under her breath before they could slip away. "You're mutterin' again," Calder observed one afternoon as he guided the chocobos along a particularly rutted stretch. "Either you're plottin' my murder or practisin' what you're goin' to tell your ma so she doesn't worry herself bald."

"Bit of both," she said, bracing herself as the wagon jolted. "Figure if I make it sound romantic enough, she'll focus on the sunsets and not the part where we nearly got shaken to death by badly maintained infrastructure." Calder huffed a laugh. "My da used to say letters are just lies with better penmanship," he said. "But sometimes folk need those lies. Makes the truth easier to hold." She thought about that for a while, about which parts she smoothed over for Hanako and which sharp edges she left in for Marcus, who she trusted to see the humour in them. It occurred to her that every version of her out here—the dutiful daughter, the ambitious pizzaiola, the curious almost-adventurer—was being pinned like a butterfly in someone's mind by the words she chose. It was a mildly horrifying thought. It was also, in a strange way, comforting.

When they finally rolled back into Ul'dah, filthy and sunburnt and three sacks of grain lighter, the city's noise hit her like a wave. She helped see to the cargo, accepted her pay with a satisfaction that felt deeper than the weight of the coin, and watched as Hundbraena squared off with a clerk from the Syndicate's office over some imagined discrepancy. Brynkin vanished toward the taverns with a promise to "research local vintages" and Calder muttered something about finding a quiet corner with tea and no shouting. Marisa stood for a moment in the shadow of the Gate of Nald, feeling the stone at her back and the desert at her feet, and realised that, for the first time, neither felt entirely foreign. She was tired, yes, and eager for a real bath and a bed that didn't move—but she was also already thinking, traitorously, about the next run.

That night, in the cheap inn off the main thoroughfare where she'd stayed on her first arrival, she lay on the narrow bed with the shutters cracked open to let in a sliver of hot, dusty air. The city hummed outside, a muted roar of voices, metal, and coin. On the small table by the bed, her map lay unfolded, lines spidering out from Limsa now in multiple directions: to Gridania, to Ul'dah, along the trade road to Vesper Bay. Little notes crowded the margins—*Eryne – likes basil*, *Hund – pretends not to like anchovies*, *Ma – send more stories than reassurances*. Puku sprawled across the corner that contained La Noscea, paws twitching in some dream-chase. Marisa watched the faint sway of the lantern on the ceiling and felt, with a clarity that made her throat tight, that she was no longer entirely of one place.

Between worlds, she thought. Between sea and sand, kitchen and campfire, home and horizon. It should have been a lonely place to stand. Instead, with ink still under her fingernails and the ghost of the road in her bones, it felt—for now, at least—exactly where she was meant to be.

Chapter 35: Salt on the Tongue, Sand in the Shoes

The ferry back to Limsa cut through the waves with an almost smug ease, as if it knew it had done this run so many times nothing the sea did could surprise it anymore. Marisa stood at the rail near the prow, the spray flecking her cheeks, hair whipped into a loose halo of half-tamed blonde. Thanalan's red cliffs had long since dipped below the horizon; ahead, Vylbrand rose slowly out of

the haze, the familiar teeth of its coastline sharpening with every bell. Puku had wedged himself into the crook between her satchel and the rail, nose tucked under his tail, twitching whiskers betraying that he was only pretending to sleep. She rested one hand on his back and the other on the worn wooden spoon Marcus had given her, thumb tracing its smooth handle. The air smelled right again: salt and tar and fish and the faint, metallic tang of Limsa's guns in the distance. Still, beneath the relief was something new, a strange extra layer like a spice she couldn't quite name. The sea felt less like the whole world and more like one very loud, very beautiful part of it.

By the time the ferry eased into the harbour, Limsa Lominsa was in full voice. Bells rang out over the white arches, gulls shrieked territorial insults, dockhands shouted to one another across stacks of crates. Red-and-black banners snapped against the bright sky, that longboat as familiar as ever. Marisa disembarked with the rest of the passengers, boots hitting the planks with a little more weight than they'd had when she'd left. On instinct, she glanced up at the forest of masts and rigging and picked out the flags—Lominsan, Maelstrom, a smattering of foreign colours. No black-and-gold Ul'dahn scales here, no Gridanian yellow, no Ala Mhigan griffin. Home turf. Puku popped his head up, sniffed deeply, and let out a pleased trill that said, as clearly as words, *Now that's more like it.*

The Lower Decks hadn't changed while she'd been gone. The canal still stank faintly of algae and old rope, the narrow walkways still creaked ominously in places they'd been creaking all her life, and the same old drunk still seemed to be asleep on the same old crate outside the same old warehouse. Yet as she made her way along the familiar route to the flat, satchel thumping against her hip, she noticed small things she'd never really seen before: the way the light filtered greenish through the water and up onto the underside of the bridges, the pattern of rust on a neglected chain, the precise tilt of a laundry line that let the breeze dry the clothes faster without whipping them into the canal. Details she would have missed once. Details you noticed after watching other places with different shapes and different light.

Hanako was on her knees by the low table when Marisa slid the door open, carefully arranging a few sprigs of dried flowers in the narrow vase they kept as the flat's single indulgence. She looked up at the sound, hands stilling. For a heartbeat both women froze—mother and daughter caught between the urge to rush forward and the instinct to pretend everything was perfectly normal. Then Puku solved the problem by darting past Marisa's ankles with a chirp and flinging himself bodily at Hanako's lap.

“Ah—Puku-chan!” she exclaimed, nearly losing her balance as she caught him. “You are back, and heavier.” She stroked his fur, eyes glossy, before lifting her gaze to Marisa. “And so is your mistress, I see.”

Marisa laughed, the sound coming out a little shaky as she stepped inside and closed the door behind her. “It’s just sand,” she said. “It gets into everything. Clothes, boots, soul. I’m fairly sure I’m bringin’ half of Thanalan home in my socks.” She shrugged off her satchel and dug inside, pulling out a small cloth-wrapped bundle and a narrow paper packet. “Brought you somethin’. Two somethings, actually.” Hanako set Puku gently aside—he protested but permitted it—and accepted the bundle. Inside was a slim bronze coin, worn at the edges, stamped with the stylised scales of Ul’dah. Beside it lay a length of bright cloth ribbon, dyed a deep desert blue that contrasted sharply with the muted tones of Hanako’s kimono. “From the markets?” Hanako asked, tracing the coin’s raised edge with a fingertip. “Mm. From a stall where the merchant swore at me in three languages when I haggled properly,” Marisa said, unable to keep the pride out of her voice. “The ribbon’s from Horizon. Thought you might like the colour. And this—” she handed over the paper packet, “—is a spice. Not too strong. Good with grilled fish.”

Hanako turned the ribbon between her fingers, the coin glinting on the table. She took a slow breath, then another, shoulders easing as if some knot she’d been carrying since the day Marisa left had finally loosened. “You kept your promise,” she said. “Letters from Gridania. Letters from Ul’dah. Now gifts from the road. I suppose I must accept that my daughter is becoming one of those people who collects places the way others collect lacquerware.” Her mouth twitched. “Sit. Tell me everything that you did not write, and some of what you did.”

So Marisa did, talking until her throat was dry and Hanako had to push a cup of tea into her hands. She told her about the smell of the Shroud after rain, about Eryne and the way the Gridanian conjurers had dissected pizza like it was some new species of herb. She described the white glare of Ul’dah’s midday sun, the chaos of the Steps of Nald, the line of refugees at the wall. Then she moved on to the caravan—the rattling wagons, the long days of dust, the nights under a sky so full of stars it felt like falling upward. She gave Brynkin all the flourishes he deserved and only some of the ones he didn’t, painted Calder as the kind of quiet that made noise meaningful, and tried her best to capture Hundbraena as more than a growl in a coat: the way his big hands were impossibly gentle with the chocobos, the way he watched the horizon like it owed him an explanation.

When she mentioned the moment Hund had said, in that gruff, offhand way, that there'd be a place for her if she ever wanted it, Hanako's eyebrow arched. "So. The road is already asking for you by name." Marisa fiddled with her cup. "It's only a maybe," she said. "I told him I've got obligations. The parlour. You. Marcus. I liked it out there, but I don't want to vanish like Eldric did. I'm not built to live out of a wagon forever." Hanako's gaze softened at the name, some complicated mixture of anger and grief flickering and then settling. "No," she agreed. "You are not your father. He chased horizons because he could not bear to stand still. You..." She reached out to brush a stray lock of hair from Marisa's forehead. "You are building something. Kitchens, roads, stories. It is different."

Later, with promises made about helping with laundry "tomorrow, absolutely, cross my heart," Marisa made her way up through the city toward Marcus's parlour. The walk felt steeper than usual after days of desert and wagon-bed, but the sight of the familiar sign swinging above his door put a spring back in her step. Inside, the dinner rush was rolling toward its peak: tables crowded, cutlery clinking, a chorus of hungry voices rising and falling like a tide. Marcus stood at the counter by the oven, commanding the chaos with a ladle in one hand and a towel in the other, issuing instructions in a blend of Eorzean and Corvosi that made even the cockiest sailor jump to obey.

He saw her between orders, did a double-take, and then his whole face lit up in a grin that made him look years younger. "*Eccola!*" he boomed. "The prodigal pizzaiola returns, and the city does not appear to be in flames. This is good. I was worried you had overcooked Thanalan." He thrust a peel at one of his assistants, muttered rapid directions, and then rounded the counter to clap her into a floury hug that left a ghost of handprints on her red coat. "Well, *marilla*? Did the desert bow down before your culinary genius, or did it try to eat you?"

She gave him the same story she'd given Hanako, but with the edges sanded in different places. For Marcus she lingered on the food: the improvised stews, the lentil experiments, the way a pinch of one particular Ul'dahn spice had rescued a pot that had been threatening to turn to beige disappointment. She mimed Hund's grunted approval, Brynkin's melodramatic swooning over second helpings, Calder's quiet, dry compliments. When she got to the offer—the "if you want it, you're crew" part—Marcus's brows rose, but he didn't interrupt. Instead he listened, arms folded, eyes warm, as she talked about the tug-of-war inside her: how the road called, but so did the ovens; how she loved the feeling of watching a map fill with lines, but also the weight of a key in a door that was hers.

“So,” he said at last, when she’d trailed off into vague hand-waving and self-conscious laughter. “The world has invited you for dinner, and you are trying to decide how many courses you can handle.” He rubbed his chin, leaving a streak of flour there. “*Bene*. Good problem to have. Do not decide everything at once. You are what, seventeen?” She grimaced. “Nearly eighteen.” “Ah, *vecchia signora*, forgive me,” he said with a mock bow. “In any case—this is not a marriage proposal. It is a job. You liked your trial run. You did not die. Your mother did not disown you. You keep cooking here, you run your little Puku Pizza, and when Hund writes or sends word that he needs a cook for a run, you see if it suits. You do not have to choose ‘road forever’ or ‘never leave the Mist.’ You choose again and again. *Capito?*”

Something unknotted in her chest at that. She hadn’t even realised how much she’d been thinking in drastic terms: settle down completely or throw herself onto the trade roads until she burned out. The notion that she could do both—sometimes here, sometimes there—felt almost scandalous, like cheating at a game whose rules she’d only just learned. “You make it sound easy,” she said. Marcus snorted. “It will not be easy. You will be tired and broke and sometimes very, very annoyed with people who ask for pineapple on pizza. But it will be *yours*. That is the important thing.” He patted her cheek with a heavy, affectionate hand. “Now, you stay for dinner. I have a new topping combination that is either genius or a terrible mistake, and I need a victim. Eh, *taster*.”

She stayed, of course. She tied on an apron, fell back into the rhythm of the kitchen like she’d never left, and let Marcus bully her into trying a pie topped with thin-sliced potatoes, rosemary, and some Corvosi cured meat that tasted like a boar had gotten drunk and rolled in spice. It was, annoyingly, excellent. They argued about whether it would sell to Lominsan palates, laughed at some of the more absurd customer requests, and for a few bells the desert dust shook loose from her bones under the warm, familiar tyranny of the oven.

That night, back in Puku Pizza, after a shower that lasted exactly as long as the hot water allowed, Marisa stood in the middle of her tiny parlour and turned a slow circle. The walls were the same: her map tacked up with its growing web of lines; a small shelf of books; a hook where her red coat lived. The oven in the corner ticked as it cooled, the stone still radiating the day’s heat. Outside, she could hear the muted rush of waves against the cliff, the murmur of neighbours heading home along the Topmast’s corridors. Yet she saw everything slightly differently now, as if someone had pulled the camera back a few ilms and widened the frame. This room wasn’t the entirety of her world anymore. It was one of several centres she carried with her.

She walked over to the map, fingers hovering over the inked lines: Limsa to Gridania; Limsa to Ul'dah; Ul'dah to Horizon and Vesper Bay. New scribbles joined the old—little notes about stew ratios, about a decent well near a particular bend in the road, about a Roegadyn who pretended not to care and a Lalafell who cared about everything far too loudly. In the margin she wrote, almost as an afterthought: *Happy Trails – good for business. Ask about seasonal routes.* Then, after a moment's hesitation, she added: *Not instead of home. As well as.*

Puku, finally satisfied that his world had been restored to the correct proportion of familiar smells, leapt onto the table and flopped right across the map, pinning Limsa and Ul'dah both under his considerable fluff. Marisa scratched between his ears, earning a rusty purr. "All right, boss," she murmured. "We'll keep the parlour hot. We'll run the roads when it makes sense. We'll write too many letters and maybe bring Ma so many little trinkets she needs a second box." She glanced out the window at the faint, distant lights of the harbour. "Seventeen and already needin' a bigger map. Could be worse."

She blew out the lamp, the room falling into the soft grey of moonlight, and crawled into bed with the comfortable ache of someone who'd carried her own weight and then some. The sea sang its old song outside, steady as breath. In her half-sleep, the rhythm of wagon wheels over ruts wove itself through the sound of waves on stone. For the first time, the two didn't clash. They braided together instead—road and tide, crust and crumb, here and elsewhere—into something that felt like the start of a life big enough to hold all of it.

Part VI — Puku Pizza Expands (Years 18-19)



Chapter 36: Rush Hour

By the time Marisa hit eighteen, mornings at Puku Pizza had started to feel less like “opening a tiny parlour” and more like “reporting for duty at a one-woman outpost on the edge of civilisation.” The Mist’s Topmast was already humming when she headed up the curve of the walkway: estate caretakers sweeping steps that would be windblown again in a bell, neighbours shouting gossip across balconies, the distant crash of waves climbing all the way up through the clean white stone. Puku Pizza sat halfway along the curve, wedged between a tasteful planter of sea-thrift and a far less tasteful brass plaque advertising a neighbour’s “bespoke aetherial portrait services.” Someone had stuck a homemade flyer to her own sign, which was impressive, considering she hadn’t printed any.

She plucked it off and squinted at it. Someone had copied her logo in shaky ink—a stylized artwork of Puku wearing a red cap—and scrawled underneath: “*Ask the red one. She runs.*” “Nice to know the rumour mill’s workin’ harder than my advertising budget,” she muttered, stuffing it into her pocket. Puku peered out of the satchel slung across her chest, gave the red-and-gold Puku Pizza plaque his usual imperious inspection, then wriggled free the instant she unlocked the door. The parlour inside was a narrow triangle of space—kitchen at the back, wood-fired oven in one corner, two tiny tables and four mismatched chairs squeezed at the front—but it had the warm, lived-in feel of a place that had earned every stain on its floor. Sunlight poured through the front windows, turning flour dust into drifting gold. Her map of Eorzea, tacked to the far wall, rustled faintly in the sea breeze, red ink lines radiating from Limsa like spokes: to Gridania, to Ul’dah, to Horizon and Vesper Bay.

Rush hour started long before the first customer walked in. She tied on a red apron already ghosted with older flour, rolled her sleeves past her elbows, and set to work. Dough first: old starter coaxed awake with warm water and flour, the familiar tug and stretch under her fingers as she kneaded at the counter. The oven in the corner still held yesterday’s heat; she fed it kindling, listened for the soft hungry crackle, and opened the flue to let it breathe. Tomatoes went into a pot with garlic and herbs to simmer into sauce while she portioned dough balls and lined them up under a cloth like a row of sleeping coeurls. Puku did his usual inspection rounds, leaping from stool to table to counter, sniffing at everything with the seriousness of a customs inspector. When he tried to stick his face into the cheese crate, she flicked his ear. “Quality control does not mean eatin’ half the stock,” she scolded. He blinked at her slowly, utterly unrepentant.

The first knock came earlier than she’d expected. She had just finished stretching the day’s first crust—a neat circle spun from hand to hand—when someone rapped on the door with the urgency of a man who’d mistaken the sign for “emergency infirmary” rather than “humble pizza parlour.” A Yellowjacket sergeant stood there when she opened it, blond braids escaping his helm. Two younger guards hovered behind him, looking as if they’d rather be anywhere else. “You the pizza girl?” he demanded. “Depends,” she replied, leaning on the doorframe. “You the ones who left a tomato sauce handprint on my flyer at Tidegate?” One of the younger guards made a strangled noise; the sergeant’s ears went pink. “We’re on early patrol,” he said, ignoring the question. “No time to sit. Can you do three pepperoni-and-onion, one plain cheese, and somethin’ with ‘a lot of mushrooms’ before we have to report at the Moraby check?”

She sized him up, mentally tracing the route down from the Mist to the ferry, across the bay, up the switchback road. The timing would be tight, but not impossible. “If you pay extra for the rush,” she said, “and one of you carries my insulated box on the way there. I’m not sprintin’ the whole Cliffside.” Ten minutes later she had four pies in the oven and a growing queue of delivery slips on the counter. The Yellowjackets had barely vanished back down the stairs when a pair of drenched fishers from Aleport stumbled in, smelling aggressively of the sea and holding a sack of something that wriggled. “We’ll gut ‘em outside, promise,” one said, thrusting the sack at her. “But if you could do a ‘fish special’ with whatever we survive filleting, we’ll pay in gil *and* smoked pilchards.”

The rest of the morning went that way: a flurry of orders, half of which were normal and half of which involved some bizarre request only Limsa could produce. An Arcanist from Mealvaan’s Gate wanted a “test pizza” divided into six perfectly even wedges, each with a different single topping, “for experimental purposes.” A pair of adventurers, sunburnt and still half in their armour, asked whether she could do a breakfast pizza with egg, bacon, and “whatever vegetables make it look like we made a healthy choice.” A grandmother from Lower La Noscea, leaning heavily on a cane, insisted on an anchovy-laden pie “like they used to do in Aleport before they started listenin’ to people who said anchovies were ‘too strong.’” Marisa took every order, adjusted her prep on the fly, and kept the oven fed and breathing. By the time the bells in Limsa’s upper decks chimed noon, the little parlour smelled like every good decision she’d ever made.

The first real wave hit just after midday, when the sun was high enough that even people with no appreciation for subtlety understood that a hot meal delivered to their door beat going out into the glare. Delivery slips multiplied on the counter like coeurls in mating season. Marisa strapped the insulated carrier onto Rocceto’s back, tightened the harness, and ran through the list. “Moraby, Aleport, the lighthouse, and Camp Overlook,” she told him, patting his neck. “We do the coast first, then cut back up. No biting customers. Even the ones who say ‘oh, we thought you’d be taller.’” The red chocobo snorted, stamping one taloned foot, his feathers flaring with offended pride. He tolerated the harness, barely, because he’d learned that harness meant running and running meant the kind of full stretch he rarely got in the cramped confines of the Mist.

She swung into the saddle, Puku hopping up into the satchel with the practised ease of long habit, and they took off down the Topmast, hooves striking sparks off the stone. The trip blurred into a rhythm she’d come to love: the rush of wind past her ears, the stinging of salt on her lips, the way Rocceto’s stride devoured the road. They thundered past bemused estate caretakers, startled a

pair of nobles coming out of their villa, and hit the ferry with seconds to spare. On the far shore, it was all business. Moraby's Yellowjackets were waiting on the dock, coins ready and complaints already forming about sauce distribution. Aleport's fishers greeted her like a long-lost cousin, slapping her on the back so hard she nearly lost her balance. The lighthouse keeper at Oschon's Torch accepted his pie with quiet delight and pressed an extra handful of gil into her palm, mumbling something about "keepin' the light on in more ways than one."

By the time she and Rocceto pounded back up the Mist's switchbacks, the chocobo's flanks were lathered and her own legs felt like they belonged to someone else, but the carrier was empty and her coinpurse rattled in a satisfying way. Puku had spent most of the ride perched like a smug gargoyle, tail lashing with every bump, occasionally yowling directions as if he had any idea which way was east. Back at Puku Pizza, she stripped saddle and harness, rubbed Rocceto down with brisk, grateful hands, and bribed him with a handful of grain. "You're the best terror on two legs, you know that?" she murmured into his feathers. He preened, fluffed himself up, and tried to nibble her sleeve, which she chose to interpret as affection.

Afternoon bled into evening, and the pace inside the parlour shifted from pure delivery to a mix of sit-in and carry-out. A young Roegadyn couple claimed one of the tiny tables and shared a single pie between them, arguing good-naturedly about whether the crust should be crisp or chewy. A small group of Marauders from the guild muscled their way in, all scarred knuckles and booming laughter, and ordered "whatever'll fill us up fastest without bankruptin' us." She threw together a pair of enormous half-and-half pies that met somewhere between her standards and their wallets. Even a shy-looking Miqu'te from the Arcanists wandered in, book still in hand, and spent an entire bell slowly working through a cheese pizza while scribbling notes in the margins as if she were studying the spell structure of mozzarella.

Somewhere between wiping down counters, sliding pies in and out of the oven, and darting out with the occasional evening delivery around the Mist itself, Marisa caught herself leaning against the counter during a rare lull, chest heaving, hair stuck to her forehead with sweat. Her arms ached from kneading, her back throbbed from riding, and there was a smear of tomato sauce on her cheek she hadn't noticed. Puku was curled in a sun-warmed patch by the window, paws twitching as he dreamed, while the oven pulsed heat at her like a living thing. Outside, the corridor hummed with low voices and the distant sigh of the sea. For a moment, the sheer *booming* of it all hit her. This was no longer an experiment, no longer a "little side-business" to spite Pagoda Buligoda. This was work. This was real.

She didn't get long to dwell on it. The door chimed again and a familiar bulk filled the frame: Hundbraena Toegfyrsyn, coat dusty from travel, brown hair brushed back, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Smelled you from the docks," he rumbled. "Figured I'd see if the legend lives up to the letters." Behind him, Brynkin peered in around his elbow, hat tipped back, eyes bright. "Oho, so this is the famous Puku Pizza," the Lalafell said. "Smaller than I imagined. Smells better than I imagined. Where d'you keep the gold you're obviously rollin' in?" Calder slipped in last, offering Marisa a nod and a faint, genuine smile. "Busy day?" he asked, glancing at the flour on her sleeves.

"Aren't you supposed to be in Thanalan terrorisin' perfectly innocent Brass Blades?" Marisa demanded, grinning despite the exhaustion. "If you want food you're gettin' in line like everyone else." Hund glanced at the mostly empty room, raised a brow, and said, "Looks like we're early, then." They took a table that barely fit all three of them, boots and coats and travel dust making them look comically out of place amid the neat wooden chairs and little potted herb on the windowsill. She brought them a large pie on the house, half one of her standard combinations, half experiment—a nod to the stew she'd improvised on the caravan, lentil and spiced sausage on one side, smoked fish and onion on the other.

As they ate, the conversation flowed like it had around the desert campfires, only now the backdrop was the low murmur of the Mist instead of wind over sand. Hund grunted his approval after the second slice, Brynkin proclaimed it "a revelation in crust form," and Calder observed that if she ever opened a second location in Ul'dah, he'd happily handle the sharpened-end-of-things in exchange for staff discount. Somewhere in the middle of their chatter, Marisa caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the front window: hair wild, apron stained, arms folded, listening with her head tilted just so. She looked—she realised with a small shock—like someone who belonged here, in this triangle of stone and heat and noise. Someone who could welcome people in from the road because she herself had been out there and come back again.

They didn't stay long; caravans rarely did. But when Hund stood to go, he left a small folded scrap of paper under his empty plate. She found it while clearing the table later: a rough note in his blunt hand—*Good food. Good head. Next run to Gridania in three moons. If you want part of it, send word via Horizon.* No pressure, no demand, just an opening carved out in the shape of a possible future. She tucked it into the frame of her map, just above the line she'd drawn between Limsa and the Shroud.

The last customers drifted out sometime after midnight. Marisa locked the door, banked the oven, wiped the tables and counters until the wood gleamed, and stacked the chairs legs-up. Her legs felt like overcooked noodles, her wrists ached, and she had the distinct impression that if she sat down too quickly, she'd never get up again. Puku leapt onto her shoulder as she stood in the centre of the little parlour, arms crossed, surveying the space. Dough bins empty. Sauce pot scraped clean. Coin box heavier than it had been that morning. The map on the wall rustled in the breeze, the red lines gleaming faintly in the lamplight.

“Not bad for a girl who used to think the world ended at the harbour, eh?” she murmured. Puku head-butted her chin, purring, which she chose to interpret as agreement. She blew out the lamp, locked up Room 77 behind her, and stepped back into the corridor. Outside, the Mist was quieting, the sea breathing steadily below. Tomorrow would bring more orders, more deliveries, more aching feet. Maybe another caravan. Maybe some new problem she hadn't even thought to worry about yet. But tonight, as she made her way home through the sleeping ward with cat on her shoulder and flour still dusting her hair, Marisa felt the pleasant, bone-deep satisfaction of someone who had spent an entire day doing exactly what she was meant to do—and had lived to be tired from it.

Chapter 37: Routes, Rocceto, and Red Ribbons

By the time the novelty of “being eighteen with her own parlour” wore off, Marisa had discovered a new and terrifying adult hobby: logistics. One grey morning she sat at the tiny front table in Puku Pizza with her elbows planted on the wood and her map spread out beneath her, red ink lines already criss-crossing La Noscea like an overexcited cartographer's fever dream. Circles and notes crowded the coast: Aleport, Moraby, Swiftperch, Oschon's Torch, Camp Overlook. Next to some she'd written things like “30 bells round trip – Rocceto tired but fine” or “extra fee – pirates too handsy.” Puku lounged directly on top of Limsa proper, tail flicking idly, as if personally guarding the city from bad ideas. “If we do Moraby first, then cut across to the lighthouse, then up to Swiftperch, we can pick up the Mist-bound ferry without breakin' Rocceto's legs,” she muttered, drawing a tentative loop. “If we don't, we're gonna spend more time backtracking than delivering. Thoughts?”

Rocceto, tied to the railing just outside, tossed his head as if he knew she was talking about him. The red chocobo's feathers caught the light each time he shifted, more crimson than chestnut when the sun hit them right. He had filled out in the months since she'd taken him from Red Rooster Stead, all long lines and tense, coiled strength, but his eyes still went narrow and white-rimmed at certain sounds and smells as if expecting a whip to follow. Today, at least, he seemed content enough, tearing at the potted sea-thrift and ignoring her warnings about "that being ornamental, you menace." Marisa sighed, drew one more line, and snapped the map shut. "All right. No more thinkin' on paper. Time to stress-test the system."

They started with what she grandly referred to as "Route Scarlet North," which sounded far more official than "the loop that hits Swiftperch, the lighthouse, and as many half-legal fishing spots as we can cram in." She strapped the insulated delivery box to Rocceto's back, tightened the harness, and looped a bright red ribbon around the base of his neck, tying it with a flourish. "There," she said, stepping back to admire her work. "Now you look like the dashing steed of a reputable delivery concern, not a reformed brawler who once tried to eat a stablehand." He clicked his beak and shook his head until the ribbon settled just so, preening despite himself. Puku poked his head out of the satchel, blinked once at the ribbon, then slowly extended a paw and batted at the dangling end. Rocceto snapped his beak a handspan from the offending paw, which Puku took as an invitation to retreat with immense dignity.

The first leg went smoothly. They flew along the Mist's upper walkways, hooves ringing, then clattered down to the ferry and crossed to the mainland. The sea air tasted clean and sharp; out on the water Rocceto relaxed in a way he rarely did on city streets, muscles loose under Marisa's legs. Once ashore, they thundered along the coastal roads, wind whipping strands of her blonde hair free of its tie. At Swiftperch she dropped off two pies to a pair of miners too exhausted to form proper sentences; at Oschon's Torch the lighthouse keeper greeted them like old friends and pressed a small, salt-stiffened charm into Rocceto's feathers "for safe footing." Marisa made mental notes as they went—time between stops, how long it took the cheese to stop being pleasantly stretchy and start being tragically congealed—and the ink map in her head adjusted itself with every hoofbeat.

It wasn't until she decided to test a southern route—a "Route Ember," as her notes optimistically called it—that things went sideways. The loop made sense on paper: from Moraby down past a cluster of farms, cut inland toward Red Rooster Stead, then back up toward the ferry. The Stead itself had started placing small orders every now and then; rough-handed ranchers and odd labourers who paid in coin and occasionally in eggs. It was work, and decent work at that. Still, as they picked up the road that led

toward the farm, Marisa felt Rocceto's gait change under her. His stride shortened, shoulders bunching, feathers puffing a fraction. "Easy, big lad," she murmured, shifting her weight in the saddle, hand easing on the reins. "We're just droppin' off food, not signin' you up for anythin'."

The closer they came, the more obvious it became this was not just ordinary stubbornness. The smells thickened—straw, sweat, that sour tang of too many animals kept in too small a space—and with them came sounds: deep booms of laughter, the sharp metallic clang of a ring gate, the distant roar of men shouting in unison. The Stead had always had a reputation: for birds bred mean, for fights that went on longer than they should, for coin changing hands over bloody beaks. Marisa had pushed that knowledge to the back of her mind when she'd first argued her way into taking Rocceto off their hands. Now, approaching the place with him, she felt it like a weight. The chocobo's skin twitched under her, breath coming faster; he tossed his head hard enough that the red ribbon snapped against his chest.

"Roc," she said, voice steady but low, "hey. Hey. Look at me." She leaned forward, fingers sliding along his neck to the side of his head, trying to catch his eye. For a heartbeat he met her gaze, wide and wild. Then someone at the Stead whooped—sharp, triumphant, the exact timbre of a cheer for a landed blow—and something in him snapped. He reared suddenly, front talons slashing the air, a strangled, furious *kweh* torn from his throat. Marisa grabbed for the reins with both hands, clinging with knees and instincts, her heart slamming against her ribs. The insulated box yanked at its straps, swinging. Puku, in the satchel, exploded out in a blur of fur and indignation, landing in the dust with all four paws spread, fur puffed twice his size.

For a terrifying breath it felt like Rocceto was nowhere near her—like he had gone somewhere deep and dark behind his eyes where no amount of soothing words could follow. He twisted, half-launching sideways, muscles bunched as if to bolt back the way they'd come. It wasn't malice, she realised with a cold clarity; it was blind terror. He thought he was going back into the ring. And if he bolted in this state—with boxes on his back, with her in the saddle—they'd both end up broken at the bottom of some ditch, if they were lucky.

"Rocceto!" The word came out sharper than she intended, cutting across the din from the Stead. She yanked the reins not just back but slightly to one side, turning his head away from the noise, away from the sight of the pens and the makeshift fighting circle. Her thighs screamed as she leaned into the motion, putting her whole weight into it. "Hey. Hey. Look at me, you beautiful idiot."

You're not there anymore. You're with *me*." Her voice cracked on the last word, a raw edge of panic showing through. She didn't care.

For a moment, he fought her, neck like iron under her hands. Then something in his posture shifted—the angle of his ears, the flare of his nostrils—and his spinning focus latched onto her instead of the memories clawing at him. His breathing was still fast, sides heaving, but the lethal edge of panic dulled. Marisa kept talking, words tumbling out in whatever order they came. "We're leavin'," she said, eye never leaving his. "We are turnin' around, and we are leavin', and if they want pizza they can damn well come fetch it at the gate. You hear me? You don't ever have to go back there if you don't want to." She reached down, fumbling one-handed in the saddlebag for the emergency treat bag she usually deployed at the end of long runs, and managed to pull out a handful of dried apple slices. She held them up where he could see and smell them. "See? Road snacks. Not blood. Road snacks with your name on 'em if you stop tryin' to launch us into the Twelvesdamn stratosphere."

He snorted, trembling, then, tentatively, lowered his head enough to lip the offerings from her palm. The first couple went down too fast to taste; by the third his jaw had slowed, the relentless tension beginning to ease. His feathers settled millimetre by millimetre. Behind them, someone shouted again, the sound of a crowd cresting—but this time, with his head turned away and her hand under his beak, it didn't land as deep. Marisa exhaled slowly, realising she'd been holding her breath for far too long. Puku crept back toward them, fur still puffed, and leapt onto the back of the delivery box with an indignant chirp as if to say, *Deeply unprofessional behaviour from all parties involved*.

She guided Rocceto in a slow, deliberate circle, putting the Stead at their backs. "Right," she said, throat dry. "New rule. We do not, under any circumstances, go past that fence again unless you personally march up to me and request it in triplicate." She cast a glance toward the Stead, where no one seemed to have noticed their near-disaster; everyone's attention was on whatever match was currently sending cheers into the sky. The delivery, she decided in that moment, could rot for all she cared. She'd bring them a refund later. Or not. "We're turnin' this into a perimeter run. Moraby, farms, then back. I'd rather lose a customer than lose you."

The ride back toward the coast was slow at first. Rocceto's stride stayed shorter than usual, his ears flicking nervously at every sudden noise. But with each field they passed and each bell that put distance between them and the Stead, the line of his neck lengthened, his gait opening up like it was supposed to. Marisa kept a running commentary the whole way—pointing out

interesting rocks, insulting pirates under her breath, narrating plans for a new mushroom-and-herb special as if they were the most fascinating thing in the world. It didn't matter what she said; what mattered was that her voice stayed there, tethering him to the present. By the time they hit the ferry, he was back to tossing his head at the dockhands and trying to steal a bite of someone else's lunch.

That night, after the last pie had gone out and the oven was all banked embers and memory, she stood at the little table under the map with a quill in her hand and a stubborn ache in her chest. Puku snored gently in the chair beside her, paws twitching. She drew a neat red line down toward Red Rooster Stead, then stopped. Slowly, she traced a curve around it instead, marking the route they'd taken that day. Next to the Stead she wrote, in small, careful letters: *No Rocceto deliveries. Walk-in only.* She stared at the words for a moment, then underlined them.

In the morning, when she went out to check on Rocceto where he roosted in the Mist's small stable area, he lifted his head and gave her a look that was almost apologetic. There was a faint scuff on one of his legs where he must have clipped a rock in his panic, but nothing serious. Marisa rested her forehead briefly against his beak. "We'll work around it," she murmured. "You don't have to be brave about everythin'. You already do more than enough." She retied the red ribbon at his neck, fingers gentle, and added a second, smaller one to his reins. Decoration, yes—but also a quiet promise she'd made the day before and meant to keep.

Somewhere, she thought, there were people who saw chocobos as interchangeable beasts, just muscle to strap to wagons or pit against one another in bloody spectator sport. Those people had never tried to coax a terrified, proud, ridiculous bird back from the edge of his own memories with nothing but a handful of treats and the sound of their own voice. As she led Rocceto out into the bright morning for another day's work—this time on a carefully adjusted route—Marisa felt a strange mix of protectiveness and gratitude. He wasn't just her delivery mount. He was a partner with a past. And if her job now included making sure that past stayed behind them, well... she'd add it to the growing list of responsibilities she'd never asked for and couldn't imagine giving up.

Chapter 38: Tea, Tales, and Traditions

On the rare mornings when Marisa didn't have to sprint out of Puku Pizza with a stack of orders clutched under one arm, the city felt almost indulgent. The sea fog rolled low over the harbour, softening the edges of masts and rigging, and the usual racket of gulls and dockhands came through muffled, like sound underwater. She had declared this particular day a "No Long-Distance Delivery Day"—written in chalk on a small board by Puku Pizza's door and underlined three times—so after the breakfast rush of a few Mist locals, she closed up early, banked the oven, and headed down toward the Lower Decks with Puku draped bonelessly over her shoulder like some floppy fur stole. "You and Ma are gonna gang up on me, aren't you?" she muttered as she walked. Puku yawned in her ear, unfazed, and flicked his tail in a way she chose to interpret as *obviously*.

The Lower Decks were as damp and familiar as ever. The canal glugged along between the buildings, greenish water reflecting laundry lines and leaning balconies; the air smelled faintly of salt, tar, and frying fish. Children chased each other along the walkways, leaping over missing planks with the instinctive precision of those who'd grown up counting gaps instead of cubits. Marisa threaded through the bustle, nodding to the occasional face she knew: the old Roegadyn who sold cheap knives from a crate, the Lalafell fishmonger who refused to learn her name and called her "Pizza Lass" as if it were an official title. When she reached the familiar door of the Takeuchi-Shipman flat, she slid it open with her elbow, balancing Puku's weight and a small paper-wrapped parcel that smelled faintly of sugar.

Hanako was seated at the low table, back straight, hair pinned in a neat bun, wearing a soft plum-coloured kimono patterned with tiny cranes that looked like they might take flight if she moved too quickly. A tray sat between her and an empty cushion: teapot, two cups, and a small lacquered box that usually held sweets reserved for special occasions. She looked up as Marisa stepped in, and the faint tension in her shoulders eased. "You are on time," she observed, which, coming from her, was just short of, *I'm glad you're here*. "I thought perhaps your customers had chained you to that little oven."

"They tried," Marisa said, kicking off her boots at the threshold. "I escaped under cover of a 'Closed for family obligations' sign. If anyone complains, I'll tell 'em to take it up with you." She dropped the paper parcel on the table with a flourish and plopped down on the opposite cushion. Puku slid off her shoulder and immediately claimed the warm patch where sunlight from the window hit the tatami. "From the markets," she added. "Kugane-style sweets. Or as close as Limsa can get." Hanako opened the parcel and gave the contents a critical once-over: small squares of jelly dusted with starch, a little crooked around the edges but bright with citrus and plum. "We will see," she said, but there was a hint of amusement at the edge of her mouth.

She poured the tea with the same meticulous care she gave everything rooted in home. The pot was old, the glaze hairline-cracked from years of use, but the steam that curled from the spout smelled like roasted barley and evenings in Kugane. Marisa accepted her cup with both hands, trying not to slouch too obviously. They sat in a companionable silence for a few sips, the quiet only broken by the distant thump of someone dropping a crate on the walkway outside and Puku's gentle purr. Then Hanako nodded once, decisively, like someone starting a performance. "So," she said. "You have become busy enough that I must make an appointment to see you."

Marisa snorted into her tea. "It's not that bad," she protested. "I'm just... more organised now." She gestured vaguely, nearly sloshing. "Routes. Regulars. There's a Yellowjacket sergeant who tips in advance if I promise not to be 'five minutes late with the only hot food in the godsdamn watch.' Things like that." She hesitated, then added, more softly, "It's goin' well, Ma. Better than I thought it would. People know the name now. Puku Pizza. They even get it right more often than not."

Hanako's eyes softened. "I see your name, too," she said. "In letters. On little scraps of paper from the postmoogles. 'Miss Takeuchi's pizza saved our caravan from mutiny.' 'Miss Takeuchi's pizza made my grandchildren stop complaining about their vegetables.'" She picked up one of the jellies and turned it between her fingers. "And on the ledgers the collectors bring, now," she added, almost offhand. "Men who once came only to remind us what your father owed now knock more politely, because the numbers go down instead of up, thanks to you." She glanced up, eyes softer. "You are becoming well known, Marisa-chan. Not as someone's daughter. Not as someone's apprentice. As yourself."

The words landed with more weight than Marisa had expected. For a moment she was back in Kugane, a small child trailing after a mother in perfect white makeup, a father with a laugh too loud for narrow streets. Then she was in Limsa again, smaller still, standing in a crowd of rough voices and bigger bodies, clinging to Hanako's sleeve while Eldric spun some tale for half-listening dockhands. Back then, she'd been "little Mari," "Eldric's girl," "that Hingan child." Now strangers came to her door and said, "Is this where the pizza girl lives?" and meant it as a kind of respect. "Feels strange sometimes," she admitted. "Good-strange, but still strange. Like I've somehow tricked everyone into thinkin' I know what I'm doin'."

“That feeling does not go away,” Hanako said dryly. “You simply learn to do more things while feeling it.” She took a sip of tea, then set the cup down with a small clink. “Tell me about your customers,” she prompted. “Properly. Not just ‘they pay on time’ or ‘they tip badly.’ What kind of people eat your food?”

So Marisa talked. She described the Yellowjackets and their brusque gratitude; the caravaners who staggered into the Mist when they had a night between routes, eyes still full of desert and hands calloused from reins; the shy Arcanist who always ordered the same thing and always looked as if she might bolt if spoken to too loudly. She told her about the older Roegadyn woman who came in once a sennight for a small anchovy pie and never smiled until the first bite—then lit up like someone had opened a window. Hanako listened, hands folded in her lap, occasionally interjecting with a pointed question. “Does the shy one eat alone?” “Does anyone bring their children?” “Are there many from outside Limsa?”

When Marisa mentioned a pair of Domans who had turned up recently, hesitant but curious, Hanako’s expression tightened in a way her daughter recognised. “Did they speak Doman?” she asked. “Or only Eorzean?” “Both,” Marisa said. “They swapped mid-sentence sometimes. I could follow most of it. They... miss home.” Hanako’s gaze went distant for a heartbeat, the lines at the corners of her eyes deepening. “Of course they do,” she murmured. “The world keeps making more of us.” She looked back at Marisa, studying her face as if checking it for cracks. “And you,” she added, “what do you tell such people, when they sit in your little Lominsan parlour and speak of lands that no longer exist as they once did?”

“I tell ‘em the pizza’s hot,” Marisa said, then winced. “And that they’re welcome to stay as long as they like. I... don’t know how to fix anything bigger than an empty stomach, Ma.” She toyed with her tea cup. “Sometimes it feels like I should be doin’ more. Like I’m wastin’ something, livin’ in the Mist and sendin’ letters instead of... I don’t know. Fightin’ the Empire. Joining some grand resistance. Bein’ the sort of person the *Harbor Herald* writes articles about that aren’t in the gossip section.”

Hanako’s mouth quirked. “Ah yes, *atashi no musume*, the great revolutionary. Overthrowing tyrants one perfectly charred crust at a time.” She let the teasing hang in the air for a moment, then sobered. “Listen to me. There are many kinds of work in this world. Some swing swords. Some write letters. Some carry stories. Some feed people who would otherwise go hungry, or remind them for one moment that life can still taste good.” She picked up one of the jellies, examined it, and popped it into her mouth. After a

contemplative chew, she nodded approval. “You are not wasting your life because you are not on a battlefield. You are... how do they put it here... holding the rear line.”

Marisa blinked. Coming from anyone else, it might have sounded like an attempt to make her feel better. From Hanako, it landed as simple fact. “Rear line, huh?” she said. “Never thought of it that way.” She thought of Marcus talking about the Empire in Locus Amoenus, receiving letters from home never fully explained. Then of Marcus himself, catching her wrist when she tried to cheat on prep time. *If you cannot make a simple crust properly, how will you manage the complicated things?* he’d said once. Basic work, foundation work. Maybe that was all life was, in the end. Make sure people get fed. Make sure they remember what “normal” feels like between calamities.

Hanako refilled their cups, the steam briefly fogging her glasses. “Besides,” she added, more gently, “you are still young. You have already done more than I had at your age, running a business, crossing the sea, writing letters that travel further than I ever will. When I was eighteen I was still praying not to trip over my own sleeves in front of rich men too drunk to notice.” She smiled wryly. “We measure ourselves against the wrong things, sometimes. You compare yourself to heroes in stories. I compare myself to the girl I might have been if I had stayed. Both are ghosts.”

They slipped into Hingan for a while after that, almost without noticing—old habit creeping back in now that Marisa’s tongue had loosened from regular practice with Marcus’s Corvosi and the occasional Doman. The cadence shifted: softer consonants, different music. Puku twitched an ear but otherwise did not care what language the voices came in, as long as the room stayed warm. Hanako told a story about one of her first *okiya* patrons, a tipsy civil servant who’d insisted she “interpret” a particularly terrible poem he’d written; Marisa retaliated with an anecdote about a drunk Lominsan who’d tried to order a “pizza with no toppings, no cheese, just crust, but make it special.” They laughed more than they usually allowed themselves to, the sound bumping gently against the low ceiling.

At some point, Hanako rose and went to the small chest in the corner. She knelt, lifted the lid, and took out a folded length of cloth Marisa had only seen a handful of times: a crimson *obi* embroidered with chrysanthemum and wave motifs, the colours still rich despite age. “This was my mother’s,” Hanako said quietly, bringing it back to the table. “She wore it when she apprenticed. I brought it with me when I left, but I have not... had reason to put it on in years.” She spread it out carefully, smoothing the fabric,

then looked up at Marisa with an expression that was part mischief, part something almost shy. “Stand,” she ordered. “Turn around.”

Confused but obedient, Marisa got to her feet and turned, feeling clumsy and oversized in her simple shirt and trousers. Hanako stepped behind her and, with deft hands, wrapped the obi around her waist, humming under her breath as she worked. It felt strange—constricting but not unpleasant, like being briefly reshaped into someone else’s silhouette. “There,” Hanako murmured, tying the knot with a final tug. “Just to see.” She walked around to appraise her handiwork. For a moment, her face did something complicated: pride, nostalgia, grief all passing through. “You look ridiculous,” she concluded, lips twitching. “Too tall. Hair all wrong. But... a little like you might have looked, if things were different.”

Marisa looked down at the embroidered silk, then at her calloused hands. She thought of flour, of reins, of knife handles; of ink stains on her fingers from route notes and letters. “Feels like I’m stealin’ someone else’s life,” she said. “A version of me who never left Kugane. Who never learned how to swear in Lominsan. Who doesn’t know what sand tastes like when the wind kicks up.” She hesitated, then added, “But I don’t hate how it looks. On me, I mean. It’s... pretty.” Hanako’s eyes softened. “You are not stealing,” she said. “You are borrowing. Remembering that you are not just one thing. You can be a pizzaiola and still be Takeuchi as well as Shipman.”

They unwound the obi together, folding it carefully back into its chest. Before she put it away, Hanako cut off a short length of the red ribbon she used to tie the inner wrapping and handed it to Marisa. “For your chocobo,” she said, as if that were the most natural thing in the world. “So he also remembers he has a foolish Hingan girl as his mistress.” Marisa laughed, throat tight, and tucked the ribbon into her pocket alongside her delivery notes. “He’ll wear it with pride,” she said. “And probably try to eat it.”

When she finally left, the fog had burned off and the Lower Decks were drenched in late-afternoon light. She climbed back toward the Mist feeling oddly lighter, as if some invisible weight she hadn’t known she carried had shifted into a place she could support. At Puku Pizza, she tied the little strip of obi-ribbon around one of Rocceto’s reins, snug beside his usual red. He shook his head until it fluttered just right, then preened it with great care. “There you go,” she said, giving his neck a fond pat. “Now we’re all walkin’ around with bits of Ma’s past on us. Guess that makes us a proper family.”

Inside, the oven waited to be lit again, dough bowls waited to be filled, and a stack of delivery slips from the day before sat in their neat pile, small paper promises of meals yet to be made. Marisa rolled her shoulders, tied on her apron, and set to work. Somewhere between the careful way Hanako had poured tea and the easy way she now slung flour across the counter, a line had been drawn and then blurred until it no longer mattered which side of it she stood on. She was Hingan. She was Lominsan. She was a pizzaiola, a daughter, a girl with sand in her boots and red ribbons on her chocobo. Nothing about that was tidy. But as she stretched the first dough of the evening into a perfect, spinning circle, it felt—like so many imperfect things in her life—exactly right.

Chapter 39: A Map with Moving Edges

Marisa was now nineteen, and over time the wall above Puku Pizza's front counter looked less like decoration and more like a battle plan. The map of Eorzea she'd tacked up there when she first opened Room 77 was now so riddled with red ink lines, circles, and little scribbled notes that the original printing struggled to show through. La Noscea was a dense spiderweb of routes and timings. Twelvesdamned Ul'dah, once just a distant blot of desert and irritation, now sported neat arrows from Vesper Bay and Horizon. Gridania had a dainty ring around it with the words "*rain = double travel time; Eryne = basil hook-up*" squeezed into the margin. Someone—she suspected Brynkin—had drawn a tiny doodle of Puku in the corner, sitting on a pizza box and looking smug.

She stood on a chair one quiet afternoon, charcoal stick between her fingers, frowning at the Shroud. "If I cut across from Gridania proper to Bentbranch, then back through the ferry to Aleport..." she muttered. "No, that's three ferries for one day and Rocceto will mutiny. Maybe if I anchor here—" She reached up to add a small triangle near Fallgourd Float, then froze when the door's bell chimed and the chair wobbled. "We're closed for disaster planning!" she yelped, hopping down before she could fall. "Come back when I'm less likely to die of my own brilliance."

The man in the doorway snorted. Baderon from the Drowning Wench filled Puku Pizza's frame like he filled any room he walked into: broad shoulders, beard that looked like it had never once known restraint, and eyes that had seen more shipwrecks and hangovers than any sane person should. "That so?" he rumbled, leaning an elbow on the jamb. "Funny, that. 'Cause from where I'm standin', looks like ye're drownin' in success, an' I came t' make it worse." Puku, who'd been napping on one of the chairs, lifted his head, blinked slowly at the newcomer, and decided he wasn't a threat as long as the oven stayed warm.

Marisa wiped her charcoal-stained fingers on her apron and planted her hands on her hips. "If you're here to tell me the Wench wants 'another dozen pies for the 'We Didn't Sink This Week' special,' you'll have to book it like everyone else," she said. "I'm a respectable, overworked businesswoman now, you know." "Aye," Baderon said, amusement crinkling his eyes. "That's why I brought paperwork." He reached into his coat and pulled out a folded sheet, slapping it onto the counter. "Got me a regular ask comin' in from folk I'd normally tell to shove off. 'Is there anywhere in Limsa that delivers t' Gridania? Is there anywhere that'll bring food t' Camp Drybone from the city that isn't three days old an' lookin' like somethin' the coeurls rejected?'" He jerked his chin toward her map. "Figure ye might have Opinions."

She unfolded the paper and scanned the rough list: names of Free Companies, a couple of independent adventuring bands, even one scribe's circle from the Botanists' Guild who clearly had more gil than sense. Next to each was a scrawled note: "*will pay on time*," "*always broke but good for gossip*," "*tipped this much at Wench last time – stingy bastards*." "You're keepin' a ledger of my potential customers," she said, eyebrows rising. "What's the catch?" Baderon shrugged, pretending nonchalance. "Catch is I'm sick o' listenin' t' 'em whine that they can't get a hot meal that isn't fish stew or pub grub. Ye're already runnin' yer little red lines all over the map. Might as well get paid properly for it." He scratched his beard. "An' if ye're seen takin' jobs that start in the Wench, well. Doesn't hurt my trade either, does it?"

She thought of the debt ledger Hanako kept in the flat, of the lines of numbers that had slowly, gratifyingly, started to shrink over the past year. Of Eldric's old mess being chipped away one slice at a time. Then she looked back at the map, at the routes she'd already carved out with sweat and saddle sores. "All right," she said. "I'll take 'em. But we're settin' boundaries. I'm not deliverin' to the middle of a Coerthan blizzard or into a Sahagin camp just so some idiot can say they had pizza 'under fire.'" "Reasonable, that," Baderon said. "I'll tell 'em the 'Puku Pizza International Outreach Initiative' has standards." He smirked. "An' that ye're still only one girl, a chocobo, an' a very judgy cat."

Once he'd left—with a promise to send some of the new work her way and a grumbled compliment about “makin’ the rest of us tavern folk look bad”—Marisa climbed back onto the chair and stared at the map again, chewing her lip. It struck her, not for the first time, how much bigger her world had become without actually feeling like it had blown apart. The Mist was still her centre of gravity. Puku Pizza was still a triangle of hot stone and tables. But now there were lines tying that little room to places she'd only ever read about as a child. Bentbranch's forests. Drybone's blasted, sunburnt stones. The pale green of Gridania's glades. She wasn't just feeding Limsa anymore. She was feeding people on the road, at camps, in tumbledown clearings where the aetheryte hummed and the only other building was a half-collapsed inn.

The next few moons turned into a blur of expanding edges. Some days were still Mist-bound: all local orders, all familiar faces. Other days, though, she'd pin a fresh slip to the wall—“*Two cheese, one mushroom, Camp Drybone, leave with Brass Blade sergeant on duty*”—and feel that itch in her feet that meant she was going to be thinking about the route until she'd ridden it. She learned the rhythm of Gridania-bound ferries, the best time of day to hit the path between Bentbranch and the city proper before the worst of the rain set in, and which Brass Blade officers along the Thanalan road cared more about paperwork than whether her satchel smelled strongly of oregano.

Once, delivering to a Free Company encampment on the outskirts of the Shroud, she arrived to find half the camp arguing over a quest board while the other half tried to repair a tent that had clearly lost a fight with a coeurl. “Ah, thank the Twelve, food!” their leader groaned when she rode in, waving her over as if she were reinforcements in some great battle. “If I had to listen to one more debate about whose *turn* it is to tank, I might have defected to the elementals.” They devoured the pies around the campfire, still bickering amiably; one of them, a grizzled Highlander woman with scars like bad cartography, asked where she was based and nodded approvingly when Marisa named the Mist. “Smart,” she said. “Stay where the boats come in. World's in the comin' and goin'.”

On a different run, to a ragtag group of miners outside Horizon, she found herself trading slices for information: what the latest Syndicate edict meant for caravan fees, who'd seen Imperial airships where they shouldn't be, which routes were suddenly “unsafe for no official reason.” She tucked those little scraps away alongside the coin, filing them with a part of her mind that had learned from Marcus and Hund both that food was never just food. It was a reason for people to talk. It was an excuse to gather. It was a way to hear what wasn't being shouted in the streets.

The more the map filled, the more deliberate she became about not letting it swallow her whole. There were days she deliberately turned jobs down—especially ones that would have had her away from Limsa for too long. It was tempting, sometimes, to imagine expanding until Puku Pizza was some sprawling enterprise with branches in every city-state, deliveries criss-crossing the continent like the web on her wall. But then she'd come home after a long run, push open the familiar door, and feel the oven's heat roll out to meet her, see the exact way light fell on the two tiny tables, hear Hanako's voice in the back of her head reminding her that stability was a luxury, not a prison.

One evening, after a particularly long day that had involved a last-minute order from a Company in Lower La Noscea and a detour to avoid a Sahagin patrol, she found Marcus leaning against the wall opposite Puku Pizza's door, arms folded, watching the comings and goings along the Topmast as if he'd been there a while. When she came up the path and fished out her key, he pushed off the wall with a small nod toward her satchel. "Long day," he observed. Inside, once she'd unlocked the door and let him in, his gaze went straight to the map on the back wall. He stepped closer, squinting at the chaos of lines and scribbles, and tapped one note in particular—"Do not argue with this Brass Blade about tolls. Not worth it." "I see you are developing a philosophy," he said, glancing over his shoulder at her with a crooked smile. "Very good. Philosophy keeps you from strangling customers. Most of the time."

She unlocked the door and ushered him inside, kicking it shut behind them. "If the customers don't get me, the geography might," she said, dropping her satchel on a chair. "Every time I think I've got my routes sensible, someone decides they desperately need pizza at some ruin that isn't even on the map." "And you say no?" he asked, eyebrow raised. "Sometimes," she replied. "Sometimes I say 'yes, but you're payin' enough to replace my chocobo if this goes wrong.' Balance, Marcus. I'm learnin' it. Slowly."

He looked back up at the map, eyes tracking the red lines. "When I first came to Limsa," he said, "I could not bear to look at maps. They all had the same mark on them: Garlemald at the top, like a stain. Every route in and out of Locus Amoenus went through checkpoints. Every road had a cost." He tapped the parchment lightly. "This... this is better. Your roads are made of pizza. The toll is paid in crust."

She snorted. "Only you would find a way to make that sound profound," she said. But his words lodged somewhere under her breastbone all the same. Her roads were hers, not decreed by an Empire. Her deliveries ran on her timing, not on an overseer's.

When she chose to go to Gridania or Ul'dah, it was because she'd weighed the costs and decided the trade was worth it, not because some officer had told her where to stand.

Later, after he'd stolen a slice from the cooling rack with the shameless entitlement of someone who had, in fact, earned that right, Marcus wandered over to the map again and pointed at an empty patch of sea east of Limsa. "What is here?" he asked. "Nothing," she said. "That's just ocean." "Mm," he said. "Be careful. Emptiness on a map is where the next line wants to go." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "You cannot fill in everything, *marilla*. Leave some blue. Leave some space where the world is allowed to surprise you."

When he'd gone and the shop was quiet again, she stood alone in front of the map, charcoal in hand. For a long minute she simply looked—at the crowded coast, at the criss-crossed routes, at the new little notes Baderon's list had prompted. Her hand drifted toward Coerthas, then hesitated. Snow. Dragons. Politics she barely understood. No, not yet. She lowered the charcoal and instead darkened the lines she already had, sharpening what she'd already carved into the world rather than chasing every possible road.

Puku hopped up onto the sill and meowed at her, tail flicking. "Yeah, yeah," she said, putting the charcoal down and reaching for the broom instead. "We'll keep the map honest. We'll keep the dough rising. One thing at a time." The world outside Puku Pizza's thin walls was vast, stretching far beyond even her ink-scribbled imagination. But as she swept flour from the floor and listened to the wind rattling the windows, Marisa felt oddly steady. The edges of her world were moving, yes. But they were moving because she pushed them—and because, at the end of each day, she had somewhere solid to return to.

Chapter 40: Letters from Home

The rain had settled over Limsa in one of its stubborn, sideways moods—the kind that soaked you from the ankles up and made even the hardest dockhand swear at the sky. Puku Pizza was quiet that afternoon, the usual ferries delayed and the casual customers preferring to linger in taverns already lit and loud. Marisa took advantage of the lull to prep dough for the evening, sleeves rolled, hair tied back, the rhythmic stretch and fold of the dough soothing something in her that the constant clatter of

deliveries never quite touched. The oven burned low and steady, filling the parlour with a comfortable, bread-warm heat. Rain drummed on the stone outside, a steady, soft percussion.

The chime at the door sounded soft over the patter. She glanced up, fingers still sunk in dough, and saw Marcus step in, shrugging off a dark cloak damp with rain. He looked more weathered than usual, she thought—nothing dramatic, just a certain heaviness around the eyes, as if the rain had seeped into his bones. He carried a leather satchel that wasn't his usual kitchen one, the strap darkened by years of travel. Puku appeared from wherever he'd been sleeping, sniffed the air, and immediately padded over to wind around Marcus's boots, leaving a faint dusting of flour on the leather. "Ah, *piccolo furto*," Marcus rumbled, bending to scratch behind the cat's ears. "You at least still know how to greet a man properly."

"You sayin' I don't?" Marisa asked, lifting her hands from the dough and flexing them. "I'd hug you, but I'd end up printin' a whole loaf onto your coat." She wiped her fingers on her apron instead and leaned her hip against the counter. "You look like the *Harbor Herald* just printed an extra tax on pizza." "Worse," he said, unfastening the satchel and setting it on one of the little tables. "The postmoogles have discovered their sense of professionalism." He pulled out a bundle of letters bound with twine, the paper creased and faintly yellowed. The outermost bore the unmistakable formal script of High Garlean, stiff and blocky even from where she stood. The ones beneath were looser hands, some in Corvosi, one in a messy scrawl that had bled where rain had once kissed it.

She reached for a cloth, wiped the last of the dough from her hands, and joined him at the table. Up close, she could see the way his jaw worked as he untied the bundle, like someone clenching against an ache. "From Locus Amoenus?" she asked, softer now. He nodded once. "From... what is left of it," he said. "From people who are still there, at least. An old neighbour. A cousin. A baker who took over my old oven." He tapped the Garlean-script envelope with a finger. "And from the loyal servants of the Empire, reminding us all that we are very fortunate to be so... *watched*." The word came out with all the warmth of a fish pulled three days late from the bilge.

"Bad news?" she ventured. "Or just... the usual flavour?" Marcus exhaled through his nose, a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. "The flavour is familiar. The recipe changes." He slid one of the thinner letters toward her, the one written in a mix of

Corvosi and colloquial Garlean that she could now muddle through, thanks to his stubborn lessons. “Here. Read. Slowly. And do not make that face you make when you think about throwing things.”

She unfolded the letter carefully. The script was crabbed but determined, the ink slightly blotched in places. As she read, her lips moved just enough to shape the words. It was from someone she recognised by name alone: Tiberis, Marcus’s cousin, the one he sometimes swore had flour in his veins instead of blood. The letter started with pleasantries, the way all such letters did—health, family, carefully neutral remarks about the weather—and then slipped, line by line, into the spaces between what could be openly said.

There were mentions of “revised quotas” that meant longer lines for bread and shorter tempers in them; “new inspections” at the basilica and the market, which she knew by now meant soldiers standing where priests or merchants had once stood. The old chapel at the edge of the district—once a place of small, practical offerings to a handful of local saints—had been “repurposed.” The word sat heavy on the page. “They have turned the apse into a storage room for materiel,” Tiberis wrote. “The incense cupboard now smells of oil and iron. The old statues are ‘in transit for restoration,’ which means we will never see them again.”

Further down, the tone tightened. There were whispers of small disappearances: a neighbour who had “relocated for work” and whose flat remained mysteriously dark; a teacher who had “spoken too freely” about Corvosi history and was suddenly gone from the school rosters. “We are told this is progress,” Tiberis had written, in a hand that had grown more cramped with each line. “That the marble must be reshaped to fit the Imperial ideal. But if you chip at something long enough, Marcus, it stops being a statue and becomes rubble.”

Marisa felt her mouth go dry as she read. She had never seen Locus Amoenus, but she’d heard enough of Marcus’s stories to picture the narrow streets, the crowded tenements, the basilica with its mismatched columns. The image of soldiers stacking crates where candles once burned stuck in her throat. “He... he’s all right, though?” she asked, looking up. “Tiberis. He’s still... there?”

“For now,” Marcus said quietly. He had another letter open in his own hands, this one in tighter, more official script. “He writes. He bakes. He feeds people. It is a form of defiance that nobody can quite call treason. Yet.” He made a face and flicked the paper he

held. “Our friends in the provincial administration, on the other hand, wish to remind all loyal citizens that hoarding grain is a crime, that unauthorised gatherings at shrines are a crime, that distributing leaflets is a crime, that asking too many questions about missing persons is, of course, a crime.”

Marisa grimaced. “So breathin’ too suspiciously will be a crime next,” she muttered. “‘*Article Twelve: Inhalation Without Proper Imperial Authorisation.*’” It was a weak joke and she knew it, but the alternative was sitting in silence with the taste of rust in her mouth. Marcus huffed a laugh despite himself. “Careful,” he said. “You joke like that in the wrong district and someone will decide you are ‘politically unhelpful.’”

He spread the rest of the letters out like a strange, painful fan. One from the baker who’d taken over his old shop, talking about yeast shortages and how customers had started showing up before dawn to make sure they got bread. Another from an old neighbour, a woman who used to send her children to fetch pizza from his oven on holidays, now writing about how those children were being “encouraged” to attend new Imperial youth programs. Each letter had its own particular rhythm, its own way of dodging the censors with careful phrasing and tiny jokes tucked between the lines. But the weight was the same: a sense of something closing in, of air getting thinner.

Marisa listened as he translated, filled in gaps, explained things the writers had only hinted at. The basilica’s clergy “retired early” after refusing to stop blessing loaves. A small shrine to an old Corvosi sea-god had been boarded up and its offerings “confiscated.” The phrase came with such heavy irony that she didn’t need him to explain that the coins and trinkets had likely walked into somebody’s private purse. At one point he mentioned, almost casually, that his younger niece was “under scrutiny” for her involvement in a student circle that discussed “unauthorised literature.” His mouth tightened on the last two words.

“Can you... do anythin’?” Marisa asked at last, fingers curled around the back of the chair so tightly her knuckles ached. “From here, I mean. Apart from send letters back.” She knew the answer, or thought she did, but some stubborn part of her still needed to ask.

Marcus looked down at the spread of paper, then around at the little Puku Pizza parlour—the oven, the map, the flour ghosting the floor. Rain ticked softly against the stone outside. “I can send money,” he said, after a moment. “Which I do. Quietly. I can send advice, which they sometimes take and sometimes ignore, because they are young and stubborn and think they are immortal.” His

eyes flicked up, fond and exasperated all at once. “I can remind them that being clever is not the same as being careful. And I can...” He let the words trail off, his gaze going distant for a heartbeat. “I can decide how much longer I sit here, in this city that lets me bake and shout and drink without fear, while they are... rearranged.”

She felt that like a dropped stone in her gut. “You’re thinkin’ about goin’ back,” she said quietly. It wasn’t quite a question. He rolled one shoulder, a shrug that carried more weight than most full confessions. “I am... considering things,” he replied. “It is not so simple as packing a bag and walking into the first transport. The Empire does not stamp passports with ‘returning exile, please be kind.’ But yes. I think. I read these. I look at your map. I stand in a city whose biggest worry most days is whether the price of fresh fish goes up a few gil. And I ask myself how long I can justify staying away from the place where my family is still trying to keep the ovens lit.”

Marisa’s throat tightened. She thought of Marcus as she’d always known him: flour on his hands, alternating between cracking jests and barking at apprentices to slice thinner, knead longer, *think*. She hadn’t truly allowed herself to imagine him elsewhere, less reachable than a quick walk up from the Wench. “If you go back,” she said, voice rough, “they won’t just let you walk in and pick up where you left off. You’re on somebody’s list. Probably several somebodies’ lists. And you’ve been here, makin’ jokes about pizza in front of Maelstrom officers and anyone who’ll listen. It’s not like you’ve been quiet.”

He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You give me too much credit,” he said. “Garlemald does not wake up each morning thinking of one irritating Corvosi who ran away to make flatbread in Limsa. But.” He tapped the official letter again. “Provincial bureaucrats remember. They are like bad sauce—clingy and hard to wash off.”

She leaned forward, bracing her elbows on the table. “If you go,” she said, forcing herself to say it cleanly, “I want you to have a reason better than guilt. ‘My cousin wrote me a sad letter’ is not enough to walk back into the lion’s den for. You’ve built somethin’ here too. You’ve got students. Me. People who rely on you to yell at their dough until it behaves. That has to count for somethin’.”

For a moment, his expression softened into something almost proud. “*Mia stella*,” he said. “Listen to you, talking about weighing reasons. When I left, I did it with a sack, a stolen recipe, and the vague idea that if I kept walking west long enough, the Empire would lose patience and forget I existed. You are already smarter than I was at twice your age.” He reached across and tapped her

knuckles with flour-rough fingers. “Do not worry. I am not going to vanish tomorrow. There are papers to arrange. Favors to call in. Money to move. And...” His gaze drifted briefly to the oven. “There are a few things I still want to make sure you know how to do without me standing over your shoulder shouting.”

The idea of him leaving still made something in her chest clench, but the way he said it—practical, almost wry—kept it from tipping into panic. This wasn’t a goodbye. Not yet. It was the first crack in a wall she’d assumed was load-bearing, now suddenly revealed to be something that might move. She let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding. “Good,” she said. “Because I am not ready to be the only person in Limsa who knows how to properly pronounce half these Corvosi words for toppings.”

He laughed softly, some of the tightness in his shoulders easing. “Then we had better start another lesson,” he said, gathering the letters back into a stack with surprisingly gentle hands. He tucked them away into his satchel like fragile cargo, then clapped his palms together as if physically dusting off the weight. “Enough of Imperial stupidity. Show me this ‘philosophy’ you are developing on your routes. And then we will make a pizza that Tiberis would disapprove of on principle because it does not follow the proper ratios.”

She stood, feeling like someone had opened a window in a room she’d only just realised was stuffy. The knowledge that somewhere, far across the sea, a city Marcus loved was being chipped away by decrees and inspections sat heavy behind her ribs. But alongside it now was another knowledge: that he was thinking about it, planning, not just sighing over old scars. It scared her. It also felt, in a way she couldn’t quite articulate, right. People like Marcus did not stay still forever. They were always either running from something or running toward it. Maybe this was what it looked like when a person got tired of only doing the former.

She crossed to the counter, dusted her hands with flour, and reached for a lump of dough, the familiar weight grounding. “All right,” she said. “Lesson one: how to make a pizza so good even an Empire can’t legislate it out of existence.” He snorted, rolling up his sleeves. “Ambitious,” he said. “I like it.” Outside, the rain tapped on, indifferent to Empires, debts, and distant cracked marble. Inside Puku Pizza, under the watchful eyes of a growing map and a very nosy cat, they set to work—one of them already halfway between two worlds, the other slowly realising that sooner or later, she would be too.

Chapter 41: The Weight of the Wooden Spoon

The first sign that something was different was that Marcus showed up before she opened and didn't come bearing a takeout order or an insult disguised as a compliment. Marisa was halfway through hauling flour sacks from the tiny storeroom to the kitchen when she heard a knock that was too polite to be a Yellowjacket's and too restrained to be Hund's. She nudged the door open with her hip to find Marcus standing there with his usual satchel, a second, bulkier bag slung over one shoulder, and an expression that looked, disconcertingly, like resolve. "You are open for apprenticeships today, yes?" he asked, stepping in without waiting for an answer. "Good. I have decided to terrorise you thoroughly."

She blinked, pushing the door shut behind him with her heel. "You terrorise me all the time," she said. "Most days it's just with opinions about crust thickness." He ignored this, dropping the heavier bag onto one of the tables with a thump that made Puku startle out from under a chair. When he unbuckled it, she saw what he'd brought: his own old tools from Riverside—scratched wooden spoons, a battered peel, a heavy stone mortar that looked like it could outlive the building. They were worn in the way only objects that had passed through too many hands could be, edges polished by years of use. Seeing them here, in her space, felt a bit like watching a tree uproot itself and stroll into somebody else's garden.

"Today," he announced, rolling up his sleeves with grim ceremony, "we are doing everything properly. No improvisations, no 'it'll do,' no 'the customer will not notice.' We will make dough that would satisfy my grandmother, rest it like we have the patience of saints, and top it with respect. You will hate me by the end, but you will not be able to say I left you half-trained." He glanced at her then, the words hanging between them like steam. *Left you.* She heard it and he knew she heard it; his gaze flicked away toward the oven before she could pin him to it.

She swallowed. "All right," she said, trying for lightness and landing closer to steady. "If you're gonna haunt my kitchen even while you're still alive, might as well make it useful." Puku, having decided the mortar wasn't going to attack him, hopped onto the counter for a closer look. Marcus snapped his fingers and the cat sat down immediately, tail tucked, as if he, too, understood that today was not the day to test boundaries.

They started with dough. Marcus commandeered her mixing bowls, tutted at the state of one, swapped it for his own, and set her to measuring flour and water with a precision that bordered on religious. “You have good instincts,” he said, as she stirred, “but instincts are for the days when the world does not want to fall apart. Technique is what carries you when you are tired, distracted, angry, or very, very sad. You learn the rules so that when you break them, it is on purpose.”

He made her remake the first batch when she tried to rush the kneading, flicking her wrist with the back of his spoon when she grumbled. “Again,” he said. “You will not always have time to listen to the dough. You must teach your hands to know when it is right.” The second batch passed muster; he had her tear it open, feel the gluten strands, smell it. “This,” he said, “is what you trust. Not the clock. This.”

They moved on to sauce, then to cheese, then to topping combinations. He dragged out old Corvosi ratios, muttering about balance and fat and acid and heat and how “if you put everything you like on one pizza, you create a committee, not a dish.” He made her defend every choice. “Why this sausage with that onion? Why these herbs with that cheese? Do not tell me ‘because it tastes good.’ That is a result, not a reason.” She sparred back, arguing for her own favourites, and sometimes he conceded, sometimes he did not. At one point he took a bite of a pie she’d cobbled together on instinct—thin crust, lemon-marinated fish, capers, a scattering of pickled vegetables—and chewed slowly, eyes unfocused. “You stole this idea from three things I made you eat and two things you read,” he said at last, “but you made it yours. Good. You are learning to be shameless in the right ways.”

Hours passed like that: the oven roaring, the room filling with the smell of tomatoes and char and hot bread, their voices rising and falling as they argued, tested, tasted, adjusted. It was harsher than their usual sessions, less banter and more demand. Yet beneath the impatience there was a current of something almost fierce, almost tender—like he was trying to cram years of hovering mentorship into a single, concentrated day. Every time she thought they were done, he’d produce another recipe variation, another story, another rule he hadn’t yet written down for her. “You think you know how to handle a rush?” he scoffed, when she complained about the ache in her arms. “Wait until some fool orders thirty pies at once for a wedding and the oven decides today is the day it will not behave. Work now. Curse me later.”

It wasn’t until late afternoon, when the counters were dusted with flour and stacked with cooling test pies and Puku lay sprawled on his back in a dough-induced coma, that he finally leaned back against the wall and let out a breath. His hair was damp with

sweat, his forearms dusted white almost to the elbow. “Good,” he said. “This, at least, I can leave without waking up in a cold sweat thinking you are underbaking everything.”

Marisa, who was wiping her forehead with the back of one wrist, froze mid-swipe. “You keep sayin’ that word,” she said, too casually. “Leave.” The silence that followed was full of the oven’s soft crackle and the faint hiss of rain outside. “Last time you talked about goin’ back to Locus Amoenus it was very ‘in theory’ and ‘in the distant future when the stars align and the Empire collectively chokes on a bread crust.’ This is feelin’ a lot more like ‘I am packing my bags and forgetting my favourite student exists.’”

He was quiet for a moment, eyes on the floor. When he looked up again, there was no flippancy left, only a kind of tired honesty she didn’t see often. “I will not forget you,” he said. “That would require a blow to the head so severe I would forget my own name. But yes, I am... moving from ‘in theory’ to ‘in practice.’ Slowly. Within a year, maybe two, if I can make the arrangements.” He gave a half-shrug that didn’t quite hide the tension in his shoulders. “The letters keep coming. The situation does not improve. At some point, *not* going back becomes harder to live with than the risk of going.”

Her stomach did something unpleasant, like she’d eaten three slices too fast after a long ride. Nineteen suddenly felt both very young and very old. “So that’s what today is,” she said. “Not ‘Terrorise the poor girl for fun,’ but ‘Make sure she doesn’t burn the city down with bad dough once I’m gone.’” She tried to say it lightly and didn’t entirely succeed.

“Yes,” he said simply. “And no. You are already competent. I do not stay because you need me to hold your hand. I stay because I like being here. Because shouting at you about sauce is more pleasant than pretending Locus Amoenus is just a name on a map.” He pushed himself away from the wall, crossed to the table where the test pies cooled, and picked up one of the wooden spoons he’d brought. It was older than her, she guessed, the handle worn to the shape of his grip. He turned it between his fingers, then held it out to her, handle first. “This belonged to my mother,” he said. “She beat dough with it. She beat sense into her children with it. I took it when I left and I have carried it all the way from Corvos to here. If I go back...” His mouth twisted. “If I go back, I cannot take everything with me. Some things must stay where they have grown new roots.”

She stared at the spoon, throat suddenly tight. Taking it felt like accepting that this wasn't just a dramatic mood that would pass. It was a step toward a future in which he was not a ferry ride and a walk away. "You're really serious," she said. "About goin'." "I am serious about *trying*," he corrected gently. "The Empire may have other ideas. The sea may have other ideas. Fate may have ideas I do not like. But I cannot spend the rest of my life in Limsa telling young people to be brave while I hide behind my oven."

For a moment she wanted to tell him to stay anyway. To say that he'd done enough, that nobody back in that "cracked marble city" could reasonably demand more of him than he'd already given. But she saw the way his eyes flicked toward the letters tucked safely in his satchel, the way his jaw clenched when he said "hide," and she swallowed the words. She knew what it felt like to have the horizon tug at you. She couldn't begrudge him the same pull just because hers led to caravan routes and his led back into the lion's mouth.

She reached out and took the spoon. It was heavier than it looked, the wood warm from his hand. "If you're leavin' this here," she said, trying to keep her voice steady, "you realise that means I'm gonna yell at people with it in your absence, right? And tell any apprentice I get that some terrifying Corvosi once beat sense into me with it, too." A ghost of a grin tugged at his mouth. "Good," he said. "Let the legend grow. Tell them I could detect underbaked crust from three streets away."

She snorted. "You can," she said. Then, more quietly, "I don't like this, Marcus. Just so we're clear. I don't like the idea of you walkin' back into all that. But I... get it. And I am not gonna guilt you into stayin' where your head and heart won't let you stay. That'd be... wrong." She fiddled with the spoon, thumb finding the groove where his had rested thousands of times. "Just... don't go without sayin' goodbye. Properly. Or I'll sail to Corvos myself and throw this thing at your head."

"Threats of international assault," he said dryly. "Very good. You are truly my student." His expression softened into something openly fond. "I promise. No vanishings. No letters from strangers saying, 'oh, by the way, Marcus is gone.' When it is time, you will know. And until then, we keep doing what we have been doing. You make pizza. I shout. We both pretend we are not sentimental people."

They went back to work then, the conversation folding itself into the rhythm of the kitchen the way all weighty things eventually did. He corrected her grip on the peel, showed her a quicker way to portion dough without wasting scraps, made her blind-taste

two different batches of sauce and identify which had been simmered with the lid slightly askew. She filed every correction away with obsessive care, suddenly hyperaware that there would come a day when there was no voice over her shoulder telling her when she'd misjudged the heat.

Later, after he'd left—with a promise to come back “tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that; do not get rid of me yet”—Marisa locked the door, banked the oven, and stood alone in the warm dimness of Puku Pizza. The wooden spoon lay on the counter where she'd set it, its worn handle catching the light. She picked it up and gave it an experimental twirl. It felt wrong, and then, a heartbeat later, not entirely wrong. Like a borrowed coat that would, given time, smell like you instead of its original owner.

She hung it on a hook by the oven, the one she usually reserved for her favourite ladle. Puku leapt up, sniffed at it, and, apparently satisfied, curled into a tight ball on the prep counter. Outside, the rain had eased to a mist, the world damp and reflective. Inside, surrounded by flour and heat and the ghost of Marcus's voice still echoing off the walls, Marisa let herself sit for a moment and feel the shift. Her mentor was still here. Her life was, in all the ways that mattered today, unchanged. But the future had tilted a few degrees on its axis, and she could feel the weight of the wooden spoon on the hook like a promise and a warning both.

“Within a year or two,” she murmured to herself, resting her chin on her folded arms. “Plenty of time.” It sounded like forever. It sounded like no time at all. She blew out the last lamp, the parlour falling into soft shadow, and headed home through the damp streets with the knowledge that, sooner than she liked, she would be the one people turned to as *the pizzaiola* of Limsa Lominsa—not because Marcus was down the street in his own little parlour, but because he was gone. The thought scared her. It also lit something in her chest that felt suspiciously like resolve.

Chapter 42: Embers In The Sky

For the rest of her nineteenth year, Marisa lived with one foot firmly planted in the present and one toe hooked, stubbornly, in the future. Days at Puku Pizza settled into a rhythm that felt almost grown-up: morning prep, midday rush, long rides along familiar routes, evenings spent coaxing dough into obedient circles and listening to the city breathe outside her door. The wooden spoon

Marcus had given her hung by the oven, its worn handle catching the light whenever she turned, a constant reminder that she was no longer just “the student who helps out” but someone being quietly prepared to stand alone.

Marcus himself became a little harder to catch, though never so much that she could accuse him of avoiding her. Some weeks he was a daily presence—dropping by to steal a slice, critique a new topping combination, or grumble about postmoogles delays. Other weeks he vanished into the city, surfacing only in rumours: someone had seen him at the Maelstrom offices, arguing with a clerk; someone else had spotted him talking to a Lominsan ship’s captain with the air of a man measuring a hull with his eyes. When he did appear in her parlour, he always had some new “last little thing” to teach her: a different way to read a patron’s face, a trick for coaxing a temperamental oven through a bad day, the art of saying “no” to a bad deal without making an enemy.

Life went on around those lessons. She took more long-distance deliveries, learned which caravan captains could be trusted to carry her pies as riders and which ones would “accidentally” eat them en route, wrote letters with flour-stained fingers to people in Gridania and Ul’dah who now thought of Puku Pizza as a taste of Limsa. At home, Hanako began to complain, half in jest, that she saw her daughter more often in the pages of the *Harbor Herald*’s gossip column than at their own table. On particularly exhausted nights, Marisa would stagger back to the Takeuchi-Shipman flat, flop face-down onto the futon, and mumble into the pillow that she was too young to be this tired. Hanako would cover her with a blanket, neither saying nor needing to say that tiredness earned in one’s own name tasted different from the exhaustion of just surviving.

The letters from Locus Amoenus kept coming. Marcus didn’t always show them to her, but she saw the way his expression changed when he’d had a fresh batch—how he grew a little quieter, a little more intent, as if listening to a voice only he could hear. Once, he admitted in an offhand tone that some of his paperwork had been approved: a provisional travel document, stamped with Imperial crests and polite menace. “Not a guarantee they let me in, or let me back out, of course,” he said, shrugging as if discussing a minor supply delay. “But the first brick has been moved. We will see what falls.”

She found herself watching him more closely after that. The way he leaned on the counter at Riverside when he thought no one was looking. The way his jokes about Garlean bureaucracy had acquired an extra edge, less bitter and more resigned. She wanted to grab him by the apron and shout that he didn’t have to go—that he was allowed to choose safety, allowed to stay in this loud, salty city that had adopted him as surely as it had adopted her. But she saw the way he lingered over certain phrases in the letters,

the way his fingers tightened imperceptibly on the paper, and she knew that for Marcus, “staying” and “hiding” had long since become the same word.

Time slid forward in the way it always did: in deliveries and dough, in letters and quiet decisions, in the slow, almost imperceptible shifting of what felt inevitable.

A year later, when Marisa was twenty and the calendar’s moons had turned more times than she liked to think about, she climbed down the damp stone steps into the Lower Decks under a heavy evening sky and realised, with a start, that she was about to say goodbye to Riverside as she had always known it. The rain had started again, steady and cold, turning the planks slick and the canal below into a dark, restless mirror. Lanternlight blurred in the water, smearing gold and orange across the current. She hugged her cloak tighter around herself and hurried along the walkway, boots splashing through shallow puddles, Puku’s head occasionally bumping her chin from his snug place inside her satchel.

Riverside Pizzeria looked smaller than she remembered from those first awe-struck visits years ago. The painted sign over the door was a little more faded, the frame a little more warped by sea air, but the smell that drifted from the chimney—woodsmoke and tomatoes and something indefinably Marcus—hit her like coming home to a version of herself that still had flour in her hair from apprenticeship days. Tonight, though, there were no voices spilling out, no clatter of crockery. The windows were dim, the interior lit only by the warm, low glow of the oven and a single lantern hanging near the counter.

She opened the door without knocking, as she’d done a hundred times, and stopped just inside, water dripping from her cloak onto the familiar floorboards. The benches along the wall were bare. The usual clutter of mismatched plates and old, chipped mugs was gone, stacked instead in neat crates near the door. The shelves that had once groaned under the weight of jars, spoons, and little Corvosi trinkets were half-empty, their gaps revealing scuffed wood and nail holes. Only the oven remained untouched, its mouth glowing, coals banked like a sleeping heart.

Marcus stood beside it, sleeves rolled up, his hair tied back with less care than usual. He was wiping down the counter when she came in, moving with the slow deliberation of someone stretching out the last of a ritual. For a heartbeat, she thought he might pretend this was an ordinary evening. Then he looked up, met her eyes, and smiled in a way that tried very hard to be only wry,

and did not quite manage it. “You are late,” he said. “I was beginning to think I would have to close without you stealing one last meal from me.”

“Sorry,” she said, closing the door behind her to keep the wind from rearranging the dust. “Had to finish up at Puku’s. Thought I’d better pay my respects before you ship off to go annoy an entire province instead of just one city.” She glanced around at the crates, the stacked crockery, the bare shelves. “You’re really doin’ it, then. Shuttin’ this place for good.”

He set the cloth down, palms resting flat on the counter for a moment. “For good as in ‘no more customers banging on my door at all hours demanding pizza?’” he said. “Yes. For good as in ‘I will never stand in front of a hot oven again?’” He shrugged, a slow roll of shoulders. “We will see. There are ovens in Corvos. Some of them are even still legal.”

“How long until you leave?” she asked. “For the ship, I mean.” “Several moons yet,” he said. “Papers, passages, favours. It takes time to arrange all the ways a man might regret his decisions.” His mouth twitched. “But Riverside is done. I cannot keep one foot in this oven and one in the future. I will stay with a friend near the Docks until it is time.”

The words landed with a dull, inevitable weight. She knew this was not the final farewell—not yet. They would still have chances to talk, to argue, to dance around the shape of the looming absence. But the sight of the crates against the wall, the empty space where familiar jars had once stood, made something behind her ribs ache. “You’re closin’ the door,” she said quietly. “Even if you’re not leavin’ the city yet.”

“Doors must close so others can open,” he replied, as if quoting some old Corvosi proverb. “Besides, if I left this place half-open, Limsa would turn it into a gambling den or a fish market within the week. Better to end on my own terms.”

He straightened then, clapped his hands lightly as if shaking off dust, and forced the mood to turn with him. “Enough,” he said. “If we keep talking, we will drown in sentimentality and I will be forced to fake my own death to escape it. We have work to do.” He nodded toward the empty counter. “One last pizza. Properly done. From start to finish. You will do most of it, because if I do, it will be for me, and tonight is not about that.”

She blinked. “One last... don’t you mean ‘a few’? You could at least let me scam you out of two.” “One,” he said firmly. “One that is exactly what it needs to be. No more, no less. You will make it. I will judge it. We will eat it. Then I will close my oven, and you will walk back up the hill and keep yours burning.”

He moved around the kitchen with the easy familiarity she’d always envied, pulling flour from one of the remaining sacks, setting out a bowl, measuring with his eye in that infuriating way that somehow always landed exactly right. When he gestured for her to take over, she slipped into the motions without thinking: water, yeast, salt, the slow incorporation of flour until the dough came together under her fingers. It felt different here, in this kitchen where she’d first learned the difference between “mixed” and “ready,” where his corrections had once felt like thunderclaps. Now, with the wooden spoon he’d left hanging in Puku Pizza and his trust sitting solid in her chest, the work felt... shared.

They let the dough rest, talking about nothing important. He asked after Hanako, harrumphed approvingly when Marisa described how her mother had started subtly directing customers to Puku Pizza whenever she overheard anyone in the markets complain about “bland tavern fare.” Marisa, in turn, asked about Tiberis and the others in Locus Amoenus; Marcus answered in the wary present tense of someone who knew such statements could go out of date between letters. When the dough was ready, they portioned it together, his hands guiding when she hesitated, then falling back when she did not need them.

For toppings, there was no debate. “Simple,” he said. “This is not the time to show off. This is the time to remember why we started.” He laid out what he had kept aside for this night: a bright, clean tomato sauce perfumed with basil; fresh mozzarella he must have bullied a trader into procuring; a small dish of black olives glossy with oil; a handful of basil leaves, still damp from a recent rinse. It was a Corvosi-inspired pie, stripped of all needless ornament: focus on crust, on heat, on the balance of salt and brightness.

She stretched the dough into a neat circle, thinner in the centre, leaving a raised rim just the way he’d nagged her into learning. Sauce went on in a spiral, gentle and even, no puddles. “Remember,” he murmured, “you are painting, not drowning.” Cheese followed—torn, not sliced—nestled where the sauce thinned. Olives, scattered with care, not dumped. Basil last, a few leaves held back to add fresh after baking. When she slid the peel under the assembled pie, her hands barely shook.

The oven took it in with a rush of heat. They stood shoulder to shoulder, watching the crust blister and rise, the cheese sigh into molten pools, the edges speckle with dark, charred spots that would have made Pagoda shriek and Marcus's mother nod. The smell—tomato, smoke, the faint sharpness of basil—filled the small space, pushing back the damp chill that had crept in from the canal.

When it was done, she drew it out and set it on the counter. For a moment neither of them spoke. It was not the prettiest pizza she'd ever made, nor the most daring. But it was... honest. Everything she'd learned, everything he'd taught, distilled into one round, bubbling whole.

"You should name it," Marcus said at last, reaching for a knife. "If I am to be sentimental, I insist it be on my terms."

She hesitated, then grinned despite the tightness in her throat. "Fine," she said. "El Corvosano. For the man from Corvos who moved all the way to Limsa just to teach an idiot girl how not to burn the crust."

His laugh came out startled, then warmed into something rich and genuine. "*El Corvosano*," he repeated, rolling the syllables in his mouth. "Sounds like the sort of thing a pretentious tavern would overcharge for. I approve." He sliced the pizza, steam curling up from the cuts, and handed her the first slice.

They ate leaning against the counter, the way they had a hundred times before, burning their fingertips on too-hot cheese and blowing on each bite like children who'd never learn. The crust was crisp at the edge, soft and open within; the sauce bright; the mozzarella creamy; the olives sharp little pockets of salt that made the basil's freshness sing. It tasted, Marisa thought, like every early morning and late night she'd ever spent in a kitchen, like every argument over ratios, every time he'd made her throw out something "good enough" in favour of "right."

Marcus finished his slice, licked a smear of sauce from his thumb, and regarded the remaining pizza with the solemn air of a man about to pass judgement on a rival empire. Then, with no warning, he threw his head back and bellowed, in that full, booming voice that had once intimidated half of Limsa's Lower Decks, "Now *that* is what I call a *pītsa magnificus*!"

The words bounced off the beams, rattled the empty plates in their crates, echoed around the oven's open mouth. Marisa choked on a laugh, almost dropping her slice. "I'm stealin' that," she said when she'd recovered. "You realise that, right? I am takin' that exact phrase and usin' it on every good pie from now until the day I die."

"*Bene*," he said, smirking. "Consider it my curse upon you. Every time you shout it, you will think of me, and you will either be inspired or annoyed into doing better work. Both are acceptable outcomes."

They lingered on that last pizza longer than hunger required, drawing out each bite, each small comment, as if the taste itself might anchor them in this moment indefinitely. Eventually, though, the slices became crusts, and the crusts became crumbs. The oven's glow dimmed as Marcus carefully banked the fire one last time, hands moving with the tenderness of someone tucking a child into bed. He hung his apron on its hook. He wiped the counter with slow, precise strokes. Riverside Pizzeria, stripped of noise and clutter, became what it had always secretly been: four walls, a hearth, and every memory they'd baked into them.

At the door, Marisa hesitated. "You'll... come by Puku's?" she asked, hating how small she sounded. "Before you go, I mean."

"Of course," he replied, as if the idea of slipping away without doing so were unthinkable. "I still need to make sure you are not underbaking anything in my absence." For a moment, his hand hovered as if he meant to reach out and ruffle her hair. Instead, he rested it briefly on her shoulder, fingers warm and solid. "You will be fine, *marilla*," he said quietly. "You are already more than fine. Do not let the world convince you otherwise."

Her throat closed up. She nodded, because she did not trust her voice, and stepped out into the night before she could embarrass herself by crying all over his sensible plans.

The rain hit her immediately, cold and insistent, soaking into her cloak and dripping from her fringe. The Lower Decks glistened under lanternlight, every surface slick and reflective. Puku wriggled in the satchel, protesting the damp with a cranky mrrp, then settled when she tucked the flap more securely around him. She pulled the door shut behind her, listening to the soft, final click of the latch.

For a moment she just stood there on the narrow walkway, breathing in the mingled scents of rain, river, and the lingering ghost of baked bread. Riverside's sign creaked overhead in the wind. Somewhere down the canal, someone laughed, oblivious. Life went on, as it always did, indifferent to the way individual stories twisted, ended, began again.

On impulse, she tilted her head back, letting the rain hit her face. The clouds above Limsa were frayed and broken, torn by higher winds. Between them, where once there had been only stars, there now hung that strange, bright red point in the sky—the one that had appeared moons ago and refused to fade. People had started giving it names, half-joking, half uneasy. It had seemed so small at first, a curiosity over the sea. Now, looking up from the slick planks of the Lower Decks, Marisa could see it clearly even through the rain: a hard, ruby gleam, larger than she wanted it to be, like an ember pressed too long into the dark.

She frowned, rainwater trickling down her temples. “You’re closer,” she muttered to the sky, as if the thing could hear her. “Or I’m just finally payin’ attention.” For a heartbeat, a tiny, irrational shiver ran through her, as if some part of her gut had recognised a threat her mind was not ready to name. Then a gust of wind shoved at her back, reminding her that standing around getting drenched would solve exactly nothing—not Marcus’s impending departure, not Eldric’s old debts, not whatever that red wound in the heavens meant.

She drew her cloak tighter, adjusted the satchel so Puku was better shielded, and started up the long path back toward the Mist. Behind her, Riverside Pizzeria stood dark and silent for the first time in years, its oven cooling, its stories sealed into stone and memory. Ahead of her, Puku Pizza waited—a smaller hearth, a newer story, its own light stubbornly pushing back the damp. Above it all, the red point in the sky burned quietly on, growing by fractions no one could yet quite measure.

The night tasted of ash and rain and fresh basil. It was, in its way, perfect for endings. It was also, though she could not yet know it, the last truly ordinary rain she would ever walk through.

Part VII — The Calamity (Years 20-21)



Chapter 43: When The Star Frayed

The first time a customer referred to it as “the red moon,” Marisa almost corrected him. It still looked like a star to her—albeit a rude, overfamiliar one—hanging above Limsa like a lantern someone had forgotten to snuff out. Even through the soft sea haze it was visible now, a hard crimson point that refused to twinkle like everything else. On clear nights it glared down with a steady, watchful light that made the regular stars around it seem suddenly shy. From the balcony outside Puku Pizza she found she could pick it out without even trying; it had become part of the city’s furniture, the way the lighthouse beam and the glow of the Aftcastle fires were. “It’s gettin’ bigger,” Brynkin announced one evening, chin shiny with oil as he chomped his way through a slice. “Last week it was, what, half a fingernail? Now look at it. Nearly a thumb.” Marisa, wiping tables, snorted and said, “You just

have greasy fingers, that's why everything looks enormous. Eat your pizza before it eats you back." But later, when she stepped outside to close the shutters, she caught herself holding up her own thumb and measuring.

As the moons turned, the *Harbor Herald* made a little cottage industry out of that bloody dot. At first it was just a curiosity—small columns with titles like "*Astronomers Baffled by 'Crimson Wanderer'*" buried between trade reports and the usual scandals about the Syndicate. Then came broader headlines, the kind that filled the entire top half of the page in fat, alarmed letters. "*Magi Confirm 'Lunar Aetheric Disturbance'*" screamed one; another week, it was, "*Grand Companies Call for Vigilance as Red Moon Swells.*" Marisa read each issue cover to cover, fingers smudged with newsprint and flour, telling herself that it was just professional interest in current events and not an attempt to reassure herself that someone, somewhere, understood what was happening. At the flat, Hanako began folding each paper more carefully, smoothing the creases as if the act could somehow keep the news inside from growing worse; sometimes Marisa came home late to find her mother kneeling beside their small household shrine, lips moving soundlessly, the glow of a single candle gilding the lines of her face.

In Limsa, worry came wrapped in bluster. The Drowning Wench grew louder as the red moon brightened, nights thick with dockhands and sailors arguing over whether this was an omen, a Garlean weapon, or just "the Twelve droppin' a rock on us for bein' too handsome." The Maelstrom presence in the city swelled: more crimson coats on the bridges, more drills on the piers, more shouted orders that made the gulls scatter. Yellowjackets checked passes more often and yelled less for show and more from genuine urgency. Once, delivering a stack of pies to the Barracuda Barracks, Marisa nearly collided with a squad of fresh-faced recruits jogging uphill in formation, their sergeant barking, "Eyes ahead, not on the damned sky! If it's going to fall, staring won't stop it!" She hopped aside, clutching the boxes, and one of the recruits muttered, "If it falls, I'm sprintin' straight for that pizza place in the Mist, I tell you that much," which earned him a cuff and a smothered laugh.

Business at Puku Pizza did not slow; if anything, it grew more intense, in that strange way people clung to small pleasures when the world felt uncertain. Some days she felt like half the city had collectively decided that if the heavens were going to crack open, they would at least face it with a full stomach. Sailors came in before long voyages "just in case we don't make it back," pressing extra gil into her hands and saying, "Turn the rest into dessert, lass." Caravaners bound for Thanalan and the Shroud ordered larger pies and more of them, loading up as if pizza could be stored like hardtack. A squad of Maelstrom engineers working on some new coastal installation became regulars, stomping into her parlour in heavy boots and shedding rain onto her floor, arguing

over crust thickness and whether a red moon meant they'd be working overtime until the end of days. Marisa grumbled about the mess and told them that if the world was ending they could damn well wipe their feet, but she knew the extra coin that clinked into her strongbox each night was the difference between just paying down Eldric's old debt and actually making the numbers shrink in a way Hanako could smile at.

Marcus grew thinner around the edges as Dalamud thickened. He still came by Puku Pizza, still stole slices and tutted over her ratios, but there was a tautness to him now, as if some internal rope had been pulled one notch too tight. When the red moon first made headlines he'd looked up at it from the Mist, eyes narrowed, and said, "Ah. Of course. When Garlemald meddles with celestial bodies, it is never to improve the view." Since then, his muttered comments had grown more pointed. "If it is theirs, they will not admit it," he said once, riffling through a new batch of letters from Corvos. "If it is not theirs, they will try to claim it. Either way, trouble." He talked more openly now of his plans to leave—not in sweeping declarations, but in practical updates. "The passage is nearly secured." "My niece writes that the inspections grow stricter." "If I linger too long, they will close the door in my face and call it policy." Marisa found herself alternating between asking questions she wasn't ready to hear the answers to and avoiding the subject entirely, as if by not naming it she could keep both Marcus and the red moon fixed where they were.

At night, when the parlour was swept and the oven banked, she sometimes took Rocceto out along the upper paths of the Mist just to move. The ward's white arches and carefully tended lawns felt almost absurd under that growing crimson eye; the Tidemistress's fountain trickled as peacefully as ever while sailors elsewhere in the city whispered about omens and the Twelve. Rocceto was tense on these rides, feathers prickling at sudden noises, but the sky itself didn't seem to bother him; to chocobo eyes, perhaps, the threat was still too abstract. Puku, riding in his satchel, would occasionally tilt his head back to stare up, pupils thin slits, as if offended by any light he hadn't personally sanctioned. "Don't look at it like that," Marisa muttered once, reins loose as she let Rocceto pick his way along the path. "You're gonna start a fight you can't finish." She meant it as a joke. The words tasted flat.

One evening, a few weeks before everything finally changed, she brought a stack of leftover slices down to the Lower Decks, figuring the least she could do was share them with anyone too busy or too broke to eat properly while the city's nerves jittered. The walkways were more crowded than usual: families clustered together, people trading rumours and glances at the sky. At the flat, Hanako accepted her share with a faint smile and a weary shake of the head. "You should be saving for yourself," she scolded

gently. “Not giving away your hard work because the heavens have decided to be dramatic.” But later, when a neighbour’s child peeked in, wide-eyed, and Hanako wordlessly slid a slice onto a small plate and pressed it into her hands, Marisa saw the way her mother’s fingers lingered for a moment on the girl’s shoulder. Fear was fear, whether expressed in whispered prayers or extra food.

That night, slipping out again toward Puku Pizza, Marisa paused halfway across one of the Lower Decks bridges. The canal below swallowed reflections: lanterns, the glimmer of the lighthouse, the faint smudge of stars. Above, Dalamud burned, no longer something you had to squint to see. It cast a faint, wrong-coloured tint over the clouds; where they thinned, its light threaded through like blood through gauze. She folded her arms against the chill and told herself that Limsa had weathered storms before. Sahagin raids, pirate feuds, the constant teeth of the sea itself—none of it had managed to sink the city yet. Still, the sight of that unblinking red disc made her think, unbidden, of cracks in fired clay. Once a fracture started, it ran deep, ignoring the painter’s careful work on the surface.

With a small, irritable huff at herself, she jerked her gaze back down to the street. There were routes to plan for tomorrow, orders to prep, dough to wake before dawn. The sky would do what it wanted, no matter how much she stared at it. She turned her collar up against the wind and kept walking, the glow of Puku Pizza’s little windows ahead of her bright and stubborn against the night, while far above, unnoticed for the moment, the red moon swelled another fraction wider.

Chapter 44: An Uneasy Quiet

The morning began like any other, with Marisa half-dressed, half-awake, and wholly at war with the alarm bell on her bedside crate. It clanged in that particular pitch she herself had tuned it to—annoying enough that she couldn’t ignore it, but not so shrill that the neighbours would complain. Puku, who had clearly decided that dawn was a social construct, sprawled luxuriously across her stomach and refused to move, blinking at her with the smugness of a creature who had never once been late for a shift. “If I oversleep, you don’t get breakfast,” she muttered, shoving the cat aside and swinging her legs over the edge of the futon. “We

both suffer.” Puku meowed in outraged disbelief, but when she stood, he hopped down and trotted ahead of her toward the little kitchen, the matter clearly negotiable.

Outside, the Mist was waking in its usual, deceptively peaceful way. The sky over the ward was that soft, hazy blue that came before the day decided what it wanted to be; gulls wheeled over the water, their cries echoing between whitewashed walls and archways. From somewhere further up, she caught the clink of bottles as a neighbour’s delivery arrived, and the distant splash of someone diving from a terrace into the sea. If she didn’t look up, if she kept her gaze on the cobbles and the familiar lines of The Topmast’s façade, she could almost pretend the only thing that mattered was whether the breakfast crowd would be more in the mood for mushroom or sausage this morning.

Inside Puku Pizza, the air still held last night’s faint memory of smoke and spice. She rolled up her sleeves, tied on her apron, and fell into the rhythm she knew better than most songs: check the oven, coax the embers back to life, mix the first batch of dough. The flour puffed white against her hands, clinging to the creases of her fingers; the yeast bloomed in warm water, a small, satisfying bit of alchemy that had never once failed her. As she kneaded, she let her mind wander over the day’s routes. “Two Mist regulars,” she counted under her breath. “One late-morning run to the Wench, one to the Barracuda Barracks... and maybe that engineer lot from the Drydocks if they decide they need ‘emergency morale rations’ again.” She paused, then added, “And no Thanalan runs today. Not with the sky lookin’ the way it does.” Saying it aloud made the decision feel firmer, less like cowardice and more like common sense.

By the time the first customers trickled in, the room was full of a comfortable heat and the yeasty promise of dough rising properly. A pair of Mist neighbours came for their usual early slices—a Roegadyn fisherman and his conjurer husband, bickering affectionately over whether to try something other than “the usual” while both of them ordered exactly “the usual.” A Maelstrom ensign she knew by face but not by name ducked in next, damp from sea spray, depositing a small clinking bag of coin on the counter with a harried, “Ten of whatever keeps men from thinkin’ too much about the sky.” Marisa arched a brow as she counted. “That an official order?” she asked. “Semi-official,” he replied. “Commander says: feed ‘em before panic sets in. If they’ve got their mouths full, they can’t start rumours.” He tried to make it a joke, but there was a tension in his shoulders that didn’t match the words. She took the order anyway, because feeding nervous soldiers was better than leaving them alone with their thoughts.

On her way down to the Lower Decks late in the morning, a stack of boxed pies balanced against her hip, she noticed the city felt... tight. Not louder, exactly—if anything, some corners were unusually quiet—but there was a tautness in the air, a sense of something coiled. Yellowjackets at the chokepoints checked passes with sharp, efficient movements and fewer jokes. A Maelstrom squad marched past her at the top of a stair, axes polished and expressions grim, their officer carrying sealed orders tucked under one arm. Even the gulls seemed more agitated, crying sharper as they circled the masts. The red moon hung clearly above the harbour now even in daylight, a sullen ember bleeding through high cloud; when she glanced up, she could see a faint halo of discoloured sky around it, like bruised flesh. She tore her gaze away and focused on not slipping on the damp steps.

At the flat, Hanako had already set out tea. She had also, Marisa noted, burned a fresh stick of incense at the small household shrine and left a folded paper charm tucked beside the little wooden image representing Takenouchi-no-Sōun, the family's ancestral *kami*. “You’re stockin’ up on faith now, too?” Marisa said, nudging her boots into the corner. Hanako gave her a look over the rim of her cup. “I am doing what can be done with what I have,” she replied. “You make pizza. I light incense. The *kami* can decide which is more useful.” She set the cup down, her expression softening. “You are not taking any long journeys today?” “No,” Marisa said, sliding one of the boxes onto the table. “Stayin’ close. Mist, Wench, maybe Drydocks if they beg. I’m not keen on bein’ caught between nowhere and Coerthas if the sky decides to fall.” Hanako’s fingers tightened minutely on the porcelain at the phrase, then relaxed. “Good,” she said. “If disaster insists on coming, let it find you close to home.”

On her way back up to the Mist, she swung by the Drowning Wench to drop off an order and nearly ran into Baderon in the doorway. The weathered Hyur looked more serious than she’d ever seen him, the ever-present mug in his hand only half-full. “City’s hummin’ like a taut bowstring, lass,” he said without preamble, glancing back towards the tavern where sailors crowded the windows, many of them craning for a glimpse of the sky. “Got word also the Alliance is makin’ some big push out there at Carteneau, gettin’ ready for a final dust up with the Empire. Grand Companies movin’, Merlwyb rallyin’ the Maelstrom... you can feel it in the tide.” Marisa shifted the stack of boxes in her arms. “You think it’s gonna go bad?” she asked. He scratched his beard, eyes narrowed. “Dunno,” he said. “Maybe we get lucky. Maybe they sort it all out an’ we laugh about bein’ nervous old fools. But if ye’ve got anythin’ ye been puttin’ off—letters, apologies, stupid risks—either do it today or let it go. Sky looks like it’s fixin’ t’ make decisions for us.” She grimaced. “Inspirin’ as always, Baderon,” she said. “I’ll add ‘existential pep talks’ to the list of services

offered.” But his words stuck with her as she left, as persistent as the red light that seemed to seep into the streets even through the clouds.

By late afternoon Puku Pizza was as busy as it had ever been. The door chime never stopped ringing for long; the oven roared hot enough that she had to keep stepping back to wipe sweat from her brow. Brynkin dropped by “for just a slice” and ended up staying long enough to help ferry boxes to waiting customers when she started falling behind. “I’ll start chargn’ for me labour if this keeps up,” he warned cheerfully, balancing three boxes on one arm. “You already do,” she shot back, shoving another pie into his hands. “You pay yourself in food.” At some point a pair of Maelstrom engineers from the drydocks squeezed in, smelling of oil and ozone, and one of them said, “If we’re still here tomorrow, lass, we’ll want to talk about a regular contract.” She tried to laugh it off. “If we’re still here tomorrow, you can have a whole pie for free,” she said. “You lot can work out the paperwork with my accountant.” “Your what?” the other asked, blinking. “My mom,” she said. “She’s scarier than your Admiral. Don’t test it.”

Marcus arrived near dusk, leaning in the doorway for a moment as if testing the air before committing to entering. The red light outside had deepened, painting the Mist’s white stone with a faint, eerie blush. Inside, the oven cast its own golden glow, warm and familiar. He looked between the two colours, then stepped inside as if choosing between worlds. “Busy little hive,” he remarked, dodging around a departing customer. “At this rate, the end of days will be brought about by cheese shortage, not falling moons.” She snorted, pulling a pie from the oven. “You want in on this?” she asked. “There’s a stack of orders to the Wench that needs a trustworthy courier who won’t eat half the cargo.” “Please,” he said, offended. “If the world is possibly ending, my last act will not be to commit such a cliché.” He rolled up his sleeves anyway, taking over slicing and boxing with the easy competence of someone who found comfort in repetitive tasks. For a while they worked shoulder to shoulder, saying very little, letting the rhythm of oven, knife, and door chime fill the space where more difficult words might have gone.

It was only when the rush tapered off and the last of the early evening crowd trickled out into the reddening light that he finally spoke about anything larger than toppings. “Had another letter this morning,” he said, wiping down the counter. “From Corvos?” she asked, already knowing the answer. “From Tiberis,” he confirmed. “He says the sky looks wrong there, too. Different angle, same dread. People crowding the basilica, lighting candles in front of boarded-up shrines. Soldiers making noises about ‘maintaining order’.” He shrugged one shoulder. “It is oddly comforting, knowing that fear is at least consistent.” Marisa glanced toward the door, where a chink in the shutter let in a narrow bar of crimson. “You still goin’?” she asked. “Back, I mean. If... if we get

through this.” He considered, then nodded once. “If I can,” he said. “Assuming there is still a city to return to, on both sides of the sea. Assuming ships still sail. But yes. This changes nothing and everything all at once. I am still who I am.”

She wanted to say *and I’m still who I am, and that includes bein’ not ready to lose you yet*, but her throat closed around the words. Instead, she nudged his elbow with hers and said, “Then you’d better survive this nonsense, Marcus. I am not lettin’ the Empire be the thing that robs me of my favourite shouty teacher. If anyone is gonna kill you, it’s me, when I find out you’ve left without sayin’ goodbye.” He snorted. “Noted,” he said. “I will add ‘vengeful pupil’ to the list of things to outrun.” His eyes strayed to the shutter again. “Try not to be out delivering when the sky decides to do something dramatic, *marilla*. There are enough fools like me who will run into the fire. We need some who stay by the ovens.”

By full dark, the rush had finally eased. The Mist was quieter than usual—few children playing in the streets, fewer couples strolling the paths. Most people seemed to have retreated indoors, either to taverns or to private rooms, drawn to any place where company and walls could blunt the feeling of that red eye overhead. Marisa cleaned the last pans, banked the oven, and flipped the little sign on the door from OPEN to CLOSED, the gesture feeling heavier than it had any right to. Marcus had left an hour earlier with a promise to “hover nearby until the Admiral proves the world will still be here in the morning”; Hanako was expecting her back at the Lower Decks. Puku, having gorged himself on stray scraps all day, snored softly in his basket by the warm bricks.

She dimmed the lamps one by one, leaving only the oven’s embers and a single lantern by the door. For a long moment she stood in the centre of the small parlour, taking in its every detail: the scuffed floorboards where chairs had scraped, the map on the wall with its web of red ink routes, the hook where Marcus’s wooden spoon hung beside her own ladle. This little room had become her world’s centre without her entirely noticing when that had happened. The idea that anything—falling moons, roaring dragons, Imperial plots—might threaten it felt unreal. And yet the air itself seemed to hum with a taut, expectant energy, like the breath drawn before a shout.

On impulse, she crossed to the door, unlatched the shutter just enough to peer out. The Mist lay spread below in tiered white steps and neat fences, lanterns burning here and there like cautious stars. Over it all, dominating the sky from horizon to horizon, hung Dalamud. It was no longer just a dot or even a disc; it was a looming, crimson mass, its surface mottled and veined, bleeding light into the clouds. She stared at it for a long heartbeat, the sight sitting uneasily in her stomach like something too rich.

Somewhere out there, she knew, ships were sailing and armies were marching, men and women making choices that would either save or doom thousands. Here, in this quiet slice of the Mist, a pizza girl watched the sky and felt very small.

“Right,” she said aloud, because silence suddenly felt dangerous. “You’re doin’ whatever you’re doin’. I’m lockin’ up and goin’ home. We’ll see which one of us wins.” She closed the shutter, locked the door, scooped up a protesting Puku, and stepped out into the cool night. The air smelled of salt and rain and something faintly metallic she couldn’t quite place. As she walked toward the ferry that would take her back to the Lower Decks and home, the red light haloed the edges of every shadow, staining even familiar corners strange. It was, she would realise much later, the last night Limsa Lominsa would know that kind of quiet—the thin, brittle calm that clung to the city just before the heavens finally shattered.

Chapter 45: When the Moon Broke

The day the moon fell began with the smell of rising dough and the sound of gulls.

Marisa woke before the alarm for once, not from any noble intention but from a vague, unpleasant awareness that she had been dreaming of red light pressing against her eyelids. For a moment she lay still in the half-dark of the flat, listening to the muted creak of the Lower Decks around them and the slow, uneven breath of Hanako sleeping in the next room. Puku lay curled at the crook of her knees, warm and heavy. Everything sounded normal: a distant splash from the canal, footsteps overhead, the muffled call of a fishmonger already setting up. The only intrusion was a faint, dull ache behind her eyes, as if she had slept under too-bright lamps. She pushed the feeling aside, sat up, and began the quiet ritual of getting ready.

By the time she climbed the stairs from the Lower Decks toward the ferry landing, the city was awake. Dockworkers shouted to each other over the clatter of crates; ropes groaned as ships shifted in their moorings. The air carried the familiar mix of tar, salt, and the faint tang of metal from the Maelstrom’s preparations. When she stepped off the ferry into the Mist, the ward greeted her as it always did: white stone slick with morning dew, hedges trimmed with obsessive care, the low murmur of neighbours talking

over railings. Someone had already lit incense at a small household shrine by one of the gates, the thin trail of smoke smearing in the breeze.

Only when she reached the door of Puku Pizza and turned to fit the key into the lock did she make the mistake of glancing upward. Dalamud loomed above Limsa like a wound. It was no longer a distant point or even a disc; its sheer size defied scale, a vast, cracked sphere filling far too much of the sky. Its light was not the cool silver of the true moon, nor the soft gold of the sun, but a raw, pulsing red that washed the clouds in bruised colour. She stared for a heartbeat, her hand resting against the doorframe, feeling suddenly as if the stone under her boots were less solid than it had been the day before. Then she forced her gaze down, turned the key, and stepped into the dim, familiar interior of Room 77.

Work was a refuge. She lit the lamps, coaxed the oven awake, and let the stubborn, physical tasks of the morning claim her. The dough behaved as it always did under her hands. The oven's heat was the same fierce, steady breath on her face. She shaped pies for the early orders: two Mist families, a Yellowjacket patrol that had taken to ordering the same thing so often she no longer bothered to ask, a small delivery to the Bismarck for the lunchtime rush. If she listened past the crackle of the fire and the scrape of her knife, she could hear the city's tone shifting outside: bells sounding more often, shouted orders with less of the usual inflection of habit.

By mid-morning, on what should have been an ordinary busy day, the light began to change. It was subtle at first. The shaft of daylight that usually fell through the crack in the shutter took on a tint, the edges of it tinged faintly red. Shadows sharpened in strange ways. The pale stone visible through the gap looked as if it had been brushed with watered wine. Marisa felt it before she fully saw it—a slight unease in her gut, an old childhood instinct that said storms did not usually come from above like that. She wiped her hands, crossed to the door, and opened it just enough to look out.

The Mist was quieter than it should have been. People stood in small groups, faces turned upwards, conversations forgotten. A child clung to his mother's skirts and pointed mutely at the sky; the woman pried his hand away from her sleeve and dragged him toward their door without taking her eyes off the heavens. Over the ward's white arches and neat fences, Dalamud's swollen shape dominated everything, its surface now visibly broken, criss-crossed with glowing fissures. For the first time, Marisa could see movement on it—flares of light along the cracks, like a forge being hammered open from within.

A sudden peal of bells broke across the city then, not the usual patterns for shift changes or minor alarms but a wild, sustained ringing that seemed to come from every direction at once. It was joined by the deep, distant thud of cannon from the harbour and the higher, harsher blare of Maelstrom signal horns. Somewhere below, a voice amplified by magick boomed out orders she couldn't make out, buried under the layered echoes. The air felt strange against her skin, heavy and charged, as if a storm were pressing down from above rather than rolling in from the sea. She shut the door, heart beating too fast.

Puku, who had been dozing in his basket, was awake now, ears flattened, tail fluffed. He made a noise she had never heard from him before, low and almost voiceless. "It's all right," she said, more for herself than for him. "It's... a drill. Big show. Alliance is probably out there throwin' magic at it. We're safe here." The words fell flat in the stillness of the little parlour.

She was still standing there, trying to decide whether to keep working or run, when the world shifted. It came without warning: a deep, gut-level lurch, as if some enormous hand had seized the city and given it a single, sharp shake. The oven roared; a stack of plates rattled off a shelf and shattered against the floor. Marisa stumbled, catching herself on the counter. A heartbeat later, the sound hit—an immense, tearing roar from above, layered with the groan of stressed stone and the distant, horrifying scream of metal sundering. It was too large to understand, a noise that made every smaller sound she'd ever known feel like prelude.

She didn't decide to move so much as find herself already in motion. Puku was in her arms before she fully registered crossing the room. She shoved him into his satchel; he fought her for a moment, claws slipping harmlessly against the reinforced leather, then went still, eyes wide. She grabbed her cloak, slung the satchel strap over her shoulder, and took one precious heartbeat to look around the room. The oven flames leapt wildly in their stone mouth. Dough waited on the counter, half-risen, never to become anything more. The map on the wall trembled, one corner tearing loose from its nail. For a strange, disassociated moment she thought: I should damp the oven; I'll burn the place down. Then another roar cracked the sky and any thought of fire being contained to her oven vanished.

Out in the Mist, chaos had begun in earnest. People were running now, some with bundles under their arms, some empty-handed. Others stood rooted where they were, staring upwards, only jolted into movement when someone physically grabbed them. The red light from above had deepened to something rawer, almost painful; it painted every face hollow and strange. Marisa forced her way through the narrow paths, pushing past a neighbour who clutched at her sleeve and asked, voice shrill, "What is happening?"

“Inside,” she rasped, shaking her off. “Get inside. Away from anything that can fall.” She didn’t know if it was good advice, but it was something.

She reached the small stableyard where Rocceto was kept just as another tremor rolled through the city, this one longer, a slow, nauseating sway that made wooden beams groan and loose stones skitter down the paths. The chocobo pen was in uproar; birds screamed and kicked, eyes rolling white, their handlers shouting to be heard over the din. Rocceto was already half-mad with terror, slamming his weight against the rails, feathers fluffed, beak snapping at anyone who came too close. For a moment she thought he might not recognise her in this cacophony. Then she stepped up to the fence, seized his bridle with both hands, and shouted his name until her throat hurt.

“Rocceto! It’s me. It’s me. Look at me.”

He jerked his head, nearly tearing the leather from her grip, then flung one furious, terrified eye toward her. Recognition flickered there, thin but real. The next jolt from above sent loose dust raining down from the stable’s rafters; a beam somewhere cracked with a sharp, ugly report. “We have to go,” she said, pressing her forehead briefly against his beak. “Now. Please.”

It took three people to get the gate open and the saddle on—a handler shouting instructions, another woman physically pushing at Rocceto’s flank while Marisa wrestled with buckles and straps. The moment he was free, he leapt away from the pen in a surge of muscle, nearly yanking her off her feet. She dragged herself into the saddle more by instinct than grace, clutching at the reins with one hand and her satchel with the other. Someone yelled something about “shelters” and “Upper Decks” and “Maelstrom orders”; she barely heard them over the blood pounding in her ears. There was only one thought in her head, clear and sharp: Hanako is in the Lower Decks.

She steered Rocceto toward the ferry landing at a near-gallop, hooves striking sparks from the stone. The Mist blurred around them—a terrified child pulled out of their path, a cart overturned and abandoned, a man on his knees praying in a language she didn’t recognise while his neighbours shouted at him to move. The ferry itself, when she reached it, was already overloaded, people crammed shoulder to shoulder on the deck, hands grasping for the ropes. The ferryman, pale but steady, shook his head

when she shouted his name. “No room, Miss Takeuchi,” he called back. “We’re takin’ this lot down and comin’ back for as many as we can. If the piers hold.”

The thought of waiting, of standing still while the sky boiled, was unbearable. “Then I’ll ride the long way,” she said, more to herself than to him, wrenching Rocceto around toward the main slope down into the city. The path from the Mist to the Lower Decks was never truly empty, even in calm weather; today it was a churning artery of humanity, people pressing in both directions—some fleeing uphill toward the residential wards, some rushing down toward the harbour to find loved ones or ships. She forced her way into the flow, knees pressed hard to Rocceto’s sides, voice hoarse from shouting warnings. The chocobo’s terror translated into speed; he threaded through gaps that barely existed, skidding on loose gravel, skirting falling debris by heartbeats.

Halfway down, the sound changed. There was a new note in the roar from above, a rising, tearing shriek that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Against her better judgement, she risked a glance skyward between the buildings. Dalamud was no longer simply cracked; it was coming apart. Great plates of its surface were shearing away, trailing molten fragments. Light poured from within—not the familiar gentle luminescence of the true moon, but a fierce, blinding brilliance shot through with black lines that did not make sense to her eye. For a moment, silhouetted against that impossible glare, she thought she saw something move—something vast and wrong, unfurling. Then the glare intensified and she had to wrench her eyes down, blinking tears out of them.

The next impact wasn’t a tremor; it was a blow. Somewhere beyond the curve of the cliffs, something struck the sea or the land with such force that the shockwave hammered through Limsa, knocking people from their feet and sending cracks spiderwebbing across stone. Rocceto screamed; Marisa nearly slid from the saddle, clinging to his neck until her vision cleared. In the distance, over the line of roofs and rigging, she saw a column of fire spear upward into the sky. The sound followed it, a noise like mountains breaking.

When she reached the Lower Decks, the city she knew had become a maze of falling stone and flame. Parts of the boardwalk had collapsed into the canals; one entire section of buildings along the waterline burned, flames licking hungrily at rope and tar. Yellowjackets and Maelstrom officers fought to clear paths, dragging debris aside, hauling the injured toward whatever open space

looked least likely to collapse next. Smoke thickened the air, burning in her lungs. The light was all wrong—sun and red moon and fire mingling into a colour that seemed to have no name.

She could not ride Rocceto into the narrowest alleys; she dismounted near one of the chokepoints and slapped his flank. “Stay,” she ordered, voice shaking. “Or run somewhere not on fire. I’ll find you.” He stomped, feathers flaring, torn between bolting and following; she left him there, trusting that his instincts would preserve him better than hers might. Satchel clutched to her chest, she shoved her way through the panicked throng toward the staircase that led up to their flat.

The stairwell was choked with dust and plaster; a chunk of the outer wall had sheared away above, leaving a gap through which she could see the sky burning. She climbed anyway, coughing, half-crawling over fallen masonry. At the landing, she almost collided with Mrs. Brolla from two doors down, who gripped her arm with desperate strength. “Marisa! Your mother—she went to the harbour this morning for fish, she hasn’t come back, I thought she was still with you—” The words tumbled out in a rush, frayed by panic. For a heartbeat the floor seemed to tilt under Marisa’s feet.

“She’s not here,” Marisa said, breathless. “She—she’ll have gone to ground. She knows how. Get inside, Brolla. Stay away from windows, away from the outer wall.” She prised the woman’s fingers off her arm as gently as she could, then shoved past, heart pounding so hard it hurt. Their own door hung crooked on one hinge, the frame warped. Inside, the flat was a scatter of fallen crockery, toppled shelves, and overturned cushions. The shrine in the corner had been jolted; the little wooden figure of Takenouchi-no-Sōun lay on its side, candle stub snapped. There was no sign of Hanako.

For a moment Marisa stood in the centre of the wreckage, fighting the urge to ransack the place as if her mother might somehow be buried under the tatami. A fresh wave of heat rolled through the room, followed by a distant, rising scream that did not sound entirely human. Outside, someone shouted something about “the harbour” and “the sky,” voice breaking. She grabbed the one thing that her hands found without thinking—the small flag box where she kept her collection, miraculously unbroken in its corner—and then forced herself to set it back down. There was no room. No time. “You’re not here,” she whispered into the empty air. “So you’re somewhere else. Somewhere better than this.”

She stumbled back out into the corridor, back down the broken stairs, each step a small act of obedience to the part of her brain that still believed movement equalled survival. The air on the Lower Decks had grown hotter and thicker, smoke and ash swirling with the mist off the canals. Above the din of panicked voices and breaking stone, a new sound cut through—the deep, resonant blare of a horn blown not by man but by something immense. It was followed by another roar from overhead, this one layered with a wordless, consuming fury that sent a cold, visceral dread down her spine.

She looked up.

Over the harbour, beyond the forest of masts and the jagged line of the cliffs, something impossible unfolded itself out of the ruin of Dalamud. Wings, vast and bright as molten metal, spread against the bleeding sky. A great, sinuous body coiled, black against the red light, every line of it radiating power and rage. Where its gaze swept, towers crumbled. Where its breath fell, fire blossomed, white-hot and immediate, devouring wood and stone alike. The Elder Primal—Bahamut, though she would not know his name until later—had torn himself from his prison and descended upon Eorzea like judgement.

For a heartbeat, the world narrowed to that sight. Then the shockwave from his first true strike hit Limsa. A wall of heat rolled inland, hot enough that she felt her exposed skin tighten. The sound that followed defied language; it was not just noise but force, a hammer blow of aether and fury that rattled her teeth and made the air itself vibrate. Somewhere, a tower collapsed into the sea, sending up a plume of steam that briefly veiled the harbour in white. When it cleared, part of the city's familiar skyline was simply gone.

Marisa did not remember deciding to move after that; she only knew she was running, shoved along by the same tide that carried everyone else. She saw a Yellowjacket pinned under a fallen beam and, without thinking, flung herself and two strangers at it, muscles straining until something in her shoulder gave and the man was dragged free. She saw a child standing in the middle of the walkway, wailing, and scooped him up as she passed, thrusting him into the arms of the first adult who looked even marginally in control. She saw fire leap from rooftop to rooftop, leaping gaps she would have thought impossible, and realised with sick clarity that if it reached certain warehouses, half the harbour would go up at once.

At some point her feet carried her toward the familiar path that led to the Bismarck. The great ship-turned-restaurant was a natural gathering point in any crisis—central, open, its kitchens equipped to feed more than just paying guests. Today, its decks were a chaos of bodies and shouted orders. Culinaricians in soot-streaked whites darted between makeshift cooking stations, turning sacks of flour and barrels of vegetables into food for the displaced. Yellowjackets and Maelstrom officers hauled in crates of supplies, and every flat surface seemed to hold someone—injured, exhausted, simply stunned.

She spotted Lyngsath by the rail, his normally immaculate uniform stained with sweat and ash, his hair more askew than she had ever seen it. He was barking orders to a line of apprentices; his voice cracked once and he did not pause to clear it. Pagoda was there too, the infamous Big Bulli himself, sleeves rolled up, face smudged, moving with a grim efficiency that had no room for cruelty. He caught sight of her as she pushed onto the deck, Puku's satchel tight against her side, eyes wide and unfocused. For a strange, disorienting moment she braced for the old, sharp words—"What are you doing here? You will only be in the way." Instead, he pointed the handle of a ladle at her like a baton.

"Take that station," he said, voice rough but level. "We need hands. If you can bake, you can feed. If you can feed, you can keep people on their feet."

There was no time to argue. She dropped her cloak, tied on an apron somebody thrust at her, and fell into motion. For a while the world narrowed to dough and heat again—loaves shaped and jammed into any spare space in the ovens, pots stirred with whatever implements came to hand, bowls refilled and passed down the line. Her fingers burned, her shoulders screamed, but the work gave her a shape to pour her terror into. Somewhere overhead, Bahamut continued his ruinous circuit of the skies, each fresh blast of fire punctuating the rhythm of their movements. Once, a tremor shook the Bismarck hard enough that a stack of plates went flying; someone screamed; Lyngsath bellowed at them to keep their heads down and their hands moving.

In a rare moment between tasks, Marisa found herself shoulder to shoulder with Pagoda at a cutting board, hacking vegetables into rough chunks. Sweat ran down his temples, mingling with soot. His hands, usually so precise, shook faintly when he set the knife down. He did not look at her when he spoke. "You are still in business?" he asked, as if they were having a normal conversation. "In the Mist." "Yes," she said. "Room 77. Puku Pizza."

He grunted. “Keep it open,” he said. “When this stops—whatever this is—people will need somewhere to go that smells like bread and not burnt stone.”

Before she could reply, a shouted warning went up from the harbour side. A wave of heat washed the deck, staggering those nearest the rail. Someone screamed that the fire had jumped to another part of the city; someone else yelled for more water. The fragile pocket of order dissolved again into motion. Pagoda grabbed a tray of hastily-sliced bread and shoved it into her hands. “Take this,” he ordered. “Find anyone who cannot stand. Put food in them. Then run.”

She obeyed. She moved among the huddled, ash-smeared clusters of people sheltered on the Bismarck’s deck and the nearby pier, pressing bread into hands that shook too much to hold it properly. Faces blurred: a Miqu’te woman with a burnt sleeve; a Lominsan sailor with a head wound, eyes fixed on the broken line of the horizon; a child whose cheeks were streaked with mud and soot, gnawing mechanically at the crust in her hand. All the while, the sky burned and roared and the city shuddered.

At last, when the baskets were empty and another bell began to ring—a harsh, insistent clang that signalled some new threat or order she could not untangle—Marisa found herself standing at the edge of the Bismarck’s deck, staring out across a harbour she barely recognised. Smoke and steam obscured much of it, but she could see enough: ships gutted and listing, parts of the sea itself boiled into churning white, sections of the docks simply gone. Above it all, Bahamut coiled and struck, each sweep of his vast form carving fresh scars into the land.

She thought of Hanako somewhere in that chaos. She thought of Rocceto, hopefully still where she’d left him or smart enough to flee somewhere safer. She thought of Puku, a warm, frightened weight against her hip. Pity and duty tugged at her from every direction—stay and help at the Bismarck, run to the Lower Decks, flee to the relative height of the Mist, find Marcus, find anyone. In the end, the choice made itself. If the city was to burn, she needed to get to the one place she might defend: the little oven in the Mist, the tiny square of floor and stone that sheltered Puku Pizza, and whatever was left of her mother’s world below.

She turned away from the harbour, away from the cooks and the wounded and the grim, ash-streaked faces, and forced her way back into the streets. The sky above Limsa Lominsa burned, and the city burned under it. Somewhere far beyond her sight, the great wheels of nations and gods turned; here, in the choking alleys and collapsing corridors, a pizza girl ran with a satchel, a

half-wild chocobo, and the stubborn conviction that if she could just keep moving, something of this life might survive until morning.

Chapter 46: Ashfall Over The Mist

The path back up through Limsa was nothing like the one Marisa had taken down.

The streets she'd sprinted along earlier that day were now choked with debris and smoke, the air thick enough that every breath scraped her throat. Fire climbed the sides of buildings like something alive, leaping gaps with a twisted merriment. The familiar shouting of merchants and sailors had been replaced by screams, by the crack and groan of stressed stone, by the constant, distant bellow of the thing in the sky tearing at the world. Every now and then the city lurched again, a deep structural shudder that made walls shed tiles and people stumble.

She ran anyway. Puku's satchel banged against her hip with every step, the cat pressed so tightly into the bottom of it that she could barely feel him move. The smell of burnt rope, hot metal, and something far uglier—burnt meat, she realised with a sick twist—mixed into a cloying fog that clung to her hair and clothes. She tried not to look too closely at the shapes she stepped around, but some images forced themselves in regardless: a hand protruding from under a fallen beam, fingers still curled as if reaching; a woman kneeling by a body she rocked as if it were merely sleeping; a Yellowjacket with a splintered spear, staring blankly at the stump where a warehouse used to be.

Near one of the chokepoints down toward the harbour, she spotted Rocceto where she'd left him—or close enough. The chocobo had wedged himself against a half-fallen stretch of wall, reins tangled, sides heaving. His feathers were streaked with ash, his eyes rolling white in panic whenever fresh tremors rattled the stones. For a moment she thought he might bolt when he saw her, wild instinct overriding any training. Then she called his name, voice hoarse, and he swung his head toward her with a sharp, desperate jerk that almost looked like relief.

“Come on, boy,” she said, grabbing for his reins with hands that still shook from the last shockwave. “We’re goin’ up, not down. Away from all this.” He tossed his head, muscles bunching, and for a terrifying instant she felt the pull of his strength against her far-smaller frame; if he decided to flee in some other direction, she would not be able to stop him. But he let her drag his head down long enough for her to press her forehead briefly against his beak, her fingers stroking the feathered bridge. “It’s me,” she murmured. “It’s Marisa. We keep movin’, yeah?”

Getting into the saddle was less a mount than a scramble. Her boots slipped once on ash-slick stone; she hauled herself up anyway, using the panic in her limbs as momentum. Rocceto bunched his muscles and surged forward the moment her weight settled, weaving through the chaotic mess of people with a desperation that matched her own. She leaned low over his neck, shouting warnings when she could and simply clinging on when she couldn’t, letting his instincts find the least lethal route.

As they climbed, the Lower Decks unfolded around them in jagged glimpses between buildings and smoke. Whole sections of boardwalk had collapsed into the canals, leaving yawning gaps where water boiled under falling debris. A warehouse near the fish market blazed like a pyre, sparks streaming off it as they rode past; the heat made her eyes water, even at a distance. She saw bodies in the water, some moving sluggishly as others leaned down with hooked poles to drag them out, others already too still to help. A Maelstrom ship in the harbour was on its side, half-sunk, its mast snapped; men clung to the tilting hull like barnacles.

The sky above it all was an impossible tableau of fire and motion. Bahamut coiled and struck and spread his wings, his form wreathed in light bright enough to sear afterimages into her vision even through the smoke. Each time he unleashed his breath, a lance of incandescent ruin stabbed down toward the land beyond the city, and the shockwaves of those distant impacts rolled back like thunder, rattling shutters and knocking tiles loose. It felt less like watching a battle and more like witnessing a god tearing up the world in a rage.

By the time they reached the higher paths that led toward the Mist, Marisa’s lungs burned, and her legs had gone from shaking to numb. The route that usually took her ten, fifteen leisurely minutes at a trot blurred into a series of crises: a fallen arch they had to detour around; a cluster of panicked citizens blocking the main way until a Yellowjacket officer screamed them into motion; a sudden rain of shattered glass when some high window gave up and emptied its contents onto the street. Through it all, Rocceto

proved the wisdom of her stubborn choice back at Red Rooster Stead years ago; his speed and sure-footedness turned what could have been a fatal slog into a desperate, but survivable, climb.

The Mist, when they finally crested the last rise and the ward came into view, looked like a painting left out in the rain. The neat lines and bright colours were still there, but blurred and streaked by smoke and falling ash. Several of the little cottages had missing chunks from their roofs; one whole side of a neighbouring building had collapsed inward, its garden wall half-swallowed by rubble. Trees that had once been trimmed into pleasant, ornamental shapes were scorched or snapped, branches blackened against the unnatural crimson light.

And yet, somehow, the ward still stood. The outer walls hadn't fallen. The paths, though cracked and littered with debris, remained passable. People were everywhere: some gathering in frightened clusters in the middle of plazas, others already organised into bucket lines, hauling water from the nearest fountain to splash onto embers creeping along a hedge. The air here was a little clearer than down by the harbour, the altitude and sea breeze dragging some of the smoke sideways instead of letting it settle. The red light from the sky bled over everything, turning even white stone a faint, sickly pink.

Marisa slid from the saddle with her legs protesting, landing harder than she meant to. Her knees almost buckled; she caught herself on Rocceto's tack and took a moment to breathe, one hand pressed against his neck, feeling the rapid thud of his heart. "Stay here," she said, tying his reins to a bent but still-standing lamp post. "If the ground starts fallin' out from under us, you've got my permission to run and I'll find you later." He snorted, feathers slicked tight against his body, but he didn't fight the knot. His eyes stayed wide, fixed on the churning sky.

Puku's weight in the satchel felt reassuringly solid as she adjusted the strap and headed toward The Topmast. The building that housed Puku Pizza loomed ahead, its familiar façade marred by fresh cracks running like grey veins through the stone. One upper corner had lost a chunk of masonry; the balcony there leaned at an angle that made her stomach lurch. A section of roof tile had slid down and shattered near the entrance, shards scattered like broken plate. But the main structure was still upright, doors and windows stubbornly in place.

Neighbours were clustered near the front, some holding buckets, others simply standing with their arms wrapped around themselves. As she approached, one of them—a middle-aged Elezen woman who ran a small tea shop further up—grabbed her forearm. “Marisa,” she said, voice trembling but controlled, “we were about to check if anyone was still inside your room. There was smoke from one of the windows earlier, but we think it was—”

“The oven,” Marisa said, already pushing past toward the stair. “I left it burnin’.” Her mind filled in the rest: the banked embers, the shaking of the earth, one good jolt turning embers to scattered coals and coals to fire.

The interior stairwell had not escaped unscathed. Several steps were cracked; plaster dust sifted continuously from the ceiling with each new tremor. On the second landing, a section of the outer wall had sloughed away, leaving a jagged opening through which she could see the sea, black and red under the bleeding sky. Wind pushed against her there, laden with ash. She squeezed past, ignoring the way the exposed edge of stone dropped away into empty air just a few handspans from her shoulder.

When she reached Room 77—Puku Pizza—the door was slightly ajar, the frame warped. Her heart lurched once; she shoved it open with her shoulder and stepped inside.

It was like walking into a version of her life tipped on its side.

The counter had shifted half a fulm, dragged askew by the motion of the building; one of its legs had punched through a floorboard and was precariously balanced on the beam below. The shelves nearest the oven had vomited their contents onto the floor, jars shattered, spice and flour and dried herbs ground together into a pungent, chaotic layer underfoot. The map on the far wall hung by a single nail, the other corner having finally surrendered; it drooped at an angle, edges singed where some brief, hungry flame had licked up from below. One of the front windows had cracked, a spiderweb pattern radiating out from a single impact point; soot blackened the sill.

The oven itself gaped like a wounded beast. The front lip was blackened more than usual, and there were fresh scorch marks on the ceiling above it where an uncontrolled flare had clearly kissed stone. A streak of charcoal ran across the nearest wall, ending in a dark bloom where something—possibly one of her own pans—had briefly caught and then been smothered. Someone had been

in here, she realised; there were wet footprints on the floor, small puddles of water near the oven's mouth. Someone had thrown water or sand, had fought the beginnings of a blaze before it could turn her entire world into char.

For the first time since the shaking began, something other than grim focus cracked through her chest. Relief hit so sharply it almost hurt. She stepped forward, set Puku's satchel down, and crouched to open it. The cat exploded out in a blur of fur and indignation, tail as big as Rocceto's plume, ears flattened. He hissed once at the room as if personally offended by the state of it, then made a beeline for the one patch of floor near the oven that wasn't covered in debris and dropped there, sides heaving.

"Yeah," she said, voice rough. "Me too."

There was no time to indulge in the temptation to just slide down the wall and let the shock swallow her. Another tremor shuddered through The Topmast, making the cracked window rattle in its frame. From outside, she could hear shouting—the specific cadence of organised panic. She wiped her face with the back of one flour-streaked hand, forced herself upright, and did a quick, ruthless assessment. The oven needed watching; the banked coals were still hot, and any fresh shower of dust or debris might shift something important. The shelves could wait. The cracked window might be a problem if the building took another hit.

She propped the counter as best she could, wedging a fallen crate under the leg that had punched through the floor, then moved to the oven. Someone—one of the neighbours, probably—had thrown a heavy layer of damp ash over the coals, smothering the worst of their eagerness without killing them completely. With careful hands she shifted the ash, coaxing the remaining embers into a central mound where they could be watched. It felt obscene to be tending a cooking fire under a sky that looked like the inside of a forge, but leaving it untended felt worse. Control what you can, she told herself, repeating the mantra Marcus had drilled into her during their hardest lessons. The rest will do what it wants.

She had just finished nudging the last coal into place when a head appeared around the doorframe. It was the Elezen tea shop owner again, hair dishevelled, a smear of soot across one cheek. "We're forming a line," she said without preamble. "From the fountain up to here. The Admiral's people say we have to stop any embers before they set the ward off like tinder. You have buckets?"

"In the back," Marisa said, already moving. "Four, maybe five."

The next hours blurred into a feverish, ash-dimmed cycle of hauling water, dousing sparks, and scanning the horizon for new threats. A wind had picked up from the sea, and with it came a constant fall of ash—fine, grey, relentless. It drifted down onto roofs and hedges, nested in cracks, turned every surface dull and monochrome. When stray sparks from some distant blaze rode the wind into the Mist, they found plenty to cling to; if not for the bucket lines and frantic hands, half the ward's carefully tended greenery would have gone up in an instant.

Marisa ran back and forth between the fountain and the buildings until her shoulders burned and her hands blistered under the bucket handles. She found herself working beside people she barely knew beyond nods in the street: a stonemason whose name she'd never asked, a retired sailor with scars and a limp, a shy arcanist who normally sat quietly on the outer steps reading. They all moved with the same grim urgency, words stripped down to essentials. "There." "Roof." "Watch that corner." Once, when a gust hurled a cluster of still-glowing embers against The Topmast's side, she and the stonemason scrambled up onto a low ledge to slap at them with wet cloths, smoke stinging their eyes.

Between trips she snatched glances at the sky. Bahamut's rampage had shifted further inland now; the direct strikes were less visible from Limsa, but the red glare and the pulsing shockwaves of distant impacts remained. At some point the true moon and sun had vanished entirely behind the roiling clouds and debris; time became untethered from the usual cues. She lost track of how many times the city shuddered, or how many times some new plume of fire flared on the horizon before being beaten back.

Eventually, exhaustion carved out a small pocket of numbness inside her, a space where fear and grief couldn't quite reach. Her world shrank to tangible things: the weight of a full bucket, the slosh of water against the rim, the rasp of her own breath. When her legs finally refused another sprint, she let herself collapse just inside Puku Pizza's door, back against the wall, chest heaving. Puku crawled into her lap without ceremony, claws pricking through her trousers as he kneaded once before curling up into a tight ball.

She didn't know how long she sat there, staring at the opposite wall without really seeing it. The sounds outside shifted gradually from frantic to merely urgent, then to a kind of strained quiet punctuated by the occasional shouted order or sob. Somewhere overhead, the sky's constant roaring eased, replaced by a lower, more distant rumble. The colour of the light leaking in around the warped doorframe softened a fraction, red bleeding into a murky, ashen grey.

When she finally pushed herself to her feet again, the oven had cooled to a deep, steady warmth. The coals glowed faintly under their ash blanket; the stone arch above them had new hairline cracks she'd have to keep an eye on. The shelves remained a wreck, the floor a disaster, the map a wounded thing hanging by one stubborn nail. But the room was still here. The ceiling had not fallen. The door still opened and shut. Her little world, battered and smoke-stained, had not been taken from her.

She stepped outside onto The Topmast landing and looked out over The Mist. A fine layer of ash blanketed everything, softening edges, muting colours. Footprints criss-crossed it in every direction. Neighbours moved like ghosts through the haze, some carrying buckets, some just... walking, as if to reassure themselves that they still could. From this height she could see parts of Limsa beyond the ward—gaps in the skyline where towers had once stood, plumes of smoke still rising from the harbour and the far-off cliffs. The lighthouse flame burned on, a stubborn point of light against the bruised sky.

For the first time since the first tremor, there were no immediate orders for her to follow, no obvious fire for her to put out. The stillness felt alien. She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly aware of how sore and filthy and very, very small she was. Somewhere down in the labyrinth of the Lower Decks, her mother either huddled in some makeshift shelter or lay under rubble; the not-knowing gnawed at her, but her legs quivered at the idea of one more climb, one more descent through smoke and chaos. “Tomorrow,” she whispered to the ash-hazed air. “At first light. I’ll go down, I’ll find you. Just... hold on.”

Behind her, Puku Pizza’s warped door stood half-open, the faint warmth from the oven spilling out around her ankles. Rocceto, tied below, shifted and shook his crest, sending a small cloud of ash drifting away from his feathers. Above them all, the sky sagged under the weight of what had just happened, a patchwork of smoke and cloud and unnatural light slowly, grudgingly fading. Ash continued to fall, soft and soundless, settling into her hair, tracing pale streaks through the grime on her cheeks.

Limsa Lominsa, scorched and shattered and bereft of too many voices, was still standing. So was she. It felt, in that moment, like the smallest and largest miracle she had ever been part of.

Chapter 47: A Harbor Without Its Herald

Dawn didn't so much break over Limsa as seep into it, a thin grey light filtering down through the stained, uneven ceiling of cloud and ash. Marisa woke on the floor of Puku Pizza with her cheek stuck to the boards and every muscle in her body complaining. At some point during the night she'd simply... stopped; sat down with her back to the wall, Puku a warm weight in her lap, and let the exhaustion drag her under. Now her neck ached from the angle, her hands were stiff, and her mouth tasted of smoke and stale adrenaline. For a few blessed moments, coming up out of sleep, she forgot. Then she inhaled, her lungs filled with the sour tang of spent fire and damp stone, and memory crashed back over her in all its burning, shuddering detail.

Puku mewed his displeasure as she shifted, then headbutted her sternum with more force than necessary. "Yes," she croaked, her voice a stranger in her own throat. "I'm rude for movin'. The city nearly fell into the sea and I'm the inconsiderate one." He blinked at her, unimpressed, then leapt down, landing with a small puff of ash. His white paws were grey within three steps; he sneezed and retreated to a relatively clean patch of floor by the oven's side.

She pushed herself upright slowly, bracing a hand against the wall as the room tilted for a moment. The oven still held the ghost of warmth, the coals under their ash blanket giving off just enough heat to keep the damp from settling into her bones. The rest of the parlour looked much as it had the night before: shelves emptied by violence, jars shattered, flour and spice and dust mixed into a gritty paste wherever someone's wet footprints had crossed. Through the cracked window, the light that crept in was colourless and thin.

The first thing she noticed, once her eyes adjusted, was the quiet. Not silence—not quite—but a marked absence. No gulls squabbling over scraps, no ship bells chiming the usual shifts, no distant thud of crates on docks. The ever-present rumble of Limsa's harbour had been blotted out, replaced by an uneven patchwork of more fragile sounds: a cough from the landing outside, a door creaking open somewhere up the hall, the distant, ragged murmur of voices unwilling to rise above a certain volume as if afraid of waking something.

Her stomach made itself known with an undignified growl. She couldn't remember when she'd last eaten anything that hadn't been hastily stuffed into her mouth between crises. The thought of food turned her head, automatically, toward the prep counter; the sight that greeted her there—a bowl of dough that had started to rise before the world tore open, now collapsed and dry at the edges—landed like a small, unnecessary grief. "Sorry, love," she muttered to it. "World ended. I'll do better next batch."

There were decisions to make, and she made them in the order Marcus had once drilled into her: breathe, check, move. She checked the room first, walking the perimeter with one hand trailing along the wall, feeling for shifts in the stone. The hairline cracks radiating from the oven arch hadn't widened overnight; the damaged window held. The floor had a worrying tilt near the counter, but the crate she'd wedged under the leg still braced it. No fresh dust had fallen from the ceiling. Puku Pizza, battered and smoke-stained, was stable enough for the moment.

Next came the question she'd been avoiding by virtue of unconsciousness: Hanako. The thought of what the Lower Decks might look like in daylight made her stomach knot, but putting off the search any longer was unthinkable. If her mother had made it through the night, she would be somewhere down there, picking her way through the wreckage, possibly worrying herself sick over a daughter who hadn't turned up. If she hadn't... then not knowing would be worse than anything she might see.

She splashed water from the emergency jug onto her face, wincing at the sting as it cut through the grime. There was no point in changing clothes; everything she owned would smell the same right now. She did, however, pause long enough to tie a damp cloth over her nose and mouth, the way she'd seen some of the Maelstrom do on the Bismarck. The air in the Mist was clearer than it had been the previous night, but ash still drifted lazily down, an almost delicate fall of grey that belied the weight of what it represented.

Outside, the ward looked like a dream someone had smudged with dirty fingers. Ash lay over everything in a soft, uneven layer: hedges, stone paths, the decorative fences that once gleamed so prettily in the sun. Footprints had already trampled patterns through it—bare feet, boots, the odd three-toed chocobo track. The air held the sour, metallic tang of cooled smoke, overlaid with something saltier and less definable: sweat, tears, the breath of too many people who had screamed themselves hoarse.

Rocceto stood where she'd left him, though he had twisted himself almost fully around the lamp post at some point in the night, reins wound twice around the iron. His feathers were dull with ash, his crest drooping in a way she'd never seen before. When she approached, he made a low, uncertain sound, somewhere between a whine and a question. "Still here," she said, patting his neck, feeling the latent tremor in his muscles. "Good lad. You an' me have got one more bad trip in us, yeah?"

Around them, Mist residents moved in small knots, talking in low voices, carrying buckets or makeshift stretchers. The bucket lines had slowed to occasional trips now, dousing stubborn embers rather than raging fire. Someone had set up a crude notice board near the ward's entrance: a plank lashed between two posts, scraps of parchment and bits of torn cloth pinned to it with whatever nails or tacks could be found. Names covered it already, written in hurried hands. Some had "SAFE" scrawled beside them, others "MISSING." A few, the ink smeared and the edges already curling, bore a single, bleak word: "DEAD."

Marisa's gaze caught on a familiar flourish of script—the tea shop owner's hand, she thought, recognising the neat loops. She forced herself to look, scanning for the characters of her own name, for Hanako's. Neither appeared. The absence meant nothing and everything all at once. Names took time to travel; survivors took time to report. "Find her first," she told herself. "Then worry about boards."

The ride down into Limsa felt like descending through layers of someone else's nightmare. In the higher districts, damage was bad but patchy: one building gutted here, another miraculously untouched there. As they dropped toward the harbour, the destruction thickened. Entire façades had peeled away, exposing rooms like dollhouses sliced open—beds still made, tables still set, one wall missing. Smoke still rose from a few stubborn fires, though the worst of the blaze seemed to have burned itself out or been beaten back. The faint but inescapable smell of charred flesh hung in pockets, catching at the back of her throat even through the damp cloth.

People were everywhere, in that peculiar mix of motion and stillness that followed catastrophe. Some worked with clear purpose, hauling rubble into piles, rigging ropes across gaps, checking precarious walls with practised hands. Others wandered, dazed, their movements aimless, as if wandering long enough might return the city to its previous shape. Here and there she passed someone sitting alone on a stoop or a broken wall, staring at nothing, their expression emptied out. No one was shouting any more unless they had to; even the arguments had a hoarse, threadbare quality.

The Lower Decks had never looked gentle, but now they seemed positively cruel. The canals were wider where whole runs of walkway had dropped away; shattered pilings poked through the water like broken teeth. As Marisa led Rocceto as far as she dared and tied him off to a still-solid pillar, the path ahead became hauntingly familiar—because she had already run it once, in fire and darkness, when the sky was still tearing itself open.

She found the turning almost by muscle memory. Here was the corner where she'd grabbed a screaming child and shoved him into a stranger's arms. There, the scorch mark on the wall where a burning awning had collapsed; the ash was thicker now, softened by night and dew, but she could still see the pattern of it. The external stair to their building loomed ahead, braced now with a hastily nailed beam. Last night she had stumbled up those steps half-blind, heart pounding, only to find the flat door hanging open and the rooms inside torn apart by the quake—with no Hanako and no time to search properly before another tremor had driven her back out. The memory of that empty space had sat in her chest all night like a stone.

Now, in the thin grey daylight, she climbed the same stairs more slowly, every board creak sounding louder than it should. The landing had been swept clear of the worst of the debris; someone had taken a broom to the place in the intervening hours and propped charms along the wall—paper wards hastily inked and pinned up in a wavering line. The corridor door was back on its hinges, crooked but closed. Her hand hesitated for a heartbeat over the latch, fingers trembling, then she pulled it open.

The hallway smelled of ash and damp plaster and, faintly, tea. That last scent made her throat tighten. Their door—her door—stood at the far end, properly shut this time. A felted good-luck charm hung slightly askew from its handle, its little embroidered face smudged but intact. Last night it had swung loose, banging against the wood in the drafts. Now it was still. Marisa drew a shallow breath, stepped up, and knocked.

For a heartbeat nothing happened, and the hollow in her chest widened. Then the latch clicked, and the door eased open a handspan. Hanako peered out, eyes wary and tired, her hair pulled back in a hastily tied knot, a thin smear of dried blood along one cheek where something had clipped her. For a long, disbelieving moment they simply stared at each other—mother and daughter, ash-streaked mirror images separated by the width of a doorway and the worst night either had ever known.

“Marisa,” Hanako said at last, voice gone small and hoarse. She pulled the door wider, taking in the scorched cloak, the soot, the way her daughter's shoulders slumped under an invisible weight. “You— you came.” The words weren't quite right; they sounded like they'd started as something else and been hastily folded into shape.

“I came last night,” Marisa blurted, and the dam she'd been patching over since dawn cracked clean through. “The stair was half down, the shrine was on its face, the whole place looked like a bomb went off and you were just—gone. I thought—” Her voice

hitched; she swallowed hard against the rest of the thought. “I thought the worst and then the ground wouldn’t stop movin’ and they were screamin’ for help and I... I had to run.” She hated the way that sounded—like a confession, like an apology for surviving.

Hanako’s hand, which had been braced on the doorframe, softened its grip. She reached out and cupped Marisa’s soot-streaked cheek in her palm, thumb brushing an ashy stripe under one eye. “I know,” she said quietly. “Mrs. Brolla told me she saw you in the stair for a breath and then the world took you away again. I went to the harbour, foolish old woman that I am, thinking there would be answers there. There were only bodies and orders and men with spears telling us to turn back. When I finally fought my way home, the flat was empty, your bed was cold, and the sky was still red.” Her fingers tightened, just a little. “I thought I had lost you to it too.”

That was all it took. Marisa lunged forward the last half-step and wrapped her arms around her mother, clinging with a ferocity that made Hanako stagger back a pace before she caught her balance. They held on to each other in the shattered little entryway, pressed together hard enough that ribs protested, as if proximity alone could anchor them against aftershocks real or remembered. Marisa could feel Hanako’s heartbeat under her ear, fast but solid. For the first time since the first tremor, some deep, animal part of her unclenched.

After a long moment, Hanako let out a breath that shook only a little and pulled back just far enough to look her over properly—hands skimming shoulders, arms, as if checking for breaks, her gaze sharp despite the exhaustion. “No broken bones?” she asked. “No burns I cannot see?”

“Just bruised everywhere and ugly,” Marisa said, trying for flippant and only half-succeeding. She swiped at her own eyes with a filthy sleeve and managed a wobbly grin. “You should see the other guy. The moon looks terrible.”

“Your jokes have not improved,” Hanako replied, but a ghost of a smile tugged at her mouth. She stepped aside and gestured her in. “Come. Sit down before the floor decides to throw you again. We will argue about your choices later. For now, I will make tea and pretend this is merely a very bad storm.”

Inside, the flat wore the evidence of having been both wrecked and deliberately set to rights. Marisa recognised the overturned shelf she’d stumbled past the night before, now righted and refilled as best as possible; the same shards of pottery she’d crunched

underfoot had been swept into a neat pile in one corner. The shrine she'd found knocked over in the dark stood upright again, the little wooden figure of Takenouchi-no-Sōun dusted off and facing the room with solemn patience. A fresh sprig of green—some hardy herb scavenged from a neighbour's window box, perhaps—had been tucked into a cracked cup beside it, an offering against the ash.

She sank down at the low table more than sat, the rush of relief leaving her limbs weak and boneless. Hanako moved about the tiny kitchen with the clipped efficiency of someone holding herself together by the strict observance of routine: water poured, tea leaves measured, cups set out with only the slightest rattle. When she returned and pushed a chipped cup into Marisa's hands, their fingers brushed; both of them held on for a heartbeat longer than necessary.

"You found me," Hanako said quietly, as if acknowledging a bargain upheld. "And I found my way back to you. For now, that is enough."

They sat for a while at the low table, drinking tea that tasted faintly of smoke because everything did now. Hanako listened as Marisa haltingly relayed what she'd seen: the Bismarck turned into a field kitchen, Pagoda shouting orders with singed eyebrows, the impossible sight of something vast tearing itself out of the red moon, the way fire had moved across the land like a living thing. In turn, Hanako spoke of the crush at the Lower Decks chokepoints, of makeshift triage stations set up on any reasonably flat surface, of the way people had crowded around scattered conjurers and thaumaturges as if proximity to magic might make them safer.

"Have you heard from Eldric?" Hanako asked at one point, so casually that the question landed like a dropped brick. It took Marisa a second to realise her mother wasn't being cruel; the circuits in both their minds had simply misfired back to old, unfinished stories. "He could be anywhere down there. On a ship. In the—"

"No," Marisa said, more sharply than intended. She took a breath, softened it. "No, Mum. I haven't. If he was here when this happened, he'd..." She looked down into her tea and let the unfinished thought sit between them. Some fantasies were not strong enough to survive a night like the one they'd just had.

Outside, the city tried to stumble into some semblance of a new pattern. The bells remained silent for anything but urgent signals. The *Harbor Herald* did not appear; no newsboy's cry punctured the morning, no ink-smelling bundle slapped onto their stoop. The absence was so jarring that Marisa's hand twitched once toward the door at the usual time, fingers closing on air. "No paper today," Hanako murmured, following her glance. "The Herald has nothing to herald."

"Or too much," Marisa said. "How do you even fit this into a column?" She gestured vaguely toward the window, where a sliver of the ruined city was visible between buildings. "*'Local woman writes: please stop droppin' primals on us, it's bad for business.'*"

"Flour prices expected to rise due to shortage of intact mills," Hanako added dryly, a spark of her usual acerbic humour showing through. "City in ruins, but at least the gossip column survived." The faint smile that followed was thin, but real.

By midday, the flat began to feel oddly unreal, a pocket of relative intactness floating in the wider wreckage. It felt wrong to sit in a room with four standing walls while rents in the city yawned wider outside. Marisa stood, joints protesting, and said, "I have to go back up. Check on the parlour properly. Rocceto's tied to a post up there, probably wonderin' why his human has taken leave of her senses."

"I should come with you," Hanako said immediately. "I won't sit here and stare at the walls while you climb through rubble alone."

"You'll stay," Marisa countered, gentler than the words themselves. "At least for now. If there are aftershocks and this place finally gives up, someone needs to be here to move fast. Besides, the climb back up is bad enough with two working lungs." She thumped her chest lightly. "Mine were filled with half the harbour last night. We'll trade later. You come up and scold me for my mess when things stop fallin'."

They argued a little, out of habit as much as conviction, but in the end Hanako relented, on the condition that Marisa eat something more substantial than tea before leaving. There was rice, miraculously unspilled in its crock, and a few pickled vegetables that had survived the quake in their jar. The simplicity of the meal felt almost obscene in the face of so much loss, but her body seized on it, reminding her with each bite that she was very much alive.

On her way back toward the Mist, she saw more clearly the beginnings of what would become the city's long-term response. Maelstrom officers had set up makeshift command posts at key intersections, maps spread across barrels, messengers running back and forth with scribbled reports. Yellowjackets moved through the crowds in pairs, not just maintaining order but counting, taking names, directing people toward shelters that had sprung up in warehouses and half-damaged guildhalls. Somewhere beyond her immediate sightline, conjurers and scholars were already arguing about aetheric fallout, about what it meant to have a primal of that magnitude tear open the sky.

What she did not see, anywhere, were stacks of fresh papers or *Harbor Herald* runners. The city's usual habit of narrating itself had been interrupted. In that silence, rumours flourished like mould: a woman at a corner insisted that all of Mor Dhona was gone, swallowed whole; a man near one of the bridges swore he'd seen the Elder Seedseer herself riding a wave of living wood across the Twelveswood to shield Gridania; a dockworker solemnly informed anyone who would listen that the Garleans had done this on purpose and that somewhere, in a hidden fortress, men in magitek armour were applauding. Truth and fear tangled into one indistinguishable thread.

When she finally crested the last rise and the Mist spread below her once more, she felt the oddest sensation of déjà vu, as if the past day had been a fever dream and she was about to find everything as it had always been. But the ash on the paths, the cracks in the walls, the soot-smudged faces of neighbours leaning against fences dispelled that illusion quickly enough. Rocceto whickered when he saw her, a low, rough sound of relief that put a lump in her throat all over again.

Puku Pizza waited where she had left it: door warped, window cracked, interior a mess. Inside, the air had cooled a little; the oven's stones no longer radiated the same comforting heat. She stepped over fallen jars and retrieved a fallen chair, setting it back upright by the counter more out of instinct than plan. The act of righting it made something tentative inside her sit a fraction straighter as well.

She moved slowly through the small parlour, coaxing order back into corners where she could. Broken glass went into a bucket. Intact jars were wiped down and returned to their shelves. The map, still hanging by its lone nail, was carefully lifted down, smoothed, and laid flat on the counter to await proper repairs. Each small, practical task layered one more thin film of normalcy over the rawness of the previous night. It did not erase the charred bodies she had stepped around, the gouges in the skyline, the

memory of a dragon's silhouette against a bleeding moon. But it gave her hands something to do while her mind tried to make room for all of it.

Only when she paused to stretch her aching shoulders did she realise what was missing from the clutter. The little pile of *Harbor Herald* issues she kept tucked in the corner—her favourites, folded open to columns she liked—had been scattered by the tremors. A few were within reach, half-buried under flour; others had slid under the counter. She knelt to retrieve one, shaking ash from its pages, and found herself staring at the date printed neatly at the top. Yesterday's issue. The last normal morning Limsa had had.

She smoothed the paper out on the counter and looked at the headlines. They seemed absurdly small now: arguments over tariffs, a scandal about a minor noble's gambling debts, a speculative piece about the "Crimson Moon" that treated it like an interesting puzzle rather than a loaded weapon. In the margin, she'd scribbled a note to herself about a particular recipe in the lifestyle section she'd meant to try. "Next week," she had written. "Too busy tonight."

There would be no next week issue to complement it. No tidy, printed summary to explain what she'd just lived through. For the first time in her life, the story of Limsa Lominsa's day had to be held in its people rather than on the page. Her own part in it would not be a headline. It would be a soot-smudged girl with sore hands, standing in a half-ruined parlour, deciding to light an oven again in a city that had very nearly burned.

She folded the paper carefully, then slid it onto a shelf rather than back into the pile. Yesterday's Herald would have to do for a while. Until someone in a less-broken part of the city set ink to fresh paper again, the harbour would be without heralds, and the work of remembering would fall to those whose knuckles were still raw from clawing their way through the ash.

Marisa drew a long, slow breath, tasting smoke and stone and the faintest trace of cooled dough. "All right," she said aloud, to the cracked window, the stubborn oven, the city beyond. "We're still here. You and me and this ridiculous little room. Let's see what we can make out of what's left."

Chapter 48: Smoke on the Horizon

In the days that followed the night the sky broke, Limsa Lominsa lived in two tempos at once. Up close, life shrank to small, practical movements: hauling rubble, boiling water, writing names on boards and doorways. People spoke in low voices about cracked beams and missing neighbours and which warehouses could be salvaged. But if you lifted your head—if you let your gaze wander past the broken skyline—there was always smoke. Not the familiar, tidy plumes of cookfires and chimneys, but great, ragged columns on the horizon, smeared across the sky like charcoal dragged by an unsteady hand.

From the balcony outside Puku Pizza, Marisa could see three of them most mornings. One rose inland beyond Upper La Noscea, thick and dark, the wind pushing its upper half eastward toward Coerthas. Another hovered in the direction of Moraby, changing shape with each shift in the breeze. The third was fainter, more of a constant haze than a plume, but it never quite went away. They were too far to smell, but just knowing they burned made the ash on Limsa's own streets feel less like a local disaster and more like fallout from something that had cracked the whole world.

Puku Pizza, against all sane odds, had become part of the city's recovery whether Marisa planned it that way or not. Once it was clear Topmast wasn't about to tumble into the sea, neighbours began knocking—not for a menu, but for help. The Maelstrom had requisitioned a few larger kitchens outright; the Bismarck was still doling out bread and broth to the displaced. Smaller places like hers filled the gaps, turning sacks of flour and rescued barrels of oil into whatever could be sliced and carried one-handed. She baked loaves more than pies now, big rough rounds that could be torn and shared, and sent them out in baskets carried by whoever came through the door with a halfway sensible plan.

"Hot food keeps shock from turning people stupid," a harried Yellowjacket told her on the third day, leaning against her counter while a stack of still-steaming loaves cooled. His moustache was singed on one side; his voice had the faraway roughness of someone who hadn't had a full night's sleep since before the skies went red. "If they're chewing, they're listenin'. If they're listenin', they're not wanderin' into condemned buildings or the wrong end of a collapsing quay."

“Fine by me,” Marisa said, sliding another tray onto the scarred wood. “I’ll keep the city civilised one crust at a time. Just make sure someone comes back with my baskets. Those are expensive.”

It was Baderon who finally dragged her further than the Mist and the Lower Decks. He turned up at Puku Pizza one afternoon looking as if someone had poured him out of his own tankards and forgotten to clean the cup: eyes rimmed red, beard and hair shot through with grey ash, apron stained with things that probably had names but didn’t deserve them. He still grinned when he saw her, though it stuck a little at one corner.

“Lass,” he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder toward the sea, “I’ve got a problem only a madwoman with a chocobo an’ too much energy can solve.”

“Flatterin’ way to open,” she replied, wiping her hands on a towel. “What kind of problem? If it’s pirates refusin’ to tip, that’s a *you* issue.”

He snorted. “Out in Middle La Noscea, up by the bluffs, the Maelstrom’s set up a sort o’ camp,” he said. “Refugees from the hamlets that caught the worst of the fallout, folk whose houses decided they preferred being kindling. Admiral’s sendin’ supplies, bless her, but it’s all hardtack and salted this and that. You know as well as I do that’s no way to feed men who’ve spent three days diggin’ their lives out o’ the ground.” He nodded toward her oven. “You, on the other hand, are sittin’ on a perfectly good morale engine.”

Marisa glanced toward the corner where yesterday’s Herald lay folded, yesterday in this case being “the last day the world vaguely made sense.” No new issue had appeared; no neat column had yet told her what was happening beyond the smoke. “You want me to ride out with bread,” she said slowly. “Into the bits that were under that thing’s shadow.”

“I want you to ride out with bread, and maybe see for yourself that the horizon doesn’t end at the city walls,” Baderon said, softer. “Rumour’s doin’ more damage than half the stray embers. Some of it’s true, mind, but... better you see what’s really burnin’ than sit up here inventin’ worse. You’ll ‘ave a Maelstrom escort, an’ I’ll yell at anyone who tries to requisition your chocobo on principle.”

Leaving Hanako again so soon after finding her felt like picking at a half-healed wound, but when Marisa brought it up at the flat that evening, her mother only sighed and set down the mending she'd been pretending to concentrate on. "You will not sit in this room and rust," Hanako said. "If there is work to be done and you are strong enough to do it, go. Just don't try to out-race dragons."

"That was one time," Marisa muttered. "And I was very motivated." But she squeezed her mother's hand hard before she left, as if transferring some of her own warmth as collateral.

The next morning she loaded Rocceto with two great sacks of bread and whatever else she could safely balance: hard cheese, dried fruit, a few bottles of cheap but clean ale that Baderon had pressed on her "for the worst cases." Puku claimed his usual place in her satchel, only his ears and occasionally his whiskers visible above the flap. A Maelstrom sergeant with a scar down one cheek met her at the edge of the Mist, four soldiers at his back. They all looked as though they'd been rolled in soot and then left out to dry, but their gear was in order and their eyes were clear.

"You're the pizza girl," the sergeant said, eyeing Rocceto as the chocobo stamped and shook ash from his feathers.

"Puku Pizza," Marisa confirmed. "Though this lot's mostly bread. Don't tell your men, I don't want riots."

He grunted, the ghost of a smile cutting through his weariness. "Name's Serjeant Lofwyrn. Stay close, stay low if there's another tremor, and if I yell at you to run, you run."

They rode out through the Zephyr Gate and into Middle La Noscea. The landscape beyond Limsa's immediate cradle had always felt open to Marisa, full of wind and grass and the steady churn of the sea at its edges. Now it looked... bitten. Great chunks of hillside had slumped away where the earth had shaken itself loose. A line of trees along a ridge had been scorched into black silhouettes, their branches frozen in a gesture like pleading. In a low-lying field, a herd of aurochs lay where they'd fallen, some half-charred, others simply... stopped, their bodies twisted in ways that spoke of terror more than flame.

The smoke plumes dominated everything. Up close, the nearest one wasn't a single pillar but a cluster of smaller fires feeding a shared column, rising from what had once been a hamlet along the road. The Maelstrom had already been there; she could see their colours on makeshift barriers, their sailors' bodies moving among the ruins. Water glimmered in hastily-dug ditches,

reflecting the warped sky. As they passed, the sergeant raised a hand in a brief salute to the exhausted-looking officer in charge; they exchanged a few rapid sentences about numbers and supplies, too clipped and quiet for Marisa to catch.

The camp on the bluffs had the hollow look of a place thrown together in a hurry and held together by stubbornness. Lines of canvas had been rigged between whatever posts could be hammered into cracked ground; blankets and sails did their best to pretend to be tents. People huddled under them in clusters—families, mostly, with whatever bundles they'd managed to yank from collapsing houses. Children with ash in their hair clung to parents whose faces had the stretched, brittle look Marisa recognised from glimpses in a warped pot lid—the look of someone whose mind had not yet caught up to what their eyes had seen.

The arrival of the chocobo and the Maelstrom escort turned heads. When word went around that the newcomer had brought food that wasn't ration biscuits, the mood shifted like the wind veering. Marisa found herself at the centre of a loose circle of hungry men and women, handing out hunks of still-warm bread and wedges of cheese as quickly as her hands could move. A few recognised her—not by name, but as “the red one from the Mist” or “the lass that runs up and down to the Barracuda Barracks with boxes.” Under any other circumstances she might have preened. Here, she just kept slicing.

“Did it look like this in the city?” a man asked her at one point, staring past her toward the blackened line of the distant hamlet. His hands were rough, his clothes those of a farmer; ash had settled in the lines of his face, making him look older than he probably was. “When it... when he... whatever that was, came down?”

“Worse,” she said honestly, thinking of the Lower Decks with whole sections torn away. “Different. Closer. More water, more things fallin' in it. More scream—” She cut herself off, pressed a piece of bread into his hands instead. “It's bad everywhere,” she amended. “But you're here. We're here. That counts for somethin'.”

A conjurer from Gridania—one of a small knot of them who'd been summoned by the Alliance—stood near the edge of the bluff, staff planted in the cracked earth. Marisa drifted that way when the worst of the immediate rush had passed, Puku resettling in her satchel with a grumpy chirrup. From up there, the view laid itself out in brutal honesty. Smoke on the horizon in three

directions. The sea below, churned and oddly streaked in places where something had boiled it not long ago. And above it all, the sky still wrong: no red moon now, but veils of strange light where rifts in aether had not quite finished closing.

“Never seen it torn like that,” the conjurer murmured when he noticed her beside him. His accent had the lilting cadence of the Shroud. “Not in all my studies. Not in any of the old tales that sounded like more than simply tales.”

“Is it... fixable?” Marisa asked, gesturing vaguely at the shimmering scars overhead. “Or are we stuck with that as our new ceiling?”

He exhaled slowly. “The Twelveswood teaches us that some wounds never close entirely,” he said. “They change the shape of what grows around them. But we’re still breathing. The aether still flows. For now, that will have to be enough.” He glanced sideways at her. “You’re from the city?”

“Limsa,” she said. “Mist. Originally Hingashi, but that’s a long story. I deliver pizza.”

His mouth twitched, as if unsure whether to smile. “Then you are as much a healer today as any of us,” he said, nodding toward the camp where people were already tearing bread into smaller pieces to share with those who couldn’t stand in line. “We patch the aether. You patch the stomach. Together we may trick the soul into believing tomorrow is worth seeing.”

She thought of Marcus then, as she always did when someone mentioned bread and souls in the same breath. Somewhere on the other side of the city, perhaps, he was doing exactly what she had been doing these past days: coaxing reluctant ovens to life, turning what grain remained into something that could be carried to those too stunned to cook. Or perhaps he was already gone, bound for Corvos on whatever ship still dared the seas, watching different smoke on a different horizon. The not-knowing gnawed at her.

On the ride back, the plumes followed them, always just at the edges of her vision. Rocceto snorted at them occasionally, as if offended by the way they smudged the sky. Her muscles ached from hours in the saddle on top of days spent hauling buckets and trays, but something in her chest had shifted. The Calamity was bigger than Limsa, bigger than her little oven and the cracked stair to the flat. It had reached out long fingers to La Noscea’s hamlets, to the Twelveswood, to Thanalan’s sands and beyond. The smoke on the horizon was a reminder that while their city still stood, other places had fared far worse.

Back in the Mist, as the strange, dim twilight of the new sky settled over the ward, Marisa unloaded the empty sacks and set Rocceto to drink at the trough. Hanako would be waiting up in the flat with too-strong tea and too many questions. The notice board by the gate had acquired more names, more notes in different hands. Somewhere in the jumble of ink, someone had written, in a neat, firm script: *“Marcus Corvinus – Riverside, Lower Decks – missing, last seen aiding relief.”* She didn’t see it yet; that would come soon enough.

For now, she paused outside Puku Pizza and looked westward, past the neat fences and the falling ash, to where the last light caught the lingering plumes far off over the sea and land. Smoke on the horizon, she thought. Not a threat, not exactly—not anymore. A marker. A promise that the world had changed, and that the work of living in it would not be simple.

“Tomorrow,” she told the oven, the city, herself, as she pushed the door open. “We’ll bake more. We’ll go further. We’ll see how much of this mess we can feed back into somethin’ worth keepin’.” Puku slipped inside ahead of her, tail high, as if to declare that whatever else the sky decided to do, his dinner schedule remained sacrosanct.

Chapter 49: Marcus

It took three days before Marisa finally walked down to Riverside, and by then the delay sat on her shoulders like an accusation. In those first days after the sky tore open, her world had shrunk to tight, practical loops: from Puku Pizza to the makeshift bucket lines in the Mist, from the Topmast flat to the Bismarck’s commandeered field kitchen, from Maelstrom supply wagons to hastily rigged shelters. Every time she thought of turning her steps toward the little side canal where Riverside Pizzeria crouched over the water, something else—another fire, another errand, another neighbour on the brink of falling apart—got shoved into the empty space instead. It was easy to pretend she was too busy. It was harder to admit she was afraid of what she wouldn’t find.

On the morning she finally went, she didn’t announce it with any grand words. Hanako glanced up from the mending she was doing by the window and studied her daughter’s face for all of half a heartbeat before asking, “Where?” Marisa pulled on her ash-stained cloak, fingers clumsy at the ties, and answered, “Riverside,” without trying to dress it up. The name lodged between

them like a stone. Hanako's mouth tightened, but she nodded once and said only, "If the place stands, light incense for him. If it does not..." She paused, as if choosing between several equally terrible sentences, then finished quietly, "Then come back anyway."

The path through the Lower Decks felt different now that she wasn't sprinting through it on borrowed adrenaline. The damage was clearer in daylight: jagged gaps where walkways had fallen away entirely, new patches of raw, bright timber where carpenters had already begun the impossible task of knitting the city back together. The water below was a sluggish mirror of the destruction above, littered with broken beams, driftwood, and the occasional grim object she refused to name even in her thoughts. The usual smells of fish, tar, and cheap ale were overlaid with something harsher: wet ash, cooling stone, and the sour tang of burned rope and fabric that no amount of sea breeze could quite carry off.

Riverside had always been a little hidden, a place you found by following your nose and the sound of loud Corvosi swearing. Now, threading her way through a crooked side alley she'd walked a hundred times before, Marisa had to stop herself from flinching at each familiar turn. Here was the low arch where she'd once cracked her head ducking in with three hot boxes. There, the old crate that Marcus had always insisted on leaving by the wall because "it has been there longer than half this city and I do not argue with elders." The closer she got, the tighter her chest grew, until it felt like the ash in the air had settled inside her ribs.

Riverside Pizzeria was still standing. For a moment that simple fact made her dizzy with relief. The building leaned more noticeably toward the canal now, as though the quake had shoved it forward and it had decided to stay there out of spite, but the façade remained intact. The painted sign above the door—*RIVERSIDE PIZZERIA* in Common and Corvosi, with a flourish of stylized script curling underneath—had a crack spidering through one corner, yet his hand was unmistakable. Someone had tacked a sheet of parchment to the doorframe.

Marisa stopped just short of the threshold and read it. The letters were careful, each stroke deliberate:

Riverside Pizzeria is closed until further notice.

Marcus Corvinus – missing after the Calamity.

Last seen assisting Maelstrom relief efforts at the Lower Decks.

If you have information, please speak to his wife inside.

The word *missing* seemed to pulse on the page. It was better than *dead* and somehow worse; it didn't tell her anything she could build a feeling around. Before she could decide whether to knock, the door creaked open from inside.

A woman stood there, framed by the dimness behind her. She was shorter than Marcus but shared his dark hair, though hers was gathered back in a knot threaded with a few stubborn strands of iron grey. Fine lines bracketed her mouth and eyes—not the soft etchings of age, but the sharper grooves of someone who had spent years worrying and the last several days doing little else. There was a smudge of soot along her forearm where she'd evidently leaned on something without noticing. She looked Marisa up and down—the ash in her hair, the red cloak, the way she hovered as if one more bad word might send her bolting—and said in lightly accented Common, “If you are here for bread, we have none today. The guild is feeding people near the barracks.”

Marisa swallowed, then managed, “I'm not here for bread, ma'am. I'm Marisa Takeuchi-Shipman. From Puku Pizza. I— I'm his student.” The word *student* came out too small for what that relationship had been, but it was the only one she trusted to hold without cracking.

Something softened in the woman's eyes at his name. “So,” she said quietly, drawing the door wider, “you are the loud Hingan girl from the Mist. The one with the cat in the bag.” Her mouth twitched, almost but not quite becoming a smile. “I am Livia. His wife. You should come inside.”

Riverside's interior felt like a breath held too long. The big domed oven still crouched in its corner, but the stone arch above its mouth was laced with fresh cracks, hairline fractures that ran up toward the ceiling like frozen lightning. One leg of the front table had splintered and been propped on stacked bricks. Flour dust lay in strange patterns, not the familiar scatter of a busy day but jags and streaks that spoke of sacks jolted from shelves and grabbed up again with shaking hands. The air was colder without the oven's usual belly heat, and the silence pressed on Marisa's ears.

On one of the tables, someone had arranged a small, stubborn order: a line of candles burned down nearly to their bases, a dish with smouldering incense, a ledger, a few neatly folded cloths. At the far end, laid carefully as if it were something sacred, sat

Marcus's old wooden dough scraper, its handle worn to a shine by the same hand over and over. Marisa's throat tightened at the sight of it; there was something obscene about the tool existing without its owner, as if someone had pressed pause on him mid-motion and left the room empty around it.

They sat opposite each other at the table, hands on the wood because there was nothing better to do with them. Livia regarded her for a long heartbeat, then said, "He talked about you, you know. The girl who kicked like a chocobo and argued with recipes." She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. "He was proud. He never said that word, of course. He said you were 'too loud for a small kitchen, just loud enough for a loud world.' That is his version."

Marisa let out a wet little laugh that scraped going out. "He always made it sound like he was puttin' up with me as a tragic burden," she said, staring down at her own clenched fingers. "I thought if I got through one session without him yellin' about my dough, it'd be a miracle."

"It is easier to shout than to say 'I care,' for some men," Livia replied, and now the lines around her eyes shifted into something almost gentle. "You did not come only to hear that, though." She drew in a breath that seemed to brace her whole frame. "You want to know what happened."

Marisa's gaze jumped, involuntarily, to the oven and back. She thought of the notice on the door, of the word *missing* with its edges left open on purpose. "If you can tell me," she said, and heard how brittle the hope sounded even as she tried to hide it. "If there's any chance he's... I mean, if he might still be..." The end of the sentence crumbled in her mouth.

Livia folded her hands together so tightly her knuckles whitened. "When the ground started to move," she began, her voice taking on a careful, measured cadence like someone reciting something they had told themselves many times already, "he sent me and the children upstairs. He said the canal walls were old and he did not trust them not to jump into the water when the city shook. He stayed down here to kill the fire. He said, 'If the sky wants to fall, fine, but I will not let my oven make it easy.'" The slightest ghost of a smile crossed her face and vanished. "He came up later with flour on his shirt and said we were to sit under the table and not move unless the whole building decided to swim. Then the Maelstrom started shouting in the street for anyone who knew the lower walkways. They needed people who could carry and who knew where not to step."

She glanced toward the crooked doorway as if expecting to see him stride through it mid-story. “He went,” she continued. “Of course he went. He told the children it would be a story for later, how their father helped the city remember how to breathe. He kissed me once and said, ‘It is just a storm, Livia. I have stood in worse.’ Then he ran out into it.”

Marisa could picture it too clearly: Marcus shoving his arms into his coat, muttering in Corvosi Latin about stupid timing, then plunging into a street full of falling stone and smoke as if charging a busy dinner shift. “He’d have come back,” she said quietly, half to herself. “He always comes back. For the last batch, for the tastin’, for...”

Livia’s fingers tightened further. “Some of the Maelstrom came by yesterday,” she said. “Not officers. Just two of the younger ones, boys hardly older than you. They had been attached to a relief party along the lower harbour. They asked if this was Riverside, if this was where Marcus Corvinus baked. When I said yes, they looked as if someone had punched them.”

A sick, cold feeling began to coil low in Marisa’s stomach. “What did they say?” she asked, though part of her already knew from the way Livia held herself half-bent around an ache she could not put down.

“They told me,” Livia said, and now her voice frayed, the careful composure splitting at the edges, “that there was a row of houses along the quay near the fish market that had caught fire when the first blasts hit. Old timber, old pitch in the walls. The flames went from roof to roof like they had been waiting for an excuse. People were still inside. Smoke, screaming, you know this part.” She swallowed, throat working. “Your friend—the tall Roegadyn from the caravans, I think, he was there too, they said—saw Marcus argue with one of the sergeants. The sergeant told them the roof was going and that anyone inside was already gone. Marcus said, ‘I have pulled people out of worse ovens than that,’ and went in anyway.”

Marisa heard herself whisper, “Of course he did,” and wasn’t sure whether the words came out full of pride or fury.

“They saw him go through the door,” Livia said. “He wrapped something around his face and he went in. A few breaths later, someone else ran out—an old woman, coughing, half-carried by a sailor. The boys said they thought, ‘He did it, the madman, he did it,’ and then—” She broke off, pressing a hand hard against her own chest as if the memory were trying to climb back out. “Then the building groaned and the whole front buckled. One of the fish oil barrels inside must have split. They said it was like

watchin' an oven door blow; the air popped, and the next thing they knew there was just a sheet of fire and the front wall was in the canal. When it cleared, there was nothing left you could call a doorway. Just flame and smoke and pieces of stone."

For a moment the only sound in the room was the soft crackle of the incense stick burning itself away. The image slammed into Marisa with enough force to leave her breathless: a familiar broad-shouldered figure disappearing into a doorway, the world exhaling heat, the sudden violent *absence* where he should have reappeared. Some part of her brain, the stubborn, stupid sliver that still wanted to bargain with the Twelve, tried to latch onto the detail of the old woman staggering out. "He got someone out," she said, voice raw. "He saved at least one."

"He did," Livia said, and now the tears spilling down her cheeks made her eyes shine unnaturally bright. "And then he went back for more, because that is who he is, and the building took him. They dragged bodies from that street all night. Men, women, children... cooked, crushed, unrecognisable. Too many. The Maelstrom counted them as best they could. They told me there was a 'Corvosi male, approximate' in the pile they burned by the quay when they could not find enough sheets for all of them. They asked if I would like to mark that as my husband."

Marisa flinched as if struck. The thought of Marcus reduced to a smudged line on a soggy ledger and a burned heap made something inside her curl up in helpless rage. "You said no," she blurted, almost desperately. "Tell me you said no."

"I said they were not fit to name my dead if they could not even recognise his face," Livia replied, and there was an iron weight under the grief now, hot and heavy. "I told them I would not sign anything that turned my husband into their guess. So on their neat little board, he is 'missing'." She let the word hang between them, bitter as old coffee. Then she shook her head once, slow and final. "But I am his wife. I saw the way the sky broke. I heard the way the ground tried to swallow us. I know how men come home at the end of a shift, and he has not walked through that door. I do not need a Maelstrom stamp to know that Marcus Corvinus is dead."

The bluntness of it stole Marisa's breath more effectively than any smoke. She had been clinging, somewhere beneath all the practised realism, to the idea of an *if*: if he was in a field hospital, if he was trapped under a half-fallen wall but calling out, if he was on some ship diverted to another port. Livia's certainty felt like someone stepping into that fog and slicing a clean line through

it. "There's no chance..." she began, and her voice broke entirely. She had to swallow hard before she could manage, "No chance he got turned around, ended up with some other lot? That he's out there, swearing in Latin at some poor Gridanian healer?"

Livia's expression gentled, but she did not retreat from what she had said. "If he were alive," she answered, "he would be moving the world itself to get back here. He would send word with the first sailor who could still carry a message. He would haunt every Maelstrom officer until one of them knocked on my door by mistake just to be rid of him. Three days is a lifetime for a man like that. He is not a man who disappears." She drew in a shaky breath, then added, quieter, "I would be crueller to my children keeping them waiting for a ghost than telling them their father died running into fire, doing exactly what he said he would do. The world took him. I... know it."

The words landed with a heaviness that sank straight through Marisa's bones. For a moment she could not see the room properly; her vision blurred around the edges, turning the oven, the table, the smouldering incense into smears of light and shadow. "He promised he'd see me open the second location," she heard herself say, absurdly. "Said he'd come taste the first pie and tell me I'd done it wrong even if I hadn't." Her laugh came out as a jagged sound that hurt. "What am I supposed to do now, huh? Who's gonna stand in the middle of my kitchen shoutin' '*too much basil, not enough respect!*' at me?"

Livia reached across the table and closed her hand around Marisa's. Her grip was smaller than Marcus's, but it had the same unyielding weight. "You will shout at yourself," she said. "You will hear him in your head every time you burn a crust. You will curse him for leaving you with an empty seat in your kitchen. And you will keep baking anyway, because if there is anything that stupid man believed in more than his own dough, it was that the world needed to be fed even when it was on fire." Her lips trembled; she pressed them together. "We will grieve him our own ways. That is all that is left to do."

They sat like that for a long while, the two of them bent over the table in the half-ruined pizzeria, hands joined in a shared, terrible understanding. Livia spoke, in fits and starts, of Locus Amoenus: of narrow streets cut with fog from the river, of the first time she had seen Marcus bellowing at a line of Imperial officers in Latin so elaborate it took them several sentences to realise they were being insulted, of how he had laughed the day he threw his signet ring into the canal and opened this place instead. Marisa, through tears, offered up her own pieces: the uncooked pizza that had slapped her in the face, the first time he'd called one of her

pies “not shameful,” the way he’d shouted, “Now *that* is what I call a *pĩtsa magnificus*,” as if he were knighting her in the name of crust. Each memory hurt going out and yet felt like a refusal to let him be destroyed all over again.

When she finally stood to leave, her legs felt unsteady, as though the floor might pitch under her the way it had on the night of the Calamity. At the threshold she hesitated, then turned back. The oven loomed in its corner, silent and cracked. On impulse she crossed the room, laid her palm flat against the warmest stone she could find, and whispered, “Thank you,” because there was no one else left to hear it who would understand what she meant.

Outside, the narrow lane along the canal seemed too bright. The ash had settled in uneven drifts against the walls, muting the colours of laundry lines and shutters, blurring the line between stone and sky. Marisa walked back toward the busier walkways in a daze, barely registering the shouted orders, the creak of patched planks under her boots. Someone called her name once; she didn’t turn. When she reached the pillar where she’d left Rocceto, the chocobo tossed his head and made a questioning sound low in his throat. Puku, tucked in the satchel at her side, poked his head out and mewed, ears flicked back as if sensing something sharp in the air.

“It’s fine,” she said, though her voice came out thin and strange to her own ears. “We’re fine. We’re...” The lie fell apart between one word and the next. She hauled herself up into the saddle anyway and pointed Rocceto uphill toward the Mist. The ride back to the Topmast passed in jerks and jump cuts: one moment a broken bridge with a new plank laid; the next, the familiar curve of the Zephyr Gate walls; then the quiet ash-fuzzed paths of the Mist, her neighbours’ faces turning toward her and then away again when they saw something in her expression that told them not to ask yet.

By the time she reached Puku Pizza’s door, her hands were shaking so hard she fumbled the latch twice. She shoved it open, stepped inside, and kicked it shut with more force than necessary. The parlour seemed almost indecently intact now that she had seen Riverside’s hollowed-out heart: the crooked counter, the leaning shelves, the map still lying where she had left it on the prep table, weighted at the corners with spice jars. The oven in the corner dozed, its stones still holding the memory of the last batch of bread she’d baked that morning.

For a second she just stood there, blinking in the dimness, the silence ringing in her ears. Then something in her gave way.

She crossed the floor in three strides, grabbed the back of one of the chairs she'd righted days ago, and sagged down into it as if her legs had been knocked out from under her. Her vision blurred again; this time she didn't bother to fight it. The first sob tore its way up without her permission, harsh and ugly, and once it had broken through, the rest followed in an unstoppable flood. She folded in on herself at the little table where she'd planned routes and counted coin and scribbled new menu ideas, pressing her forehead to her crossed arms as the sound of her own grief filled the small room.

Puku scrambled out of the satchel with a distressed chirrup and climbed clumsily into her lap, pushing his head under her chin, kneading at her ribs with blunt claws. She clutched him to her without thinking, burying her fingers in his fur as if he were the only solid thing left in the world. "He's gone," she gasped into the softness of his neck, the words hiccupping past the tears. "He's really gone, Puku. The old bastard—he went runnin' into a burnin' house and he—he—" She couldn't finish the sentence; it dissolved into another raw, helpless sound.

Her gaze snagged on the scrap of parchment pinned near the oven where she'd once written down a joke from Marcus—three words in looping script: *pītsa magnificus, sempre*. He had laughed as he wrote it, insisting that if she was going to steal his catchphrase, she might as well spell it properly. Now the letters swam in front of her, dark and absolute. "You don't get to just leave," she choked out, staring at the blurred ink. "You don't get to teach me how to do this and then run into the fire and not—" She slammed her fist softly once against the table, the gesture more childlike than furious. "You weren't finished."

The oven ticked softly as a bit of stone shifted with the lingering heat. Outside, someone shouted, faint and distant; a gull cried; a plank creaked under a neighbour's tread. Inside Puku Pizza, Marisa wept until the muscles in her throat hurt and her eyes felt scraped raw, until the tears thinned to hiccups and the ache inside her settled into a heavy, leaden weight. She pressed her palm against her sternum as if she could physically hold herself together where the loss had torn through.

When the worst of it finally ebbed, leaving behind a trembling, exhausted quiet, she sat back slowly, one hand still tangled in Puku's fur. The little cat purred on instinct, a low, steady vibration that seemed to insist, in the only language he had, that she was still here, that the walls still stood, that this small, flour-scented corner of the world hadn't collapsed. She dragged in a shaky breath and looked toward the oven. It stared back, mute and patient.

“Fine,” she whispered hoarsely, wiping her face with the heel of her hand. “You win, old man. I’ll keep it goin’. I’ll bake the stupid bread and slice the stupid basil with the stupid right amount and I’ll yell at anyone who disrespects the crust. I’ll even shout your ridiculous Corvosi if I have to.” Her mouth twisted, halfway between a grimace and something resembling a smile. “But I am going to miss you every single time I pull a pie from that fire, and if you are not up there somewhere screaming at the gods about their proofing times, I’ll be very disappointed.”

The room didn’t answer. The incense Livia had lit in Riverside still clung to her hair and clothes; beneath it, the familiar smell of dough and ash and tomato rose from the stones. Marisa sat there for a long time in the quiet, Puku a warm ball in her lap, the grief still raw but now anchored to something solid: a story, a choice, an ending she had not wanted but could no longer outrun. Outside, the city went on dragging itself out from under the Calamity’s shadow. Inside Puku Pizza, a girl who had once had a pizza thrown at her face mourned the man who had done it, and silently, fiercely, promised him that his fire would not go out.

Chapter 50: The Year of Red Evenings

The year after the sky broke did not arrive all at once; it seeped in around the edges of the damage, threaded between scaffolds and ash. Days stopped being counted in moons and market bells and started being measured in other things: the number of cracked beams patched, the length of relief lines, how many times the city went to sleep under a red-tinged sky and woke up again to find itself still, improbably, standing.

For Marisa, it began in the quiet after she ran out of tears in Puku Pizza. She woke the next morning on the parlour floor with a kink in her neck, Puku snoring on her stomach and a blanket she didn’t remember fetching tucked around her shoulders—Hanako’s work, undoubtedly. Her head felt full of wet wool, her eyes swollen, her chest hollowed out and sore. The grief hadn’t gone anywhere; it had simply settled, the way ash settled in the seams between cobbles, down into the spaces that couldn’t be scrubbed clean.

Outside, the Mist was muffled in grey. The first few days after the Calamity, the sky over Limsa had been an angry, boiling thing—bloody red, then bruised purple, then a sickly, turbulent yellow. Now it had found a habit: by noon the clouds thinned just enough to let some light through, but toward evening the whole horizon went the colour of banked coals. Every sunset looked like embers under glass. People started calling them “Bahamut evenings.” Marisa privately dubbed the whole stretch of time the Year of Red Evenings and refused, on principle, to let the name make her flinch.

Life did what it always did in Limsa Lominsa: it clung, adapted, and loudly refused to go under. The harbour, once the city’s great noisy heartbeat, came back in halting fits. The first few ships to limp in after the Calamity were half-ruined things, masts splinted, sails patched with whatever cloth had not burned. Their crews brought news of other places that sounded less like reports and more like fragments of a broken story. Mor Dhona was glass and wound. The Twelveswood was restless. Thanalan still burned in patches. For weeks, Marisa caught herself glancing toward the Zephyr Gate, expecting to see another moon hanging far too low over some distant horizon. The absence of it felt almost as unnerving as its presence had been.

The Harbour Herald came back before the bells did. The first issue after the disaster was pitifully thin, printed on cheaper paper that crinkled oddly between her fingers. There were no gossip columns, no serialized adventures, no jaunty cartoons in the margins. The front page was a long, stark list of names under three headings: *Missing*, *Confirmed Lost*, *Safe and Seeking Kin*. She sat at the Puku Pizza counter and read every one of them until the letters blurred. Marcus’s name wasn’t there, and that hurt in a new, sideways way. A week later, another issue added more to the *Lost* list and a few blessed lines to *Safe*. She circled acquaintances in charcoal, relief and pain rearranging themselves in her chest as she went.

She wanted, on some level, to stop baking for a while. To leave the oven cold as a mark of respect, or because it felt wrong to fill the parlour with warmth when so many places were still dark. But the world stubbornly refused to structure itself around her feelings. People still knocked on her door, hesitant at first and then with growing certainty. At the beginning it was refugees shuffled into the Mist from the Lower Decks, eyes hollow, hands clenched around ration slips that promised plain bread and weak soup elsewhere. “We heard,” they’d say, apologetic, “that the girl up here will put somethin’ hot in your hands if you’re workin’ or look like you’re about to fall down.” Later, it was Yellowjackets on new, strange rotations; Maelstrom lads with shoulders drooping under the weight of too many names; neighbours with coin again, wanting—almost guiltily—to taste cheese and basil and tomato instead of whatever was being ladled out of cauldrons in the plaza.

So she baked. At first the motions felt like betrayal, every knead of dough a small treason against the candle she'd lit for Marcus at Riverside. But her hands knew what to do even when her heart did not. She heard him whether she wanted to or not: "You are folding air into it, girl, not wringing its neck," when she overworked the dough; "Salt is not a suggestion," when her fingers hesitated at the pinch; "If the crust is good, they will forgive anything short of poison on top," when she found herself fussing over toppings just to avoid the quiet.

She added a new pie to the menu without putting it on the board at first. Thin crust, blistered at the edges, with simple toppings: mozzarella, olives, basil—El Corvosano. It was the first time she made it after sharing it with Marcus a year ago now, and her hands shook so badly she almost dropped the peel. When it came out of the oven, smelling of every lesson he'd ever shouted at her, she stood for a long time just staring at it. Then she cut a slice, sat down, and ate it in small, deliberate bites, tears slipping down her face and into the crust. "This one's for you, *el maestro*," she murmured to the empty room when she'd finished, holding it up in his honour. "House special." Eventually she painted it onto the board outside, in smaller letters than the rest. The first customer who ordered it unprompted made her want to both laugh and throw up.

Debt collectors turned up again as soon as the worst of the smoke cleared. The same pair from before—one tall and bored, and of course, the unwelcome figure of Dalmert himself—stood in her doorway with ledgers in hand and expressions she had once described to Hanako as "faces like mouldy cheese." Now their fussing over numbers seemed almost comforting in its mundanity. "You're still alive," Dalmert said, sounding faintly surprised. "And in business."

"Apologies for the inconvenience," Marisa muttered, handing over a small stack of coin. It wasn't much, but it was more than she'd ever been able to spare before. "Take it before the sky decides to drop another problem on us."

They leafed through their records, eyebrows rising as they read down the column of payments she'd managed in the months before the Calamity and the ones she'd scraped together since. "You're chipping away at it," Dalmert conceded. "Keep going like this and 'Mr. Shipman's unfortunate obligations' might not hang over your grandchildren."

“High praise,” she said dryly. When they’d gone, she stared at the smudged ink where her father’s name appeared beside the debt and tried to decide whether she was angrier at him for leaving it or grateful that paying it down gave her something concrete to push against when the grief for Marcus got too big to fit in her chest. The answer changed depending on the day.

Hanako slipped into her own new habits. In the first weeks, she threw herself into helping neighbours patch walls and clean houses, her precise hands as deft at mending clothes as they were at binding bandages. At night, when she thought Marisa wasn’t looking, she sat at the low table with the little ancestral shrine, a fresh sprig of green in the cup beneath the wooden figure. Sometimes she lit a candle, sometimes not; always she sat very still for a long time, lips moving in silent conversation with ancestors and long-gone deities she claimed not to bother any more. When Marisa asked, half-joking, “Putting in complaints with the kami?” Hanako sniffed and said, “If they are taking feedback on recent events, I will be heard.”

They argued less in that year, not because there was nothing to argue about but because neither of them had the energy to waste. When they did clash—a snapped remark about risk, a disagreement over how much time Marisa spent outside the Mist—there were usually apologies before bedtime, muttered and gruff but sincere. Once, after a particularly sharp exchange about her late returns from the Lower Decks, Marisa found a neatly folded note tucked into her satchel the next morning, written in Hanako’s careful, formal hand: *“Please be safe. I would like to scold you for many more years.”* She stuck it to the inside of the pantry door with a bit of wax and left it there.

The city slowly re-layered itself over its own scars. Scaffolds went up and came down. The Bismarck transitioned from emergency kitchen back to something resembling an actual restaurant, though there were always a few empty seats that hadn’t been empty before. Pagoda Buligoda returned to terrorising apprentices with renewed fervour; Lyngsath resumed his gruff mentoring, though Marisa sometimes caught a faraway look cross his face when the light hit the harbour a certain way. Rumours about the Warrior of Light and the company that had vanished at Carteneau turned into half-myth within months—stories told and retold in every tavern, each with its own flourishes. Marisa read every fragment the Herald printed about them, heart snagging every time the paper speculated on their fate. There was something horribly familiar about a hero whose name sat under “missing” with no body to show.

Puku Pizza, improbably, did well. People wanted comfort, wanted familiarity, wanted to sit in a place that smelled of cheese and tomato and hear someone complain about dough instead of primals. She saw new faces and old ones, sometimes both in the same person—neighbors thinned by loss, children who'd grown half a fulm taller in the months since she'd last really looked at them. Sometimes customers would stop, midway through biting into a slice, and go distant, eyes glittering with something that had nothing to do with the crust. When that happened, she pretended not to see, busying herself with the ovens until they either came back or quietly left.

Every few weeks, when she had enough coin and emotional fortitude in reserve, she walked down to Riverside. Livia kept the notice on the door updated—new dates, the word *missing* written in the same steady hand, a quiet rebuke to the Maelstrom's need for tidy categories. Inside, the oven remained cold, its cracks dark against the stone. The dough scraper still lay in its place on the table. They didn't always talk about Marcus; sometimes they talked about flour prices, about gossip in Corvosi, about whether the river's smell had changed since the Calamity. But there was always a moment, somewhere between tea and goodbye, when their conversation circled back to him like a ship to harbour. Those visits hurt. She made them anyway.

As the moons turned, the red in the evenings began to soften. The ash thinned in the air; the strange ripples of light where the sky's aether had torn slowly calmed, like a pond smoothing itself after a stone's been thrown. One clear night, nearly a year after Bahamut's fire, Marisa stepped out of Puku Pizza after closing and realised with a small jolt that she could see stars properly again—sharp and cold and indifferent above the patched roofs. The constellations hadn't moved. The world had been smashed and shaken and scorched, and the same patterns still traced their ancient lines overhead.

She stood there for a long while with her hands in her pockets, Puku's warm weight curled just inside the door, and thought about everything that had been burned away and everything that had refused to budge. Eldric's debt, stubborn as barnacles. Hanako's rituals. Rocceto's tendency to bite anyone who came near his saddle. The way her own hands still reached for flour and water and salt even when her heart wasn't sure what to want. The memory of Marcus's battered accent singing in Corvosi over the clang of pans.

By the time the next spring rolled in and the chill winds off the sea started to smell more of salt than smoke again, Marisa had turned twenty-one. The city was still full of scaffolds and half-finished repairs; the wound the Calamity had carved into the world

was still a raw, visible thing in news from abroad. But the Year of Red Evenings had taught her something she hadn't realised she was learning: that a life could be shattered and still go on, not in spite of the cracks but around and through them.

On the first truly clear evening of that new spring, she pulled a Corvosano from the oven, held it up to inspect the char on the crust, and heard herself say, in a voice that wobbled but held, "Now *that* is what I call a *pĩtsa magnificus*." There was no one else in the parlour to hear it. That felt right. Some promises, she decided, were between the living and the dead, the baker and the dough, the city and the ones who had chosen to stay in it.

Outside, the sky over Limsa glowed with the ordinary reds and golds of a sunset that owed nothing to primals. Inside, in a little pizzeria in the Topmast, a young woman set a pizza on the counter, wiped her hands on her apron, and turned toward the door, ready for whoever the world sent in next.

Part VIII — Post-Calamity (21-25)

Chapter 51: New Year, New Routes

The first year after the Calamity had been about surviving. The years that followed were about deciding what to do with the fact that she still was. Once the sky stopped looking like it was about to crack open again every other week, Limsa's rhythms slowly returned, even if the melody had changed. Ships came and went. Repairs shifted from frantic triage to stubborn, ongoing projects. The Harbour Herald started using ink on gossip and sports again instead of devoting every scrap of paper to casualty lists. Somewhere in there, almost without her noticing, Marisa's life stopped being "after Bahamut" and turned into something with its own momentum.

Puku Pizza became part of that new normal. At first the parlour had been a waystation for the stunned and the exhausted: free slices for workers coming off the bucket lines, cheap bread for families whose homes were still half tarps and borrowed walls. As the scars in the streets grew less jagged and scaffolds came down, coin started to trickle back across her counter. A Yellowjacket on patrol might grumble, "Same as before, lass, extra cheese," and she'd realise with a jolt that "before" didn't have to mean "before the world ended." It could just mean "before noon."

Her delivery routes stretched with the city's recovery. First back to the familiar: Zephyr Gate, the Barracuda Barracks, the old posts in Western La Noscea that had lost a few watchtowers but still needed someone to bring hot food to tired, salt-crustured sailors. Then further, as word spread that the girl in red was willing to go where other vendors balked. A Serpent officer passing through commissioned a trial run to a newly rebuilt outpost in the Black Shroud; a Gridanian merchant, charmed by the sheer audacity of "pizza delivery between nations," sent a letter with a wax seal and a ridiculous list of topping requests. Marisa squinted at the order—"mushrooms you can only get if you're friends with a Hearer, truly?"—and took it anyway.

Each new route felt like adding another line to the map that still dominated one wall of the parlour. Gold thread for reliable paths, red for the ones that had tried to kill her at least once. Sometimes, late at night after the last pie had gone out and Hanako had retreated to the flat, she'd sit at the table with a stub of charcoal and trace those routes with her fingertip: Limsa to Aleport. Aleport to Vesper Bay. Vesper back to the city with caravans. Limsa to Gridania, winding through the Shroud's green hush and

back again under unfamiliar stars. Rocceto knew many of them by heart now; if she slackened the reins and simply said, “Home,” he would angle his beak toward the Mist and carry her there without fail.

The grief for Marcus never went away. It simply stopped being a wave that knocked her off her feet every time it hit and became instead a stone she carried in her pocket, smooth with handling, weighty but familiar. Some days she would be halfway through stretching dough when a mannerism or a phrase would surface so vividly that she had to stop and press her hands flat on the table until the ache subsided. He was everywhere in her kitchen: in the way she flicked flour from her fingers, in the way she listened to the oven as much as she watched it, in the instinct that told her when a crust was seconds from perfect and when it was already lost. Livia kept the “missing” notice on the pizzeria door, more for herself and the children than for bureaucrats. When Marisa visited, they sometimes lit candles and said nothing at all; other times, they laughed so hard at some remembered absurdity that the grief folded back on itself and, briefly, felt almost like joy.

Eldric’s debt hung on too, an uglier kind of inheritance. Yet as Puku Pizza’s name spread, the ledger figures shifted from “crushing” toward “merely offensive.” The collectors came less often and stayed shorter. There was a morning, sometime in her twenty-third year, when she handed over a pouch of gil and caught Dalmert, frowning at the column of numbers. “At this rate,” he muttered, scratching something in his book, “you’ll have settled this whole mess before you’re grey.” He glanced up. “Assuming you don’t do anything spectacularly foolish.”

“Borin’ is my middle name,” Marisa said, straight-faced. “You’ll get your blood-money. I’d just rather it come from pizza than piracy.” When they’d gone, she stood for a long moment with her back against the closed door, breathing deep, realising that for the first time in years the debt felt like something she might outpace rather than something that would always run her down.

Hanako adjusted in her own way to the new years. She never embraced Limsa the way her daughter had; the Lower Decks were still loud and crude and full of temptations she eyed like a stern auntie. But she softened, in small ways. She learned to read the *Herald* without complaining about its flimsy paper. She began to greet regular Puku Pizza customers by name when they crossed paths in the Mist. Once, when a particularly bedraggled Yellowjacket staggered in asking if “Miss Takeuchi” had any leftovers he could trade for a favour, Hanako silently ladled him soup from a pot that had not yet reached their own dinner table and told him, in crisp, accented Common, that if he died from malnutrition she would be personally offended.

“You are getting soft, ma,” Marisa teased later, leaning in the doorway as Hanako tidied the bowls.

“I am getting practical,” Hanako replied. “If the city insists on keeping you alive, I must help feed the people who keep you that way.” She hesitated, then added, almost grudgingly, “And... it is good, seeing them laugh in here. It feels less like we live in a graveyard and more like we live in a port again.”

On evenings when business was slow, Marisa found herself wandering the docks rather than collapsing immediately into bed. She would stand at the railings and watch the rebuilt ships coming in, their lanterns bobbing on the dark water, their flags fluttering in winds that no longer smelled of ash. Each pennant told a story: Maelstrom crimson and black, Ishgard’s stark heraldry on merchant sails, the intricate patterns of Hingan banners she hadn’t seen since she’d been small enough to hide behind Hanako’s kimono. Sometimes she caught herself imagining routes that leapt far beyond La Noscea—pizza delivered in the shadow of Ishgard’s walls, slices eaten on the steps of Kugane’s markets, a map that wrapped all the way around the world. Then she’d laugh, shake herself, and head back to Puku Pizza, where there were dishes to wash and dough to prep and a very real, very impatient cat demanding supper.

The stars above all of this were the same constellations she’d heard named in Hingan stories and Lominsan taverns: the Scholar, the Bream, the Gates. And yet, standing in the Mist one quiet night with Puku draped bonelessly over her shoulders and Rocceto snoring in his stall, Marisa realised they looked different to her now. Not because they’d moved, but because she had. The girl who’d once drawn Limsa’s flag from memory in a Kugane alley, dreaming of blue seas and white stone, had become the woman with flour on her hands and routes scrawled across a map, who knew the road to Vesper Bay by the feel of the wind alone. The world was still broken in places. *She* was still broken in places. But there were also new roads under those stars, and she had already started walking them.

Chapter 52: The Girl Who Delivers

By the time Marisa turned twenty-four, people in Limsa had stopped asking “Who?” when someone mentioned “the pizza girl” and started asking instead, “Which ward is she in tonight?” The nickname clung to her whether she was hauling crates up the Topmast stairs or sprinting across a windswept causeway in Lower La Noscea with a stack of boxes under one arm. She took a perverse pride in it; there were worse things to be known for than feeding people. In a city that had once nearly starved under smoke, being the one who showed up with hot food and a bad joke felt, in its own small way, like a kind of resistance.

Puku Pizza had grown with her. The parlour was still cramped and crooked, the oven still temperamental in the rainy season, the tables still mismatched, but the place had a lived-in warmth now that hadn’t been there in the early days. The walls bore the evidence: scribbled notes from friends, a few faded flyers for old events, a framed clipping of a *Harbor Herald* human-interest piece titled “*Lominsa’s Red Comet: The Girl Who Delivers*” that she pretended to find mortifying and secretly cherished. Someone—she still wasn’t sure who—had left a small, hand-painted sign on the counter one evening that read “*IN CRUST WE TRUST.*” She’d snorted, then propped it up beside the tip jar and never moved it.

The routes stretched further. With the worst of the post-Calamity shortages eased, merchants and Company men had more coin to waste on novelty again. If you were in the right circles, it became a minor brag to claim you’d had pizza delivered “out there”: a camp in Eastern La Noscea where a Company unit was drilling, a temporary dig site in Thanalan where a scholar with more enthusiasm than sense insisted that “culinary morale” was crucial to their productivity, a tiny fishing hamlet barely clinging to the cliffs where an old Roegadyn woman sent for “that flatbread with the cheese that melts like a good hymn.” Each successful run turned into another stitched line on Marisa’s map, another story she could fold into the growing legend that was less “girl from Kugane” and more “pizzaiola of La Noscea.”

Somewhere in her twenty-fifth year, she bought the Garlond GL-II *Red Rocket*. The chance came almost sideways, as these things often did. A Garlond Ironworks mechanic had set up a stall near the shipyard, hawking “light personal conveyances” to anyone foolhardy or rich enough to trust new magitek on La Noscea’s roads. Marisa had stopped at first just to gawk, hands on her hips, whistling low at the sleek lines and compact engine housings. “Not exactly chocobo-friendly,” she’d remarked. The mechanic, a harried Miqu’te with grease up to their elbows, had eyed her over a stack of invoices and said, “Deliveries, right? You’re the red girl. Got one here that’s technically second-hand but never been crashed. You want to go faster, or are you married to feathers?”

It took months of extra shifts, of trimming her own expenses down to the bone, of one very uncomfortable conversation with Hanako about taking a “calculated business risk” that sounded suspiciously like something Marcus would have said. But the day she finally signed the last of the papers and ran a hand along the Red Rocket’s polished chassis, she felt a fizzing in her chest that was almost giddy. It wasn’t just speed. It was *range*. Ul’dah in an afternoon if the winds were kinder to the ferry. Gridania and back between two sunsets. Places whose names had once been ink on other people’s letters were rapidly becoming destinations she could pencil in beside a list of toppings.

She didn’t abandon Rocceto, of course. The chocobo remained her steed of choice for routes where roads were more suggestion than fact, or where engines were more likely to draw hostile attention than hooves. But the combination of bird and bike turned her into something almost mythic in certain circles: a red streak on the coastal roads, a flash of metal between the trees, a familiar silhouette cresting a hill with boxes stacked and riding goggles skewed. Word travelled faster than she did. There were jokes now that if you shouted “I’m hungry!” loud enough in La Noscea, Marisa would appear out of the mist with a pizza before the echo faded. She publicly insisted this was nonsense and privately took notes on how the rumour might be made true.

The debt ledger thinned. One late afternoon, with the light slanting in through Puku Pizza’s front windows and the smell of roasted garlic hanging in the air, Dalmert set his book on her counter and tapped a finger against a newly inked entry. “That’s the last of it,” he said, sounding almost offended. “You’re clear.”

Marisa stared, then laughed—once, a sharp, incredulous bark that made Puku startle in his corner. “You mean I don’t have to dread your ugly face any more?” she asked. “What a tragedy. How will I fill the void?”

“You could try saving,” he suggested dryly, but there was a flicker of amusement in his eyes as he snapped the ledger shut. “Or investing. Heard you’re doing good business being Lominsa’s most foolish courier.”

When they’d gone, she stood alone in the parlour with the silent weight of it: *no more Shipman debt*. No more Eldric-shaped hole in her finances, at least. The hole he’d left in the rest of her life was another matter, one she still hadn’t decided how to address. Some days she imagined tracking him down across the sea, marching up to whatever sorry berth he’d washed into, and planting a

boot squarely in his backside. Other days she thought of that last conversation on the docks and felt sixteen again, torn between adoration and fury. For now, paying off what he'd left behind would have to serve as both punishment and tribute.

Hanako aged in little increments—an extra silver thread in her hair here, a deeper line at the corner of her mouth there—but she refused to slow down more than necessary. “If you can race all over the realm delivering bread,” she told Marisa tartly, “I can certainly walk to Aleport without needing a nap.” Yet there were moments, when the evening light caught her just so, that Marisa saw the weight of everything they'd lived through sitting on her mother's shoulders. It made her more protective, in ways that irritated them both. She found herself checking the flat's beams after storms, insisting on escorting Hanako home from the market if the hour grew late, quietly steering particularly rowdy customers out into the street before they could bump into her. Hanako, for her part, took to tidying small corners of Puku Pizza when she thought Marisa wasn't looking: straightening chairs, setting a fresh cloth under the shrine to Marcus she'd coaxed her daughter into putting up on a shelf near the oven, humming old Hingan tunes under her breath.

The world beyond Limsa kept stirring. The *Herald* carried more and more stories about Doma and Ala Mhigo, about uprisings and campaigns and the strange, quiet return of the Warrior of Light. Reading them, Marisa felt a prickle of something between admiration and longing. She didn't want to fight primals or topple empires; those were stories that belonged to other people, larger than life and far from pizza ovens. But a smaller thought kept tugging at her: if the realm could change that much, what was she waiting for, sitting in one port and only visiting the others when a delivery slip demanded it?

On a bright, salt-sharp morning in 1577, a courier left a flyer on her counter: a notice about new adventurer recruitment, about companies seeking “reliable, adaptable individuals” for work across Eorzea. She read it three times over the course of the day, each time finding her eyes snagging on different phrases. *Exploration. Escort. Support.* Nowhere did it say “no pizza girls allowed.” By closing, she'd tucked it behind the “IN CRUST WE TRUST” sign, where the edge of the parchment peeked out like a half-formed idea.

That evening, after the last plate had been washed and the oven banked, she stepped outside Puku Pizza with Puku draped comfortably in her satchel and looked up. The sky over the Mist was clear and deep, the stars sharp as pinpricks. There were fewer red evenings now; tonight the sunset had faded cleanly into blue-black. Down in the stables, Rocceto rustled and huffed, the faint

jingle of tack carrying up on the breeze. The Red Rocket sat tucked against the wall by the stairs, gleaming faintly in the lantern-light, ready to roar at her slightest touch.

She thought of Locus Amoenus and a man who'd run into burning houses because he refused to accept that anyone was past saving. She thought of Kugane's lanterns, of Eldric's wild stories about seas that went on forever. She thought of Hanako's careful script in that old note—*I would like to scold you for many more years*—and of the map on Puku Pizza's wall, its web of routes already thick across La Noscea and reaching, tentatively, toward the wider world.

"Alright," she murmured to the quiet ward, to the oven behind her, to the absent dead and the very present living. "One little pizza parlour, one hungry-arsed cat, one overworked bird, one over-enthusiastic bike, and one girl with more confidence than sense. Let's see what else we can manage."

She turned back inside, flipped the sign on the door from *CLOSED* to *OPEN* even though it was well past business hours, and laughed softly at herself. The sign wasn't for customers this time. It was a reminder, a promise: that her story didn't end at the edge of the Mist, or with a dragon's fire, or with a pizzeria in Riverside gone cold. It was still unfolding, one delivery, one conversation, one ridiculous, heart-full choice at a time.

Somewhere in Limsa, someone's stomach rumbled. Somewhere on a road she hadn't yet taken, someone would soon be very glad a red-clad pizzaiola from Hingashi and Lominsa had decided that "adventurer" and "delivery girl" didn't have to be different jobs. And somewhere inside, under all the scars and the jokes and the maps, the same stubborn spark that had once looked up at Dalamud and refused to stop running flickered brighter, hungry for whatever came next.