

## Forged: in Compassion

I didn't think my family adjacent crew would turn literal in any way. But one night changed that.

It was like any other afternoon in Port Trait. I stationed our ship there for resupply-sakes and to just ground ourselves for a while — the usual procedure, along with the pints of alcohol.

Our first night there I practically had to check up on the ship by myself as most of my crew was drinking themselves into a stupor, especially my co-captain strangely enough. Either way, I left the bar, leaving my crew to have their fun inside. Of course, I still had to hear the tail end of them cursing at me for taking the last cinnamon roll before the door shut behind me. I know they were drunk, but I had to have *some* kind of snack while I looked after the ship.

As I made my way down the street, the chill of the wind nearly blew my hat off a few times and made my jacket flap around like a flag, all while the wicks of the street lamps flickered as I made my way closer to the pier. I thought nothing of it, our navigator predicted it would be a windy night with the changing of the season.

*'Wind's worse than we thought,'* I muttered to myself as I continued, with the lights flickering more and more. I trailed off, thinking aloud another thought. "damnit Shin...I didn't want to yell at you for drinking yourself out of wor—"

I heard the sparklers in the street lamps go off and a small shower of sparks rained down as their douser's shut, quickly letting the darkness close in on me.

I cursed loudly, and looked all around. "Who's there?" I asked.

No one answered.

I stood there in a widening stance, slowly clenching my fists as my heart raced; but just slightly. I inhaled through my nose, taking in the cold air. With the gusts of the wind too loud to hear any possible ambush, I turned and turned on my feet, my eyes sweeping over the area, wondering if it was all just paranoia that watched me from the shadows.

A moment passed and the illume came back from behind the clouds. The wind slowed to a stall, and I stopped in place to listen, and just look around. Sure enough the silence

was broken, and by something small. Just a single sharp breath, like someone was crying dryly, came from the alley across the street.

I stood up straight and walked towards the noise as the curiosity overtook my want for a fight. And that is where I saw her.

A little girl sat in the dark, crouched against the wall, hugging her knees. She was weeping; like the kind of crying you'd make while hoping someone wouldn't hear you. But I did.

I didn't want to spook the poor thing, so I knelt down slowly and knocked a couple times on the ground. I gave just a few knocks before she practically jumped out of her skin, getting to her feet and bearing a set of shark-like teeth at me, unhindered by her matted, shaggy hair getting in her face and eyes.

*'Well that figures,'* I thought when I noticed that my hair was standing up. I knew I wasn't scared of some kid with sharp teeth. Did she do that? Even setting that and her teeth aside, from her form I could immediately tell something was very different about her.

Her short, white and blue hair was a disheveled mess of knots and matting. Small lines of dry blood stained the edge of her mouth and led up to a round scab on her nose. And yet the oddities kept stacking up.

She wore no shoes; her dirt-coated feet pricked by small bits of wire, and noticeably large marks of rust residue circled her ankles. I'd seen people with marks like these who had been chained to something for long periods of time. It seemed this kid was no exception.

On top of that, she looked frail, with her wrists and legs especially thin, visible even through her blue jacket which seemed to be a size or more too large for her.

If anything, the only trait she shared with the other children I had seen that day was her height. From what I could tell – she was no higher than my waist, if not shorter.

We stared at each other for a few minutes; she studied me, I studied her, until I decided to break the silence.

"Hey there. Are you gonna bark, or are you gonna bite?" I joked.

She didn't budge or make a sound aside from her shaken breath.

"Not a joker? I see...Now, the rust marks on your ankles. Your baggy clothing, the mats in your hair. You're quite strange-...But then I see those blue horns back there," I

commented gesturing to the back of my head. "I think that's a good indication of what you are, draconid."

The girl took a step back, trying to cover her abnormalities from my sight with her hands before she took another stance.

"Hey, don't worry. I'm not here to hurt y-"

"That's what *they* said to me!" She hissed, her voice dry and stale. "Those Wyrms hunters... cruel wretches! All of them!...And you're one of them! I know you are!"

I saw a slight twinkle in her eyes as she yelled out. Tears of fear? Wet anger? I couldn't tell.

"Kid, Calm down. I'm not some Boogeyman here to eat you." I said, slowly standing and walking toward her.

She responded promptly, stepping backwards into the alley. It was like herding a scared cat, trying to reassure and remind and all, but all she did was step back further into the alley, eventually pressing herself against the wall in some stubborn act of desperation.

She looked around, panic glazing into her eyes as her back slid down against the wall. "No...Nonono- Y-...You're just going to trick me! Just like everyone! They all lied! W-Why wouldn't you?!" The flame of the lights outside of the alley pulsed to life and flickered as she breathed quicker by the second.

I petered closer toward her before stopping short a few meters. "Kid, I can tell you, hand on heart, that I am not a Wyrm Hunter...And, from what I can tell." I paused and reached into my pocket causing her to flinch. "You are hungry"

I knelt again, pulling the still warm cinnamon roll in its bag out of my pocket.

A moment passed, her nose carefully twitching before she took a few cautious sniffs towards me. Her eyes practically locked onto the pastry halfway in the bag as she stood again slowly.

"Wha-...is th-" She looked at me for a moment with a small spark and gleam returning to her blue and yellow eyes. "Spices? From the south dunes?"

She began walking toward me and ran up, snatching the bag from my hand. She tore it open, taking a good long sniff of the sweet smell of sugar and cinnamon before taking a large bite out of the bun. And then another, and another until the whole thing was gone. I didn't think it was possible to chow down so fast, but how could I blame her?

She paused and looked up to me slowly. There was colour in her face again; A brief moment of pinkness returning to her pale cheeks. Then I saw the glinting in her eyes, building up more and more before eventually spilling over into small streams of tears.

I hesitated for a second before I put a hand on her head, patting her hair straight and picking out any kind of dirt and debris I could find.

“See? I'm not so scary-“

Before I could finish speaking, she hugged tightly to my leg sending a small jolt through me like I'd just got hit with a static shock from a carpet.

I was surprised. But glad. But then I wondered. Why is she out here? Where did she come from? Who are her parents and why weren't they here? I put away those questions for the time being.

“You could've at least saved me some of it,” I joked again.

She seemed to scowl at the thought, grabbing tighter onto my leg. I knelt to her level again, asking a simpler question. “So, what's your name?”

“...G-...Gledrath...I'm Gledrath” she answered quietly.

“Okay then...Gledrath...Interesting name! My name's Hamura. Hamura Rex!” I said, attempting to catch her eye contact. Sensing her unwillingness to pry further, I quickly scooped her up, placing her on my shoulders.

She waved her arms around, letting out a panicked blather, hoping to not fall.

“So, what would you like to eat next?” I asked, walking towards the end of the alleyway.

Gledrath sat there in a shocked silence before answering. “I-...Icecream please.”

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How I managed to be coaxed by some human into trusting him was beyond me. Though the minimal malice I felt from Hamura, combined with the empty pit in my stomach seemed to contribute to it.

I sat by him, eating my ice cream as he continued to talk, his words muddled through what I ate. The flavour of something so new and so sweet almost made my jaw hurt, the flavours melting in my mouth I savoured for until eventually it disappeared in my hands.

“Oh...You finished that faster than I-“

"More?" I asked.

Hamura chuckled, raising his hand.

I flinched, regretting having asked at all. Mother was the same. Perhaps he was too. Had I asked for too much again? Was I about to suffer the consequences?

The too familiar tingle of a strange electricity came back to me, until suddenly, my thoughts paused with the gentle sensation of Hamura's hand.

"Jumpy are we? Hold here, I'll get something more for you." Hamura smiled softly as he petted my hair, before standing up and striding into a building a short walk away.

I looked down at my shaking hands, before placing one of them where he placed his.

"...I-...don't understand..." I muttered. "What...was-...hmm"

I sighed, and then I felt a small drop of water land on my hand. I looked up. More drops, falling from above. I held out my palm, watching the drops gather and spread.

Rain. I knew rain. This rain was different though, it was gentle, cool and calm. The water dripped from my hands, collecting and dropping down from the roof of the buildings, the sounds of its impact and its ripples in puddles soothed me.

I let out a breath, and a small chuckle escaped my lips as the drops hit me. The laughter grew and grew as I remembered the rain. How much I loved the rain.

As I hopped and skipped, splashing in the slowly growing puddles, I heard his call again.

"Gledrath! You're going to get wet!" Hamura called, holding a bag.

I stopped where I was as he draped his coat over my shoulders.

He stammered a bit, looking in a few different directions before nodding to himself.

"Have you seen a ship before?" He asked me.

I answered no, and soon he was guiding me down towards a giant puddle where these strange and gigantic things of wood and cloth floated, wobbling back and forth in the water.

He held my hand the whole time as we walked along the planks above the puddle.

"Ah!" He exclaimed, speeding towards one of the structures, its outside black and striped with light blue and its pointed front decorated in the statue of a drake.

"See this is my ship Gledrath! The Storm Rider!" Hamura explained with pride. "Here, follow me," he beckoned, walking onto a small bridge between the ship and the walkway.

Hesitantly I stepped aboard, and immediately I retracted my feet, feeling as if this thing was breathing.

Hamura chuckled at my display. "It can take your weight! Don't worry Gledrath," he assured me.

I stepped on again, and immediately took to Hamura's side.

He sighed, ruffling my hair again. "You don't seem to know a lot about this world. Let's get out of the rain, and we can speak more then."

I nodded, and held on as he went below the floor of the ship.

He gestured to a barrel, handing me an odd round and red object. I sat down, looking at what he'd handed me. I turned the smooth red thing in my hands, staring at how it shined before Hamura spoke again.

"It's...an apple, kiddo...You do know what an apple is right?"

I hummed as I shook my head no.

"Hrnn...Well it's food, you can eat it."

I looked between him and the apple, before pulling it close to take a bite. It was sweet. Crispy too. It was nice.

Hamura sat down across from me, holding his chin in his hands. "So...Gledrath, where did you come from?" He asked. "You mentioned Wyrms hunters, so you escaped in some kind of way, but before that where were you?"

I swallowed, looking off before I remembered. "The Realm of Scales! There was this gate and my friend and I left through it!"

"Left?" He wondered. "Why'd you leave?"

I took another bite, talking through chewing. "Everyone dere fought dat dere was sumfing rong wif us!" I swallowed again. "But no there wasn't! So we left and-...then I was captured.