

PORT UMBRA

Dim-witted wasn't exactly the way I would have described him, but he certainly wasn't the true leader of the pack of rabid hyenas that followed him wherever he went. Three years into my studies at the camp, Reimund Laine and his lackeys had already made a name for themselves. The newcomers knew to nod their heads in agreement and laugh at every joke. Those who didn't were usually the butt of them.

The turn of the crowd was hard to predict. I wondered how long it'd be before the pack ate one of their own.

That was, at least, where my mind wandered to as I watched a familiar flickering shadow follow behind the freckle-faced girl I only recalled from basic resistance training. Not all who attended the Moonlighters Circle had a knack for channeling umbra, but the ability to protect oneself from mundane threats was always useful.

With threats that lurked beyond the veil in the shadow realm, no simple self-defense class would suffice. If I hadn't heard the snickers coming from the hallway outside my cabin, I never would have known to keep an eye out for subtle shifts in the darkness.

I was still in earshot to warn the soon-to-be victim before she reached the stairs to the upper deck and met whatever foul fate was to come. Instead, I kept my mouth shut. I held no ill will for her, but I was wearing a face I didn't wish to be recognized.

Slowly but surely, her rubber slippers lifted off the ground to reach the first step, and she entered a wall of swirling darkness that her eyes likely couldn't pick out from the dusty air around. Once she had been locked behind the wall, she gasped. Flailing, hands reached out in the last direction she had spotted filtered sunlight from the upper

deck — her only salvation. But it was all too late as she lost her footing and crashed onto her rear.

The prey turned towards a cackling pack of hyenas who would have stood an entire head above her even if she stood upright. At the center of the pack stood the lead hunter. A thick mane of sandy curls, striking amber eyes, and two hands adorned in clawed gold rings: Reimund drew wandering eyes all on his own without his noisy entourage.

Extending a gilded hand, Reimund said, “Apologies. I only meant to startle you. I didn’t expect that you’d fall.”

“On the stairs though? I could’ve cracked my skull open...”

That hardly was enough to appeal to Reimund’s yes men who had heard similar complaints before. Laughter drew others from their temporary cabins who were about as helpful as I was skulking in the distance. Once the pack spoke, none would speak out against them.

“It was a joke! Liven up, will you? We’re on holiday for Gods’ Yule and you’re stuck being this much of a stick in the mud?”

There was no arguing with a witty retort like, ‘Who cares?’ The girl, of course, didn’t bother and simply bowed her head and ascended into the light where lurking umbra was far less of a threat. A fog horn sang right on schedule, and the timid watchers followed suit.

The joy of returning home for the holidays was that I’d leave all the pranks and bickering from camp behind for good tidings to fill its place. Not that I didn’t have bickering to worry about back home, but at least I didn’t have to worry about people like Reimund Laine.

“You’re all to be on your best behavior until we set sail again,” a counselor shouted from the top of the stairs, “You all know the rules of Port Sadatsi. What lurks in the shadows is to remain there.”

Before I joined my peers on the upper deck, I held an open palm to my face. Umbra restricted my vision for a moment, but I donned a mask that was plain enough never to be remembered. Even if I hardly visited Port Sadatsi for any other reason than to travel to and from camp, it was a better idea to remain out of sight — at least in my lot’s line of work.

Sunshine spat down from the cloudy skies and left me squinting as I followed the queue down the slipway and onto a crowded dock that had just as many wide-eyed tourists as sailors. Sandwiched between two continents and the Kurekaarla islands to the south, it made the perfect halfway hub for those traveling for business, pleasure, or something more devious.

Melting snow and garland draped every rope-woven fence, street torch, and horse-driven caravan: no one that entered the harbor would leave without knowing that the Gods' Yule was upon us. For most, that meant three days of gift-giving until the winter solstice marked the new year. At the end of the dock, the winter bazaar held all the last minute goodies one might need to ensure that the base of their trees overflowed with gifts. I hadn't done any of my own shopping yet, but seeing as my family wasn't exactly big on 'quality time', it would probably stay that way.

More to the point, I was flat broke. Every gilded shell my family begrudgingly sent me with to camp had been pinched tight to form a fine powder. If there was a stall full of freebies anywhere in sight, I would have swarmed over it quicker than umbra to a lightless nook. With everyone in the market squeezed together elbow-to-elbow, however, it wasn't a sound business decision to give away all the desirables for free.

What I wouldn't have given to snag one of Reimund Laine's gaudy rings and hock it for enough shells to pay for my room and board in Port Sadatsi for an entire week. That would have been a *true* holiday. All the nuisances would be out of sight and out of mind, and I wouldn't be a nuisance to them either.

Getting caught up in daydreams like that was dangerous. While I idled by the edge of the market, the crowd shoved me past picked-through stalls full of fine linens too fine for the likes of me, dried and sugared fruits among other sweet treats, and glistening jewels that I'd have to score a heist job to obtain.

Wearing the face of no one in particular, there wouldn't have been too many consequences if I made off with a trinket or two. By the time the port authority got all of their eye witness reports in for the wrong guy, I would have been long gone back in the snow drift doldrums of Takkareev.

The naive part of me wanted to promise that I wouldn't make a habit of pilfering. I didn't fool myself into thinking, however, that my family put up the hefty tuition costs for me to attend the Moonlighters Circle for any other reason than how it benefited them. I didn't ask how they scraped the money together for a reason.

My stomach grumbled. That seemed like a good enough lead to follow. It wasn't as if there'd be imported delicacies from lands far off back home.

Breaking free from the market, I fell back into a small cove between the back entrance to the stables and what might have been a storage shed for manure by the smell of it. A peer of mine had the same idea. Just five quick steps towards the darkness and they were gone from my sight, and they left a swirl of black smoke in their wake. I held my breath as I entered.

To say I was 'traveling' might not have been the right word. What existed beyond the veil was a mirror of the land of light. Or, at least, it was a mirror of the port's crashing shores, swooping grasslands, and fields of red budding rosids. Gone was the bustling market and in its place stood a gravel courtyard with fold-out tables, benches, and a few pop-up stalls with amenities. There was no need for docks or carriages as all that existed in the horizon was a grand illusion where the wall of umbra cut off.

The umbra portal was only a halfway hub, after all. I didn't expect that anyone other than instructors and campers frequented Port Umbra more than twice a year. Those who channeled umbra were not welcome in the land of light, but we had a *symbiotic* relationship.

Not all of us were made richer by such deals. With just ten shells left jingling in my pocket — five of which I needed to save for a carriage ride from the port in Takkareev to my family's farm — I settled on grabbing whatever was discounted thoroughly enough to mark its expiration date.

Honey-braised lamb flanks, bowls of carrot and rice mash, and jam-filled pastries: my mouth watered as I passed all of the delicacies I wished to fill my belly. Instead, I was resigned to a puke-colored pea soup. It cost two shells for an entire bowl, and that would fill me up until I was back home and could nibble on whatever stale bread Mama forgot to toss from the table's basket.

By the time I sat down with my food, my head spun and my vision blurred. I couldn't recall the last time I actually ate, and tunnel vision had me eyeing up that soup bowl like it was my last meal under the twin moons under two moons.

Digging my spoon into the bowl, a savory scent filled my nostrils as a strip of tender bacon emerged from the viscous goop. It had been weeks since I tasted meat, and yet the sense of sheer joy I felt left me perturbed. Checking my peripherals, I spotted no swirling mist, and everything was as I recalled it before I sat down. With all the holiday rush, I wondered if the merchant simply tossed in a strip to spread the joy.

Before I took the first bite, I knew something was amiss. Wishful thinking got the better of me. My teeth clamped down on something hard like bone. By the time I heard the snap, I ripped my hand away, but the throbbing pain had already begun. A droplet of

red dripped down the front of my beige sweater followed by my chunky soup that flung from the table as I jumped upright. The hidden veil fell and cackling in the distance tipped me off to what had happened.

I couldn't have avoided him if I tried, apparently. Reimund Laine needed his next target to keep his unloyal hounds at bay, and I showed up to the right place at the right time.

"Apologies!" Reimund shouted from the booth across the courtyard, "I didn't think you'd bite your own fingers! Must've been hungry."

At once, the peanut gallery hooted and hollered. I spared myself further embarrassment as I wiped the sickly goop from my lap and made my way to the lattice wall that hid a row of outhouses and a wash basin. If I had a change of clothes back on the ship, I would've tossed my ruined sweater, but I didn't have that luxury.

Footsteps alerted me as I failed to scrub out the stains. I was dismayed to spot a mane of gold. Under any other circumstance, my mask would have kept me concealed, but covered in pea soup, I stood out like a beacon.

"No hard feelings I hope," Reimund hardly seemed to notice that he blocked my path out of the wash-up nook, "Sometimes jokes get out of hand, but it's all in good fun."

I had my options. On one hand, I wanted to get our conversation over with sooner than later. All he wanted was the same thing he was always used to getting: someone slapping him on the back and telling him he did good. The enforcers who typically made that a reality weren't anywhere in sight. And maybe because I wasn't certain I'd be returning to camp, but I was feeling bold.

"It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. It was either you or me. I don't blame you. Self-preservation is a valuable skill. I'm sure a family as renowned as yours knows that well. You're smarter than you look."

While his eyes blinked widely, I figured I would have had a chance to squeeze by him. Reimund, however, wouldn't budge. There was no barreling past someone with shoulders so broad — even for a guy hardly a year or two older than I was. As far as I knew, he only struck from the shadows, but being so frail, there was no point in taking the risk.

"What do you mean?" he asked, and I started to question whether it was right to think he wasn't dim-witted.

Keeping up the act, I shrugged, “Those brutes of yours might not understand, but I get how you feel. Those of us with the power to wield umbra have something important to uphold: hierarchy. For one to stand at the top, another has to be at the bottom. You’re simply teaching people where they lie.”

“I just came to check if you were alright. I don’t really know what you’re talking about and... Were we in any classes together this season? Forgive me if we’ve met before. I’m Reimund-”

“Laine,” I finished, “Of course I know who you are. Your family is famous — infamous too. Gotta say I’m embarrassed to formally make your acquaintance like this, but it’s my own fault for failing to catch onto the guise. Like that sorry sap on the ship earlier! You’re skilled at concealing your umbra. Or maybe others just lack the wit to keep up with you.”

I handed him enough rope to hang himself up high as an arrogant fool, but to my surprise he squirmed where he stood, “Did you need someone to walk you to the infirmary or back to your cabin? I mean it when I said I have no bad intentions. I certainly don’t view myself as better than anyone.”

“But why not? You could if you wished. The power to trap anyone in a guise against their own wishes. We could all be blissfully unaware while you pull all the strings. Now here’s a question about those two who always follow you around: are they your followers by choice or are they caught up in your spell?”

“That’s out of line!” the lion finally bore his fangs, “Leave my friends out of this. The joke was poor judgment on my part, and I owe up to that. Let me make things right. I’ll replace your meal and clothing. I’ll do one better. It’s almost Gods’ Yule, after all. Pick out a gift, and it’s yours.”

Reimund Laine offering me riches beyond my wildest imagination seemed too good to be true. At the same time, the last chance I got to add clothes to my wardrobe was when my elder brother left home — seemingly for good. Maybe the pack leader was still pulling another one of his pranks on me. I didn’t spot strange swirls that’d give away that he placed walls of umbra around me, but I walked into his trap without noticing last time so I wasn’t about to let my guard down.

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