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Chapter 1 - The Coming Storm

A chill wind passes gently through the cozy little mountain village of Krigerhjem, signaling the beginning of winter.

Many things were uncertain about living in the Forsaken Ring, such as when they would get their next load of resources, or what fresh horror would find its way to their shores. The one thing that was always constant on this island, however, was that chill winter wind bringing with it layers upon layers of snow, ice and death.

Compared to the rest of the islands in the Forsaken Ring, they were lucky. Not only did the tall mountains protect them from the harshest of storms, but their island was home to the Master. The Master was known all the way to the Divine Ring for training the greatest soldiers in their nation, so as a result, their island received protection from the multitude of pirates that lurked in the surrounding seas. At least... it used to.

"Ouch! Get off of me!" screams a little girl through a smushed face. "Mom! Make her get off of me!" The culprit, another younger girl, barely out of diapers, sits on top of her sister's head, giggling uncontrollably.

A young mother wipes sweat from her brow as she sets aside a clean dish, a look of controlled annoyance on her face at the unending arguments of her children. Inevitably, she snaps and shouts, "Get off of your sister right now!", which, of course, alerts the baby strapped to her front. It kicks and screams in frustration. She sighs in defeat.

This old wooden house was full of creaks and groans. But one creak in particular gives her an overwhelming sense of relief. The door swings open to reveal a young teenage boy wearing a warrior's training outfit with the school's insignia.

"Thank the Gods." she says with a sigh of relief. If anyone could calm those wild kids down, it was her son, Xin.

Xin chuckles knowingly, "Good to see you too, mom. Sorry I'm home so late."

Unlike their mother, the girls had not heard the creaky door. They did, however, hear the familiar sound of their brother's voice. Like tigers hearing the cries of a wounded animal, their predatory eyes latch on Xin, and they charge in for the kill.

"You're home! Play with me!" demands the elder.

"No! He wants to play with me!" whines the younger as they both come charging towards him. He smiles and readies for impact. With the cutest battle cry they could muster, they jump on Xin with beast-like clingability. Through many exaggerated stumbles, and playful swings to eject them, Xin eventually falls to the ground and cries out in fake defeat.

After a few more action packed kisses and tickles, the girls calm and return to arguing with each other about who gets to play with what toy. Noticing the coast was relatively clear, he joins his mother in the kitchen, who is now frustratingly trying to soothe the baby. Xin takes over and in just a few moments has the baby back asleep.

"Traitor." grumbles the mother to the sleeping baby, causing her son to chuckle sympathetically at her.

Taking a moment to sigh, then stretch, his mother looks at her son with concern.

"Why are you home so late? I was getting worried." she inquires.

Xin scratches his head in response. "I'm not sure exactly. Something about Master's retirement? He made us spar with each other all night until we could all barely move. Gods, I'm exhausted. I think Master might be getting senile..."

His mother snorts trying to hold back a laugh.

"Oh Xin, that's not very polite. He's not that old." she half-heartedly scolds.

"Well, I wasn't going to say it to his face! The man killed an arch-angel in his prime. There's no way I could ever become that strong." Xin sighs.

A stern seriousness crosses her face as she grabs his ear and looks him in the eye. "Now you listen here Xin Romo. You come from a family of elite warriors, it's in your blood. I know, one day, you'll become the greatest warrior this world has ever seen."

Xin pushes her hand away and looks away solemnly "It didn't help dad. He still died as a nameless soldier in some pointless battle."

The sternness on her face melts away "Oh sweetie..."

Straightaway, he stands up and gently passes the baby back to his mother, then turns to his sisters. They had put their petty squabbles aside for a moment to watch their family with wide, concerned eyes. It wasn't often they saw their brother this upset.

"Come on, girls," he says with a forced smile "It's time for bed." The girls fuss, moan and whine, but comply with their brother's request.

"Oh, my boy," the mother sighs as her children walk away. "There's so much you don't know."

She gazes out the window longingly, still hoping to see her love eagerly walking up to their creaky old door. It had been over a year, however, and she knew he wasn't coming back home. It pained her that the world didn't know what her husband really died for, nor that she could tell anyone. Maybe she should tell Xin the truth...

From the corner of her eye, she notices a pillar of smoke rise in the distance. Her mind is snapped back to reality and as she gets closer to the window, a sick realization dawns on her. Faint screams and sounds of battle float in through the window. As quickly as possible without waking the baby, she runs upstairs where Xin is fighting with the girls trying to get pajamas on them. He sees her and notices her face of panic.

"Pirates." she strains.

Chapter 2 - The Girl

His mother's panicked face fades away into darkness. Only faint screams and pleas echo in his mind. Gradually, a childhood home turns into a dungy bar teeming with stinking, dirty pirates.

The once clean-cut young soldier boy is now a rough and worn looking young man. His short chestnut brown hair sits messily on top of his head, and he had the beginnings of a goatee on his chin. His current shirt that had once been loose now tightened uncomfortably around his toned muscles, but he liked it too much to toss it. Plus, he only owned like four shirts. A cigarette, presently consisting mostly of ash, sits lightly in his mouth as his steel-blue eyes gaze off to the stage. Atop the small, time worn stage sits a young woman strumming a guitar, singing sea shanties.

She was an interesting sight, radiating with confidence and quick to shoot a flirty smile. Her clothes seemed quite contrary to that of a typical performer. They were neat, clean and well fitted, but simple, covering almost every inch of her body including her hands, which were adorned with fingerless leather gloves. Besides this, her boots looked like they were meant more for combat than for performing. Despite her attire, however, she was an exquisite woman and a fantastic musician. The crowd of rowdy pirates certainly didn't seem to mind. They cheered and danced, trying to be the next one to catch her eye.

"Xin? Xin?" Chimes the hulking man dressed in ragged furs sitting next to him. With arms as large as tree trunks and sitting at least a head taller than Xin, he was quite the threatening figure. At least until one looked into his warm and caring eyes.

Xin doesn't seem to notice his voice. James, a skinny, well-dressed man with short, curly hair sits to Xin's other side. His long thin face looks at Xin with curiosity, then follows his gaze. Realizing the distraction, he snickers knowingly

"Sorry bud, looks like Xin's mind is elsewhere." He laughs.

The immense man, Yuri, scowls and cuffs Xin upside the head. "Focus kid! This is serious."

"Ouch!" cries Xin, burning his arm with his fallen cigarette. "For f— What the hel?" he growls, sending a sidelong glare at his friend.

"What the hel?" Yuri mocks back. "'What the hel' is that we're trying to go over the plan and you're eye fucking the entertainment!"

"I--- You---- fucking hel, Yuri. I was not!" Xin stammers awkwardly. He was an outstanding swordsman, always able to keep a cool head in the middle of battle, but bring up anything about sex around him and he becomes a blushing schoolgirl.

Earlier that day, the three bounty hunters had landed here to hunt down a small bandit gang out in the forest. However, before they had even set foot on the island, the bandits had been wiped out by an unknown hunter, and the pirate Roland the Toothless had made dock.

Roland was a notorious pirate, with a far higher bounty than the three had ever taken out. The ease of their targets was not necessarily by choice, but by simplicity. They were excellent fighters, well at least Yuri and Xin were, but they did lack a certain tracking skill, so they mostly just took in whatever they came across. In the Forsaken Ring, a high bounty didn't mean you were strong, it just meant you were good at avoiding the law.

This certainly seemed to be the case with their current target, Roland the Toothless, who had one of the highest bounties in the area, but no reputation of being a fighter. There had been no rumors about him ever touching a sword or even throwing a punch. All people

knew was that any man, woman or child that ended up as Roland's target disappeared soon after.

That wasn't what Xin cared about, however. It wasn't that he didn't care about others, quite the contrary, but his primary goal in life was to track down the crew that had attacked his island seven years ago. Upon learning that Roland had ties to Konstantin and his crew, Xin insisted they take the bastard out. He had spent the day scouting out the ship, learning what he could about the crew and its captain. He was confident that as long as they could separate Roland from his first mate, they could take him out easily.

The young lady on stage changes songs, singing a beautiful ballad. In response, the whole bar calms to the beautiful melody. Some even break down into tears. The previously red faced Xin now smiles softly and sends his gaze back up to the stage.

Yuri sits back with a smile. It annoyed him that Xin wasn't taking this as seriously as he would like, but happy to actually see a smile on his face. It was a fairly rare sight. He had gone through so much and lost so much at such a young age.

"She is pretty, isn't she Xin?" he probes.

Xin snaps his gaze to Yuri, his face the color of ripe strawberries.

"No!" He cries, a little too quickly and loudly. A few annoyed heads turn and shush him.

Xin sinks into his chair "I mean... yes... a bit... But that's not... I wasn't... she just seems... familiar. I feel like I should know her but..."

As he looks up to see if his friends have any idea what he's talking about, he notices their knowing grins.

"Stop looking at me like that." Xin growls.

"I don't think I've ever seen him this red." Yuri points out.

"And he's stammering." says James.

"You like her!" they chime in unison, shoving their faces as close to his as possible.

"Argh, get away from me." grunts an annoyed Xin, pushing their invasive faces away. "I don't like her. I haven't even met her!"

"But you'd like to." Yuri teases, still grinning.

"Well, yes, but not because I like her. You both got to meet her." Xin reminds them.

With this in mind, James rubs his hand, which is crudely wrapped up and crusted with blood. "Yeah, and I nearly lost a hand from it." he grumbles.

"Oh, don't be such a big baby," chimes Yuri. "You were about to get us all killed with that big mouth of yours by thinking you could impress the girl by telling her we were bounty hunters, while conveniently forgetting you were in a bar full of pirates. It's a good thing she figured it out before you shouted it out loud."

"She didn't have to stab my hand!" he whines. "That girl is crazy!"

"That's not the crazy part. When I tried to pull her off, she threw me across the room like a rag-doll." says Yuri in a hushed voice.

"What?" James and Xin shout in disbelief. In the five years Xin had been bounty hunting with these two, Yuri had never been thrown, pushed or moved in any way. He was an enormous man, not a giant, but he was solid. For him to be thrown by a girl half his size...

More heads turn in response to their outburst, shushing their secondary noisy interruption.

"I thought you were just messing around." James whispers urgently.

Yuri shakes his head "Nope. She acted like I was, but I really wasn't. One moment I was standing beside her, the next moment I was gone. I don't even know what happened.

James ponders for a moment "But that's impossible... there's no way. "

"I suppose she could have a blessing..." Xin suggests, gazing back at her, now with a new interest.

Blessings came from the sacred garden in the nation of Gaia, and were normally only given to Gaians, but since all three boys were raised in the nation of Yggdria, none of them were sure how it worked. They did know that those who visit the garden come back with enhanced abilities, and occasionally even magic powers.

"It's possible. She could be a Gaian." replies Yuri, now studying her a bit himself. "She's a fair bit darker skinned than we usually see up here in the North. Present company excluded, of course." he adds, referring to James, who's dark copper skin was in complete contrast to Xin and Yuri's light ivory skin. "But... it just didn't feel magical." he adds.

Thinking back, Yuri had faced multiple opponents with items called 'enchancements', so he knew what the magic of the gods felt like. Whatever she had didn't feel like that.

Unlike Gaia, Yggdria was home to The Forges. It was like The Gardens, since one of the three primal gods created it to grant power to the humans. However, rather than enhancing humans directly, The Forges enhanced items, such as swords and armor, allowing anyone with that item to hold that power. They referred to these as 'enchancements', and were common enough if you had the coin.

A final strum signals the end of the girls' song. The bar erupts in cheers as she sets down her guitar and takes a bow.

"Well gentlemen." She says to the group of pirates doting over her "That's all for tonight." Her voice was just as melodic and beautiful as her singing.

"Aw, but we want to hear more." Whines one pirate.

"I could... but then I might be too tired to play cards with you tonight." she teases. "And I love playing with all of you."

With a multitude of grins and cheers, the pirates part way for the girl as she walks towards a foul-looking man. With a sigh, she seats herself softly on his lap, running her fingers through his thinning hair.

"And I especially love playing with you, Roland darling." She coos, causing the man to grin a huge, horrible, toothless grin at her. Not missing a beat, she flicks her head back to the rest of the pirates and asks, "Now who's going to buy me a drink?"

In a flash, the pirates clamber and race to all buy her a drink.

The bounty hunters watch the scene with mixed reactions. Yuri watches with confusion, Xin watches with disgust, while James has a small panic attack.

"Wait, wait, she's friends with Roland? Shit, shit, shit! She might blow our cover." he wheezes, remembering how he nonchalantly revealed their plan to who he thought was just a simple but beautiful tavern worker.

"If she was planning on doing that, why didn't she let you blab your big mouth?" questions Yuri.

James grumbles, "Maybe she just enjoys stabbing people."

"Let's not make any hasty assumptions." Xin suggests, trying not to stare at the gruesome scene "Let's just monitor things. But be ready."

The night rolls on, and the girl's drink never seems to reach an end, causing her to get increasingly tipsy, and Roland to get increasingly handsy.

"It's a shame that you cover up so much of your body." Roland says, running a hand up her arm then to the top button of her blouse. She gently redirects his hand into hers.

"Well, where's the fun in showing off everything? I like to save my body for someone special." She sighs flirtily.

“And how special am I?” Roland asks, causing her to lean into his ear and whisper something to put another grin on his toothless face. Immediately, they both stand up and head for the exit, Roland's crew packing up and following behind them with woots and cheers.

James and Yuri look at each other in a panic. “She can’t seriously be going with him.” squeeks James.

Out of all the stories they had heard about Roland the Toothless, the most common theme seemed to be his nasty habit of kidnapping and raping young women. If this girl was willingly going with Roland now, they could only imagine that meant the worst. She seemed to go willingly, however. Maybe she knew what she was doing? Maybe Roland had tricked her or drugged her. James and Yuri are frozen in indecision. Do they intervene?

They didn’t have to wonder long about what they should do, however, since before James and Yuri could even discuss their plans going forward, Xin, his swords, and his jacket were gone. They look back to the group leaving and notice they have come to a sudden halt.

“What are you doing, boy?” shouts Roland, and the two instantly realize where their good friend, Xin, had disappeared to.

“Damn, kid really is going to get us killed,” grumbles James.

Xin stands at the door, worn-out, fur lined leather jacket on, with two longswords strapped to his back to form an “X” shape. He stares down the disgusting-looking bastard, unflinching at the fury in his eyes.

“Move.” Roland demands.

Xin calmly pulls out a cigarette and lights it. “Not a chance in Helheim.” he responds. Roland raises his arm “You little brat, I’ll--”

The girl lays a hand on Roland's arm to stop him. “I’m sorry Roland darling,” she says “It’s my fault. He’s my ex, and he’s quite jealous.”

James and Yuri, who were attempting to sneak around behind the group, stop and look at Xin in disbelief and confusion.

Xin blushes and looks at her with confusion “Wh--”

She gets right in Xins face, brushing back his chestnut hair, her warm golden eyes staring into his. That familiar feeling he had earlier starts growing even stronger.

“I told you before, Xin baby.” she whispers gently. “Only the strongest will do.”

The realization dawns, and fills Xin’s body with pure rage. He knew exactly who she was.

“You! You bi--”

The world starts spinning, the room is a blur. He thinks he hears laughter... and an offer to kill him? What just happened? Shit...

Chapter 3 - A Personal Hel

Years ago, a young Xin, battered and bruised, clothes torn to shreds, stumbles between jeering pirates on the deck of an enormous pirate ship. They take every opportunity they can to hit and mock him, but their pathetic taunts and strikes aren't what fills Xin's eyes with tears.

It was partly from the pain of betrayal. Betrayal from his Master, a man he had respected as a father. A man that apparently sells his strongest students to slavery for the sake of his own retirement. Mostly, however, his tears were from the pain of watching his mother and sister used and murdered in front of his eyes. That horrifying vision was burned into his mind forever more.

"Aw, look at the little baby cry." mocks one especially dirty pirate, punching Xin in the gut as he gets in range.

"You'll regret this. We'll never submit. We're warriors!" cries Xin.

A hearty, vile laugh sounds from outside the circle where a rough looking man, with piercing violet eyes, sits on a large chair smiling at him. On his chest is a more intricate version of the same tattoo the rest of the crew has. A skull on top of the North star all within a circle. He recognizes the man as the stranger that had observed the sparring match at the school. Captain Konstantin, he heard the pirates call him.

Beside Konstantin sits a teenage boy, who the pirates had called Mikhail. He seemed oddly well groomed for being a pirate. He also had strikingly pale skin and hair, which was quite a contrast to the tanned, dark haired girl he had his arm wrapped around. Dressed in oversized clothing, she watches the scene with stoic boredom. Unlike the other pirates, she seems to have no desire to take part in the abuse. She raises the hood of her cloak as all eyes peer their way.

"Stupid boy." guaffs Konstantin, his dark voice sending a chill through Xin's spine. "Where do you think your fellow soldiers are? They've already submitted. They're snivelling in the hold just waiting to be taken to their new home. You are the only one left with any spirit."

A pit forms in his stomach as he looks around and realizes he could very well be telling the truth.

In this world, resources were hard to come by. The twelve angel families in charge of the lands take this as an excuse to enslave the 'useless' humans that 'pollute' the outskirts of their world. This meant anyone in the Forsaken Ring was fair game to slave traders, and they would not be reprimanded. In fact, they were often paid quite well to do so, and who better to hire than already morally corrupt pirates. In Yggdria, most slaves were sent to the mines in the Rustic Ring. It was dirty, menial work, but had a far better chance at life than being sent to the nation of Ratum. Any slaves sent there were likely to die within five years.

There was no way that would be him, thought Xin. He wasn't a slave, he was a warrior, from a family of warriors.

"There's no way you're sending me to the mines." screams Xin.

"He may have a point, Captain." Says a voice from behind him. "He's got a pretty nice bone structure, we could sell him off as a sex slave. He was quite fun."

The pirates part ways to show a man with tan skin, and long black, scraggly hair. Images of that man overpowering him and his family flash through his mind, causing absolute rage and hatred to run through his body. As he attempts to charge at the man, he is

stopped abruptly by his chains sending him stumbling to the ground. A roar of laughter sounds all around him.

"My my," laughs Konstantin "It would seem the young soldier remembers you Viktor."

"You... you bastard. I'm going to rip your fucking head off!" Xin cries, pulling himself up off the ground. A pirate pulls on his chains, knocking him down again.

"Aw, the little girl misses his mommy." laughs Mikhail from his safe little perch, squeezing his arm around the girl beside him.

"Oh he's not a little girl anymore." mocks Viktor "I made him a proper woman."

All but that girl burst out in laughter at Xin's expense. The girl sighs a bored sigh, apparently she had seen this dance too many times before. Mikhail gives her a nudge, she looks at him and gives him a half-hearted smile.

"Ha, real nice, calling me a girl while you hide behind one. So what, is she your bodyguard?" spits Xin, wiping fresh blood from his face. The girl stifles a laugh.

Mikhail stands up, rage in his eyes. "WHAT?" he screams.

Xin continues, glaring mockingly at Viktor "Then there's this guy who needed three other guys to handle me. Real manly." he spits.

"You fucking brat!" screams Viktor as he charges at Xin, tackles him down and starts punching his face in. Satisfied with someone teaching Xin a lesson, Mikhail sits back down with a laugh. He sets his arm back around the girl who is now back to being bored.

"Well this one certainly has more spirit than the usual snivelling brats we get on here" Says Konstantin to the two beside him. "He's going to be a tricky one to get ready to sell."

"Can I break this one father? It seems like a lot of fun." Mikhail asks with an evil grin. His eager eyes, the same odd violet color that his father had.

"I don't know, boy." sighs Konstantin. "Viktor is right. This one's got real potential, could even sell him to the angels if we do it right."

The girl pipes up "I want to help."

"What?" Konstantin quizzes. "Why? You've never wanted to before."

"It's about time I learned something to help out. Besides, he just lost his mom and sisters right?" she explains. "Who better to torture him than a little girl?"

Mikhail grins lovingly at her, taking in every inch of her wicked face.

Konstantin laughs a hearty laugh. "Well fuck me lbby. You got a point. Alright, I'll let you help out, but don't fuck this up, got it?"

lbby smiles, her golden eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "Aye captain."

Chapter 4 - A Fighter Revealed

As the world stops spinning, Xin sees those golden eyes again. There they were, seven years later, and the bitch was just sitting there smiling at him like nothing had happened. Almost like she was excited to see him. Like she hadn't spent a week helping torture him. Whipping him, mocking him, making him relive that horrid day with his family. Perhaps worst of all, was the teasing of freedom. Every time they would leave the prison cell, a key was left just out of reach, taunting him with the ability to escape, but never actually getting there.

"Ah, there you are Xin baby. Thought you were going to pass out. Sorry about that, I'm still working on controlling my strength properly."

Xin looks around and realizes they are no longer in the bar, they are just outside, completely alone, away from any windows. Where were Yuri and James? Did Roland kill them? Damn the gods...

"You. I knew I recognized you. Why are we out here? What do you want, lbby?" Xin growls.

A fire sparks in her eyes at the mention of her name. Before Xin can even try to block she appears in front of him with a dagger to his throat.

"Never say that name." she snarls. "That girl died." Her face switches instantly to a sweet smile then cuts the end of Xin's cigarette with the dagger. "It's Lorelei now." she says, taking a few graceful steps back.

Xin looks at his unlit cigarette with confusion, then back at her.

"I don't really give a fuck what you call yourself. Where are my friends?" Xin snaps.

"Oh, you worry too much. They're waiting patiently inside with Roland." She says matter of factly, then feigns being distraught while saying, "I needed to be alone with my ex, the braindead Xin Romo, so I can explain why we just can't be together anymore." She brings her hand up to her face to emphasise fake crying.

"Hmph, braindead hu?" he grumbles while relighting his cigarette. "So what do you want? Are you working with Roland? Gathering more slaves to sell? Or just finding more little boys to torture?"

Lorelei laughs uncontrollably at him. Once she regains her composure, she says,

"You're still mad about the torture? Did you really not figure it out, after all these years? Oh my, you may be more braindead than I thought." Then, like a switch, her laugh turns to an intense glare.

"But are you still a weak little boy? Are those muscles just for show, or can you actually use them?" she mocks.

Xin grips at his swords, wanting to attack, but holding back. He wasn't one for attacking unarmed opponents, and especially not when they were women. He knew he had to be careful with her though. She was dangerous. Being part of the most notorious crew in the Yggdrian seas meant she must have had something up her sleeve. At a glance she seemed to just be standing, but he couldn't help but notice a readiness and sturdiness he hadn't seen in a long time. Not since his days of training as a soldier.

"Oh? Are we trying to be a gentleman? Don't be an idiot." she growls then charges at him. He draws his swords to slash at her, but she ends up ducking beneath, then coming up to knee him in the gut, knocking the wind out of him. He recovers quickly, bringing an elbow in to knock her back, but she quickly backsteps it. There was his opening. He takes a huge swing at her shoulder, not wanting to kill her, but at least keep her from causing trouble.

Apparently that wasn't an option, as she steps into the swing, blocking his arm, then disarms his sword. Shit. That hadn't happened in ages. He comes in swinging with the other arm, but she blocks the sword with her stolen sword, causing his arm to bounce back from the force. He takes a few surprised steps back. It was like hitting a wall.

She smiles knowingly at his disbelieving face. She attempts to do some fancy, mocking swing with the sword, but fumbles slightly from the weight. How could she seem so strong, but fumble with his sword like that? After a quick realignment of her body, she wielded the sword again easily.

"You know you're only supposed to use one of these at a time right? Seems pretty ridiculous to use two." She chides, examining the stolen sword.

There, she was distracted. He comes in swiping down at her. She sends her sword easily overtop of her head, for a block that makes Xin's arm go numb from the shock. There was no way she could out muscle him, he thinks as he continues to press down, hoping to break her. He takes note of the fact that she seems to be wielding the sword with her left hand, even though he was sure she did everything else right handed moments earlier.

"Very nice, guess those muscles aren't just for show." she says with a smile. While holding her block with one hand, she walks her other hand up his arm, then flicks his nose and swipes his cigarette. What the hel? What kind of move is that? Xin takes a step back confused.

Lorelei, sets the sword down on her shoulder and looks at the cigarette with curiosity. She takes a long drag, then instantly starts gagging. With a look of disgust, she puts it out on the ground. Xin accidentally lets out a small laugh. This was the oddest fight he had ever had.

She shoots him an annoyed glare, then sighs. "Remind me again, how did you escape?" she asks, only a hint of teasing in her voice.

"The night you decided you could do it on your own, you left the key too close. I waited until you were gone to reach it and then I escaped."

She smiles and shakes her head. "Dumb little girl, right? Can't do anything right. Obviously she just fucked up. I mean why else would she come in the middle of the night without Konstantin and accidentally leave the key too close?"

Xin looks at her in shock. She didn't mean...

No time to think. She goes on the offensive, catching Xin off guard. The sword that seemed too heavy for her a moment ago now dips and weaves seamlessly through the air, striking many non-vital parts all over Xin's body. She was making a point.

Her last swing seemed to leave her open. Taking the opportunity, Xin crouches down and sweeps at her feet. She stands firm, grins, then knees him in the chin, knocking him to his ass. She sits on his chest, pinning him down with his own sword to his throat.

They sit there, panting and staring each other down for a moment, Xin's past racing through his mind, with sudden renewed clarity.

The night she dropped the key too closely... it wasn't like all the other times. She had come in alone, in the middle of the night. Only one guard was on duty, and another young boy that followed Ibby... or Lorelei around. As she did the usual torture dance steps, she also made a passing teasing comment that he could never have the strength to swim to the island to the north. She never said things like that, he never had any idea where they were until that night.

Once he escaped the cell, he easily killed the one guard that was left behind. He was seemingly very distracted by a magic trick the young boy had produced. Guess he would never figure that one out.

After that, Xin knew he should have just left, jump ship and take his chances with the ocean, but he couldn't leave without killing Viktor. The bastard deserved a gruesome death. Before he could even start looking, Lorelei, along with the same young boy appeared from the shadows. She seemed surprised he had escaped, but still teased him, egged him on, mocked his strength and his family. In a blind fury, he attacked her. She sidestepped at the last minute, sending him diving into the frigid ocean. He heard mumbled shouts aboard the ship. His revenge would have to wait, he decided, and began swimming north.

"You helped me escape." Xin breathes, the events finally all falling into place in his mind. Lorelei laughs and gives him a pat on the cheek.

"Give the boy a prize, he's gone and figured it out." she teases, then steps off of him and kneels down in front of him, stabbing his sword in the ground.

"But why?" Xin asks, sitting himself up and looking her in the eye.

"No time for explanations. There are some people, really important people to me, and they need help. I had plans to do it alone, but I think I can make use of you. If you're willing."

Xin thinks for a moment. He was still wary of the woman, there was still so much he didn't know about her but... if there really were people in danger...

"What's the plan?" he asks. Lorelei gives him a smile.

Chapter 5 - Trophies

As the sun begins setting, Lorelei stumbles down a wooded path through the forest, clutching onto Roland's large arm. Her guitar strapped to her back, and a small bag in her hand, she drunkenly giggles how excited she was to see Roland's ship. As they step out of the wood, there lay Roland's ship, anchored near shore, a large plank laid out, ready to receive them. It was a huge ship, not as large as the one Konstantin commanded, but still impressive in its own right.

"By the gods Roland." Lorelei gasps. "This is your ship? You really are a powerful man aren't you?"

Roland strokes her cheek, "One of the most powerful in these seas." he coos.

"That is very sexy." she leans in to whisper, causing Roland to grin and also come in closer. She places a finger to his lips, a teasing smile on her face.

"Come on darling. I want you to show me the inside of the ship. So we can be..." she looks back at the other pirates ogling them. "...alone."

Roland leads her to the ship, then towards his quarters. Before they enter Lorelei passes a small bag to one of the pirates with a plain looking eyepatch.

"Take care of that for me." she asserts. "It's got all of my personal belongings in it."

With an eager grin, the one-eyed pirate watches his captain and the eager girl disappear into captain's quarters. As soon as the door clicks, he starts rooting through the bag. One of his shorter, angrier comrades notices this, giving him a stern glare.

"What are you doing?" asks the squat pirate. "She asked you to take care of it, not to snoop."

"Yeah but... this is her bag... full of her stuff. Meaning there's probably panties in here." replies the monocular pirate, basically drooling. Suddenly, his one eyed pal doesn't seem so stupid, as the squat pirate dives in to also claim the bounty.

Inside Roland's room, an eager Lorelei bounces into his room with faux excitement plastered on her face. She takes a look around the snug captain's quarters, which seemed about the same as any quarters. The room is in slight disarray, with empty bottles and clothes strewn here and there. Along the walls are different pictures, weapons and random knick knacks.

Lorelei stops dead in her tracks as she notices a familiar martial arts outfit and straight sword displayed proudly on the wall. Like a fucking trophy. Her heart leaps into her throat and dread fills her stomach.

Click sounds the door, followed by Rolands large clammy hand placing themselves on Lorelei's shoulders.

"What's the matter lovely Lorelei?" he whispers in her ear. "Have you seen a ghost?"

Lorelei catches her breath, smiles a forced smile and shakes her head. "No, of course not." she replies and sets her guitar down gently by the door.

"Really?" Roland asks skeptically. "Because our beautiful prisoners here seemed to perk up pretty quick when they heard the name Lorelei. I thought you might have known them. Lin tried her best to save them, but she failed in the end."

The fake smile drops from her face, and her fists clenched in anger. Obviously the charade was over.

"Where's Lin? What did you do to her?" She growls.

"The same thing I'm going to do to you." he whispers darkly in her ear.

The time for talking was over. In a flash, she spins around, letting her fist fly at his face, but he was expecting it. He catches her small hand in his large one, holding firm, but she wasn't worried. He only thought he was stronger than her, a simple alignment of her body, and he would be on his ass with a foot in his mouth.

Before she could do any alignment, however, Roland takes a deep breath and blows in her face. What the hel? Why would he...

Suddenly, a numbness overcomes her body and her muscles fail her causing her body to relax and fall into Roland's waiting arms.

"Ah, that's better." he chuckles.

Try as she might, her body refused to respond to her screaming brain. All she could manage was to dart her eyes back and forth.

"What did you do to me?" She asks, a hint of panic in her voice as he lays her down gently in his bed.

"It's the blessing I received." Roland explains. "Got it off the blackmarket in Gaia a few years back. I can completely immobilize a person with my breath."

Lorelei glares at him "So that's how you got the upper hand on Lin." she spits "I should have known you couldn't beat her in a fight."

"Why fight when I can just have fun?" mocks Roland

Those large, awful hands run their way down her face, then rest on top of her breast. Lorelei's skin crawls from his touch, she wanted to rip those fucking hands off his fucking arms, but she was completely helpless.

"Don't you fucking touch me." she growls.

"But isn't that why you're here?" he asks innocently. "You seemed so eager to be here a moment ago."

"You're a vile, disgusting, evil man."

"Maybe so." Roland laughs "But I do enjoy it so."

As she is about to scream out he kisses her passionately, and messily, causing Lorelei to involuntarily gag. After another moment he sits up, rips her shirt open, then freezes in his tracks. He stares at the newly revealed tattoo on her chest with confusion and horror.

"That tattoo..." He quavers. "That is a mark of Konstantin's crew. Who are you? Are you a spy? Have I upset Konstantin?"

Lorelei musters up a cocky smile. "Yeah that's right. Konstantin is pissed that you broke the alliance with Lin."

"Liar." He laughs, noticeably relaxing. "This was Konstantin's idea. As soon as he found out about my power he set things in motion. Do you have any idea how much money those whores make? But Lin was always an issue. No one could beat that bitch. Now that she's dead, Konstantin can take over that business."

Lorelei is stunned. The word dead rattles in her head, unable to find a spot of understanding.

"No," she says softly. "You couldn't have killed her. She is the strongest woman in the world."

Roland grins. "Was."

Rage fills her veins, fury radiating from her as she screams all sorts of profanities at the horrid man. The walls seemed to shake for a moment, but it was likely just from a strong wind. There was no way that was from her. Roland lords above her, reveling in her agony. As she finally starts to run out of breath, Roland has a thought.

"Hang on. Now that I think of it, I've only ever heard of one girl as young as you receiving that tattoo."

Roland grabs her right hand and motions to remove her gloves.

"Don't touch those!" Lorelei screams, but is unable to stop him. He peels off her glove, revealing a faded, but very large and obvious self-inflicted scar. He roars with laughter.

"It's the suicidal girl! Everyone thought you off'd yourself for good last time."

Lorelei growls a bestial growl at him, unable to do anything else... yet.

"No worries," he continues, unphased by her death glares. "I can finish the job for you. But first we'll have some fun."

Roland starts removing her shirt and kissing her again. Lorelei's eyes are desperate but no matter how hard she tries, she is unable to move.

Chapter 6 - The Signal

"Give it to me! I want to open it." growls the tiny pirate, straining with all his mini might to claim Lorelei's bag as his own.

"She gave me the bag, I want to open it!" replies eyepatch.

More pirates have gathered, all wanting to be the ones to open the bag, drawing the attention of a tall, muscle bound, scar riddled man.

"What in Helheim are you doing?" he asks abruptly. All the pirates stop obediently and look at him.

"Seeing who gets to open the girl's bag." one eye squeaks.

"You're all idiots." He roars, "Clearly I'm the one who gets to open it. I am the first mate after all."

A round of sighs sound from the defeated pirate. They all knew not to mess with him. Obidently, they pass him the bag, and he opens it cheerfully. He starts pulling out multiple different articles of clothes, inspecting them closely, then tosses them to the cheering crewmates. Lastly, he pulls out something that looks like a jewelry box.

"Oooo," he says with excitement in his eyes. "I wonder what's in here. Probably some precious jewels."

The pirates stop and crowd around the first mate, all hoping to get a look inside the box.

At the edge of the sparse, spruce forest, the three bounty hunters wait as patiently as possible. Xin sits calmly under a tree, cigarette lit, sending a lazy glance up at the ship from time to time. Yuri stands, cross armed, refusing to take his eyes off. James, filling his role as the most nervous of the group, paces around mumbling.

"What's taking so long?" James asks Xin. "Are you sure we didn't miss the signal?"

"Relax James," Xin replies, tapping the ash off of his cigarette. "She said we'd know it when we saw it."

"Are you sure we can trust her? This is the same girl that tortured you, right?" he asks, stopping to look at Xin directly.

"Yep." Xin replies

"Meaning she worked for Konstantin."

"Yep."

James gets slightly annoyed by his care free attitude. "How do we know she's not still working for him, and Roland and her are conspiring to take us out?" he strains

"It's possible." Xin replies, still unphased.

"Then why do you trust her?" James asks exasperated, practically pulling his curly hair out of his head.

"Not saying I trust her." Xin sighs. "All I know is, if she's lying we walk into a trap, but if she's telling the truth then there's a bunch of women on that ship that are about to be sold into slavery. I can deal with a trap, I can't deal with the alternative."

Yuri laughs heartily, still not taking his eyes from the ship. "He's got you there James."

James sighs defeated. "Just make sure I have a nice tombstone, alright?"

Suddenly, a light appears at the ship, and the boys give it a look. That must be the--
BOOM!

The light turns into a rather large explosion, causing James and Yuri's mouths to drop. Xin grins, swiftly putting out his cigarette. "I think that's our signal."

The gorey aftermath on the ship was not for the faint of heart. Body parts and copious amounts of blood scattered the deck. Among the pirates that were still alive, some faint, some throw up, while some others scramble around in confusion. The first mate, who is no longer holding the explosive jewelry box, finds himself missing a hand and screams out in rage.

Amongst the confusion, a loud, shrill whistle alerts the conscious pirates to the arrival of Xin, standing tall at the edge of their ship.

"Damn." Xin chuckles. "That was quite the explosion. I hope there's enough of you left to give me a challenge."

As the muscle bound first mate crudely wraps his missing hand, he growls, "Did you plant that bomb?"

"Maybe I did. What are you going to do about it?" he goads.

"I'll fucking kill you!" he roars, charging at Xin, with a massive sword drawn. Xin defends it easily, glancing at the man's missing hand.

"You sure you want to fight with that stub of yours? Seems like it'd hurt pretty bad." asks Xin.

"I feel no pain." he growls, sending swing after sloppy swing at Xin. "I have an enchantment that makes sure of that."

"Really?" asks Xin, "And which item would give you that power?"

"Like I'd tell you! Then you'd try and take it for yourself." he snarls.

"Ha! Not likely. Pain keeps you smart, shows you your weaknesses and teaches you to be better. You can keep your stupid enchantment. I don't need any powers to kick your ass."

This sends the idiot into another fit, as he comes at Xin with more messy swings. Up, down, across, across, over and over again. Did this guy even know how to mix it up? So predictable. He may have muscles, but he wasn't sure this guy had ever been in a fight before. Gods, how easy would it be just to cut his head off right now, but that wasn't part of the plan. Not yet.

Just as planned, the whole ship comes crowding around Xin and the first mate, cheering on their comrade. Oh, they were going to be disappointed.

With the pirates distracted, James and Yuri sneak their way below deck and split off in different directions. James sneaks into the brig, where a group of women are huddled together. They ranged widely in looks, but were all very beautiful in their own right.

Two guards are in the room, one sitting lazily swinging around the keys and laughing as the other stands an armslength away from the bars mocking the women, offering to show them a good time before they get sold as sex slaves.

It was a good thing they were so cocky and loud, because James wasn't exactly the best at sneaking around. He was successfully able to sneak up behind the relaxing guard, and slit his throat. Not quite sneaky enough not to alert the other guard though. He jumps back in surprise at the sound of his comrades' death cry.

"Who the fu--" he starts, but is rudely interrupted by his neck being broken by one of the women in the cell. *Thud* sounds the lifeless body as it falls, and James watches in awe. He had heard of the Dragon Ladies of Le Yuan before. The whores that fight. He never realized they could be so fast and efficient. How in the world did they end up here?

Remembering that time was of the essence however, he snaps himself out of it and unlocks the cell door. The ladies watch him cautiously, seemingly trying to decide if he is friend or foe. He'd better make sure they knew he was a friend.

"Hello ladies," James beams with a deep bow, "a little bird told us you may have some anger to vent on some pirates." With perfect timing, the door crashes open revealing Yuri burdened with a stack of weapons. He drops them proudly in front of the cell.

"Well now's your chance." James continues with a smile.

The confused looks quickly turn to evil and eager grins as the women dive for the weapons and charge out the door.

The clang of swords and the whooping cheers continue out on deck as Xin and the first mate are locked in battle.

"Is this really the best this ship has to offer?" Xin sighs, half heartedly blocking another swing. "Pathetic."

"You're one to talk." the first mate growls. "You haven't attacked once!"

"Just biding my time." He replies.

"For what?"

In response, a flood of angry and armed women emerge from below deck, with cries for blood and vengeance.

"For that." Xin smiles.

Eyes wide, the muscle-brained first mate looks at the scene. Captain had warned them not to go anywhere near those ladies. What the hell happened? In a flash, Xin starts going on the offensive causing the first mate to desperately try and block him, but it's no use. One swipe, two swipes, the first mate's chest is cut wide open in a lovely "X". He looks down at it and scoffs.

"This won't stop me--" he begins, but stops as his shirt falls off his body. Suddenly, the copious amount of mortal wounds on his body flood his senses. He falls to the ground in complete agony.

Xin walks up confidently to him, lighting a smoke, the man writhing and screaming in pain bringing a satisfied smirk to his face.

"Hu... guess the enchantment was your shirt. Good guess on my part." Xin boasts.

As the idiot tries to scream out an insult, he instead loses his head from one swift slice of Xin's sword. Now that was fun. He turns his bloodsoaked grin to the other disbelieving pirates and asks,

"Who's next?"

Chapter 7 - Inner Demons

The glint of the moonlight shines beautifully off of the bloodsoaked deck, bodies of pirates littered everywhere. The Dragon Ladies, although now battered and bruised, are absolutely ecstatic. They had thought they're lives were forfeit not even an hour earlier. Now, they danced and cheered, embracing each other, and ambitiously thanking James and Yuri for their help.

On the upper deck, Xin runs his sword through one pirate that was trying desperately to crawl away, then flicking the blood off with one swift motion. He looks down at the jubilant women, a smile on his face. Then his eye wanders to Roland's door, and the smile fades from his face.

'She's been in there a while.' He thinks.

A tall, mature woman with a tight brown bun on her head comes up to Xin, looking well put together despite her time as a prisoner.

"Are you injured?" she asks, her voice rich and powerful. "That was quite a fight you put on."

"Ah I'm fine." he replies. "Hey, is your name Lin?" he asks.

The woman's face drops with despair, the earlier strength in her voice faltering.

"N-no. My name is Hina. Lin... She came to rescue us but... Roland killed her." her lip quivers. "I couldn't save her."

A wave of shock and panic fills his body. "What? No that can't be..."

Xin thinks back to after his fight with Lorelei. Her face was absolutely alight while talking about her teacher Lin.

"I know the women there will want blood." she had said *"They've all been trained like me by Lin. She's a badass, and way more skilled than I am. Hey, I bet if you're good I could ask Lin to train you too. She usually teaches women, but she might make an exception for you."*

Xin snaps his head back to Roland's door, panic setting firmly in his gut. If someone as strong as Lin could be defeated by Roland, what happened to Lorelei?

Roland's room is covered in an eerie silence where a large bloody lump lays under the covers. With a sigh and a grumble, empty bottles fall to the ground as Lorelei searches clumsily for even just a mouthful of booze.

By the gods, I need a drink, thought Lorelei. *Fucking bastard left a horrible taste my mouth. What did that fucking bastard eat every morning to taste like that? Rat shit? Disgusting.*

She finds a half empty bottle, and with a great sigh, flops down on a rickety wooden chair. Bloodsoaked dagger in hand, she pops it open and starts chugging, the brown liquid pouring down the side of her mouth, washing away a small line of the copious amount of blood that covers her face. Her once clean and neatly pressed shirt, now ripped and soaked in blood, hangs loosely off her shoulder.

As she gazes sadly at Lin's outfit, familiar footsteps approach and stop behind her. She recognizes him without looking.

"Mikhail... I was wondering when you'd show up." she sighs.

"I knew it." he mocks, his pale lips curled into a smug grin. "I knew this would be your fault somehow."

Lorelei shakes her head and takes another drink. "I couldn't have known this would happen. It's just a coincidence. Or he could have been lying."

"You know it's the truth. If you had just stayed with me we would have had our own ship, Roland would still be a nobody, none of this would have happened."

"No..." She says weakly, trying to convince herself more than anything. "You're wrong..." but he was right. Roland had told her that Konstantin had planned to give Mikhail his own ship and crew, but after Ibby was killed he refused, and that ship and crew was given to Roland instead. This led him to be able to get that disgusting blessing and kill Lin.

Mikhail places his hands on her shoulders, leans in close and smiles wickedly. "Admit it, you're cursed. Everything you touch will die. You should just end it, save everyone the misery."

He was right, she thought. He is always right.

Lorelei looks at her dagger longingly, placing the cold steel against her already scarred wrist.

A sharp flurry of knocks on the door snaps her from her daze. The handle turns back and forth, but remains closed.

"Lorelei!" shouts Xin from outside the room "Lorelei are you alright in there?"

Mikhail looks disgusted at the door. "Well I guess one thing hasn't died." he sneers, then smiles. "Ah but it's only a matter of time."

"Stop it. He's different. He's strong." she says weakly.

"So was Lin." he replies, and leaves Lorelei to sit and consider his words.

Thud, thud, CRASH! The wood door caves into Xin's kicks and flies in with a panicked look on his face. He breathes a sigh of relief upon seeing Lorelei sitting alone, soaked in blood and surrounded by broken bottles, but alive. She either hadn't noticed, or didn't care that he was now in the room, as her gaze lingered on the floor.

"Lorelei!" he exclaims. "Thank the Gods you're alive." He squats down in front of her and starts wiping blood from her face, checking for any wounds.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

Lorelei bats away his hand in annoyance. "Tchah. It's not my blood, it's his. I'm fine. As soon as the explosion went off his stupid power wore off." she growls, glaring at the lump on the bed. Xin walks over to it and makes a motion to lift the covers.

"I wouldn't..." starts Lorelei, but too late.

He had been in many fights, seen men dismembered, disemboweled and was never squeamish to blood. The scene below the sheet, however, almost makes him throw up. He quickly puts the sheet back down, taking a few gulps, then out of morbid curiosity lifts it again.

"Where's his skin?" he asks, then looks further down, his face twisted up in disgust. "Where's his..."

Lorelei smirks, "He told me to go fuck myself, I decided he should fuck himself instead."

Xin sighs, gives it one more disgusted, yet intrigued look over and lowers the sheet. "Guess my torture wasn't so bad after all."

"Tchah. Please. You got love taps from me. I never wanted to torture you, I just didn't want Konstantin to get his way with you."

Xin starts thinking again. It really was true, wasn't it.

"But why?" he asks. "There were so many others from my island. Older ones, ones that could have helped you."

Lorelei looks at her still ungloved hands and starts fidgeting. "But none of them had your spirit. You... had something no one else did. Something that inspired me. I couldn't let him break that."

"I'm sorry." Xin sighs. "I should have realized sooner."

"I lost a lot that night." she says, rubbing her wrists distractedly, "Konstantin wasn't convinced it was a mistake. He certainly made sure I didn't make that mistake again." She thinks sadly back, then shakes her head and smiles.

"But don't blame yourself for not realizing it. I've been told I'm a pretty good liar." she says then looks back to the outfit. After another large swig from the bottle she says,

"Lin never fell for my shit. She could read me like a book. She always pushed me to be better."

"Was that hers?" he asks, noticing the outfit on the wall, and Lorelei nods.

It was a simple, but beautiful red and black martial arts outfit, made of loose and flexible material, and buttoned with braided rope. He had seen outfits like it before, but not often.

"I'm so sorry." he says, then holds out his hand. "The rest of the ladies are safe though, thanks to you. Come on."

Lorelei shrinks away from his hand and shakes her head. "No, just tell them I'm dead or something. I can't..." The rest of her words get caught in her throat. She buries her face in her hands and sighs.

"There's nothing more you could have done." he soothes, putting a hand on her shoulder to try and comfort her.

Bad idea.

Lorelei's face twists into pure fear and pulls abruptly away from his touch, the clammy, vile hand of Roland still fresh in her memory.

"Get off of me!" she screams.

She pulls away so quickly that she falls to the ground, during which, more of her shirt falls away revealing multiple scars on her back. Xin's stomach twists. He knew exactly what those marks were made from. He had had the exact same marks for a time, but his marks had faded away. For them to be so many and so vivid on her back meant that she had been whipped, a lot.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to... I wouldn't try..." Xin stutters.

Lorelei grabs at her shirt and covers herself back up. "Never mind." she mumbles. "Just leave."

Part of him thought he should leave, let her grieve on her own, but something told him he should stay. He looks at her for a moment, crossing his arms in contemplation.

"I always thought that you were a crew member, but you were a prisoner on that ship too, weren't you."

"What are you talking about?" she snaps with a scowl. "Of course I was a crew member. I even have the fucking tattoo to prove it."

"Maybe they told you you were," he says, looking into her eyes "but I don't think that's the case."

As flashes of her time on that ship flood her mind, an anger within her starts to boil. In one swift motion, she grabs Lin's sword with her right hand and swings at Xin's head. Surprisingly, he was easily able to stop the attack, the strength she had in their earlier fight had completely left her body. Her right arm starts to shake weakly. He glances at her ungloved hand, and notices the faint marks resting on her wrists. She had been through a lot, hadn't she.

"Just leave me alone." she spits "My life is poison, and those closest to me pay the price. If you knew what was good for you, you'd leave now and never look back."

Xin recognized that look in her eyes. It was the same look, the same anger he had after his mother and sisters died. A painful sympathy flows through his body. Xin gently disarms her, Lorelei offering no resistance, and places the sword back in its sheath.

"I've never really been one to know what's good for me." He voices. Surprise and confusion twist up in her face as she looks up at his soft smile.

Is he mocking me? She thought. *It doesn't seem like it.*

Xin lightly places a hand on her shoulder, she flinches but doesn't pull away. He pulls her head into his chest as she stands there awkwardly.

"W-what are you doing?" she chokes.

"It's alright..." he whispers, "even the strongest people need to cry."

Tears began to well in her eyes.

No way. That was bullshit. Only weak little girls cried. I couldn't... she thinks, resisting the wave of emotions with all her might.

"Please stop." she says halfheartedly.

"It's just us. I won't say anything." he soothes.

With that, the flood gates open. Lorelei wraps her arms around Xin and begins bawling uncontrollably, burying her face in his chest. She collapses into him and they drop gently to the ground.

Chapter 8 - Closure

Xin exits the room alone, glancing back at the door with a small smile. An extremely worried James and Yuri see him and run up.

"Is everything alright?" asks Yuri. "We were just about to go in there to check on you."

"Everything is fine." Xin says with a smile. "She just needed a minute for a change of clothes."

"Typical woman..." James grumbles, inviting a swift upcuff from Yuri.

Hina, who was also listening in with worry, pipes up, "She? Who are you--"

In response, a soft *creek* turns all of their heads as the door to Roland's room opens. Lorelei strides out, clear of most blood, adorned in Lin's outfit with her straight sword strapped to her side. In her right hand, once again gloved, is Roland's head placed beautifully atop a pike.

Hina gasps, the sight of Lorelei filling her eyes with happy tears. Lorelei strides past the boys to stand beside Hina and look below to the rest of the women.

"Is that Lin?" gasps one red-headed woman, noticing the scene above.

"Don't be silly, Lin died. We all saw it." chides a tall, narrow woman.

Hina looks at Lorelei with pride. "It's not Lin, ladies. It's Lorelei."

"Lorelei!" yell the girls in almost perfect unison.

"The bastard is dead ladies." shouts Lorelei, weidling Roland's head up in the air. "It's time to fucking party!"

A thunderous cheer fills the air, followed by a rumbling of footsteps charging up the stairs. Realizing what was coming, Lorelei quickly passes the pike to a surprised, and slightly disgusted, Hina. Before she can say anything the ladies start hugging her.

"Ak!" Lorelei cries out. "No, no, no! Rule number one, no hugs!" but the cries fall on happy, deaf ears.

"Argh! You all stink! You're lucky you've had a rough few weeks or I'd kick all your asses!" Lorelei continues to protest.

After they were quite content in letting Lorelei know how much they missed her, they took a few steps back. With a huff and a glare, she straightens herself out.

"Where is she?" Lorelei asks Hina, causing any trace of a smile to leave everyone's faces.

"She's gone, Lorelei." Hina replies, not missing a beat.

"No. Where is the body?"

"They tossed it overboard."

"You're lying." Lorelei snarls. "They would have kept it to prove to Konstantin she was dead. Where is she? I need to see her."

Hina sighs defeated. "Just... give me a minute to prepare her body, alright?"

Lorelei nods and Hina walks off below deck. The boys look at Lorelei with concern, causing her to turn to them with a smile.

"Thank you boys. This went far smoother with a few extra pairs of hands. Still would have been fine on my own though."

"So... Do we get a hug too?" James says with a sly smile. Lorelei looks him up and down, then the same with the other two.

"Uh uh," she disagrees. "I have a strict no touching rule, I only make exceptions for those I trust. I've only just met you."

James and Yuri look a little disappointed while Xin tries to hide a smirk.

"But... you are off to a pretty good start." she concedes with a smile. "Keep up the good work and you might get a pat on the shoulder."

Yuri lets out a jovial belly laugh that was so contagious the rest can't help but laugh as well.

"Alright," she says, trying to bring the focus back, "time to get serious again for a second. I need you all to do a couple more little things for me."

Below deck, in a small, mildew covered room, stands a stoic Lorelei. Laying in front of her is the badly beaten body of a middle aged woman with midnight black hair speckled with grey. The face was barely recognizable, but there was no mistaking the dragon tattoos going up her arms and intertwining on her back.

This was her teacher, Lin. Once the most feared pirate in all the seas, she had retired young to found an island named Le Yuan. It was the largest most successful brothel in Yggdria, filled with women that were taught how to fight. No one messed with them, whether they were outlaws or soldiers. So many weak, broken and insecure women found their way to Lin over the years, wanting strength in a world that often overlooked and disrespected them. She would always help them... but now...

Hina stands opposite of Lorelei, silent tears streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry," Hina chokes. "I did the best I could. They were so cruel..."

"It's fine. Thank you Hina. I'm sorry for making you do this." Lorelei says. She was never quite sure how close the two of them were intimately, but she knew Hina and Lin loved each other.

Hina shakes her head, wiping the tears away. "No, it's fine Lorelei. Don't apologize. You needed closure too. The rest of us had seen but..." The rest of the words fail her as more tears fall down her face. There was nothing more she could do here. Lorelei turns to the door where Xin is waiting patiently.

Outside, the ship is humming with excitement. Some of the ladies work on gathering flowers, others help James gather a ton of firewood, while the rest help Yuri empty the pirate ship of any useful supplies. Yuri drops down two large kegs on the ground, signaling the last of the supplies off of the ship. Of course a couple of dazzled ladies remark on his amazing strength. He puffs out his chest in pride at the comments, while James grumbles about being underappreciated.

A sudden solemn quiet rolls across the shore as Lorelei, Hina and Xin walk off the ship. They make a path for Xin, who carries Lin's wrapped up body to the pyre and lays it down gently.

Through tears and cries, curses and prayers, each person present comes and sets flowers on Lin until everyone is in a circle around the pyre. James hands Lorelei a torch, and with it, she sets it alight. With a step back, she stoically watches her teacher's body burn.

"How are you doing?" asks Xin, sliding in carefully beside her.

"The woman who was like a mother to me was basically killed by a man who was the closest thing I had to a father. But it wouldn't be the first time. I'll manage." She states.

"What?" he probes, shock splattered on his face.

Lorelei shakes her head. "Never mind. It's not important."

Xin stands speechless for a moment. So many questions raced through his mind, but one seemed to stand out in particular.

"You think of Konstantin as a father?" he asks.

"He did basically raise me. Taught me a lot of things too." she replies, her face unchanged. "And that's what fathers do right? Beat you until you listen?"

Exasperation fills Xin's face. "What? No! That's not at all what a father should be."

"Well, I suppose an absent father is better than an abusive one." she replies coldly.

He knew she was having a hard time, but that comment was uncalled for. It seemed hurting people was still her specialty.

"My father may have been gone a lot, but he was still loving and caring." he says, far more calmly than he felt.

Lorelei sighs, the coldness leaving her body. "I'm sorry. I didn't... I'm sure your father was a great man."

"Sounds like you haven't seen a lot of that. If you want to talk..." replies Xin, honestly concerned about her.

"Maybe... eventually." she says, the shadow of a smile on her face.

Chapter 9 - Party Time

Roaring flames fade into embers as the darkness slowly begins to encircle the group. A sudden loud clap makes everyone jump and look over to Lorelei, who stands with a smile, guitar strapped and ready.

"Right." she says, strumming an energetic chord. "Enough with the moping, Lin wouldn't like that. It's time to party."

The night moves on and the once sad faces have slowly changed to smiles. A huge bonfire is lit, and with it, they also set that accursed ship alight. More of the ladies have found other instruments to join in with Lorelei's song. James finds a drum and also joins in, having the ladies giggle at him as he pounds on it passionately. Yuri watches with a huge grin, a drink in his hand. A couple ladies ask him to dance and he happily complies.

Xin sits further off, once again staring at the show Lorelei is putting on, this time with a new appreciation for the woman. To his side, a very insistent Hina mends his wounds. With sudden concern, Hina pops her face in front of him.

"Are you feeling alright?" she asks quizzically. "Are you gassy?"

Xin flushes, "What? No!"

Hina follows where his gaze had been. "Oh I see." she smirks knowingly, "She is something else isn't she?"

"She certainly is interesting." he says with a small smile, then looks at Hina. "So how did she end up with all of you?"

Hina sighs, scratching her head. "It's a long story." she warns.

"That's fine." he assures her.

"Well, to start with, Lin and I actually had met her before she came to live with us. They brought her to me, only about ten years old, and terrified for her life because none of the idiots on the ship knew what a fucking period was. Really. You'd think one of them could have figured it out. You know what a period is, don't you?" she asks, almost as an attack she was so annoyed at the memory. He jumps a little and says,

"Uh, yeah. Of course."

"Good." she says with a nod. "Anyway, that was the first time we ever met her. Lin knew something was wrong, and she wanted to help her, but there wasn't much we could do. They came to the island occasionally, and whenever Lin saw her, she tried to talk to her, but the girl was basically off limits and never left alone.

"Then a few years later, we both noticed a change in her. It was small, but there was a spark in her eye that wasn't there before. According to the other men on the ship she had started working harder to become part of the crew, challenging them to duels, trying to increase her rank. Successfully, so we were told. She also seemed to be watching us all more, like she was trying to learn. That went on for a couple years, until she was almost fifteen I guess. It happened right after one of their visits to the island. Three days after they left the island, that girl washed up on shore, a nasty stab wound to the abdomen."

"What? Why" asks Xin.

"No idea. She wouldn't tell us. I didn't think she would make it, but Lin insisted I do everything I could because she knew she was a fighter. That she'd make it. She was right or course. It took her over a month to wake up, and when she did she was absolutely savage, like a fucking beaten dog, snapping and snarling at anyone who tried to help her. Of course we didn't realize she was taking it easy on us until she killed the first man she saw. Seriously

bad for business having a man killer at a brothel. It is how she got her name though, since she refused to let anyone use her old name. So, with all the singing and man killing, we decided she was our little siren, just like the Lorelei of legends.” Hina laughs, her eyes in sad remembrance.

“Anyway, Lin was able to snap her out of it with her typical tough love. That’s when she started teaching her everything she knew. Not just in fighting, but in dealing with men, especially the bastards that liked to use women for their own gain. Lorelei was completely enamored by her.”

“Does Konstantin know she’s alive?” Xin asks.

“No. I’m positive they don’t. They came to the island a few times after that, but we always kept her hidden.” Hina says, watching the happy, dancing Lorelei with concerned eyes.

“I don’t know what they would do if they knew, but Lorelei was terrified of them.” Hina thinks for a moment. “Oh, but don’t tell her I told you that. Actually... any of that. She’s kind of a secretive girl.”

“Well thanks for telling me.” Xin says with a chuckle. He was quite appreciative of the story, mainly since it basically proved she was telling the truth. He really did inspire her somehow.

Hina stands up and dusts off her hands. “Looks like you’re all good. You had a few cuts but nothing serious. Pretty impressive for all those pirates you took on.”

“Those cuts were from Lorelei, not the pirates.” Xin laughs.

Hina giggles “Lin trained her well. She’d be proud.” Her eyes drift off into sadness for a moment, then she snaps back and smiles at Xin. “Anyway, as I said, you’re all good. Go have some fun.”

“Thanks,” Xin replies, “but I prefer to just watch. I’m not really one for celebrations.”

Hina scowls at him sternly. “What?” she exclaims, then crosses her arms and sighs “Come here. Look at this.”

What in the world could she want now, Xin wondered. Well, it would be rude not to humor her. He stands up and walks over to her, looking in the direction she indicated, right towards the partying troupe.

“What?” he asks.

“You see all this, all those smiling faces? Of one smiling face in particular.” Hina asks, placing a small, gentle hand in the middle of his back.

Lorelei was dancing beautifully around the fire, playing, singing and laughing along with the others.

“Yeah...” he says, cheeks slightly flushed, unsure of her point.

“You helped make that happen. Go have some fun. Doctor’s orders.” She states, giving him a big push. Completely thrown off guard, not only by her action, but with the strength behind it, Xin stumbles towards the group. Suddenly a familiar gloved hand reaches out and grabs on to his hand. As she passes her guitar on to a giddy looking lady, they start to dance together. Fighting was easy for Xin, dancing... that was a whole other thing. Hina watches the two with a chuckle as Xin nervously fumbles about.

As the night rolls on, the energy levels fade. Now all cozy and nestled by the dying fire, Yuri recounts the story of when he and James first met Xin. It was an exciting tale, filled with humor and plenty of blood. The ladies were loving it. Xin sits as far off as possible, leaned up against the tree, cigarette in hand. He tries to act uncaring, but is obviously very

uncomfortable about the revelation of his wilder childhood days. Lorelei lazily picks out a song on her guitar, casually listening to the tale with a smile.

"...And there's little Xin," Yuri booms, "standing in a field of dead bodies, covered in blood holding the bandit leader's head!"

"He really took out a whole bandit gang on his own? At that age?" asks one brunette, quite impressed. "My goodness, sounds like he was nearly as dangerous as little Lorelei."

"It's a good thing Lin was so strong. None of us knew how to handle her." states another busty lady.

The soft, sweet music of Lorelei's guitar comes to an abrupt end. Nervous faces all around look over at Lorelei.

"Alright," she says, a distant look on her face. "I think that's enough stories. Time to go."

The ladies look around confused and worried.

"Go? Go where?" one asks.

"Back home to Le Yuan of course." Lorelei replies, standing up.

"Tonight?" the busty lady whines. "But it's nearly a week's boat trip. We need a rest, Lorelei!"

The tall thin woman looks at her with pleading eyes. "It was so horrible on that ship. We need time on dry land!"

"I suppose we could at least spend the night." Lorelei sighs.

A few ladies sigh in relief, others are still annoyed at the hurried schedule.

Hina looks at Lorelei with concern. "You're coming back to Le Yuan with us?"

"Why wouldn't I?" asks Lorelei, annoyed. "Who else is going to take care of you all now?"

The group of women start arguing annoyedly, claiming to be capable of taking care of themselves, that Roland only got the better of them because they were caught off guard, that they are very capable fighters.

Hina waits for them to finish their chiding, then says, "You're not a courtesan, Lorelei, and you're especially not a madame. Just because you were Lin's student, doesn't mean you have to walk her same path."

"That's what she trained me for!" Lorelei cries in annoyance "To protect all of you."

"No." states Hina, an unbendable sternness about her. "She trained you to be strong. To protect yourself. To give you the power to make your own path in life. That was always what Lin believed in. You need to make your own path."

"So what? You're kicking me out? After I saved all your asses?" Lorelei screams.

"That's not it at all. You'll always have a home at Le Yuan, but I don't think it's the place you need to be right now." says Hina calmly.

Lorelei flops back to the ground, anger, sadness and frustration twisted up in her face. She stops and thinks for a moment.

"So what am I supposed to do? Go around playing songs for pirates? Buy some pretty dresses, hope they'll throw some gold at me." She seethes.

"Well..." pipes James "You could be a bounty hunter."

All eyes focus on James in surprise, as most had even forgotten the boys were there and listening.

Lorelei seriously considers for a moment. "Ha.... Ahahahaha, you know that doesn't sound horrible. Killing assholes and getting money for it. I could get used to that."

Yuri puffs out his chest, "And we're the best in the business, we could show you the ropes!" he declares.

"I don't know." sighs Lorelei.

"I wasn't suggesting she come with us." James grumbles as he rubs his bandaged hand.

Lorelei shakes her head "No. Roland said that Konstantin was going to take over Le Yuan now that Lin's dead. I can't let him--"

"What are you going to do?" Hina scolds "You can't fight them all off. You're strong, but you're not Lin. And once he finds out you're there he'll just send wave after wave until you're captured or dead. That doesn't do anyone any good."

"So what? You're just going to submit?" Lorelei asks sharply.

"If that's what keeps us safe. If all he wants is money then he can have it. It's not worth our lives."

Lorelei's eyes become desperate, a despair sinks into her gut. "No! He can't win. He can't... there must be another way..."

"We take him out. On our terms." sounds Xin's voice from the back of the group. He leans lazily on a tree, cigarette lit.

Lorelei looks at him with surprise "What?"

"We kill the bastard," he smirks, "and everyone that works for him. Then he's not a problem anymore, right?"

"That's true but... it will be dangerous. We could all die." Lorelei explains.

"'You couldn't protect them.', 'You were too weak.', ' You'll never accomplish anything the way you are'." He quotes, "That's what you told me, seven years ago."

"I'm sorry..." she says quietly.

Xin takes a big drag and sighs, "Don't be. It was true at the time, but not any more. I'm going to kill Konstantin, and that bastard that killed my family and I'll do it with or without your help." He states. "But... after everything they put you through, I'd understand if you're afraid."

Lorelei appears in front of Xin, her eyes ablaze with anger, a dagger stabbed into the tree where Xin's eye would have been a second earlier had he not dodged.

"I am not afraid! I'm not some sniveling little girl. I'm not afraid of anything." Lorelei screams in his face.

Xin stares her down, unflinching. "'Only the strong survive in this world'." he quotes again. "Let's show Konstantin how weak he really is."

An intense silence falls across the forest as Lorelei studies the man in front of her. Her eyes lock on to his, for the first time really noticing those steel blue eyes. Those eyes that were once filled with so much sadness were now ablaze with hope and motivation. Her rage fades and a smile creeps onto her face.

"I'll think about it." she says, and the group breathes a sigh of relief.

Chapter 10 - Rewards

Finally, the last patron had left, the tables were clean, dishes were done, and it was time to close up for the night. Jean the balding bar owner heads to the door to lock up his dungy but cozy bar. Before he can get there, however, the door swings open to reveal quite the odd group. He recognizes the two men that had been there earlier, but not the group of women that came in with them, giggling and clinging happily.

"Hey barkeep, you got some rooms for these lovely ladies?" Yuri asks, in that booming voice.

"I--" Jean begins, still wondering where the hell all of these ladies came from. This wasn't a large island and he knew basically everyone here.

"Aw," interrupts one curvy lady with a pouty lip. "We get our own room? Don't you want us to share yours?" she asks, rubbing her hand up and down Yuri's very large arm, making him laugh that jovial laugh.

"Well, it seemed rude to assume." Explains Yuri. "You have all had a rough go, but I suppose if you'd like to share a room..."

"Oh yes please." chuckles a fit blonde attached to the arm of a grinning James.

"We have missed being with real men." says a smaller lady, running a hand over Yuri's fuzzy chest. The boys look at each other, eager grins on their faces.

Hina sighs, "Well you can count me out. All I want is a soft bed and a good night's sleep." a few of the other ladies agree with her.

"You all go ahead though," she continues "I'm sure I can manage to get myself a room."

James gives a salute. "Yes ma'am!"

"Hey Xin, you don't mind do you?" Yuri asks, but receives no response.

"Xin? Where'd that kid go?" he asks in confusion.

Hina chuckles, "Lorelei's not here either."

A knowing grin creeps on James' face. "I think we know what they're doing."

"Umm... what are we doing?" asks a very confused and nervous looking Xin as Lorelei pulls him along through the halls of that same bar.

"Like you don't know." she chuckles at him.

She opens a door to reveal a very neat room. Clothes are folded and neatly stashed away, the bed clean and made up. In one corner sits a broken mirror, but the shards around it are nowhere to be seen. Many holes line the walls where a dagger appears to have been thrown.

With a light pull, she brings Xin all the way in and closes the door.

"Sorry for the mess." she chirps.

Xin looks around confused "Mess? What mess?"

"I've been staying here for a while. As soon as the ladies were kidnapped I came here knowing Roland would eventually dock here. Had to take out that asinine bandit crew that was here first though. I forgot money was a thing." she starts to explain.

"Hey! We were going to take out those guys." complains Xin, and Lorelei chuckles.

"Well, you snooze, you lose. It took longer than I thought for Roland to get here, I started getting pretty anxious thinking I was wrong. Poor Jean. He thought I was just some starving musician and offered to let me keep my room in exchange for some performances.

Nice enough guy, but... I'm probably not getting my damage deposit back." she says, motioning to the holes in the wall.

Xin blushes and scratches his head. "So... this is your room then?"

Lorelei gets up close and personal. "Of course it is silly. Why would I take you to someone else's room?"

"Uhh... for a funny story?" he squeaks nervously, the smell of booze and blood wafting off of her, mixed with a sweet, welcoming scent that Xin couldn't place.

"I'm done with stories tonight." she whispers then pulls him in for a kiss.

Xin's eyes go wide with surprise, but he gently kisses her back, relaxing a little. She pulls away, and he stands stunned.

"Uhh... wow. So uhh... what about that... whole no touching thing?" he stutters, clearly flustered.

"I think I'd like to make an exception to the rules for you." she sighs, then kisses him again, this time more forcefully, pushing him towards the bed. With a soft thump he falls on the bed and flushes brightly as Lorelei begins removing her shirt.

"I-- You-- What are you doing?" he asks.

Lorelei chuckles at him. "What do you think I'm doing?" She teases, then completely removes her shirt. "This is what you really want, isn't it?"

Xin stares wide eyed. He had seen her at a glance earlier, but didn't appreciate her perfectly tight, toned body then. On the front, her soft olive skin was only marred by one particular scar on her abdomen, and another scar on her right arm. She reaches back, unclips her bra and throws it to the side, revealing her absolutely perfect, firm...

Xin quickly looks to the ceiling. "I umm... I don't... that is...."

"Aw, what's the matter, you're not shy are you?" she teases, running a finger up his chest. "Come on, admit it. This is the real reason you want me along. Why else would you want a girl on your team?"

Xin looks her in the eye with surprise. "No! I... that's not..." his words falter as he sees her naked top again. She crawls onto the bed and presses in close.

"Come on," she breathes, "There's no need to be shy. It's just bodies right?"

"That's not... You shouldn't..." he stammers, all of his senses tingling, wanting to give in. That sweet smell was now the only smell he noticed, and it was absolutely intoxicating.

Lorelei giggles at him "You're not very articulate any more." She proclaims then pushes him down. "Don't worry so much, I really don't mind. I like you, and you certainly seem to like me." she says as she runs a hand down further and further.

"S-stop stop." Xin stammers, stifling a moan as she reaches a very sensitive, private spot.

Lorelei stops abruptly, confusion twisted in her face as the sweet smell fades away. She slides away from him.

"Wait, you're serious aren't you. What's wrong? You're not still mad about the torture thing are you?"

Xin sits up, grabs a pillow and places it on his lap. "No, that's not... it's just..." he tries to look at her but starts blushing and looks away. "Could you cover up please."

Lorelei grabs her shirt that she had casually tossed earlier and puts it on. A scowl finds a place on her face. "I see. It's my scars isn't it? I know they're disgusting."

"What? No! That's not why. I just have trouble focusing when you are... Well naked. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." he says honestly.

The confused expression returns to her face. "Then what's the problem? Any guy I know would jump at the opportunity."

"Maybe it seems crazy, but you're making this seem like that's why I want to work with you, and it's not. I don't want..." he hesitates, uncomfortable with the word. "sex... to be used as a transaction. It's supposed to mean something."

He looks at her, and realizes she's looking at him as if he had just grown another head. Was this really such a strange concept to her?

"I'm confused." she says. "Sex is sex. Two bodies smushing together. There's supposed to be more?"

"Yeah, there can be." Xin says, a hint of nervousness in his voice. "And besides that a lot has happened. What Roland tried to do to you, and what happened with Lin... you're grieving. I don't want you to think I took advantage of that. Especially if we might be travelling together. I want to work together because you're a great fighter and really smart and..."

"Alright, alright, I get it." she chuckles, then plops down on the bed. She sighs and gazes up to the ceiling.

"Maybe you're right." she says. "It's been a hell of a night. I still can't believe she's gone. It feels so surreal. Like she's gonna come bursting in that door and give me shit for not training."

Xin watches her with a small smile as her eyes seem to be racing through all the wonderful memories of Lin. Then a sadness crosses her face and her lip starts to quiver.

"But she's not, is she?" she says weakly.

The bed creaks as Xin lays down beside her and looks up at the ceiling as well. "No," he replies "She's not."

A single tear falls from her eye. They sit in silence for a moment.

Xin turns his head to look at her. "Did you want to talk about her?"

There were so many wonderful stories she could tell. How caring yet brutal Lin was when she trained her, how Lin would beam with pride whenever she heard her sing, how Lin loved to brush Lorelei's hair and tell stories about her adventures at sea. Lorelei opens her mouth, but no words come out. She shakes her head.

"Not yet..." she says then meets Xin's gaze. "Could... you tell me about your family?"

"Ha, why? So you can use them to torture me again?" Xin jokes, but quickly regrets his words as Lorelei's face falls with sadness. "I'm sorry, that was supposed to be a joke. That was terrible."

A small smile creeps on her face. "Heh... I guess I deserved it."

"Ha! You know, had you said that a few hours ago I would have definitely thought you deserved worse, but now... I really am sorry. It really has been one hell of a night."

Lorelei chuckles weakly.

"Let's see..." he begins "Well, since we were talking about fathers earlier, I'll start with him. Dad wasn't around a lot, but when he was he spent every moment he could with us. He wasn't perfect, and he could definitely have a bit of a temper, but he was always quick to admit when he was wrong and was never afraid to apologize. This one time, when we were training..."

Lorelei watches him intently, hanging on his every word, a smile glued to her face as he tells wonderful tales of his childhood throughout most of the night until they both doze off.

Chapter 11 - First Bounty

Darkness envelopes her, the waves lap lightly all around. The unseen boat creaks and groans. She takes a cautious step forward, the floorboards moan.

"Ibby?" Calls a voice. She stops cold.

"Ibby?" it calls more urgently. She turns to run but is stuck in place as a figure comes towards her out of the darkness. The shape is deformed, twisted, nonsensical, but she still recognizes it. Those violet eyes stare into her soul and her heart starts racing.

"Ibby. There you are my love. Come back to me."

He reaches out a hand and she screams.

Lorelei starts awake, jumping up and out of the bed. The sight of the brightly lit, familiar inn room calms her.

"Damn, it's morning already?" she observes.

A snore from behind her makes her jump again, but upon seeing Xin she smiles and relaxes.

"Best sleep I've had in ages, and our clothes are still on. I didn't think that was possible." she chuckles under her breath.

She grabs a sweater and heads to the window. Down below she sees Hina with a couple of the ladies talking with another woman adorned in armor that glints in the morning light.

"Sigrun is here already? That was fast." she yawns and stretches. "Guess it's time to collect my bounty."

She gathers up her things silently, places a note on the bedside table and leaves with a smile.

Xin wakes up softly as a sunbeam hits his face. With a yawn he looks next to him where Lorelei had been lying. Noticing her absence he sits up and looks around some more.

"Lorelei?" He says with a hint of worry. As he's about to go to the door he sees the note on the table and opens it up. A smile comes to his face as he reads it and shoves it in his pocket.

Xin walks into a similar looking room to Lorelei's, but this one was far from tidy. Clothes, bottles, papers and a plethora of other items were strewn across the floor. Instead of one large bed there are three smaller beds. In two of them sleeps James and Yuri along with a few of the women from last night. After lighting a cigarette he comes over to the beds.

"James, Yuri, time to go." he yells.

"Five more minutes." whines James.

"Or better yet, just go away." groans Yuri.

Xin grabs a couple half drunk bottles and pours them over their heads, also splashing a couple annoyed ladies.

"Argh," yells a suddenly very awake Yuri. "What the hel, kid?"

"Lorelei is gone. It's time to go."

"It's not our problem your girl is gone, ours are still here, so come back later." James states, snuggling back into bed.

"You really just going to let her run off with our hard earned reward?" states Xin, taking a long drag.

The two look at each other with concern, then nod. With grace and speed unbecoming of their earlier attitude, the two jump out of bed, stark naked hollering,
“Let’s go claim our bounty!”

Xin walks down the road with a now fully clothed James and Yuri, both of whom look incredibly happy. After a moment of walking in silence, James jabs Xin in the ribs.

“So...” he says with a grin, “How was your night?”

“Good.” Xin states with a small smile. That wasn’t what James was expecting.

“Good? That’s it? Aw, come on Xin, you can tell us. How was she? I mean I already knew she was crazy. Was she pretty wild in bed too?”

Xin turns bright red. “I-- We didn’t--- I didn’t sleep with her!”

They both look at him with skepticism.

“Come on kid.” Yuri chides, “You were in there all night. You don’t have to lie.”

“We just talked.” insists Xin.

James thinks for a moment. “Oh... I see. She wasn’t in the mood hu? Well she did have a pretty rough night Xin, you can’t blame her.”

“What? No. That’s not...” Xins sighs in frustration and walks ahead of the two of them making James and Yuri chuckle. Sometimes it was too easy to tease that kid.

As they catch up to Xin again, they see him finishing up talking to a merchant, a huge stack of supplies beside him piled in a cart. He reads over another note, Yuri peers over his shoulder.

“Another address?” Yuri asks.

“Looks like.” Xin replies.

“So what?” James groans annoyedly, “We’re her pack mules now?”

Xin smiles, grabs the cart and, without a word, starts walking.

James watches him with disbelief. “Wha-- Oh come on. Are we really taking orders from some crazy woman now?”

Yuri guffaws. “Oh man James, looks like Xin’s got it bad.”

“Got what?” squeaks James. “Oh Gods, we didn’t get it too, did we?”

Yuri thumps him on the back. “No, dumbass. Xin’s in love.”

“Love?” James echo’s mockingly. “He’s known her for one night, and she tortured him the first time they met. I think love might be a bit of a strong word here, Yuri.”

Yuri smiles softly, “I don’t know. I’ve seen that look, and it wasn’t just on his face. I know that look all too well.” Yuri faces James and holds out his hand.

“Bet you ten gold they end up married someday.” he exclaims. James looks at his hand skeptically.

“Seriously? There’s no way a girl like Lorelei settles down.” he states.

Yuri wiggles his hand, prompting him to make the deal. James considers for a moment, then takes his hand and shakes it with a grin.

“Alright Yuri. I’ll take that bet.”

The waves lap lightly against a small sloop ship, seagulls calling out overhead. A soft sea breeze carries Lorelei’s beautiful song while she sits on the edge of her newly acquired boat, guitar in hand. She can’t help but smile as she sees the three boys walking towards her ship, loaded down with all sorts of goodies.

Mikhail leans beside her, sneering at the boys coming towards them. “Guess you got your pawns after all. Hopefully you take better care of these ones.” he says. Lorelei ignores him and jumps down from the boat.

"Well it's about time!" she teases. "I was starting to think you got lost."

"It wouldn't have taken so long if you didn't buy so much stuff!" James scolds, though he is clearly carrying the least amount of supplies.

Lorelei chuckles sheepishly. "Sorry about that. I've never actually had that much money at one time, and I really wanted to stock up. I didn't know how much you guys ate, so I figured it was better safe than sorry."

"Wait, wait, wait." James starts. "Why do you need to know how much we eat?"

She comes up to the group and holds out a small satchel. Yuri takes it and looks inside.

"Your cut." she explains. "Sorry there's not much left, but don't worry, there will be more where that came from."

James looks at her worried "More? Oh gods... you don't mean..."

Lorelei grins and wraps one arm around James' neck, the other around Yuri's arm. "That's right." she beams "I'm joining you guys. It was your idea after all James. Thanks for that."

"But... I didn't!" James snaps, then looks at Lorelei who is looking at him with big sad puppy eyes. "Argh. Alright, I guess you can join."

With a great big grin, Lorelei lays a small kiss on his cheek. His annoyed grimace turns into a goofy grin.

"That's much better than a pat on the back." he teases.

"Well I am in a good mood today." Lorelei laughs, then looks up to Yuri. "What about you big guy?" she asks.

"Oh please, like you need to ask." Yuri laughs. "Of course I want you to join." he says, inviting another peck on the cheek for a blushing Yuri.

A large crash alerts the three towards the ship, where Xin is already loading the boat.

"Well, I guess we know how Xin feels about the idea." Lorelei laughs. "Come on, I got our next target all planned out already."

As she starts walking to the ship, she swipes one of the bags James was carrying, pulls out a pastry, and takes a huge bite. She mumbles something about real baking being so delicious as she continues walking.

"You're sharing those right?" James pleads, chasing after her.

"Only if you're a good boy and follow the rules." she begins, "As I mentioned before, Rule Number One is 'no touching without permission'. And yes, this counts for hugs."

"Yeah yeah, fine, but you're still sharing right? We've been gathering supplies all morning. We deserve at least one!" begs James.

"Rule number two" she continues, ignoring James' pleas, "is there will be absolutely no peeking in on me when I am changing, showering, generally naked. If I catch you, you will be losing something important to you. I usually like to start with the eyes."

James gets frustrated. "So you *are* planning on stabbing me again!"

"Are you planning on peeking on me?"

"No!"

"Then I won't stab you. Now Rule number three..."

The two of them keep bickering as Lorelei explains that public areas of the ship must be kept clean at all times, while James complains about never having to clean before. Xin continues to load the ship with supplies, watching and listening with amusement. Yuri stands at a distance, watching them all with a look of pure happiness on his face.

"This... is gonna be one hel of a ride." he beams.