

How many years had it been?

How many years since he had been born, amongst muck, dirt and blood? How many years had it been since he had been thrown into this life, the life of a slave to Saint Raynald? How many times had he walked these same halls, in order to do the same task, over and over again? How many more times would he have to do it, and how many more times would he fail, and be punished once again?

All of these numbers were a confused mass in his head, and soon the young man dismissed them all. Now was not the time for these thoughts; he had to serve his Master, or else face the usual punishment. And he did not think his back could take much more.

The mansion's halls were as immaculate as they had ever been, for the punishment for a single stain was a hundred lashes. As Masakenshi walked, his steps, despite being so light, echoed across the spotless marble walls. There was no other sound around, as Saint Raynald was a man who loathed unnecessary noise, to the point of forbidding his slaves from talking while they were working and cutting down the trees near his mansion, so that the birds may not lodge there and wake him in the morning.

For a moment, the slave stopped, and looked up at the large, oaken doors in front of him. They were so massive that the entirety of Saint Raynald's enslaved workforce could have passed through, should they have been standing shoulder to shoulder. As usual, the erotic imagery engraved upon it greeted Masakenshi, who hardly cared, after twenty-one years of seeing the same engravures over and over again. Still, any excuse was good in order to avoid spending time in the presence of his Master. With a sigh, the young man steeled himself, and pushed the doors open. Even they dared not to creak.

Fifty meters away from him, Saint Raynald was sitting upon his high throne, as usual. The man was wearing his immaculate white suit, as usual, and his greasy, obese face was protected by his transparent helmet, as usual. The fat World Noble was surrounded by a variety of scantily-clad and giggling women, all vying for his attention - as usual. And, as usual, the man only paid attention to the slave when he had walked up to the throne, and kneeled before it.

"Ah, it's you," Saint Raynald deigned to say, raising his nose from some vixen's busom. "The *filet mignon* you made me was good, but it had too much cheese in it. You'll be reporting in the yard for your usual twenty lashes after your next task is done."

"Of course, Master," Masakenshi answered, his voice as robotic and emotionless as he had learned to make it. "My apologies, Master."

Saint Raynald waved his hand dismissively. "But enough about cheese. I've got something more important to give you today, little worm. You see, I'm expecting a delivery for something very special today. I would have given this to my most experienced slave, but she just so happened

to kick the bucket earlier today! It's just so hard to find good help these days, wouldn't you say, little worm?"

"Indeed, Master," Masakenshi intoned, ignoring the sinister laugh of the World Noble and the giggling of his entourage. "Your wisdom is as wide as the Seas themselves, Master."

"Of course it is," the obese man snapped. "In any case, I need you to fetch me the package, little worm. Now, I know you're slow, so I'll say it slowly : it's - very - fragile. You - need - to - be - careful. If - you - don't, I'll - hang - you - from - your - feet! Capiche, little worm?!"

"Of course, Master," the slave repeated.

Such treatment might have left a normal man furious, but Masakenshi felt nothing. Not anymore, anyway. He had endured it for twenty-one years, and he had felt fury and anger many times, but it had all been for nothing each time. Thus, he had learned to repress his emotions; to serve as the perfect 'little worm' that his Master expected. It was all he could do in order to avoid the dreaded whip.

"I live to serve, Master," the young man added, quietly.

"And don't you ever forget that, little worm," the World Noble hissed, before pointing a finger at the door. "Now, get to it, I haven't got all day!"

Masakenshi stood up, and walked back and out of the door. He tried to search his own head, trying to see if he could muster some sort of anger, but... no. It was no use. He felt nothing but the duty that he had to fulfill; he didn't even bother with taking a shortcut to go back to the kitchen and grab something to eat, for he knew that if he tarried, he would be thrown into Master's dungeons and left to rot. Thus, with a rumbling stomach and his back already aching from the pain he would suffer later, the slave headed out into the early morning's light.

Kurokku Town was barely awakening, at this hour. The bakeries were already open, and the smell of fresh bread tickled Masakenshi's nose, and only made his stomach rumble further. Here and there, a few people were already roaming the streets, but any who looked upon him immediately stood out of his way. This, too, was as usual; the symbol of Saint Raynald was stamped upon the rags he was wearing, and thus marked him as his servant. The World Noble had a very simple policy; any who harmed one of his slaves would reimburse the debt by serving him, in turn. Thus, he was generally left alone, and this suited him just fine.

The young man headed out towards the harbor, and looked towards the sea for a moment. The horizon was on fire; brilliant, warm colors greeted his eyes, as the sun had barely begun to rise and painted the whole world pink, orange, and red. Would that he could appreciate the sight more, but he only had his task in mind; soon, he moved forward, and went to find Saint Raynald's usual provider; a short, stout man named Erikson.

"Ah, it's you," Erikson echoed, a crate under his both of his arms. "Yer here for Saint Raynald's special delivery, aye? Gimme a minute, boyo; that's tha' last crate we got in thar, today."

Masakenshi nodded, not bothering to speak. Erikson and his crew unloaded their ship for a while, and the sun soon began its ascent into the morning sky; the ocean turned back to its normal blue color, as the slave merely waited for what easily felt like an hour. He would be whipped for his lateness, he knew; that would be fifty lashes in total for the day, he wagered. Should he not make any other mistake, then it would be yet another average day.

"Aye, boys, leave 'er there!", Erikson shouted at his crew, before turning towards the young man. "Oh, aye, I nearly forgot about ye. Yer a quiet one, ain't cha? Reckon ye could fade into tha' background an' sneak up an' away! Har!"

The man began to laugh, but the slave was not laughing. In fact, it had been one of the least funny jokes he had ever heard in his life, and that was saying something considering Saint Raynald's average "humor". Masakenshi stared straight at Erikson, his large, grey eyes unblinking and unfaltering. Soon, the short man stopped his laughter, and sweat began to drop down his forehead as he looked into the younger man's penetrating gaze.

"...Right, right, I'll get ye yer damn crate," Erikson mumbled, before taking off once more.

A minute later, the stout man came out with yet another crate. That one was small, and it was strangely unmarked. Masakenshi noted that, if this crate were so important and fragile, perhaps it should've been marked as such? But it was intact, so he guessed that somehow, they must've known.

"Here ye go, boyo," Erikson groaned, handing the (surprisingly light) crate to the slave. "Now, get yer butt outta here, aye? I dinnae - "

"PIRATES!", a citizen shouted.

Immediately, both Erikson and Masakenshi's heads snapped towards the sea. On the horizon, which had grown blue and cloudless, the silhouette of a massive warship was clearly visible. That was the biggest ship that the slave had ever seen; had he needed to take a guess, he would've said that it was easily over fifty feet tall, and over a hundred feet long. A ship so big would've normally belonged to the Marines, the slave knew, but it indeed belonged to pirates; the sails were pitch black, and a jolly roger was clearly displayed upon the front.

The fact that the ship turned and pointed its cannons towards the town certainly helped his guess, however.

"Ah, hell!" Erikson yelled, turning back towards his crew. "All right, lads, we're gettin' outta here, and NOW! Get movin'!"

In what had seemed like less than a minute, chaos had replaced the usual quiet of the town. Masakenshi's ears were filled with the screams of the bystanders as they tried to run away as fast as possible; next to him, Erikson was shouting orders and his crew was scurrying off back into their ship; and the whizzing of cannonballs above his head, soon followed by a large explosion, completed the picture.

But Masakenshi remained calm. He had to; his task wasn't done yet.

He turned towards the mansion once more; was that the pirates' objective? But to attack a World Noble like that was entirely foolish; in fact, he was already noticing that the Marine forces that were stationed in Kurokku were scurrying towards their boats. If need be, an Admiral could be here in less than a minute; then what would those pirates do? What were they thinking, exactly?

In any case, the young man ran back towards Saint Reynald's home. A thought occurred to him that he could've used this opportunity to run away; run far, far away, and never see Saint Reynald again. After all, what could the man possibly do to him? But then, if he noticed that he had ran away with his "special" item... then what would happen? Would the World Noble chase after him, would he send the Marine itself against Masakenshi? Would it even be worth it? Would -

A cannonball exploded right beside him.

The force of the explosion threw him to the ground, and he heard a loud, cracking sound. Only then did his consciousness fade.

To his surprise, however, he soon woke up. He had been thrown to the ground, and he quickly realised that his entire body was killing him; the impact likely broke a rib or two. Furthermore, he felt something squishy underneath his chin. Blinking awake, the young slave looked down, hoping that his jaw hadn't been reduced to a fine purée - that would be at least a hundred more lashes, he knew.

If only he had been so lucky. No, it wasn't his jaw. It was the crate.

With horror, Masakenshi looked at what remained of the crate. The container had been completely crushed, and fragments of wood were spread behind him; some had lodged themselves in his chest. Worst of all, however, was the crate's contents. Whatever had been in there may have been whole once, but it now looked like a green, mushy mess on the ground. And some of it had already touched his lips!

Masakenshi kept calm, but, for the first time in his life, he wasn't sure he could do that for very long.

What now? He had failed. It was the biggest failure of his life yet; with the crate and its contents destroyed, he had disobeyed his Master and caused irreparable damage. He wouldn't just be hanged from his feet for this; no, this time, it was death that awaited him if he made it back to the mansion with the remnants in hand. Death for him, yes, but Saint Reynald wasn't known for his fairness. Who else would suffer for what he had done?

At that moment, Masakenshi's stomach grumbled.

...If he went back, he would die. If he ran away, he would die. To top it all off, his body felt broken and his stomach was so empty that the green mush on the ground was starting to look appetizing.

Well, what was the worst that could happen?

Taking handfuls of what he knew would be his last meal, the slave shoved everything into his mouth. He immediately regretted this decision; whatever taste the substance had when it had been whole, it now tasted of vomit and wet dog hair; so powerful, so pungent was its taste and smell that Masakenshi hardly managed to spit some out, the rest of it going down his throat, burning a proverbial path to its stomach. That would prove to be the last straw; once more, he collapsed forward.

Fate is certainly a cruel mistress. A few minutes later, he awoke, and immediately noticed something was wrong. His vision was in black and white, and his eyes were on fire; he felt the strong need to scratch them out. In fact, his whole body felt... felt wrong; he felt heavier, but some of the pain was gone? And the tongue in his mouth felt like it was made of pure lead, for some reason. Not to mention the splitting headache that was suffering from!

With a groan, Masakenshi tried to stand up.

That was when he realised that he didn't have legs anymore.

Masakenshi looked down on himself...or he tried to, but he noticed that his eyes were actually moving on their own, and showing him a vision of true horror. His body had turned entirely green; where human legs once were, now laid the short legs of some sort of reptile; he could not stand up for he was already on all fours, and his entire body had been transformed into some...into some sort of horrific twist of an animal. In fact, he recognised that body, those scales; it looked really close to the chameleons that roamed Saint Raynald's estate.

Then, Masakenshi allowed himself to panic.

What the hell?! What had happened?! He tried to scream, but only some sort of guttural roar escaped his throat; he tried to run away, but he stumbled upon his own tail and started rolling down the hill. His mind was in shambles, and he could hardly hear himself think over his

pounding headache and the sound of the battle that had begun between Marines and pirates. What would he do? What COULD he do?! And, more importantly, what happened to him?!

Soon, his body had rolled down back to the city, which had been all but deserted by now. The citizens had left the streets completely empty, and Masakenshi was alone. This, he realised through his terror, was a blessing; at least no one would be able to see him like this. Only when he realised that he was truly and well alone, and that the cannonballs weren't aimed at him anymore, did he try to think.

What he was right now, he didn't know. Some sort of monstrous chameleon? It didn't really matter, either; he could still use his human brain, and at this point he may as well have been a mouse, for all the difference that it would have done. A part of himself really wanted to explore what he could do now, or even try to go back to normal. The other part of him knew that it was more important to get away as fast as he could, while the Marines and Pirates were pre-occupied.

But Saint Raynold...

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU FOOLS?!" the slave heard, the World Noble's thunderous and greasy voice echoing even through the sounds of battle. "FIND ME THE LITTLE WORM! I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE PIRATES - THE FRUIT'S MORE IMPORTANT!"

Crap.

Well, that certainly forced his hand. He hated to take snap decisions, preferring to take his time in order to ponder the best course of action, but he had no real choice this time. Masakenshi turned tail (literally, for once) and "ran" back towards the harbour. His animal body was difficult to get used to, he quickly realised; his tail was simply so large that he didn't really know what to make of it. But he would have time to figure it all out, should he make it out alive. And, at this juncture, he realised that it really was the best he could hope for.

The monstrous slave soon made it to the harbour, and he quickly looked around. No ship had been left standing in the port; every vessel had either left or been shot down by cannonballs. Well, every vessel had; but there was something left. A single raft, barely equipped to fit three men on it, had been left in the harbour, and had miraculously not sunk. Briefly thanking the forces above for this measly gift, Masakenshi immediately boarded it; carefully, as he still wasn't the master of his own body.

"W-what the hell is that thing?!" he heard, from behind him.

Crap. Again.

"Shoot it! Shoot it now! And bring its head to Saint Reynald!"

The clicking of guns that are readied to fire echoed through his ears.

The time to think was long past, now. Masakenshi showed his tail and his "hands" into the water, and began to paddle as fast as he could. As it turned out, the desperation to live and the adrenaline that coursed through his body made for a dangerous combination. The normally frail slave was pushing monstrously fast, his "arms" outputting a massive amount of power as the raft itself began to lean backwards into the water from the sheer force.

The gunshots made his ears ring. The sound of bullets falling into the water made him breathe a sigh of relief.

But the monster didn't stop. He couldn't stop. Should he look back - should he falter - should his limbs fail to work... then he would die. Nothing was more certain. And, damn it all, he hadn't endured Saint Reynald's treatment for twenty-one years just to die in the form of a damn chameleon!

And so, he paddled. Even when his arms refused to move properly anymore, he paddled. Even when his tail felt like it was about to fall into the water, he paddled. Only when his pounding migraine got the better of him did he finally slump onto the raft, and collapsed from sheer fatigue.

For the third time in a single day, he awoke - and, once again, he found himself surprised to be alive. The sun was shining high above him, and he raised his hand to his face in order to wipe the sweat off. Wait, hand? Yes, indeed - his hand had returned back to normal - and the rest of his body along with it! Masakenshi felt a surge of relief through his body; until, that is, his previous wounds and the additional fatigue from his little stunt came back to slam against his body.

He stood up as slowly as he could, and swiftly noticed that he was surrounded entirely by the ocean. Kurokku Town - and, indeed, the island it had been on - were a far-off point in the distance. A wave of emotion washed over him, and he didn't really know what to make of it. Did he feel relief that he managed to evade his fate? Fear, because he was in the middle of the ocean with barely any food? Or was it the joy of finally being free of Saint Reynald's influence? He didn't really know.

Still... finally, he was free. For the time being, at least, there was no one to lord over him, no one to insult him or belittle him. So strong was the shock of the realisation that the young man almost fainted once again, but he had other, more important things to think about before that.

About his "monstrous form"... and the "Fruit" that Saint Reynald had mentionned... what was that all about? Masakenshi closed his eyes, and focused. To no avail, he soon realised; he didn't

really have a clue on where to begin, and although some weird images of food and insects flashed through his mind, he was still well and human when he re-opened his eyes.

Well... perhaps there were things more important than thinking about that. For instance: what now? He was free, yes, but he could hardly sustain himself on the ocean alone for too long. Not to mention the monsters that were, indubitably, lurking within the Sea. What was there left to do for the slave, who hadn't navigated a single day in his life?

Then, the final stroke of luck of the day : a pirate ship, in the distance. It was headed towards... towards another point in the horizon, wasn't it? Well, either he had to make due with what he had and try to find his own way, or he would have to follow the ship and try his luck.

Once again, the young man was overwhelmed with his desire to live. And so, with what little strength he had left, he began to paddle once more...