

Home

I couldn't help but let out an irritated sigh as I rubbed my temple tenderly. We had been sitting in the dark lit hearing room of the local naval headquarters, slowly dying from having listening to the investigation report from the attack for about the tenth time that day. I had never been the one for the politics side of being in the armed forces, more of the tactical and hands on work. It has been six weeks since the ambush that had caused twenty-five of my men to lose their lives, wounded another twenty and put our fleet down another ship. After multiple visits to the hospital, the doctor said I had two broken ribs on my left side and was very lucky that they did not puncture my lungs. But the pain from the injuries was nothing compared to the annoyance of the hearings.

The navy had been attempting to blame me for the loss of the ship since I had been cleared to report for duty, stating that I had been negligent to the presence of the two ships that attacked us and only after finally driving the truth of the storm covering their approach into their thick skulls, did it seem to subside slightly. Now that the final report was being read to the admiral, I could finally focus on recovering once more.

".... And with our findings, sir, it has been deemed that due to the severe weather that had struck the seas one month ago, Captain Daniel Shepherd and his subordinates would have been unaware to the coming attack as visibility would have been no more than four hundred meters on either side of the frigate known as the *St. Catherine*." stated the lead investigator, a rather tall, well build greyhound wearing a silver lined, blue uniform.

Letting out a long sigh of relief, more towards the fact that the trial was over rather than the final decision, and began adjusting my gold trimmed, navy blue officer uniform so that it would not constrict my ribcage any more that the bandages already were around my torso. Turning my attention to my first officer beside me, I simply raised my eyebrows and let out a long breath before smirking playfully.

"Well that was fun." I said without even attempting to hide the amusement I found in the situation. I could tell the Doberman was thinking the exact same thing because he only returned my comment with a smile and a shake of his head.

"Now what, sir?" he had asked after everyone had departed, catching me off guard slightly. I honestly had been so focussed on driving simple facts into the head of the investigators that I really had not thought of what we were going to do afterwards. Since our ship had been destroyed, it would be at minimum nine months until a new ship would be built and commissioned, and another four or five until it was fit for military use. "Will you be returning to the tribe?"

It was common knowledge to only a select few that I was not born into the civilized world like the rest of the navy's officers. The only other way anyone would be able to tell was if saw me fully dressed down and could see the markings on my fur, though that was rare I ever did for that reason. Tribesmen were treated as poorly as those who had interest in bedding men instead of women. I was forced to falsify my records in order to even join the military, stating the markings on my fur were from a bad night at the pub and decisions afterwards. I was born into a small tribe from the forests of Tallion, but decided to move away from them when the leadership began to become corrupt and they did not treat those who left the tribe kindly when they returned. This is one of the reasons I distanced myself from them. Being seen by one, even my parents would not end well. Luckily, I was taken in and raised by a nice farming family who had found me starving on the side of a road one day. They had educated me in the ways of the civilized world, teaching me to read and write in their language, as well as the proper mannerisms that were used.

"Go home, Mason. I will send for our remaining crew once a new ship is commissioned. Until then, we are bound to the land." I replied in a sharp, commanding tone. Mason was one of the select few whom I trusted enough to know my heritage, though it was obvious at times he wouldn't ever fully accept it.

Though the thought of home was nice, though I knew I could not visit there in my condition. To return would only mean a fight. To take a long breath to calm myself, I simply looked down at my uniform once more and confirmed that I was presentable to the public before turning to leave the large, dark room for the last time, hopefully without another word to my first officer.

The next few weeks of travel were long and exhausting as I made my way back to my home in Fort Dubien. The large seaside port city stood far to the south of where my ship had washed ashore two months prior. As much as I could have expected it to be, travelling by horseback while my ribs were healing was in no doubt the worse feeling I had felt in a long period of time. Though, I had kept pushing through and reminding myself that I could rest once I got back home, and this seemed to drive me to ignore the pain, or maybe it was the alcohol I had been drinking on the journey from my flask.

In the distance, I could see the morning sun beginning to peek over the horizon, casting a beautiful orange and pink glow over the rolling fields before me. The view of the rolling plains surrounding my home port were definitely a welcome sight to any travellers and residents alike. It was one of the reasons I had moved here from my homelands, aside from joining the military. Soon after the sun had made its daily appearance, I could begin to make out the silhouette of the towering stone walls of the port. The sight of the city had always been a welcome sign for me. Inside, I never really had to worry about many dangers. Never had to worry about making sure that a large group of men were safe. I could finally focus on relaxing and being free of any real responsibilities.

As I approached the large metal gates of the city, I approached the guard house and greeted them with a simple nod. "Ah, Captain Shepherd!" spoke the leader of the guards, a rather burly wolf mix with a booming voice that I had come to know over the years, as well as the guards. Sometimes however, I swear he just had to shout at an enemy and they would fall sometimes,

even made me cringe at times. “I am glad to see that you are in good health! Word has travelled here of the ambush on the seas and we had feared the worst!” he said with a wide smile.

“Hello Eric.” I replied as I forced a weary smile onto my face. As he brought up the destruction of my vessel however, I frowned slightly. “You really thought that would kill me?” I said, attempting to have a serious tone, though I couldn’t hide the chuckle for long when he only smirked in return.

Bidding the guard farewell, I continued through the empty morning streets of the port towards the upper part of the city. As I brought my horse around the last bend in the road, I could see the vine covered, white walls of my estate. Disembarking from my horse, I silently led her into the stables before making my way towards the large wooden doors. Taking in a deep breath of the familiar scent of the pine trees surrounding the land I owned, a smile came upon my face.

The quiet, empty hallways of my estate echoed with the clicking of my claws, every step on the hardwood floors resonating off the mahogany trimmed walls and marble pillars. I had not realized how much I had missed the feeling of being in a safe place. Since the war began, I had always been fighting and leading my crew to battle after battle. Now after almost losing my life so close to home, I couldn’t help but be happier to be back in my home city, away from the horrors of the ongoing war with the felines from across the sea.

Slowly, I began to move towards my bedroom at the end of the long hallway, my head hanging low as I walked along the sunlit corridor. I was tired from both the travel from the north, and while forcing my body to not collapse in pain from my injury wasn’t helping my energy levels, it was helping keep me awake as well. Reaching for the silver door handle in front of me, I moved through the mahogany doorway into the well lit room and chuckled uncontrollably, delighted to see a true bed. Moving into my large closet, I began to slowly remove each article of clothing, ensuring that I did not move too fast or twist in the wrong direction to trigger any more pain from my ribs than I already had.

Once I was down to only my undergarments, I removed the bandages around my torso and glanced over my appearance in the full body mirror placed at the back of the closet... and was surprised by how much I had changed. I almost did not recognize myself. While the white fur and grey markings were as they usually appeared, the time at sea had toned my body stunningly well. I had to admit, I had never been in the greatest shape, but you would have never been able to tell looking at me now. The fur along my face and neck, as well as my white tail, were a slight tinge of brown and matted from the long travels on the dirt roads between cities. The swelling on the left side of my torso was easy to pick out however now that nothing was compressing it to my body and I cringed slightly. *Another seven weeks of this?* I thought to myself as I shook my head and sighed, my weariness beginning bring me back to reality.

Making my way over to the calling silk sheets of my large bed, I carefully crawled into the comfortable pillow of heaven and pulled the sheets up to my neck. As the last few minutes of my conscious mind began to slip into the dark depths of a deep sleep, I felt for the first time in a long time, that I would be able to see the next morning, and not have to fight for the next.