

The Smiling Merchant

My hands aren't the same anymore.

I only really notice it as I hand over the promissory note to the city treasurer. They've gained a layer of callous over the years, something that my mother would have been aghast to learn, no doubt. I was supposed to be a priest, after all, devoted to books and copying religious texts. I wasn't supposed to be a merchant earning his keep the hard way.

But at the same time, as the treasurer's hand grasps mine, I can feel how lucky I had it. His palm is as hard and textured like stone. Whereas I had been on the roads for a handful of years, this is a man who had been laboring for most of his life.

"You have a nice smile," he says. "Rare to see nowadays."

"I try!" I chirp happily, allowing my upper row of teeth to add to my expression.

"I'll just be a moment, young man. Need to find the proper deed."

"Don't rush on my account," I answer.

I finally let the smile drop once I was alone, wiggling my jaw to relieve my sore cheekbones. Smiling is *not* easy work; I don't care what Madam Rola says.

After a handful of minutes, I start tapping my foot impatiently, though I quickly correct that behavior, and force myself to be still. Lourdis is by no means a small city. There are no doubt hundreds, if not thousands, of deeds for land within the city and especially unclaimed lots in the area outside the city proper. Not to mention all the unclaimed land that had been stripped of the nobility and never even parceled to begin with.

It could take a good, long time for the treasurer to find the right one. For all I know, the poor fellow might have to draw up a new deed from scratch if he can't locate the original.

I'm trying *very* hard to ignore the fact that I had informed the city that I intended to purchase this plot last year, and even put down the first half of the bargained price at the time, and that I had informed this very treasurer last week that I was coming today with the remainder. Any paperwork should have long been ready.

I hear the treasurer call out from the back before he returns to the lobby. "Here it is! Found it! So sorry!"

He emerges, stopping at the long table between us. "I had it on my processing desk, and then forgot I put it there," he explains, his face red with embarrassment. "I'm so very sorry I made you wait. Anyway... here it is. Congratulations, young man. Land ownership is a huge step a lot of people don't *ever* make. Much less at your age."

I once again offer my now instinctive smile as I take the deed, roll it up, and stick it into my satchel. "Thank you again, sir."

It's a better response than anything I could have said about that plot of land. How it had been in my family's ownership for five generations. How it would have likely been mine to use as an occasional retreat while with the clergy. How it would have technically illegal for me to possess this deed by the laws of the Republic for those reasons. How I was betting on the Republic not trying harder to nullify the Versailles Province's independence than it did two years ago.

I bow respectfully before turning about to leave the Treasurer's Office, winding through the halls of the city hall back to the outdoors. It had been an unsurprisingly gray early spring afternoon in Lourdis, the dense clouds that were remnants of the latest typhoon to hit Aramathea blanketing the region and blocking the sun.

The last hour spent inside had not changed that forecast. The city is a uniform gray from the stones beneath my feet to the sky above my head. It's dampening what should be a joyous occasion for me.

Because the Treasurer was right. People with the means to purchase land was getting increasingly rare. The economy in Avalon has plummeted, and it's taken provinces vying for independence with it. Until Versailles could properly arrange the logistics that they had left to the Republic to handle, it was going to be very rough going for a great many people, even in as large of a city as Lourdis. Especially with people arriving every day with nothing more than the clothes on their back.

It is astonishing to see how lingering the effects of the latest Daynish Campaign have been, even after all this time. Refugees are still filtering in, as those who resisted leaving their lands were discovering there isn't enough in terms of resources or people to sustain themselves even after the Daynes were thwarted.

Thwarted being the nicest way of putting it, honestly. I don't even *want* to think about the dire situation those few Daynes that survived losing over nine-tenths of their population are in, trying to hang on in the inhospitable lands of the chilled north.

"*Get out of our city!*"

The shout, filled with a venom that caused me to wince, came from just behind me and to my right. The shouter is a man I recognized from around town, a dishonored former member of the Lourdis militia. He was a thick man with a skull to match, and the years clearly haven't improved his disposition.

Lucien loved to wear his old militia uniform, which the militia inexplicably let him keep despite his discharge for showing up for duty a little too drunk a few too many times. He was wearing it now, in fact, though the blue was faded and the few bronze pins he had earned were tarnished from time and lack of care. He was holding a black leather buggy whip above his head, bringing it down onto the target of his ire with a sickening crack.

Said target is a dangerously thin red-haired woman in tattered clothes, huddled protectively around her child, a little girl I'm guessing, though it's a little hard to tell due to her mother's embrace. It's a pretty telltale sign of people from the north, and something that stirs my protectiveness for fairly obvious reasons.

I have no idea what Lucien is going through since being discharged. I also know that taking on more people in a city that doesn't even have the support structure for the *current* population is straining on everyone. I can't imagine it's been a pleasant road. But there is no shortage of those suffering, and we aren't making it any better by turning on others who are also languishing.

I force back the thought that I have to cross the road to act, while no fewer than twenty people do nothing more than look back briefly before continuing on their way. Because of that lack of concern, Lucien is able to get two more lashes in before I catch his hand on the back swing.

It occurs to me right at this moment how much being Law's pack mule has changed me, because my teenage self wouldn't have offered much resistance even an old militia man couldn't have shrugged off. Instead, he nearly yanks his shoulder out of his socket while I hold his wrist in place.

I maintain my hold as he tries to turn to face me. "That's enough," I order simply.

He responds by kicking me in the groin, and *that* is not surprisingly enough to get me to let him go. I curl up into a defensive ball, my initial worry that he'll take advantage and go on the attack. Instead, the only thing I hear is the heavy footsteps of Lucien fleeing the scene, then a pair of dainty hands helping me up to a sitting position.

"Thank you, sir. I... was afraid of what that man would do."

It takes me a second to bite back the pain to process that the woman I had tried to rescue was talking to me. "Oh. Just... glad I could help," I grumble, wincing with each breath. Coders, that bastard kicks like a mule.

"I'm Molly, and this is my daughter Emily. Pleased to meet you."

"Laron, and the pleasure is mine."

A voice I recognize drifts down from above me. "What is going on here?"

For as much as I smiled, my brother was known for his scowl. The Marshall of the Versailles Militia, Donovan, no doubt watching me like he was known to do when we were children. It's the only reason I could think of why he could have responded so quickly.

He helps me to my feet, and I explain, "Lucien, remember him? He was beating this lady and her daughter..." I happen to realize I'm still holding the buggy whip in question, and I offer it to my brother. "With this."

Donovan takes the item with distaste, holding it between the thumb and index finger of his left hand. "Yeah, that's from Epoch Stables alright. Lucien worked there, if I remember correctly. Good to know why he kicked you. Maybe now that he's assaulted a verified citizen of the province we can get a charge to stick on him. I'll have a couple Constables round him up tonight. He won't go far. He's too stupid to run. You need a medic?"

I shake my head. "I suspect the biggest wound is to my pride."

Donovan's interest is already back to whatever task had been on his mind before my drama interrupted him. "Very well. Try not to get hurt any more today. I have a scout briefing in an hour, and won't be able to watch you." My brother leaves me to my devices, weaving through the crowd on the street that still hasn't even given much more to my exchange than passing glances.

At least the woman and daughter were grateful. "I appreciate you coming to my aid, sir," the elder girl says shyly. "Emily and I have been rather lost in this very big city. We were trying to find the chapel for shelter, but the only one we were able to find claims they aren't accepting any new arrivals."

I sigh and say amiably, "You're looking for the Blessed Heart of the Saints, which can be hard to find on account of the *eight* other chapels in the city, three of which *also* start with 'Blessed Heart.' I know *precisely* where that one is. Follow me."

It doesn't take more than one intersection before I hear stomachs rumbling. I offer as warm of a smile as I can muster and say, "How about we get you two some breakfast first?"

The woman is flustered by the kindness. "Are... are you sure, sir?"

"Absolutely. Come along. There's a nice shop on the way, in fact."

"That... is very gracious of you, sir. Thank you!"

How could I be anything *but* gracious? How pretentious would *that* be? If the road has given me anything more than callouses, it has also given me perspective. I could have bemoaned my family's fall from grace. I could have turned bitter and angry at the world for the crimes committed against my family. I could have vowed revenge.

But how would that have looked to the family retreating from the Daynish hordes? A life struggling just to make ends meet and even having *that* taken away? To listen to the troubles of some rich family boy who was "forced" to "struggle" as a merchant with decent pay and at least the basic essentials of life taken care of?

Even through my losses I have been blessed above most, and I'm not too proud to admit that or embrace that luck and fortune for what it is. It might be tiring, but damn it, *everyone* is tired nowadays.

The restaurant in question is not exactly meager fare, though I don't let my charges know it, subtly informing the waiter that money is no object and slide him four gold pieces with a voiceless promise that I'll pay more if it's needed. It's

not a cheap breakfast by any means, but it won't be driving me into poverty either.

The two girls dive eagerly into their plates once the food is presented, and I ask, "So... when did you both arrive in Lourdis?"

The mother stops inhaling her food long enough to answer, "Two days ago."

Coders.

I decide the question of when they last ate was unnecessary, and instead skip a bit. "You're awfully late arrivals for refugees of the Daynish Campaign."

"Oh. We didn't retreat from *that*," she answers. "Sure, the flood hit our town pretty hard, but..."

I blink rapidly, not recalling any news of exceptional flooding. "Wait... what flood?"

"The one that hit Newberry about... oh... a couple weeks before the Daynes invaded the northern provinces. The Snake River swelled its banks pretty bad. Caused a lot of damage. Two neighbor boys were swept away because they got too close to the river. We're used to some rising waters in the spring, but to come in late fall? We weren't prepared for it."

I go white in the cheeks. Oh Coders...

"But that wasn't what uprooted us. The Daynes didn't hit *that* far south. No, it was the rebellion that did it."

I clearly haven't been keeping close enough attention to current events. "Rebellion? In Newberry?"

She swallows again before answering. "Well, the Glauster Province as a whole. After the southern provinces declared their independence, the Republic went after the rest of us with heavy taxes to try and recoup their losses. The entire eastern provinces rebelled, Glauster among them."

"You would be a lot closer to the seat of Republic power," I observe. "It would have made you a much easier target to retaliate against."

"Nor did we have the money to really build a strong army. The Republic marched through and pretty much took everything that wasn't nailed down, killing anyone who tried to stop them." She bit back a tired sob. "Newberry's probably a smoking ruin at this point, along with my husband and two boys."

"Why come here, and not Tortuga?" I ask. That would have been a *lot* closer of a sanctuary.

"We tried," the little girl answers. "They said they were full up of wastrels."

"Emily, mind your manners. Swallow first," Megan chided. "But my baby is right. Tortuga turned us and everyone else away. Forced us across the river, where all the other Free Cities said the same unless we could hold a claim. Look at me. Do *I* look like I could hold a farmstead?"

"And the path finally led you here," I said forlornly. I wish I could say that wasn't how most of the refugee stories end. "Where there's quite literally nowhere else to go."

Molly nods solemnly. "Pretty much, yes."

I get another visitor, whose voice makes me cringe. "Well, you wound up in the most sympathetic hands in the whole province, I wager."

I turn about in my chair just in time to get a coppery tail swatting my face. "Madam Rola..."

"Law and I were getting worried about you when you didn't show up. He thought you had gotten in trouble. I figured you were playing tour guide. I win!"

"Well, this time you were *both* correct," I say, then quickly explain what happened.

Rola cuts me off the minute the story gets to Tortuga. "Woulda thought nearly losing everything would have tempered Morgana's attitude. Guess not. And that brings you and your little girl here. Well, my soon-to-be former apprentice has the right of it. The Blessed Heart of the Saints is the place for you to go. Once you poor things are done eating, we'll give you both a ride there."

I raise an eyebrow, and Rola replies, "I brought the cart. Law's still at the plot. Wanted to give it a personal survey."

I groan. "You snuck off with the cart and left him stranded in the middle of a field."

Rola acts indignant, "No!"

Then follows it with a tentative, "Maybe."

Then her ears flatten and she timidly admits, "Yes."

Molly pats Emily on the shoulder, and says, "Let's eat up quick, baby. We don't want their poor friend to feel abandoned like us."

Rola snatches a chair from an accompanying table, and deftly slides her backside into it with one fluid series of motions. "Oh, whatever should you do *that* for? This is *hardly* the first time I've left him with business to attend to. Ol' Law will keep just fine. You get some food in your bellies. As much as you can stuff yourselves with."

Rola snaps her fingers, and chirps, "Oh, Marcellus, dear friend. Inform Balthier that Missus Rola is here, and that I'll be covering the bill for this table."

The waiter nods, and as he's about to turn about, she adds, "Oh! And do see if he has any of his scrumptious apple pie ready."

Marcellus nods again, only to be interrupted one more time. "And some glazed ham. That would hit the spot."

"Your master is a strong woman," Molly notes.

I smile, this time tiredly. “She may look like a wolf, but she has the the manner of a stampeding buffalo. You... get used to it in time. Pray you never have to.”

It earns me a slap to the back of my head. “You're not my former apprentice just yet, boy. Don't think I still won't cuff you for disrespect.”

Molly gently taps Emily on the cheek, and says, “Don't stare, baby. It's not polite.”

“But she has a pretty tail,” the little girl protests.

Oh dear. As I feared, *that* is the trigger.

Her mother quickly tries to apologize. “I am so sorry, madam. Emily hasn't seen a chimera before, I don't think.”

Of course, Rola is not the slightest bit offended, and instead helpfully stands; brandishing said tail with broad flourishes. “Isn't it though? I do take such care with it.” She jerks a thumb in my direction, and adds, “Nothing like this boy's girl. Shameful what she does to her tail, I say.”

“Madam Rola...” I say in an attempt to hide my discomfort by changing the topic. “Don't leave Mister Law out in the middle of nowhere. You *know* that's not right.”

The wolf chimera exhales animatedly, like *she's* the aggrieved party. “Oh, very well. I suppose I can have my food bundled up. Laron, dear, escort our guests to the cart, I'll join you shortly.”

She catches up to us before I even settled little Emily down in the front seat, empty handed and grumpy. “Too early in the day for ham *or* pie, he says. Hmph!”

“My mommy says I shouldn't have sweets until desert,” Emily declares as Rola takes her seat and I make sure I'm as secured as I can be in the back.

I am expecting some sort of pithy dismissal of the wisdom. Instead, Rola surprises me. “Perhaps your mother has the right of it.”

Molly then turns to get my attention and asks, “Miss Rola said you know other chimeras?”

“I had a couple chimeric half siblings,” I answer, “But Madam Rola is referring to my fiancee. She's a red fox chimera, though.”

“Oh!” Molly remarks. “And she is not with you?”

I shake my head, surprised at how quickly I remember the cover considering how little I have to invoke it. “She's a merchant marine, so she spends much of the year at sea. That *should* change in the future, once we're ready to settle down. Hopefully soon.”

“I think it's wonderful,” Molly tells me. “Chimeras were treated so horribly by the Republic. That they can finally be free to be themselves has to be refreshing, and that you have such a big heart for one.”

“My soon-to-be former apprentice just bought himself a nice plot of land for them both,” Rola declares proudly, and I cringe. I had been trying *not* to mention that said plot was *mine*. “That's where we'll be going after we drop you off, in fact.”

I expect to be judged by our guests. Instead, Molly happily says, “Oh, that's wonderful! What are you planning on doing with it?”

It would be rude not to answer, “Initially a trading post. I expect Lourdis is going to expand considerably in the coming years, and having a post right on the waterfront will give me quite the advantage. Well, and a house for me and my wife-to-be, of course.”

“A home is a treasure,” Rola says with her usual aire of wisdom. “Especially in these days.”

It's sometimes easy to forget that Madam Rola has suffered so much herself. In all my pursuit of a home, I never really thought about what that meant for the wolf spirit who graciously taught me (nearly) everything she knows. She has nothing resembling a home. She's the last of her kind, the rest butchered by the Daynes. Whatever home she might have had far to the north is no doubt a desecrated ruin. All she has is her cart, the road, and Law.

She'd no doubt dismiss my concern with a wave of her hand, and a pithy remark along the line of, “What I have is enough. Don't you worry about ol' Rola, now.” But I know she sometimes cries when she thinks no one else can hear her. She doesn't perfectly hide her tears all the time.

Rola jerks me from my thoughts with a bark of, “Hey! Boy! What you getting quiet about? You were asked a question!”

“Oh!” I yelp, giving as disarming of a smile as I can, and rubbing the back of my head in embarrassment. “So sorry! I do get lost in thought sometimes. What was the question?”

“There wasn't one,” Rola teases with a triumphant huff. “Just seeing if you were paying attention. You failed. A merchant must...”

“... Always be aware at all times, be it on the road or in dealing,” I finish with a groan.

Rola peeks over her shoulder with a glower. “Well, at least you listen to my many words of infinite wisdom.”

I chuckle nervously, “I try.”

“Oh, I can see what your bride sees in you,” Molly says with a grin. “You've got a smile that'd melt any heart.”

“Not mine!” Rola objects, “I'm immune!” Then with a lower voice, she grumbles, “Mostly...”

I reward the two ladies with what they were looking for. At the end of the day, of course I smile.

What other choice do I have?