

Kaide & Claire



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Chapter 5

The Dragon Lady



Ornitheas Island had been sighted in the distance and the crew was getting ready to hit land. It was late in the evening and Claire was in her cabin, preparing herself for the next day. "Fluffy chickens, Herron. You should see them," Claire let out excitedly as she was brushing out her hair seated at the dressing table. Her guard couldn't help but smile at the cute outburst when he asked her what she looked forward to most. It was good to see the noble getting excited over something small, like chickens. Two days prior, Claire had been in a fight with the tiefling prisoner after the horrific events at Gaitso Island. The day after that she had been awfully quiet and withdrawn all the way until sundown, but this morning, it was like she had forgotten about the ordeal all together. "I clearly missed out on something," Herron said as he watched Claire braid her hair. "They were enormous, and they even had feathers on their feet. My father used to chase the chickens to catch one for me," she said with warmth in her voice. "Your father chased them? He doesn't seem to be the type to chase chickens around," the guard said with a bit of a disbelieving smile. Herron knew Mr. Valeria, Claire's father, as a very stoic and distant man. A professional that was always on business trips, only to return for short periods at a time with little attention for his daughter. Usually around these times, Herron would have the time off to spend with his family. "He used to," Claire replied, "And then what? You had chicken for dinner?" the guard let out lightheartedly. "What- No! I just wanted to cuddle them." Claire chuckled as she played around with her braid, deciding how she was going to style her hair for her visit.

Being around Claire at moments like this meant the world to Herron. He had been assigned as her guard roughly six years ago, and had been by her side practically every day since. Their relationship was strictly professional, which was perfectly fine with Herron as long as he got to enjoy the girl's company. He felt like Claire was way out of his league anyway. The dream about being more involved with Claire was one that he never expected to come true. She was gracious, smart, funny and incredibly beautiful. He enjoyed her presence and always quietly admired her from a distance. However, ever since being confronted with his feelings by the demonic entity two days prior, his mind had been distracted by thoughts of Claire. Seeing the elf in such a frightened state and hearing her scream had left him distraught. Not to mention there was some remarkable tension between Claire and Dereck, and the two sharing awkward glances didn't go unnoticed. Usually Claire was never involved with any men aside from business encounters, which kept Herron in a favourable position. There was just something about Dereck that the guard couldn't lay his finger on.

"My father used to do such silly things all the time. He was always there for me," Claire continued, interrupting Herron's train of thoughts. "I wish he was actually here. At least you're still around." Her smile softened as she looked at Herron in her mirror. "Promise to not ever leave my side..." Claire let out in a pitiful laugh. Her words unintentionally came out quite romantic and caught Herron off guard. He felt warm inside at the elf's words and his cheeks turned a bit rosy. "Don't worry, I'll follow wherever you go," he affirmed. Claire gave a relieved hum at the man's response, continuing to braid her hair. "How about we go chasing some of those fluffy chickens tomorrow then?" the guard offered carefully. "I would like that," Claire responded with a smile on her lips. She tied the braids in place and turned to the man to show her formal updo, wordlessly asking for the man's opinion. "You look gorgeous, as always," Herron let out quietly. "Aw, you're too kind." Claire giggled as she turned back to the mirror, his compliment settling her hairstyle choice for tomorrow.

"Alright. Then all that's left to do is catch some good sleep before meeting with the Valeria associates tomorrow," Claire said as she stood up. Herron picked up on her subtle hint to excuse himself, and absent mindedly nodded. "Alright. I will be off to bed as well. We'll have a long day tomorrow. Enough chickens to chase." He chuckled as he went on his way to his own cabin next door. "Goodnight, Claire," he said. "Goodnight Herron," she hummed in return.

The light in Claire's cabin died down just as Dereck made his way on the top deck, greeted by a bright starry sky. Dereck had intended to check up on Claire as she had barely spoken to him in the past few days, but it looked as though he had missed his chance this evening. Their communication in general hadn't been too great lately, but they simply never had a moment in private. His mindless gaze drifted over the sea to watch Ornitheas Island drawing nearer. With the captain and part of the crew awaiting to dock, he watched the calm waves reflecting the moon. This night was beautiful; and it left Dereck feeling guilty over Kaide's current conditions. The tiefling hadn't seen any sunlight in five days nor had she been able to sleep in a proper bed. On top of that, Dereck had been the only pleasant social interaction Kaide had since her imprisonment.

When the next morning came everyone was up early, with the exception of Kaide. The lower deck of the ship remained dark so there was not a single ray of light to wake the tiefling up. Not that it mattered, it's not like Kaide had anything better to do. The Valeria ship had already pulled up in the harbour the previous night and at daybreak everyone was busy preparing to disembark. Ornitheas was a beautiful island, well known and bustling with tourists. Claire and her company were scheduled to reside at the island for two days. It was the required time for the young Valeria representative to conduct the company business, which meant most of the crew would definitely grab the opportunity to have a drink at one of the local taverns. The promise of drinks and a night of relaxation meant the overall morale was high.

The arrival of the ship was quite the topic among the locals of Ornitheas. A direct family member of the well-known Valeria family was on board, or so the rumours claimed. Everyone knew of the Valeria family, but visits from the direct family members were rare. This alone drew quite an audience to the harbour. When Claire left the ship with her party, it wasn't like everyone was just standing and staring. No, it was much more subtle than that. The crowd pretended to go about their own business standing at stalls, meeting with mutuals and trading their wares. Most of the crowd were actually there for the same thing, catching a glimpse of the daughter of Valeria. The noble elf however, remained unaware that the streets were so crowded because of her arrival.

Herron, waiting on the top deck with Dereck and the ship's crew, turned at the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs. The noble elf stepped out into the morning light and paused, putting a hand up to block the sunlight until her eyes adjusted. The tall guard was slightly awestruck with how beautiful and empowering she looked. The elf always knew how to dress to impress. Once her eyes had grown accustomed to the bright morning sun and Herron recovered from staring, Claire stepped in front of the crew and informed them they had the afternoon to themselves, drawing a cheer before they left to explore the island. Claire smiled as the sailors dispersed, leaving behind only those involved in the day's business.

Claire had some minor visits and errands to run, before their meeting with a Valeria business partner that afternoon. As these first affairs concerned mostly Claire's private matters, Dereck found himself with the morning free. With Herron by her side, Claire was ready to start her day. "Don't be late." Her words called back to him as she and Herron descended to the docks. Dereck watched as they vanished into the crowds. Mr. Crook passed him by as he also disembarked, a similar warning not to disappoint Claire. "Don't get distracted." Those were his exact words as he left. Dereck softly smirked to himself as his wandering mind was soon followed by his feet, dashing down the stairs that led to the lowest deck.

Kaide jumped awake when she heard the thunder of footsteps heading her way. In a moment of panic, she was under the assumption that they were coming for her head. She took a sharp breath and sat up before she realised it was just Dereck who had come rushing down the wooden stairs excitedly. "Hey sunshine-" Dereck chirped as he approached her cell a little more calmly now. "You up?" he asked. "Good lord- Dereck," Kaide hissed, "Well, I am now..." The tiefling leaned back against the wall. "Something wrong?" she asked. "What? No. I just came to see if you were awake. Most of the crew already left the ship," he explained. "Claire has a busy schedule and I will be free until noon, so..." "So?" Kaide repeated after Dereck, clearly not getting the message. She eyed the man up and down. "So... Let's go into town?" Dereck asked mischievously. The cute smile on the man's lips made Kaide relax a bit. Dereck awkwardly cleared his throat in the silence that followed, ready to blurt out that he didn't mean anything by it. The offer wasn't meant to sound like him asking her out or anything, despite the fluttering in his stomach.

Kaide just stared, searching for the man's intentions. Was he serious? The longer it remained silent, the clearer it became that it was a genuine offer. She took a deep breath as if she was considering it. "Sure. I could use a change of scenery. But it's not my fault if they'll have your head for this," she warned with a smile. The chances of them getting away with this weren't too great, but Kaide was already neck deep in trouble anyway. Unlike Dereck, she had little to lose with this stunt. "Do you have a key? Or is this a so-called 'emergency'?" Kaide asked, already reaching for her lockpicks. "I got you covered," the man let out as he held up the key. He seemed relieved that Kaide accepted his offer. "No need for pickpocketing. It's my treat today, alright?" Dereck unlocked the door and gestured for Kaide to get up. Kaide couldn't help but smile to herself. "I occasionally pickpocket out of necessity, Dereck. I'm not a kleptomaniac," she said as she got up on her feet.

The entire scenario felt completely unreal to Kaide as she stepped out of the cell. She had spent days in the darkness, the ship being at sea and the confiscation of her gear stifling her ability to make any sort of escape plan. Now, as the door swung wide and the promise of land under her feet approached, her mind raced with different options and possibilities for escape. Without her gear the chances of survival were low, not to mention some of it held great emotional value to her. If she truly wanted to escape now, she would have to leave all of that behind for good.

The two made their way upstairs to the top deck, where Kaide caught sight of Ornitheas island for the first time. The morning light was painfully bright compared to the darkness she had been trapped in the past few days. The fresh air instantly relieved her from the unbeknownst stuffiness she had endured. The town was easily the prettiest place she had seen in a long time. The green hills, the cosy market, the lively harbour and houses, and other buildings charmingly huddled together made the tiefling realise just how badly she was aching for freedom.

"Welcome to Ornitheas Island," Dereck said as he rested a long cloak over Kaide's shoulders, guiding her towards the gangway. "Let's keep a low profile and enjoy ourselves, alright?" The scent of warm bread greeted them as the two walked into the market. Kaide noticed a few curious glances in her direction as she pulled up the cloak's hood to cover her horns. "Are you hungry yet?" Dereck asked as he looked around at what the merchants had to offer. "I'm not a breakfast person myself, but I can imagine everything here smells a lot better than anything we have on board," he stated. Kaide smiled as she carefully looked around as well. "Well, I definitely wouldn't mind a bite to eat," she replied. A small group of children came running past as one of them almost bumped into Kaide while they were chasing after one another. Kaide abruptly stopped in her tracks and had a moment of awkward eye contact with the kid before they scurried off again. It made her realise how delightful it must be to be able to carelessly play in a town like this. Dereck noticed the gentle smile on her lips as her eyes travelled from the kids back to the market stalls.

After a few minutes of casual strolling and browsing, Kaide came to a slow halt. "What about those?" Kaide pointed as to suggest a stall that was selling some type of sweet buns. As she carefully approached, the salesman seemed happy to have caught Kaide's interest. "I'd like to try one," she said curiously. "Sure, go ahead. They smell good," Dereck said with a smile, already reaching to get out his pouch. Kaide was happily surprised that Dereck allowed her to pick whatever she liked at his expense. She couldn't even remember the last time she had been able to carelessly enjoy a market like this. Just when Kaide was about to take her first bite, she felt a gentle tug on her tail.

Somewhat startled, the rogue pulled her tail aside and looked over her shoulder. She found a young child standing behind her with the end of her cloak in his hand, his eyes sparkling with curiosity. Kaide's expression softened as she realised what had startled her was only a young boy. "Are you a dragon lady?" the kid asked rather straightforwardly. "A dragon lady?" Kaide repeated with a slight raise of her eyebrows. It was a nickname she had never gotten before, nor had any of the names and insults that had been thrown at her ever sounded so nice. "Not exactly... But I like the sound of it," she remarked with a chuckle. It was true there weren't as many tieflings as humans or elves, but it wasn't like tieflings were rare either. Even though tieflings weren't welcomed everywhere it was a little odd that this kid had apparently never seen one before. The boy's eyes seemed to be glued to Kaide's tail with wonder as it gently swayed from underneath her cloak. "Don't worry I won't spill your secret, dragon lady," the kid whispered. "Is your tail real?" an even younger girl asked as she finally built up the courage to come over as well. Kaide lowered herself on one knee. "Yeah, it is." She chuckled at their fascination. "Can I pet it?" the girl asked. "Only if you're gentle," Kaide said, before she swayed her tail to the front of her. Dereck stood to the side and watched how the young girl reached out to feel the smooth, scaly texture of Kaide's tail when suddenly a woman stepped in.

The woman came walking towards them with quite the haste and hurriedly yanked the young girl back by her arm. "Eira! Don't touch that," she hissed in a somewhat disgusted tone to her daughter. "Sorry," the woman said rather curtly. Kaide almost stumbled back and got back on her feet. She was taken aback by the sudden confrontation. The woman dragged the young girl backwards and gestured for the boy to move away from Kaide as well, before sternly telling him to head back home to his mother. "They will not bother you any further," the woman assured eventually, but it somehow sounded like she didn't say so in Kaide's best interest. She hadn't said anything wrong... Had she? Kaide wondered as she watched the mother take her leave, dragging her daughter behind her. Kaide didn't mind having kids come over to her. At least children usually didn't judge her appearance.

It was a painful reality for Kaide to be treated as an outcast, and she watched as the curious glimpse of the little boy's eyes disappeared out of sight too. "Are you alright?" Dereck asked. "Kids can be wild sometimes," he chuckled lightheartedly. Kaide was in a trance as the voices of the past echoed in the back of her mind. She had been bullied and shunned because of her heritage and appearance for as long as she could remember. It wasn't the kids' reaction that bothered her just now, it was the mother's. It was a painful reminder that even in a peaceful town like this, she was considered someone to be avoided. "Yeah... I'm okay," Kaide muttered as she looked back at her sweet bun just before she started to dig in. Judging from her reaction, Dereck had a hunch about what went through her mind. He didn't want to sour the mood by asking her about it, and instead glanced at the tiefling's small golden ear cuffs. "How about we finish our buns and I will take you to this little store that I have in mind? They have exceptional designs in jewellery."

"Jewellery?" Kaide asked in a muffled mumble after taking a mouthful from her bun. "I don't know..." The rogue never really got to look into a jewellery store for a bunch of reasons. The first, not exactly being in the wealthy position to afford a lot of luxury products. The second, that shopkeepers usually pointed her to the door the very moment she walked in. "If you don't want to, you can change your mind when we're there," Dereck said, watching Kaide's uncertainty turn into a slightly cheeky smile. "That's more like it," he mused.

Not much later, the two arrived at the small jewellery shop. The gentle sound of a small bell rang as Dereck opened the door and held it for Kaide. With slight hesitation, Kaide eventually walked in after him. It was a small, cosy looking shop with a very organic, almost modest style of displaying their wares. The jewellery itself, however, looked very expensive. Kaide smiled somewhat nervously at the store owner, a young lady that greeted her politely upon entering. "Welcome, how can I help you?" the woman let out sweetly as she carefully scanned the new customers. The shop owner's voice sounded warm and welcoming. She had her dark, curly hair put up in a neat bun and her light blue dress complimented her sepia brown skin tone. "Good morning, we would just like to look around for a bit," Dereck greeted in return while Kaide started browsing among the displayed goods, curiously looking for the piercings. Necklaces and bracelets weren't exactly her style. "Kaide, these are the gems which the island is known for, besides the chickens of course," Dereck called out. The tiefling joined his side as she inspected the gemstones. They were indeed astonishing and brightly coloured as the light bounced off of their smoothly polished surface. "They are quite the keepsake for tourists as these are only found on this island," Dereck stated, smiling as he noticed Kaide's eyes had wandered off already. "They are pretty, but not really my thing," the rogue hummed.

“Not into gems?” Dereck asked, to which Kaide gently shook her head. “Hmm... What kind of jewellery do you like?” He asked, inspecting the small piercings she had on her ear. “I like to keep things subtle,” Kaide said. To put it simply, Kaide liked her accessories to be practical. She couldn’t risk her jewellery getting caught on something, making a sound or looking too valuable. “But I don’t really need anything new. I’m good, thanks,” Kaide smiled, gently rejecting the offer of Dereck finding her something she liked. She felt troubled with the idea of shopping out of Dereck’s purse. Which was... Ironic in some way. Having him treat her to a snack was one thing, but buying jewellery was on a completely new level. But most of all, she didn’t want to owe Dereck anything. She knew how these kinds of things could turn out. One moment a man buys you a gift, the next he claims you have to repay him. Dereck’s kindness and above all protection, was more than welcome, but Kaide knew better than to blindly fall for his seemingly well meant generosity.

“Alright.” Dereck smiled, a little defeated. “But if you find something you like, let me know. Working for one of the biggest trading companies around has its perks. I have enough to spend,” Dereck let out charmingly, trying to coax Kaide into letting go of her reservations. He was a little surprised that Kaide held off like she did, he had expected her to jump at the opportunity to shop without limitations. Not only because he could buy her anything she wanted, but also because of his past experiences with Claire. Back in the day, Claire had always liked shopping for jewellery. “I will,” Kaide assured him, hoping he would drop the subject. While Kaide wandered through the store curiously browsing the shop’s wares, Dereck made his way to the counter with a golden bracelet. A few minutes had passed before Kaide caught a glimpse of an all too familiar figure passing by one of the boutique’s windows.

While Kaide and Dereck had been enjoying the charm of the local market and each other’s company, Claire had run some minor errands. She had spent the rest of her morning with Herron and only had a little bit of time left before they had to leave for their scheduled meeting with a Valeria business partner. Claire looked up at the sign on the building’s facade that said ‘Tiffany’s Boutique’. What better way to spend that time than to catch up with an old friend of hers. The small jewellery store used to belong to Tiffany’s mother, who had named the store after her beloved daughter. Claire had known Tiffany for several years now, but they only occasionally saw each other during festivities or the rare visits Claire made to Ornitheas Island. “I promise to keep it short. I’ll be out again in less than ten minutes,” the blonde chirped at her guard as the two walked around the side of the jewellery boutique. “Alright, do you want me to wait for you outside?” Herron asked with a smile. Herron rarely left Claire’s side, but Ornitheas Island was safe enough that the guard didn’t feel the need to watch Claire’s every move. Aside from that, the small talk he would have to endure if he tagged along wasn’t too appealing to him.

"Ehr- Dereck?" Kaide muttered, a little startled now that she had a clear view of Claire, who seemed to be headed towards the store's entrance. She pulled her cloak's hood forward and turned her back to the window. "Seems like we're not the only ones here," the tiefling hissed under her breath. Dereck put his coins away as he returned from the register, Kaide pulling him away by his upper arm. He turned to look toward the entrance and spotted Claire pass by the window. Dereck cursed under his breath as he guided Kaide further towards the back of the small boutique. "Just... Head for the door when you get the chance. I will meet you outside later," he quickly explained before he split up from her to catch and distract Claire the moment she'd enter.

The little, high pitched bell rang and the door of the boutique opened, as Claire appeared in the doorway. "Claire!" Tiffany exclaimed, immediately recognising the noble elf. The shopkeeper was greeted with a bright smile in return as she hurried towards the door. "Tiffany! It's wonderful to see you. How have you been?" Claire let out cheerily, reaching out to embrace her friend. The two instantly started a conversation to catch up. The store was now filled with excited chatter and girly giggles. Claire insisted that Tiffany should show her her latest work, and the two girls began making their way to the counter in the back of the boutique. Kaide and Dereck, who had separated but still within view of each other, carefully eyed each other. As long as Claire wouldn't notice Kaide, they'd be fine. Dereck turned around and walked towards the ladies to halt them in the middle of the shop. He pretended to absentmindedly bump into Claire while inspecting a pair of intricate earrings. "Claire~" Dereck mused as he was now standing eye to eye with the blonde elf. The conversation between Claire and Tiffany fell quiet as Claire stared in shock at Dereck.

"Dereck-?!" she let out a little startled. "Claire, love, I thought you were going into town," Dereck let out sheepishly, lowering his hands that held the jewellery that he had been pretending to have an interest in. "You two know each other?" Tiffany asked quietly, but her question fell on deaf ears as Claire was stupefied by Dereck's use of the nickname. "What-? So were you-? What are you doing here?" Claire asked. To say that Claire was surprised to run into Dereck here, was an understatement. She smiled apologetically at Tiffany before her eyes darted down at the earrings in Dereck's hands. "I didn't know you were into jewellery?" she hummed suspiciously, folding her arms over. "So quick to judge. Can a man not go shopping for accessories?" Dereck inquired, feigning a bit of hurt at her suspicion.

"You always hated to go jewellery shopping with me. Why the sudden change of heart?" Claire remarked sharply. "Things change, Claire. Besides, I'm looking for a gift," Dereck mused with a slight smirk, which clearly struck a nerve. The noble knew Dereck used to taunt her by flirting with other girls, and she had a strong hunch this was about that thief. That half-demon had barely been around for a few days and Dereck was already all over her. She wasn't certain if she felt her anger rising because of her despise for the tiefling or sheer jealousy for Dereck's attention. Now that Dereck had Claire distracted, Kaide decided this was the moment to make her move. She pulled her hood as far down as possible to hide her red markings and kept her face turned away from the others. Pretending to be looking at the displayed wares while she casually made her way to the door.

"You always loved shopping for new accessories. You still do, don't you Claire?" Sweetness oozed from Dereck's voice. Claire felt a shiver as Dereck stepped even closer in her space. A little overwhelmed with the sudden turn in atmosphere, she nervously watched the man's moves. "What? You intended to shop for jewellery for me?" Claire scoffed flusteredly.

The sweet act Dereck was putting up was so laid on thick, it made Kaide's skin crawl with disgust. He executed it so well that she started to doubt which part was fake and which was real. Upon reaching the door, Kaide knew she had to be quick, yet subtle. She opened the door and smoothly slipped outside, taking a sharp left to disappear into the nearest alleyway.

The ring of the bell caught Claire's attention. As she turned to look toward the door Dereck made the bold move to reach out to Claire's jawline, making the elf face him as he raised an earring next to her cheek. "Would that be inappropriate? I think this one would definitely suit you," Dereck let out charmingly. Claire could feel her face turn scarlet as she froze on the spot. The elf remained oblivious to Dereck's charm being a mere distraction. "Dereck..." She muttered with an awkward smile as her eyes locked on his.

Outside, the tall guard stood watching the crowds wandering by and enjoying the atmosphere of the island. He idly wondered if they truly would chase some chickens later that day as he let his mind wander while he waited for Claire. Herron's attention was caught by the sound of the bell, but as he looked around to see who left the store, there was no one to be seen. A little confused, he peeked through the boutique's window and saw how Dereck was holding onto Claire's jaw. Concerned, the guard rushed to the door. What was Dereck even doing here? He had never seen him enter the shop.

The calm, yet assertive manner in which Herron opened the door, caught the attention of everyone in the store. "Oh my, Herron! It's wonderful to see you again. I didn't know you were here," Tiffany let out delighted in an attempt to greet Herron, who passed her without a glance. Herron's entrance snapped Claire out of her trance. She pulled away from Dereck's grip and turned toward Herron, a wave of relief coming over her upon seeing her loyal guard. "Dereck," Herron said in a warning tone as he frowned at the man. Dereck straightened himself and carefully placed the jewellery he was holding back on its display. "You didn't write to me about your boyfriend, Claire," Tiffany remarked. "Dereck is not my boyfriend," the noble corrected quickly, gently brushing her own upper arms as she awkwardly chuckled. "I was once. But that was a long time ago," Dereck hummed in response. The revelation came as a shock to Herron. At a loss for words, he mentally kicked himself to snap out of it. "Oh, Sorry. I thought-" Tiffany started, to which Dereck pushed past Claire to head towards the exit. "No hard feelings. I'll let you girls catch up," Dereck let out casually, hoping to excuse himself and catch up to Kaide outside. Claire didn't know what to say, but Dereck's escape was put to an end by Herron, who stepped in between him and the door. "Actually, we have a tight schedule. We have just about half an hour left. It's a good thing we ran into you," Herron stated in Claire's absence of words. Slightly nervous with Herron's firm voice, Dereck agreed with a nod. He honestly had no viable reason to excuse himself. "Okay, yeah. Sure. I'll wait outside," Dereck said. "We will wait outside," Herron corrected him. "Take your time," he added gently, looking at Claire. The bell rang once again as the two men left the store. Claire attempted to return to her small talk with Tiffany for what little time remained, but the mood had been somewhat ruined. With Dereck so close in her space moments prior, the elf's feelings were all over the place. Truth be told, she didn't feel very social after the close encounter.

Kaide waited at the alleyway's entrance and watched Tiffany's boutique from a distance. After a minute or so, Dereck came outside, accompanied by Herron. It didn't take long for Kaide to realise that Dereck wouldn't be able to shake off the noble's guard dog breathing down his neck. She scoffed and decided to keep herself entertained for the rest of the day. She had no bounty on her head on this island and she couldn't wait to taste some more freedom.

When night fell, Kaide sauntered the dimly lit streets. She had spent the day exploring the town, browsing the market and was now just enjoying the evening atmosphere. The village looked cosy with its still lively streets softly lit by the light of the street lanterns. When she passed the statue in the middle of the town square, she heard a group of kids whispering and giggling behind her. Among the excited whispers she clearly caught the name 'dragon lady'. When she slowly turned around to check in on what was going on behind her, the kids ducked underneath the wooden market stalls and behind the stacked crates and barrels filled with wares.

Despite the kids being hidden, she still heard their murmurs and exhilarated giggles. Kaide ignored the ruckus at first and continued walking, but just five steps later, the exact same thing happened again. The rogue turned around once more, but quickly this time. "Alright~ What is this about?" Kaide smiled, crossing her arms. These kids were obviously having a jolly time. They weren't exactly well hidden, but she pretended to walk straight past two kids that had crawled underneath the nearest stall. "You should watch out, or the 'dragon lady' will definitely get you." With those words, she suddenly dropped down to the ground and lifted the tablecloth that was hanging over the stall. "Gotcha!" Kaide chuckled as she looked straight at the two children, who shrieked in joyful surprise. "Hiding and giggling isn't a good combination, you know?" She smiled. "You have to give the seeker a challenge at least."

The young boy underneath the stall smiled. "I told my sister and friends about you! The dragon lady with the tail," the boy explained, while the girl next to him stared at Kaide in awe and fidgeted nervously. "Do you want to play hide and seek with us, dragon lady?" the younger girl asked cheekily. The two seemed excited to interact with Kaide, mesmerised by her tiefling features. Kaide smiled at the sincere reaction from the kids. She was once again reminded how young children were not judgemental. They would just about accept anyone into their group. "You're on." The rogue got up and briefly looked around to make a mental note of how many kids she'd be searching for. There were six. "I'll count to twenty. You go hide. Go easy on me, okay?" she said before she turned her back and started counting out loud. "One. Two..." The kids immediately got up and darted off in all different directions, chased by their own laughter.

The children had really taken a liking to Kaide and she spent the rest of the evening playing with her new found friends. Becoming the 'dragon lady' had already been a good start, but she also had plenty of exciting stories to share. Most of her stories were obviously blown out of proportion, but the gullible children were hanging on her every word.

"How about we look for a place to have a nice dinner?" Herron proposed to the group as they walked down the street from their official meeting. The appointment had taken longer than expected and the entire group was both hungry and tired. Claire had lost focus and absentmindedly stared at the window sills of the building they walked past. "Sounds good to me," she muttered quietly. In the absence of Claire's lead, Herron decided to take over. "We could head to the main street and look for a tavern? After the last meeting I'd be happy to take a break." "I'm sorry the last appointment took so long," Claire apologised. "If you needed me to cut it short you could have just said so," Dereck chided. Out of all of them, he was the most bothered by their prolonged meeting. His mood had soured as he dwelled on the fact that he could have been spending those lost minutes with Kaide instead. Herron shot Dereck a glare over the elf's head, warning him to back off.

"So, dinner. Your pick, Herron," Claire continued, changing the subject as she forced a smile. "What would you fancy?" she asked. Dereck scoffed a little. "Do you mind if we split ways here? I'd still like to see the square tonight," Dereck tried carefully. "You're not joining us?" Claire let out rather surprised. "Come on, Dereck. What is so pressing that you can't join us for dinner?" Herron asked. It was suspicious to the guard how Dereck tried to come up with an excuse to split up immediately after the work had concluded. "We'll all get to see the square as soon as we finish dinner." The pressure from both the noble and her guard made it difficult to say no. Cursing to himself, Dereck eventually relented.

During dinner, Dereck seemed to distance himself from Claire. The conversations were short lived and focused on business. Dereck wanted nothing more than to spend his time elsewhere, that much was clear. His behaviour confused Claire, tearing open a wound she thought had finally healed. He had flirted so openly with her earlier. And if she had to believe him, he had been jewellery shopping for her that morning. Did this mean he was still interested in her?

"Were you... Really shopping for me at Tiffany's this morning? I didn't expect to find you there," Claire curiously brought up. "Do you really want to talk about that right now?" Dereck replied in a bitter tone. "Sorry," Claire muttered. Just like that, the conversation awkwardly died out again. The noble's appetite vanished with the conversation, she could barely take a bite. It frustrated Herron how hurt Claire seemed to be about the ordeal, and decided to ask about it. "Look, I don't know exactly what happened at the boutique today, but I think you have something to settle. You are acting weird," Herron stated rather boldly towards Dereck.

"I'm not acting weird. Claire and I used to be very close once. I was just shopping, we ran into each other and I showed her a pair of earrings. That's it. No need to be so protective of her," Dereck reproached as he leaned back in his seat. "It's my job to look out for Claire," Herron responded. "She didn't seem comfortable and you were very close up in her space," he added calmly, trying to give Dereck his perspective. "And you are very much in mine right now. How about I talk it out with Claire later in private and you keep to your regular guard duties?" Dereck bit back and continued his dinner. Herron was about to speak up on Dereck's disrespect, but Claire gently rested her hand on Herron's arm. Upon feeling the noble's touch, Herron took a breath to calm himself.

"So how did you become Claire's 'personal' guard anyway?" The way Dereck mockingly eyed him up and down at the word 'personal', made Claire uncomfortable yet again. It fell quiet as Claire almost choked on her food. "I was hired by Mr. Valeria, and was assigned as Claire's guard six years ago. I've been an apprentice under Valeria's best guards for over a decade," Herron answered calmly. The man had worked his way to the top little by little and no one else to thank for his current position than his own dedication. Claire was relieved as Herron gave such reserved and confident answers. "Well, you've been around for a while. Seems like we'll be seeing more of each other." Dereck smiled. "I look forward to our close companionship from this day forth then." His undertone was slightly defiant towards Herron. "Let's continue this professionally," Claire said in an attempt to diffuse the hostility that had built between the two men. With tension lingering in the air, the group continued their dinner. Eager to escape their company, Dereck finished the rest of his food in silence, leaving the small talk to Claire and Herron.

Outside, the children continued to follow Kaide the 'dragon lady' around, their curfews long forgotten. "Do you have a booyfriend, dragon lady?" a little girl asked curiously. "Or girlfriend," a witty boy added. "No. She is a dragon lady, so it should be a dragon!" a third child chimed in. "I want to be her boyfriend!" another boy let out rather boldly with a cheeky giggle.

"Wow! WOW! Easy there, bad boy. I'm not doing boyfriends. And I'm definitely not dating dragons." Kaide had liked the nickname of 'dragon lady', but now the suggestions were getting out of hand. "Okay, listen up." The rogue called the kids over and sat down, cross-legged at the side of the street. "Y'all ever heard of tieflings?" she asked, looking from one kid to another. "I'm a tiefling. They all have horns and tails. Like me!" As she spoke she gestured at her horns and showed off her tail. "My mom says tieflings will eat me if I am not in my bed at night," one of the older girls said. "No, a tiefling is like a beast person, but they are possessed by a demon," another boy let out. "Well I would still be your boyfriend if you were a tiefling," the boy declared with a determination only a child showed for such a statement. "I'm flattered, but I'm not looking for a boyfriend," Kaide chuckled. She took a deep breath. It was obvious these kids hadn't really seen a tiefling before. They did not really know what tieflings were, aside from the wrong imagery their parents had brainwashed into them.

Kaide was shocked by all the preconceptions the children had been taught or came up with. She was so wrapped in their stories that she didn't notice the mother of one of the kids was keeping an eye on the group from a distance. "Really? Is that what your parents have been telling you?" Kaide asked as she looked around the group. She sat with her back against the wall and pulled in her legs. "First off. Tieflings won't come to eat you for whatever reason. We're not some sort of monsters. We're not much different than you, actually. It's just-" Kaide paused to think for a moment. "For example, my mom was human. Just like you." She smiled and pointed at the kids. "I'm a half elf actually," one young boy corrected. The other kids giggled at his comment "So tieflings don't eat humans?" "No we don't eat humans, or halflings, or elves, or half-elves or whoever else you could think of," Kaide replied in a chuckle. "But he called you a dragon lady!" "But she doesn't have dragon scales or wings." The kids would once again converse with one another. "Oh. Right. So a tiefling is like half human half... Red skin with horns." It was slightly difficult to follow who spoke when. Since the conversation progressed pretty well, Kaide happily agreed for now, not wanting to overcomplicate matters.

"I think it's pretty! When I have a girlfriend, I would want her to have horns and a tail like you!" the flirtatious boy let out with a smile. Kaide smiled at the compliment. "Why, thank you. You will have the luckiest girlfriend then." She chuckled quietly. One of the little girls suddenly jumped as she saw the mother of one of her friends nearby. "Mrs. Kiala!" She called, waving the woman over. The mother gave a defeated sigh at having been spotted and approached the group. Kaide felt the tension rise immediately, unaware that the woman shared the same unease.

"Good evening," Mrs. Kiala let out as she came by the group of kids. "Mama! The dragon lady is not a dragon, but a tiefling!" the little boy said. "Good evening." Kaide's reply came out as barely a whisper. She glanced away, reluctant to keep eye contact for longer than a second and already mentally preparing herself to be berated. To Kaide's surprise, the smile on the woman's face as she stepped into the street light seemed sincere. "It's alright. I didn't want to scare you off," the woman replied to Kaide before turning to the children. "But you kids should be heading home by now, your parents are probably worried." They had been having such a good time that the children all whined at the thought of leaving. "Mom, she is a real tiefling!" the boy exclaimed excitedly. "And is she nice?" the woman asked with a chuckle. "She is awesome, mom!" the kid let out, to which his friends agreed with a nod. "Alright then, be sure to head straight home," the woman said, spurring the children to get up. Kaide watched as all the kids scurried off towards home. Some excitedly waved at her as they ran off to which the rogue gave a small wave in return.

Eventually only the mother with her own two kids remained. "Thank you... for not chasing me away." Kaide's quiet words were full of gratitude. She was pleasantly surprised the woman hadn't tried to degrade her in front of the children like so many others had before.

"It's a mark on this city. I don't know if you are familiar with the Valeria family, but they heavily influence this island and its culture," the woman explained while petting her daughter's hair. Kaide let out a quiet scoff. She was familiar with the Valeria family, a bit too familiar for her liking. "I try to teach my children to have an open mind towards the world. Thank you for spending so much time with them." It was the first time a mother thanked Kaide for being around their children. The woman's son was still standing next to the rogue, silently admiring her tail. "What brought you to our city? The gemstones?" Kiala asked.

"Valeria's ship," the rogue answered, nudging her head to gesture towards the large ship that was anchored in the harbour not too far away from them. "That's a new level of irony, right?" The tiefling's demeanour changed at the mention of the vessel. It was a harsh reminder of how she had spent the past nights locked up on the dark lower deck. It suddenly occurred to Kaide that she had opened up so easily to this woman, a complete stranger.

It was unlike her to trust so quickly, and she couldn't pinpoint the exact reason why she had done so now. Maybe it was because this woman seemed kind and trustworthy. Or perhaps it was simply because she was one of the few people around that didn't shun her.

"Truly?" the woman said in complete disbelief. A soft smile formed on her lips, but the tiefling's face remained serious. "I didn't know the daughter of Mr. Valeria was so... unlike her father," she mentioned carefully. "She's not. From what I've witnessed... The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Kaide scoffed, getting up and dusting herself off. As if the awkward topic were a trigger, the young girl's stomach softly rumbled. "Mom, can we go soon? I'm quite hungry," she complained. "Oh, of course. Let's get you two your dinner and ready for bed," the woman said.

Kaide adjusted her clothing and looked down at the kids. "Your mom is right. You should probably get going. I'll be off too." She walked past the woman and reached out, giving the boy's head a gentle rub. "Thanks for the games, guys. Next time I'm back, you can kick my butt in another round of hide and seek, alright?" She smiled. "Have a nice evening!" With that Kaide strolled off, wondering what she would do next. Was going back to the ship even safe? She'd rather hang around town and enjoy her freedom a bit longer. She stuck close to the harbour and just roamed a bit, taking in the scenery and atmosphere.

After having finished dinner with Claire and Herron, Dereck had finally managed to detach himself from the others. Since he had taken Kaide into town that day, he felt responsible for her well-being. As soon as he left the tavern he began looking for her. Originally Dereck had hoped to grab some dinner with Kaide, but that ship had long since sailed. Knowing the rogue had no money on her, he was worried she might be going hungry. On his way back to the harbour area, he stopped by a tavern along the main road and picked up some seasoned chicken skewers for her, just in case. Searching around for what felt like hours, Dereck eventually passed a woman with two cheerful kids at her side. The word 'tiefling' caught his attention among the excited chatter from the little boy, so he headed in the direction that the family had been coming from. Just when he had begun to worry he might not find her at all, a glimpse of red just outside the light of a lantern post caught his eye. Kaide was sitting at the edge of the scaffolding, her legs dangling above the water's surface. "Hey." Dereck announced himself as to not startle her as he approached. "Hey," Kaide greeted in return. "Sorry it took so long," he apologised before sitting down next to her and offering her a meat skewer. "Here. I figured you might be hungry. It is a chicken skewer. This place is known for them." "Your concern is greatly appreciated," Kaide responded cheekily as she took the skewer from Dereck.

"Couldn't escape princess Valeria at the jewellery store, huh? She has you on a short leash." She chuckled as she took a bite off the skewer. "She loves to boss me around. I didn't mean to leave you like that. I hope you still enjoyed yourself." "Don't worry. My day was great, I even made a few new friends," she said with a lighthearted tone. Dereck couldn't quite tell if she was serious. "This place is pretty peaceful. I like it around here. Might even consider staying."

"New friends huh?" At first he thought she was sarcastic, but then he remembered what he had heard. "That might explain the two kids excitedly chattering about 'the tiefling' from earlier." Dereck chuckled. He watched as she finished her dinner, the idea that she was supposed to be locked up on the ship again that night made him feel uneasy. He gave her freedom, but it pained him to think he had to take it away again.

Kaide smiled. "Well, at least they didn't look at me with disgust like most people do around here." It had honestly been one of the best days she had in a long time. "Where are you planning to go for the night? Back to the ship?" Kaide asked. It was obvious from her tone that she wasn't really looking forward to it. She'd rather find a place in town to spend the night than return to her cell. "I think I should be heading back to the ship for now. I don't know if Claire has any plans, but I don't want to raise suspicion by staying away for too long. Tomorrow's another business appointment, and Claire insisted I be there for lunch. I get that the ship currently isn't your most appealing option, but you could stay in my room? You still might hear one man snore, but otherwise it's pretty well covered," he suggested with the intention to offer Kaide comfort while keeping her safely out of sight. "What did you have in mind?"

Kaide shrugged. "I honestly don't know. Anything is better than the brig," she admitted. "So if you have an extra bed to spare, I wouldn't pass that up." The rogue stood and started to head off, checking over her shoulder whether Dereck would follow. "So, what time do you start work tomorrow? Have to get up early?" she asked as they walked along the docks and approached the ship. "Quite so, but I'll promise to leave quietly as long as you promise to stick to my chambers until I return," the man replied.

When Dereck and Kaide approached the ship, they were greeted by the sounds of revelry and haughty laughter. Some members of the crew were chattering on deck while enjoying a drink. Dereck briefly stopped on the docks, watching the group for a few moments to gauge the situation.

"Seems like we'll be fine," Dereck said quietly. Judging from how much the raucous sailors were enjoying their drinks, they were likely paying little to no attention to their surroundings. They wouldn't cause them any trouble. After Dereck's affirmation, Kaide quietly followed Dereck onto the gangway, avoiding eye contact with any of the crew as she crossed the deck. One of the crew members glanced toward Kaide as she walked past, but Kaide's cloak did a good job at preventing any suspicion. When Kaide and Dereck made their way down the stairs, Kaide's eyes were drawn to the light coming from the master cabin. Those were Claire's quarters. Knowing that the elf was on board, made Kaide somewhat uneasy.

Dereck opened the door to his cabin, which was one door shy from Herron's, and held the door for Kaide. "Please ignore the mess," he warned as a few garments lay scattered on the floor. The cabin wasn't too big, with a large bed taking up most of the room. Hooks were anchored in the ceiling to mount a hammock for days when the seas got rowdy, and against the wall stood a wooden desk with a discarded shirt thrown over the matching chair nearby. Overall Kaide thought the place looked rather luxurious, especially once Dereck lit the lantern above the desk. "My humble home away from home," Dereck muttered as he began unlacing his boots. "Humble?" Kaide repeated as she moved over towards the bed and let herself fall onto it. She let out a satisfied sigh as the soft, cool bedding caught her. "I couldn't even dream of living in a place like this, and this is just on a ship," Kaide let out, staring at the decorated beams and ceiling. Dereck smiled as he watched Kaide get comfortable on his bed, taking a seat in the chair next to the desk.

"Oh- I almost forgot," Dereck suddenly said as he set his boots aside. He reached into his inner pocket and pulled out a tiny bag, holding it out to Kaide. "For me?" Kaide questioned cautiously as she sat up, reaching for the small bag. "What is it?" she asked as she hesitantly opened it. The very second Kaide laid eyes on the fine, golden bracelet, she put it back in the pouch. "Dereck, I can't take this," she protested. "Please, take it," Dereck pressed calmly. "Dereck, I don't want you to-" "Just keep it. No strings attached. I figured if you wouldn't like it, you could at least sell it off when you need the money," the man continued. "... After we part ways." The way the sentence died down left a silence in the room.

Dereck got up to get his hammock ready for the night, assuming he was going to give Kaide the luxury of sleeping in the bed. "Thank you," the tiefling sighed as she relented and put the bag to the side. "For this, and for taking me out to see the town today." "No need to thank me. I didn't have the heart to leave you down in the dark brig on a day like this," Dereck confessed, gathering the ropes. Another silence followed as Kaide watched how the man skillfully tied the knots and got out an extra blanket for the hammock. Once the hammock was set, he began removing his vest and unbuttoning his shirt to get ready for bed. When Dereck felt Kaide's eyes on him, he respectfully turned away. "You can have the bed, I'll take the hammock. I don't mind." Kaide averted her gaze as she started taking her own boots off, trying to find the words to phrase her next question while she shot curious glances in the man's direction. When Dereck dropped his shirt to the floor, the tiefling was caught by surprise at the toned physique underneath. She hadn't expected the man to be so fit.

"Why are you so nice to me?" Kaide asked with a slight smirk on her lips. "I guess being kind to you reminds me to be kind to others, and to myself," he answered cheesily. "And how does one do that?" Kaide asked, subtly eyeing the man up and down. "By not getting myself involved with a pretty thief that will steal my heart and run off with it," Dereck mused poetically to which Kaide hummed in return, watching the man take his socks and pants off, when her eyes fell on an aged scar on the man's lower back. "You say that like you take me for some kind of monster," Kaide countered. "All girls are monsters," Dereck stated while reaching out for his nightshirt. "You just happen to also be a tiefling," Dereck's lips pulled into a lopsided smirk. "Oh, is that what this is? You thrive on the idea that your ex-girlfriend doesn't approve of it," Kaide hummed playfully, to which Dereck scoffed. "It's not that," He replied. "You're keeping me at a distance because you're considering rekindling things with Claire?" Kaide asked cautiously. A cheeky chuckle followed behind Dereck as Kaide dropped her pants to the floor. Dereck brushed his fingers through his hair as he thought about it. His gaze absentmindedly followed Kaide's movement in the corner of his eyes. The way Dereck seemed hesitant to make up his mind worried Kaide. If at the end of the trip Dereck decided to side with Claire, she could find herself in a lot of trouble. "I almost forgot that me being a tiefling was an issue. In your circles I'm considered someone you would not want to be seen with, am I right?" Kaide started unlacing her corset top as she kept a close eye on Dereck.

Dereck was having a hard time not looking in Kaide's direction as the girl started taking her clothing off. "You being a tiefling is not an issue to me," Dereck muttered, fighting his growing curiosity as he folded his clothing for the next day. "Then what is holding you back? Afraid to get hurt?" With those words, Kaide got up from the bed and made her way over to Dereck. She gently brushed her fingers over his skin, trailing down towards the large, jagged scar on his lower back. "Something like that," he admitted. Even before she actually touched the discoloured skin, Dereck reached behind him and grabbed Kaide's wrist, redirecting her to his front. Kaide was quick to catch onto the man's discomfort. It was remarkable that an old scar like that still seemed to be so sensitive. "It looks like it must run deep..." she whispered. "To the bone..." Dereck replied with a bitter smile. "You're not making my life any easier, Kaide," he admitted, considering whether or not to allow himself to be tempted by the encounter. "Life's not supposed to be easy, is it? Dereck." The girl emphasised his name, mimicking his response. As she leaned in close to him, her lips hovered near his, but just when the man leaned closer she pulled back. Dereck locked eyes with her, a soft chuckle escaping his lips. "As soon as we hit the mainland you plan to disappear, right? You'll probably run off to some distant town as I continue on my way and we'll likely never meet each other again..." Dereck thought out loud, brushing his thumb past his bottom lip. "Perhaps," Kaide hummed as she moved backwards towards the bed with a little bounce in her step. Her tail brushed past the man's arm as he raised his hand like he was about to grasp her, but refrained from doing so.

"All the more reason to enjoy our time together now. Don't you think?" Kaide mused as she sat down on the bed again, awaiting Dereck's response. He couldn't help but smirk, a mischievous glint in his eyes. Dereck was a man who usually seized any opportunity to enjoy himself, living his life with guiltless and carefree experiences. Yet Kaide hit differently. She had this enticing energy around her and he couldn't get enough of it. Kaide was wild, stubborn and in his eyes, ever so beautiful. How was he to refrain from falling into the same old habit?

