Cakewalk

by Stephanie Soden

CHAPTER ONE

In the orange-skied morning light, Rin walked briskly by the scrap yard office. Her cantor was cut off when she came before a chain-link automatic gate that was irritatingly not automatic at all. The blonde turned her head, initiating her first conversation in days, “Gate!”

The woman behind the tiny window sat entranced by the television.

… “the fourth day since the Emperor's disappearance, just two weeks since his coronation.”…

“The gate!” her finger pointed in futility.

… “With his father's death last week, some beg the question: could this be the end of the Marcrux family's hundred-year reign?” …

Without averting her gaze from the seven-inch television screen, the old woman felt for the red button beside her and pressed it. She didn't notice that the gate was already shaking before it opened.

Portland Harbor is a dirty place. Its skies are stained the unnatural color of rust from the factory pollution. Everyone in the town shares a common goal: get out. Move to Atlas. Where the streets are clean and the water is fresh. The price to live in the tiered city is a debt not paid to the aristocracy, however. Even the Emperor knew that the Crime Lords ruled his streets.

Her awkward body stumbled along the unforgiving terrain of the metal yard, clumsy feet occasionally tripping upon a bicycle frame or the top of a rusty truck. Checking for pipes and discarded

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circuits, she swept back her short wheat-colored hair and trudged on. It had been two hundred years since the war that changed the world, and what surely must have been China was a wasteland now.

Like most people, Rin was of mixed origin too muddled to discern. She could estimate herself around 30, though this was debatable since she had stopped counting several years ago. She looked like a person who would be very pretty if she wore make-up, but she didn't and therefore wasn't.

Blue eyes turned downward to glare at her growling stomach, cursing the recent lack of business for making her so emaciated. This was par for the course in Portland. If starvation didn't get you first, the toxic air would. Neither was a pleasant death, but then again neither was living. But Rin cast away such morbid thoughts and focused instead on why someone would throw away a perfectly good waffle iron.

“Unngh.”

Strange noises radiated from the distance. She had walked at least three miles into the endless range that was the Portland/Atlas Scrap Yard. Very few mechanics and copper peddlers were willing to make the trek she did.
Bang. Bang. Bang. Her shoulders flinched at the abrupt sound of gunfire. Loud, old-fashioned bullets. Seagulls shrieked, abandoning their meals and taking flight.

“Quickly.”

For a moment, Rin heeded the instinct to run the other way, but curiosity got the best of her. The dirt crushed beneath her as she began to meander closer, bag full of metals chiming softly on her back. Finally coming around the corner of a particularly large mound of televisions, Rin paused.

The three men before her didn't. The group dressed in pressed black suits sprayed bullets about the metal valley like bees. In the moment her vision swung back behind the televisions, she noticed a child lying at their feet.

Throwing herself against the shaded wall, the blonde's chest heaved. Alright, she had gained the information she was looking for. The only Portland residents that owned guns were her customers, and these people were clearly from Atlas. They also clearly wanted her dead.

“Who are you?!” they shouted.

She readjusted the bag of pipes on her back, “I'm a scrap peddler. Don't kill me.” Her eyes remained glued to the child's unmoving form.

As the men continued to inch around the corner, they could hardly hear its whistle, nor predict the speed at which the led pipe would be hurdled into their comrade's face. With a crack and fountain of red, he was down and ended in less time than they had to notice she was near.

It amazed her how quickly the muscle memory returned.

Ducking and scrambling beneath their shots, she invaded their space with a stealth grace that could have only been managed by a tiny starving person. One more died at the hands of the barbaric weapon. While the remaining attacker slipped on the rubble, Rin lunged and sloppily lodged the pipe into the TV screen near his head. When she struggled to rip it out, the entire stack of televisions teetered with a deep, roaring lurch.

In a crash and shriek of metal, the twelve-foot wall came down in a plume of dust. Beneath the sounds of twisted scrap and calling

crows was a resounding squish and strangled cry. Flopping around on top of the wreckage was Rin, having suddenly remembered what drew her to the scene in the first place. She began to desperately pull away at the shards of aluminum.

A small shifting sound called her attention to the side, where the boy lay in hazy light. Although delighted that the scrap avalanche had missed him, Rin deflated when she saw him. The boy lay in the fetal position with his back facing her. Three fresh gunshot wounds pooled between his shoulder blades, just over his lungs.

Sliding from the metal mountain, Rin approached him solemnly.

“Poor little guy.” She wrung her hands. Blue eyes looked about. Those men she flattened looked like mafia sweepers, people trained to kill at the whim of one of the Crime Lords. Suppose this was a child of a dignitary in debt—such barbaric acts were certainly not below the syndicates.

Rin rubbed her neck, debating on what to do with the body. She couldn't leave him here—the birds would have him in minutes. She wasn't keen on orchestrating a proper burial either, and dragging him into town would only raise more suspicion about Portland's one and only weapons dealer.

Touching his shoulder, Rin gently rolled him to his back. Immediately the boy coughed loudly, barely managing, “Fuck you!” among the hacking.

With an uncharacteristically girly shriek, Rin tumbled back and slammed against the televisions. As he sat up, shaking his head of the dust, she noticed he was not in fact a child but a very short teenager. His choked rasps were deep and post-pubescent. She yelped again when he turned around to reveal two more holes in his chest. Big ones.

“I apologize.” He said, “I thought you were someone else.”

The boy wavered, collapsing to his stomach, “Madam I'm in need of some assistance. I come from Atlas and my family is very wealthy. If you help me, I'll pay you hansdomly. Whatdya say?” his elegant Atlas accent was somewhat skewed by a pain-filled slur.

Slowly Rin's brain put together the pieces. A child was one thing, but a young man who had picked the wrong company was another. Surely those mafia soldiers wanted him dead for a reason— one she'd rather not get mixed up in. But his ability to communicate through such injuries really was fascinating.

She waited until his forehead abruptly slammed upon the ground, and her growling stomach interrupted the absolute silence of the morning. Looking to it, then the boy, Rin sighed heavily and slipped the bloody pipe into her bag.

The noises left in the wake of such an odd morning were the howling of the wind, the billowing of the corpse's blazers, and the flapping wings of descending crows. Like the rest of the town, they were hungry. The bodies would be gone in a matter of days.

“...Press Chairman Kai Kulon is scheduled to disclose more information at the press conference today...”

“...more on the sudden deaths of Michael and his son Adrian Marcrux after this...”

The cashier didn't turn her head as Rin struggled out of the gate with the bloodied load on her back. She gave a mute nod when a few coins were thrown onto the counter.

“...and highs in the 80's, air toxicity levels rise to 20% this

afternoon, 25% tomorrow...”

“Shit!”

The woman averted her attention from the small box to catch the tail end of one silhouette slamming the other into the alley wall. She sloppily picked him up and continued the trudge.

The boy sounded a noise of agony as they entered her apartment. Partially because the narrow walkway was impossible to navigate. Mostly because he had just woken up and was being absently slammed into every nearby surface. Rin swatted clotheslines and kicked boxes out of the way until they reached her tiny bed.

His world was a blur as he was thrown upon the twin, his dirty clothes and bloody hair making her trip to the Laundromat the day before completely worthless.

The blonde sauntered all of one step to the kitchen and threw her dusty jacket on the counter. She had absolutely no idea what she was doing. If this boy died in her apartment, it would be even more troublesome than dealing with him in the scrap yard. If he lived, then what? Was she really following some vague guarantee from a desperate kid mixed up with the Crime Lords? Crippled by another hunger pang, the answer was obvious. Yes. Yes she was.

“Where am I?” He blinked hard, dark eyes focusing, “Who are you?”

“The madam in the scrap yard, remember?”

“Oh yes.” Licking his bloodied lips, the boy pushed himself onto his side, “Can you—can you tell me where I am, please?”

“The Harbor.”

The look of hopelessness in his eyes began to resonate in her own. Suddenly her visions of a renegade or scam artist diminished. The young man before her now seemed scared and alone, swallowing her whole with his enormous coal-colored eyes.

“There there.” she pat his head, a matronly gesture that didn't become her. When this only disturbed him more, Rin deferred, “Why did those men shoot you?”

“I beg your pardon?” he said incredulously.

Worried that whatever extreme state of shock he was in would wane, she shook her head, “Tried to shoot you.”

He swallowed, “One minute I was going to bed. The next, I woke up in a junkyard. I don't remember—anything.”

“Maybe that's for the best.” She tinkered with the tiny first-aid kit under her bed. Alcohol, aspirin, bandages, sedatives, gauze—she wasn't quite sure where to start for bullet-wounds.

“You remember who you are, don't you?” she continued, “Where you came from? Where you're going?”

“Unfortunately.” watery eyes looked up at her.

“I think you'll be alright.”

“How do you know?” he shivered.

“Because I think you're a survivor.” Her eyes couldn't help but glance to his chest.

Raising a brow, he followed her gaze beneath his collarbone. When horror washed over his face, she stuck him in the neck with a tiny needle just as he opened his mouth to scream. While the boy collapsed to his side she squeezed out the remaining fluid over her shoulder.

“We'll find out for certain shortly.”