

# Persequor

By: Shivani/Grazhir

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**Pairings:** Balthier/Harry

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**Spoilers:** FF XII, HP (post DH, but the details aren't the same)

**Warnings:** AU-Crossover, slash, bad language, mild super!Harry (sorta)

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FF XII source materials include (but are not limited to) a [game script](#) by AschTheHated (with some corrections, because it seems to be following sub-titles, not the actual voice acting, and the author keeps inaccurately referring to the Dawn Shard as 'manufactured' instead of 'deifacted'), a [walkthrough](#) by Split Infinity, and [video references](#) at Blue Laguna.

**Summary:** An AU-Crossover, wherein Harry's choice of profession after the war has unexpected effects. Cast into the world of Ivalice, he finds a new purpose and life.

**Notes:** One of the reasons I decided to attempt this was [Phoenix Catcher's \*Avatar of the Occuria\*](#). At any rate, only a short section at the beginning involves the HP world. After that, it's all Ivalice, and I've tried to give Harry an interesting role to play, and so he has reasons to become directly involved. I'm also skipping the "Meanwhile... elsewhere" type cutscenes.

And yeah, I know, the summary sucks.

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## 1 : EXORSUS

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He had only been an apprentice for three days and they had sent him off for a ‘meeting’ at the Department of Mysteries. Something about his reputation and credibility, they said. Harry thought that was hogwash, but went anyway. He was to meet with one of the DoM’s experimental healers, to be updated on new techniques and spells that had been developed, and bring back a detailed report so that St Mungo’s could be that much more effective. About the only good thing from killing a dark lord was being able to essentially write his own ticket to whatever job he wanted to attempt.

Harry got through security easily enough, though not without the usual stares and whispers, and headed off to his meeting, not entirely happy due to the memories that surfaced along the way. He was met by a nameless fellow in a hooded white robe, who escorted him beyond the room that had stymied them for quite a while two years back, through any number of rooms and hallways, finally to halt in a rather large room with another man dressed in the same concealing fashion.

“Call me Fugo,” the figure said as Harry’s escort left, voice deep enough for him to assume it was male.

He nodded, unsure of whether or not he should introduce himself, and if so, by which name. So he simply assumed the man had no idea who he was and said, “Harry Potter.”

“Let’s get started,” Fugo said flatly. “This’ll take a while.”

A half hour later Harry was desperately wanting to slap himself a few times, as he felt as though he might doze off. The material that Fugo was imparting was boring enough, but the man’s droning tone was a wide-open invitation to somnolence. Things picked up very quickly, though. A nagging sense of growing unease made Harry feel just a touch jumpy, which was probably a good thing.

At least twenty men slipped into the room, wands raised, aimed at him. Harry quickly came to the conclusion that the rather glassy-eyed state of a good half those men was likely due to the imperius curse. That was when he fled, not stupid enough to believe he could take on all of them and win. He could only assume that there were far too many unmarked supporters of Voldemort still oozing around in the woodwork of government, and it was his delight to have flushed them out.

Sadly, his flight through the department was just as confusing as the first time, and he hadn’t exactly the time to stop and ask directions, not with attempting to keep ahead of his pursuers and dodge the spells that kept being shot his way. He actually thought he might have lost them when he slid into a hallway bare of anything but full-length mirrors attached to the walls every foot or so. Some of them were partially draped with white gauze, while others had ornamented frames. Others yet were broken.

A shout made him realize he was dawdling. Harry took off down the hall and randomly chose a direction when it split, quickly becoming lost, but feeling a great deal happier when he spotted a door. Through it he went, only to be presented with a bewildering array of door frames, some side by side in walls, others seemingly just standing there with no visible support.

More shouting erupted behind him, so he attempted to find a perimeter wall and follow it, though his course took him through many of the frames. And each time he did so, something about the room changed slightly, but it was nothing he could put his finger on, nor did he have time to stop and investigate to determine if he was hallucinating. He did, however, spare a split second to decide that the air smelled a bit strange.

A blasting curse hit the top of the frame he was just then running through, but . . . he wasn't there to assess the damage. No, he was standing in a black void. There were no more frames, no more shouts, and no more spells being aimed at his vital spots. Just unending, stifling, velvety black.

“Who dares traverse the gateways?” demanded a voice. “Ah. Poor wandering soul, I shall be the arbiter of your fate.”

*'Fate?'*

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He rather thought he woke up not because he was ready to do so, but because someone was very insistently slapping his cheek. Harry cracked open an eye to see a face swim into view.

“That's right, wake up! Who are you, then?”

He opened his other eye. Hovering over him was a deeply-tanned man with choppy dark hair and dark eyes. “Where am I?”

“I'll be the one asking questions, hey?” the man replied. “And that accent! Spy are you? We'll just see about that, we will.”

Harry protested being hauled up like a sack of grain, to no avail; he wasn't exactly feeling well, either. A reflexive move toward his wand brought about an unhappy surprise. He had either lost it, or it had been taken from him. He was further surprised when he was tossed into a saddle, worn by a giant . . . chicken? It was the closest parallel he could think of, even if the creature didn't *really* resemble one all that closely. Perhaps. An unfortunate breeding experiment between one and an ostrich?

Other men were there, also mounted, and the one who had awakened him vaulted into a saddle as well, then took the reins of his creature. “You'll not be wandering off. It's our lord who'll see to you.”

And they were off, bounding across the verdant landscape, the yellow bird having a peculiar gait that took some getting used to, as he constantly felt he was about to be flung off to one side or the other. While his body was attempting to deal with that issue, his eyes were everywhere; there was not a thing familiar to be seen (unless one counted that grass was grass, and trees were trees).

Eventually a dark smudge appeared on the horizon, and it resolved to be, after several hours, a massive city. And it was like no city Harry had ever before seen. A peculiar mixture of old and futuristic, he thought. The architecture had a certain sense of age about it, yet there were flying vehicles everywhere. Banners with all the same symbol were common enough as his mount was guided along stone-paved streets, the people on foot making way for the party. Approximately fifteen minutes later they had arrived at a grand residence with its own stable.

Harry was hustled off inside and shoved into a chair. None of those who remained (which was all but the one who had slap-happy hands) said anything. They would not even look at him directly, which was both irritating and unnerving. The room itself was the colour of adobe and sported wide archways in place of doors. Plants hung here and there, and the furniture was all woven from some type of reed, or perhaps wicker, and softened by plush cushions in pale greens and golds. He thought it was quite soothing, and might be more so if he had a clue what was going on.

“Ah, a visitor to this humble abode.”

He looked over his shoulder to see a tall, tanned man with longish, shaggy brown hair, and a shaped, closely-trimmed beard. “My people tell me you may be a spy, my friend,” the man said as he circled around to stand before the chair.

“I don’t know anything. Not where I am or even really how I got here. Nothing is familiar, and I don’t feel very well. I’d say from riding those weird birds, but I felt ill before that,” he replied, hating himself for sounding rather pathetic.

“I see what they mean,” the man said, reaching up to remove his mirrored sunglasses and tuck them into a pocket; his eyes were a strange, pale green. “Your accent, my friend, is telling. However, you are in luck, for I have a way with seeing the truth of matters, and I deem you no threat to me and mine.”

Harry’s ‘escort’ all filed out at that, prompting him to say, “Do I look that wretched?”

The man erupted into rich laughter and shook his head. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Al-Cid, of the noble House Margrace, rulers of the Rozarrian empire.”

‘*Oh dear.*’ Harry nodded and replied, “Harry.”

“Such a peculiar name, my friend! That will never do! Come, come, we will go sit in the garden and talk. The afternoon rains will begin soon, and there is no better place to be but there.” Al-

Cid waited for him to stand, then led him off, arriving a short few minutes later outside. A gazebo was their destination, painted pale green, and within were more of those woven chairs. “Sit, sit! Now, it is not that you look wretched. I simply have a way of recognizing the truth, my friend. Despite your accent so like those rapacious Archadians, I can see you are not one of them. However, such a thing may be an advantage.”

“Archadians?” For that matter, Rozarrians? Giant chickens? And why did the man sound Spanish? Was he some sort of Legilimencer?

“Ah, we shall speak of them soon enough. I should like to know more about you, such as where you hail from, and how you came to be with us.”

“Something tells me,” he said slowly, “that you’d not recognize the name. I come from a place called England.”

Al-Cid shook his head, which was exactly what Harry expected.

“As for how I got here, I’m not entirely sure. To be brief, a war had just ended, one in which I played a fairly important role. I—”

“Ah, ah, ah,” said Al-Cid, wagging a finger back and forth. “I think more than just fairly.”

Harry scowled faintly. “Anyway, there were a number of supporters left from the other side, those who had never been flushed out. I was at a meeting at . . . at the seat of our government when I was attacked by those same people. There were far too many, so I fled. The place I was at, though, was a place of discovery and invention and mystery, and I ended up completely lost. The last thing I remember there was an area with so many doorways. One of them I went through just as it was damaged. I ended up in a dark place, I couldn’t see anything. Some voice . . . told me it would judge my fate. And the next thing I knew I was being slapped awake.”

“It sounds like the gods were involved, my—” Al-Cid abruptly swept a hand out and smiled. “Ah, see? The rains, they come.”

He had to admit, the sight was beautiful. Sitting there in the safety of the gazebo afforded an excellent view of nature unleashing itself. After a minute of silent enjoyment he realized that none of the water was getting anywhere near them, despite the angle it fell at. Harry cast a look of confusion at his companion.

“The gazebo, it has an elemental paling to block the water,” Al-Cid explained.

The question had reminded him of another, however, so he asked, “The gods?”

“But of course! Who else would have the power? You who come from elsewhere, who does not recognize the oh so common chocobo, nor even a simple paling. What else is a man to think, hey?”

Harry gazed out at the rain again, considering. Chocobo might refer to anything—quite possibly those birds—but the paling Al-Cid spoke of was clearly a fine-tuned barrier or shield of some kind. He had thought maybe, on seeing those flying vehicles, that it was science responsible, but now he wasn't so sure. “What exactly is a paling?”

“Why, a magical barrier, of course. I have set my mind to it, my friend,” Al-Cid said firmly. “I shall see you wise in the ways of this world, and see what you are capable of. It was very good fortune for you my men found you.”

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## Two Years Later

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He slipped off his chocobo gratefully and detached the saddle bags, tossing them over one shoulder. A stablehand appeared to deal with the feathered menace, so Harry adjusted the staff on his back and walked slowly toward the house. Another day, another take of leavings of lesser monsters that roamed beyond the borders of the city. The only saving grace were the things he could fashion from those odds and ends, things he could then sell elsewhere.

Al-Cid, who he had come to learn was but one of many sons of House Margrace, had given him quarters within the family compound at Ambervale, a small cottage of a type often used for guests, that was just perfect for him. Two years of learning and work saw him one of a number of things, mage and merchant being foremost. He had learned early on that whatever caused his transition from Earth to Ivalice had changed him. His magic had been twisted, and he found it almost amusing (well after the fact, that is) that there were a mere three offensive spells in his arsenal, four if you counted one for its incidental properties.

He had wept at first, dry-eyed and silent but nevertheless weeping, over the corruption of so fundamental a part of his being. He could no longer even pretend he could handle everything on his own, a harsh awakening to reality, but one he adjusted to with only a fairly short period of being an utter bastard to everyone. Al-Cid had found him all so amusing and was never offended; perhaps it was that his truth-sensing ability allowed him to gloss over things others were not so keen to.

Harry had barely slung himself into a chair to begin unloading his spoils when he heard a familiar shout. Turning, he saw his friend and nominal lord approaching. In truth, if anyone could be called that it was Al-Cid's father, emperor of his adopted homeland.

“You return, and looking worse for wear, my friend.”

“Thanks so much,” Harry said dryly. “You're everything my ego could ever ask for.”

Al-Cid dropped lazily into a seat and flashed him an unrepentant smile. “Ah, but someone must be always a check on hubris, hey? Hallam, I have a task for you.”

“More rumors?” he inquired, sitting up a bit straighter.

“Of a certainty. Archadia seems to be on the move again, and I would have you do the usual. I have even arranged for a quantity of those baubles the foreigners so like to spend their gold on.”

Harry eyed his friend carefully, looking to see what sort of mood he really was in. “Speculation, then. Anything specific?”

“There seems to be a bit of unrest in Nabradia,” Al-Cid tossed out.

He looked down with a slight frown. Nabradia and Dalmasca were allies, the prince and princess of those kingdoms only having recently united in marriage. However, Nabradia and Rozarria had a treaty, with Rozarrian troops stationed near her borders as one line of defense and support. Harry could almost see what was going wrong, and wondered if the decision had been made with that in mind, or in ignorance of the potential outcome.

“The agents, they send back word from Nabudis. I would have you take the pulse of the usual areas.”

He breathed a slight sigh of relief. Entering Nabradia was easy enough, but his accent marked him as Archadian, despite the time he had spent in Rozarria. Al-Cid had been insistent that he maintain it, even arranging through obscure channels for Harry to have the mark of a noble in Archades so he could spend time there without much, if any, suspicion. After all, most everyone on seeing a Rozarrian merchant had but one thought: spy.

“All right. Do you want reports ongoing, or when I return?” He would have to forget about his current activities and rely on supplies he already had, plus whatever Al-Cid had arranged for his stock.

“Ongoing only if the word is urgent, Hallam. This may be but a settling in period, hey? Come when you’ve rested. I’ll have the goods and a new supply of stones for you.”

“I’ll just have to let the clan leader know I’ll be gone again,” he murmured.

“Nay, you rest. I will take care of that.” Al-Cid rose from his chair and smiled lazily, then raised two fingers in a goodbye gesture before slinking back out.

“Okay,” he muttered. “So I know it’s serious if he’s all but thrown me at a bed.” He checked the time and saw that he had several hours before he would be tired enough to sleep, so he hauled the saddlebags over to empty them out and see what he could accomplish that evening before having to give over his time toward preparing for his unscheduled trip.

The next morning he drifted through his usual routine, though skipping breakfast, and set off for his friend's, pack slung over a shoulder carefully so as not to interfere with his staff. True, he had his gun, but that left him open to being more easily hurt, so he tended not to use it unless the clan team he was supporting had him covered, or he was certain of his game.

Al-Cid was waiting with a huge meal and another pack, and sent him off with the usual friendly words. Harry was shortly staggering to a gate crystal, under the weight both of supplies and the food in his stomach, to arrive at the Tchita Uplands, where he took the time to lure a wild chocobo into his temporary service. The trip went easily enough, the chocobo enough to ward off any creatures eyeing him as their next meal; not many monsters would dare provoke one of the feathery beasts. On arrival at Balfenheim he released the chocobo and carried on on foot, seeking a warm meal and a room at the inn. And a bath. Definitely a bath.

The next morning found him claiming an open spot among the other merchants that lined the Gallerina Marketplace, his wares an exotic lure for the people who thronged the port town. The babble of those passing through and even stopping to browse was fairly innocent, but there was an underlying current of speculation and rumor, which Harry listened carefully to, even as he shifted his merchandise and held items up so that potential customers could more easily examine them.

Archadia, so it went, was unhappy with the treaty, and was considering taking action. Harry was well aware that Archadia was as much governed by the imperial senate as the emperor, and if they had their minds set on something, could overrule the less sanguinary ruler. He found it somewhat ironic that the legacy of Dynast-King Raithwall gave rise to such aggression. Then again, that legacy was born of aggression, of Humes, so. . . .

He gathered up his things when sunset threatened and returned to the inn to relax for the night before taking an airship to Archades, where he presumed he would hear a great deal more in the way of rumors flooding the streets. He stopped briefly at his own home there, it barely a hovel in comparison to the residences of the much more powerful nobles, to refresh himself and rearrange his wares to suit the location.

Rienna was his choice, it being near both the item shop and the aerodrome, not to mention several grocers. And if he found no luck there, he could try Nilbasse instead, with the Grand Arcade a final resort. He secured his sandalwood chop to his tunic where it could be seen easily enough, and then headed out to set up.

Several customers had come and gone, each of them exclaiming over the uniqueness of his wares, when a familiar voice could be heard. Harry glanced up briefly from restocking a few items on his portable display, then smiled slightly.

“Hallam, is that you?”

“Who else would I be?” he replied. “It’s been a while. How fare you?”

Ffamran shook his head and moved in much closer to speak at barely above a whisper. "I don't like what I've been hearing. And, my father. . . ."

Harry arched a brow, gaze sliding sideways to see a frustrated and concerned expression. "Still experimenting?"

"I think something is wrong," Ffamran murmured as he picked up a curio to examine. "He's obsessed. And, I think, with more and more voice among the more self-interested senators."

"I see," he spoke quietly. "I admit, I heard some disturbing rumors in Balfonheim on my way through, but those were mostly related to the senate's reaction to the situation in Nabradia."

"Yes, exactly. I fear something is to happen soon, and my father a part of it. More and more judge magisters have been arriving in the city. That cannot possibly be good news." Ffamran set down the item and took another to examine. "These are really something else, by the way."

Harry chuckled and nodded. "You know I bring out my best for Archades. Besides, you'd be upset if I had nothing out of the ordinary to tempt you with, and I should so hate to disappoint."

"Does that mean I get a favored customer discount, Hallam?" Ffamran said with a brief, teasing smile.

He shook his head and sighed. "Why you persist. . . .?"

"All right, fine. Have dinner with me? Surely you'll be ready to succumb to my charm after a day of plying your wares."

"Have you any idea just how . . . indecent that sounded?" he asked, shooting a vaguely disturbed look at Ffamran. "But, since you ask so nicely, I'd be glad to. You are going to feed me properly, right?"

Ffamran smirked. "I shall return . . . around sunset?"

Harry nodded. "If you don't see me still here, knock me up at my flat. It depends on how spendthrift people are as to whether I move around, but I'll be sure to return home before sunset."

Ffamran grinned and started to walk away, then paused and turned back, tossing the curio to him, which Harry snatched out of the air deftly.

Quite a few hours later and with feet tired from standing for so long, Harry was glad to be packing up. The citizenry had been rife with rumor and speculation, all of which centered around a possible invasion, something the idle rich thought was an excellent bit of excitement. And that was something he must report back.

Back at his place he dropped off his things and fetched a memstone from the supply Al-Cid had given him, and recorded his report, then made the hike to Old Archades. His hooded cloak and mark of nobility gave him protection from curious eyes and questioning lips, and he was unimpeded as he forged deeper into the run-down warrens, to eventually slip through an almost forgotten door, one that led to an unguarded gate crystal in the long abandoned Sochen Cave Palace. A useless curiosity for most denizens of Old Archades, it was very useful for him.

From there he gated to the Yensa Sandsea and pulled a mechanical bird from his pack. To that was entrusted the memstone, and it was launched into the air to deliver his report. Harry was quick enough that he was able to gate back out before the Urutan-Yensa could come to murder him for his transgressions. And he was ready and waiting by the time Ffamran knocked on his door.

And Ffamran was smiling once revealed, his earlier frustration nowhere in evidence. “A princely dinner awaits in the Grand Arcade, and after, like any leading man, I shall escort you home safely.”

He snorted in amusement. He might be better suited to supporting others with his magic than destroying enemies, but that did not mean Harry was helpless. Still, it was just how his friend was, and he rather expected that a talk of a different sort would ensue once returned. So he allowed himself to be led away after locking up, and enjoyed an overpriced and exquisitely prepared meal as Ffamran regaled him with silly tales of foolish nobles, all of whom seemed to suffer the horrible flaw of not realizing they were ever petty in the grander scheme of things.

It had been several months since he had last seen Ffamran, so there was plenty of useless gossip to absorb, and plenty of time to be spent gazing at him, taking in the changes on the man’s face. They were of an age, after all, and Harry wondered if any changes in himself were so evident as those of Ffamran were to him.

After the meal Ffamran very gallantly offered his arm and guided their relatively short journey, one which Harry was reasonably sure held no particular dangers. Except, perhaps, some of the fashions worn about town. He, of course, offered the obligatory drink, and Ffamran accepted, and they were shortly seated with glasses of a very mild brew, Harry refusing to keep anything strong in his own home, or even much of anything that could potentially befuddle his senses.

“I have missed you,” Harry finally said. “You always are so entertaining. But surely, my meager company cannot be much to hold your interest for long.”

Ffamran chuckled and shook his head. “I expected you would see through me. May I be honest?”

Harry arched a brow in mild confusion.

“I wanted your company for two reasons,” Ffamran said. “Your friendship foremost, so unlike the usual lot in this city, heads filled with useless rubbish and one-upmanship. I have always felt, damnably starry-eyed as it may sound, that you were different. I really am very concerned, Hallam, about what may come to pass and my father’s role in it. I do not know if I can bear things as they are, not for much longer.”

“Far be it from me to spout baseless speculation,” Harry said slowly, “but are your worries rooted in his work, or what that work may be doing to him?”

“Both. He is not the man he was. The distance between us grows daily, like some encroaching desert on what once was fertile land. He is obsessed, I think, driven down a road that is unclear to me and one I would not gladly follow. He seems almost mad, frequently speaking as though someone were there, but is not, like some spirit unseen. And, I fear his influence with the senate.”

Harry gnawed on his lower lip before saying, “And what of your . . . responsibilities?”

Ffamran frowned and knocked back the remainder of his drink. “That’s more hired muscle than adjudication at times. I don’t know. I guess I won’t know until I do.”

He raised his brows briefly and had another sip, wondering as he often had if Ffamran had any idea that Harry was a Rozarrian agent. There was always a sense of delicacy that surrounded their time together, but he could not determine if it was his own mind playing tricks on him. It was a staggering fact alone that Ffamran was as open as he was about those that comprised the Archadian government. If he was being used, that was perfectly all right, but he did hold some reservations in being an agent. Ffamran was one of those reservations, having become rather dear to him.

“What is the other reason?” he eventually responded.

Ffamran gazed at him and licked his lips, rather suggestively Harry thought. “If you won’t give me a discount, perhaps I should take advantage of you in another way.”

“W-what?” Surely that did not mean how it sounded.

“I have been exceptionally charming this evening, you must admit. Have I been so charming that you would not resist a kiss, Hallam?”

It did mean that. Harry stared at his friend wide-eyed, not blinking as Ffamran slowly rose and came to stand before him, then pulled Harry to his feet. He blinked finally at the serious look in his friend’s eyes. “How long?” he whispered.

“Long enough.”

Ffamran began to lean toward him, an action Harry stopped with a hasty, “Wait.”

His friend pulled back, a look of inquiry on his face.

“What is this to you?” Harry asked. He had spent himself with more than one man after his life began anew in Ivalice, but those had always been casual affairs. His friend was hardly in that category, and yet. . . ?

“I’m not sure yet,” Ffamran whispered. “But I would have it, if you would have it with me. This one night, at least.”

Just . . . one night? Ffamran was leaning in again, and this time was not denied as lips came to press against his own and hands reached up to cradle his head. Harry surrendered to his own desire, it having cunningly been stoked during dinner, with him having noticed all sorts of interesting things about his friend that heretofore had not particularly stood out. He brought his own hands up to glide over Ffamran’s back, the half full bottle he held slipping without care from his grasp.

He slid them down to tug the man’s shirt free so he could touch bare flesh, and mentally smiled at the sound of a faint groan issuing from Ffamran’s throat. His friend reacted by attacking his mouth hungrily, one hand moving to grasp the back of his neck while the other moved to return the favor. It seemed like a lifetime played out in mere minutes before they were reclining on Harry’s bed, clothing stripped away in haste.

The next morning Harry opened his eyes to sigh and stare at the ceiling. He was ruined, he thought, and how utterly laden with naïve romanticism was that? Depressingly, his day did not afford even one glimpse of Ffamran, so he carried on as usual, selling the odd curiosity and keeping his ears well open for anything of interest. It was two days after that when the gossip turned toward the theft of a prototype airship from one of the shipwright guilds.

The day following was cause for Harry to pack up his wares barely he even sold any, for word had come down that Archadia was advancing once again. Thankfully it was around noon, so his departure was nothing uncommon to other itinerant merchants, and the people were not inclined to buy when they could raise their speculations to a furious height.

And though it seemed unlikely, Harry would not risk the possibility that any of the imperials would check the traces on the gate crystals, so he did not take a direct route. Rather, he gated to the Tchita Uplands from the Sochen Cave Palace, and from there through several other of the crystals he had worked so hard to gain access to, before finally arriving in Schpariel, the imperial capital of Rozarria, so he could see Al-Cid.

“Ah, my friend, you return! Such an interesting report you sent.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t think this could wait for even the time it took for carrier. Everyone on the streets of Archades speaks of the Archadian army advancing, and there is only one place they likely go to.”

Al-Cid nodded sagely. “They are most displeased. Threatened, I say. I will inform the emperor at once. Hallam, I would have you check Bhujerba, hey? It would be useful to know of Ondore’s reaction.”

And Bhujerba sported a gate crystal so oft utilized that tracing its use would be folly. After all, not everyone could stomach the airship ride to its lofty heights. “I’ll go there directly,” he promised.

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## Two Years Later

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His eyes scanned his teammates constantly, flicking around in a steady pattern of watchfulness, not only for their health, but to keep watch to shout warning should anything not on their agenda attempt to ambush the hunters. The Lhusu Mines were creepy enough without having to guard against any number of strange things that roamed the darkened areas carved out of solid rock. The wan light of magicite deposits could only afford so much visibility.

He prepped a spell, one of the men having taken a nasty hit, then unleashed the curative magic. Milardros straightened up immediately and tossed a smile over his shoulder before advancing on the mark again. It was another twenty minutes before the thing breathed its last.

Alfaro came over and clapped him on the back, a smile on his sweaty face. “Excellent care of us, as usual. We never fear for our lives with you to guard our health. ‘Twas a good thing you were headed to Bhujerba, hey?”

He would take that as flattery but he knew damn well it was not; he was highly sought after by teams formed within the clan for hunts. However, while his thought to visit Bhujerba was no coincidence, being accompanied by a clan team was. And who was he to say no to those who had need of him for such a dangerous task. They had taught him everything he knew about using his staff and gun, all at the behest of Al-Cid.

“I could not have said no,” he replied. “I’d be worried, in any case.”

Alfaro laughed and shook his head. “Let us go. We have no need now to linger in this darkness. Both our marks are fairly slain, and we go to claim the prestige.”

“Try to spell my name right this time?” he mock whined.

Back outside he breathed in the fresh, clean air gratefully. The miasma below was stifling, and the horrifying skeletal remnants of humanity were a nightmare best soon forgotten. How the miners could possibly stand to work in the mines. . . . “I’ll see you whenever,” he told Alfaro, then waved and jogged on ahead, intent to secure time in the bath. And, he thought with a happy sigh, an excellent meal in the household of the marquis, a man well aware of just exactly what trade Harry plied. He made good time, and was shortly in his rooms.

Sadly, every trip to Bhujerba brought forth a memory he was unfond of reliving, when Ffamran disappeared without word, and without a trace. But, the reality of now was a bath of steaming water, calling his name. He slipped in and groaned with pleasure, intent to soak for several minutes before even thinking about moving to gather up soap and cloth. At least of late he dared step foot within Rabanastre, his accent nothing so uncommon by then; the Muthru Bazaar hosted many a foreign merchant, as did Nalbina.

However, when word came of an attack on the royal palace of Rabanastre, it was time for Harry to once again do some sampling, some pulse taking. Thus, Bhujerba, the so-called autonomous city-state, which was in fact a minor puppet of Archadia's might. Ondore was ever a man to watch, and did not scruple to make allies in secret where he must.

He emerged some time later, refreshed, and had dinner delivered, then turned in for the night, his thoughts only of sleep. The next morning he devoted to rearranging his stock, then took over one of the rooms which boasted a large surface he could work on to begin assembling stock. He was mildly surprised to see that visitors had arrived, one of whom looked astonishingly like the youngest son of Emperor Gramis. With the boy was a blond girl, who looked the elder by several years. Harry's work must have seemed interesting, for the boy guided his companion into the room and produced a smile.

"If I may ask, what is this?" the boy asked.

"Some of my wares have to be disassembled for transport, so as to take up less room," he answered, "and some I did not have the chance to make at all."

"Those are beautiful," said the girl, pointing at a collection of feathers found only within Rozarria.

"And widely sought," he replied. "I harvest them myself to save on costs."

The boy's brow arched at that. Harry rather figured that he was considering the implications, but perhaps that was too much to assign to a child barely into his teens. Then again, if he was a son of House Solidor, anything was possible.

"Forgive me," he added. "I am Hallam Laurifer."

The boy replied, "I am Larsa, and my companion is called Penelo. Please excuse us. We will not interrupt you further." He then guided Penelo off after a nod.

Harry heaved a silent sigh and let his fingers move automatically as he considered if this visit from Archadia was simply routine, or if there was a connection to the attack on Rabanastre. Ondore arrived not much later and paused to have a word with him.

"An imperial detachment is here."

“I had thought so when your . . . guests arrived. Why else would a son of House Solidor walk these halls?”

Ondore nodded, then glanced at the table. “You should pack up, my friend. It is near lunch, and I would not see you waste away in toil, no matter how idly done it be.”

Lunch, as it turned out, included Larsa and Penelo at the table, and it came out that the girl had been kidnapped and brought to Bhujerba to force a sky pirate to confrontation. Ill done, of course, as according to Penelo, she had barely spent ten seconds with the man in question, named Balthier, so he had very little reason to rescue her.

“And how did you find the mines, Lord Larsa,” Ondore inquired after the conclusion of the story.

Larsa gave hint of the slightest frown before saying, “They were dark.”

“That they are,” Harry decided to say. “I was there just yesterday, and a creepier place I’ve not recently seen.”

Ondore chuckled. “Ah, but you had a rather compelling reason, did you not?”

“Only because of the clan,” he said dismissively. “The coincidence was too much for them to ignore, and had me dragged along barely I managed to even unpack.”

“Clan?” Penelo inquired. “Is that like the clan my friend Vaan belongs to?”

“I’m sure it’s similar. I’m one of their primary support mages when I’m not off being a merchant. A team happened to pick up marks here in Bhujerba, and since this was my next stop, they decided I could spare the time to keep them safe.”

Larsa arched a brow again, though the gesture was subtle. “You must see and hear much in your travels.”

Harry considered that before saying carefully, “I’ve found it quite peculiar that people tend to be inordinately chatty with people who have exotic goods. I must wonder at times if it’s due to them wishing to seem more learned about the world around them.”

“I’m more skilled with offensive magic,” Penelo stated, somewhat breaking the sudden tension in the room. “I can’t seem to get the hang of the support stuff.”

“We all have our strengths,” Harry said sagely.

“Ah, pray excuse me.” Ondore pushed away from the table and rose, walking over to the door where a servant awaited, who murmured something as soon as the marquis was close enough.

Ondore turned back and said, “Lord Larsa, your cortege stands ready in the reception room to escort you to the imperial detachment.”

Larsa nodded and set aside his napkin. “Please, marquis, have someone inform them we will be there shortly.” He stood up and gestured to Penelo, then said to Harry, “It is a shame we could not talk more. I have a feeling you would be an interesting conversationalist.”

He merely inclined his head in a gesture of respect and stayed silent as Larsa guided Penelo away, though he did wonder why an emperor’s son was keeping her so close, she a daughter of Dalmasca. He also wondered if this chance meeting could somehow be extended into an advantage.

That line of contemplation was broken when Ondore approached and said, “My friend, word has arrived that someone in the city claims to be the great traitor.”

“Oh?” he said as he set his own napkin aside. “Who would dare claim such?”

“Come, we go to my office,” Ondore replied, and once there and settled in said, “You have heard, I expect, that an attack was made on Consul Vayne by the resistance in Rabanastre.”

“Yes, of course. The streets buzz with it.”

“I suspect we may be playing host to some part of that resistance,” Ondore explained. “It may be that I will see fit to give them audience. But you, my friend, for you I have a question.”

Harry furrowed his brow, then nodded.

“I must needs play a perilous role in the world of today, as you know. Autonomous and neutral Bhujerba must appear to be, but you know that is not entirely so. Should the resistance of Dalmasca be here, I would be given little choice with the watchful eyes of the imperials at hand.”

“You mean you’d turn them over to keep people from looking more closely at your own resistance. Word was that several were tossed into the Nalbina dungeons.”

“Correct.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“I could mistakenly turn you over with them.”

Harry blinked a few times and reached up to massage his temple. “I suppose I don’t need to point out that I could end up dead? I think I understand where you’re going with this, but. . . .”

“Yes, you could be another bridge, my friend, between myself and the Dalmascan resistance, as you already are between myself and Rozarria. It is up to you if you wish to take the risk for a chance to become something of an influence among those people, or at least an ear.”

“I . . . need to think on this,” he said as he stood. “I think I’ll take a walk.”

Ondore nodded. “Do not dally overlong, for should you decide so, you must be here. And, it may be that this claimant is naught but a contentious fool.”

Harry left, quickly making his way to his room to record a report, then headed for the aerodrome so he could gate out long enough to send it to Al-Cid. After that he walked rather slowly about the city, wondering if the risk was too great, and there was little chance he would receive counsel from Al-Cid in time, not that he really expected any. A murmured conversation with one of the Sainikah revealed that Ondore’s people were having a little ‘chat’ with the claimant and his friends, which decided Harry on returning to the estate.

He was headed toward Travica Way when a familiar voice caused him to freeze in disbelief; a cautious look back over his shoulder was enough to make his mouth drop open. There, alive and well, was the missing Ffamran, accompanied by a Viera and two male Humes.

Ffamran must have sensed the intent gaze, for he looked up. A smile blossomed as he quickly strode forward. “Hallam!” Ffamran grasped his forearm in greeting and pulled him close, then whispered in his ear, “I am called Balthier now.”

Harry nodded somewhat dazedly as his friend released him. “Balthier.”

“I have missed you. You always seemed to be elsewhere whenever I stopped in at one of your usual haunts,” Balthier stated. “Rather frustrating, I must say.” On Harry’s glance at the others Balthier promptly said, “Ah, yes. Hallam, with me is Fran, my partner. She helps maintain and co-pilot my airship. The younger is Vaan—”

“Vaan?” he interrupted unthinkingly. “Penelo’s Vaan?”

“Hey! You know her!?” Vaan looked excited and concerned.

And having made the mistake of showing more knowledge than he ought—probably due to his wits being scattered, though that was no excuse—Harry equivocated. “She was walking with an Archadian boy. I happened to learn her name, and yours. And, something about a kidnapping?”

“Listen,” Balthier said smoothly. “We’ve someplace to be, I’m afraid. Would you . . . care to accompany us?”

Harry eyed his friend speculatively, then nodded. “For a bit, at least. I admit, I am most curious about that airship you mentioned,” he said rather edgily.

Balthier winced faintly. “Then let us go.” He slung an arm around Harry’s shoulders and guided him along, taking him exactly where he had been headed in the first place. “I apologize,” he whispered as they approached the Sainikah guarding the entrance to Ondore’s estate, then requested admittance, which was granted.

Harry was by then almost convinced that his friend was mixed up with the Dalmascan resistance. He knew the name Balthier, a sky pirate of some distinction, and sky pirates had rare reason to consort with rulers. “Even a note under the door would have been nice, not a two year long silence,” he said for Balthier’s ears only.

“It was a last minute decision,” Balthier whispered back. “I had to take the chance or lose it forever. I regret that I’ve hurt you.”

“So it *was* you—the thief. You left because of. . . .”

He received no answer, for that was when they reached Ondore’s office and were ushered inside. Surprise flitted across Ondore’s face as he saw Harry among the group, but was masked with alacrity. He was seated behind his overlarge desk, one of his aides standing beside him. “Sir Basch Fon Ronsenburg,” Ondore said. “It was not so very long ago that I announced you had been executed.”

Harry looked sidelong at the previously unnamed man, then at Balthier. How nice to know his suspicions were correct. At least he would be in good company.

“And that is the only reason I draw breath,” Basch said in reply.

There was a brief pause, Ondore leaning forward to place his arms on the desk and clasp his hands together. Harry managed to catch the man’s eye and give a tiny nod, which was returned, so he assumed he had adequately expressed his acceptance. Ondore then said, “So you are the sword he’s strung above my head. Vayne has left not a thing to chance. And?”

“A leader of the resistance has fallen into imperial hands. A woman by the name of Amalia. I would rescue her, but I need your help,” Basch said.

Ondore sat back again before saying, “This resistance leader—this Amalia. She must be very important.”

Basch bowed slightly, his right arm coming up to cross his chest, a gesture that left Harry somewhat puzzled.

The marquis stood and began to move around his desk, using his cane for support. “You understand I’ve my position to consider,” he began, but was interrupted when Vaan stepped forward quickly.

“Would you let us see Larsa? He’s got my friend with him.”

Ondore turned slowly toward Vaan, bringing his cane before him and folding his hands atop it. "I'm afraid you're too late. Lord Larsa's cortege has already rejoined the imperial detachment. I am told they will depart for Rabanastre upon the arrival of the fleet this eventide."

Vaan released a frustrated sigh and looked away in defeat, then jerked and moved closer to the massive windows that spanned the back wall of the office. All attention was taken up by the sight of an imperial fleet approaching the city. Of more worry were the small craft detaching themselves from the flagship and speeding toward Bhujerba.

Vaan reacted by backing up quickly, stopped by the steady hand of Balthier, and said, "What are we waiting for!?"

*'To flee?' Harry wondered. 'Or to assume their captured leader is on board one of those ships, and to infiltrate? Or, of course, the location of his missing friend.'*

"For you to calm down," Balthier responded, hand still on Vaan's arm.

"Captain Ronsenburg." Ondore turned from the windows to face Basch again, hands back on his cane. "Surely the exigencies of position are not lost to you. Why indeed, you should find the enemy's chains . . . an easy burden to bear."

A glance at Basch's face show that he understood very well what Ondore was implying, and offering. Balthier released Vaan and stepped toward Basch, one hand outreached. "Wait!"

Basch looked over his shoulder and said, "Sorry. Can't be helped." He then drew his sword and faced Ondore, who reacted by tapping his cane sharply on the floor.

"Summon the guard!" Ondore ordered, his aide moving quickly to open the doors to admit a number of men. And as they were overwhelmed by numbers and taken into custody Ondore ordered, "They're to be taken to Judge Ghis."

Harry did not put up more than a token resistance, and stayed as near to Balthier as he could as they were cuffed and hustled off to the aerodrome for transport to the fleet. He was, however, rather shocked that no one bothered to seize their weapons. It seemed they placed much trust in their equipment, and not enough in the ingenuity of others.

Eventually they arrived at a control room of some sort, and Harry had not had any chance to speak with Balthier, much to his frustration; their guards had silenced every attempt by any of them at speech.

"The prisoners, my lord," said their escort, his voice hollow due to his armor.

Up ahead could be seen a number of imperials, one of which must be Judge Ghis, and also . . . a woman. She half turned to look, then fully, and gasped, her expression turning to one of anger. As their group approached she moved to meet them.

“Majesty—” Basch got out before she came close enough to slap him across the face.

“After what you’ve done! How dare you!” she cried angrily, arm across her body like a ward. Her voice dropped, almost to a growl. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

The judge, presumably Ghis, began to walk toward them slowly, saying, “Come now, come now. Have you forgotten your manners?” The woman backed down as he continued, “This is hardly the courtesy due . . . the late Princess Ashelia B’nargin Dalmasca.”

Vaan stepped forward to blurt out, “Princess?”

Harry realized that the only person who had recognized her was Basch, for Balthier exchanged a surprised look with Fran. Even he had not, never having had the opportunity with his avoidance of Rabanastre prior to her alleged death.

Ghis came closer still, drifting to a stop next to the princess. “To be sure, she bears no proof of her former station. No different than any mean member of the insurgence.”

Ashelia’s head jerked slightly to the side. “The resistance,” she said edgily, and returned to holding something like a staring contest with Basch.

Now, to Harry’s mind, either the alleged king-slayer Basch had a very seriously skewed set of priorities, or he had been framed for the crime and remained ever true to the throne of Dalmasca. Either way, it was clear that the princess believed him traitor.

“His excellency the consul asks the ministry of the disenthroned royal family in restoring peace to Dalmasca,” Ghis continued. “Those who foster instability and unrest, who claim royal blood without proof . . . they shall meet their fate at the gallows. There are no exceptions.”

Ashelia quickly turned her head toward the judge, determination writ on her face. “I will not play puppet to Vayne.”

“King Raminas entrusted me with a task,” Basch said evenly, causing the princess to slowly face him again. “Should the time come, he bade me give you something of great importance.” He lifted his chin and continued, “It is your birthright: the Dusk Shard.” Basch then turned his head toward Ghis. “It will warrant the quality of her blood. Only I know where to find it.”

“Wait. You took my father’s life! Why spare mine now?” Ashelia protested, hand coming up to her chest, though she dropped it just as quickly, her expression changing to that of anger. “You would have me live in shame!”

“If that is your duty: yes.”

The princess gasped as though she had been slapped in return.

Harry edged closer to Balthier as Vaan stepped forward and said impatiently, “Stop being so stubborn! Keep on like this and you’re gonna get us all killed!”

“Don’t interrupt,” Ashelia snapped at him, then gasped.

Harry’s attention was caught by a glow emanating from Vaan’s pocket, and watched in fascination as the blond awkwardly reached down to retrieve something that resembled magicite. Harry circled around cautiously, in the process getting even closer to Balthier, and so he could see things more clearly.

“Vaan, that stone!” Basch said.

Vaan seemed a bit sheepish and would not meet the eyes of anyone. “It was in the palace treasure,” he muttered.

“Well, well,” Balthier said, his tone one of mild chagrin, and shifted to stand shoulder to shoulder with Harry, Fran moving up to Balthier’s other side.

Ghis laughed heartily. “Splendid! You’ve brought the stone with you! This spares us a great deal of trouble.”

The princess darted forward but was immediately restrained by an armored hand on her shoulder. “Don’t give it to him!” she nevertheless ordered Vaan.

Vaan shifted, obviously indecisive, then looked sideways toward Balthier, who shrugged lightly and nodded. Vaan turned back to Ghis and extended the stone toward him, saying, “You have to promise: no executions.”

Ghis took the stone and stepped back. “A judge’s duty is to the law.”

Ghis slowly walked back toward the other end of the room, Ashelia struggling to no avail against the soldier’s restraining hand, and said, “Take them away. Lady Ashe is to be quartered separately.”

Ashe sighed, her face and posture expressing resignation and defeat, and allowed herself to be guided away. Harry did not resist when they were herded toward the door, the soldiers with Ashelia taking a different exit, though Vaan practically had to be picked up and turned around to get him moving.

They eventually ended up in a corridor leading back to where they'd been brought on board, leading Harry to assume they would be transported to a smaller ship, where it would be that much safer, them being so far separate from the princess.

Basch glanced sideways at Vaan and said, "So you were carrying it all along. The fates jest."

Vaan simply sighed.

Balthier snorted softly. "Tell those fates of yours to leave me out."

"Keep quiet," barked a soldier escorting them.

"There was nothing else that I could do," Basch tossed over his shoulder. "You know that."

"Oh, I understand that. Honor, duty, and all that," Balthier replied almost mockingly. "Hmph. I still can't believe that was the princess."

"I said keep quiet," shouted the same soldier, bringing his spear up to strike.

Balthier evaded nicely and was fast enough to grab the weapon, stopping the soldier and allowing Basch the opportunity to bludgeon the man from behind with his shackles and knock him to the floor. A second later Fran knocked out another with a swift kick. A strangled sound made them all turn to see one bearing black armor holding another up off the floor, then casting him aside unconscious. The so far helpful fellow then removed his helm and set it at his side.

Basch immediately strode forward. "The marquis has been busy."

"Not lightly did I beg his aid," said the man, stepping closer to Basch. "Listen, it has been a full two years. I alone have kept her majesty safely hidden." He reached out and released Basch from his shackles as he said, "I doubted friend and foe alike. I could trust nobody."

And while he had been speaking, Balthier had been busy using a thin piece of oddly-shaped metal to free himself from his shackles as Fran did the same for herself. Balthier then helped Harry as Fran assisted Vaan, and Harry could not help but smile when his friend's fingers lingered over his skin for a few moments more than necessary.

Basch massaged his wrists and said, "You did your duty. And mine for me."

"I'm getting her out," was the response. "I need your help."

"Of course."

Basch headed off with the stranger, the group following, giving Harry an opportunity to fix a little matter of ignorance. "Who is that?" he whispered to Balthier.

“Captain Vossler Azelas, a member of the Dalmascan resistance, formerly of their army. Though how he managed to get aboard. . . . And my company does not seem to have boded well for you.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t care about that. And I can help, you know that.”

“Offering your services as a mage, are we? Or, something else?”

“I see you’ve not changed. Still the scandalous phraseology,” he said with fond irritation. “To hear you speak, you’ve unfinished business.”

Balthier chanced a look at him, brief because they were all moving quickly. “I do at that. I would . . . gladly have your company.”

Harry chose to interpret that for dual meaning, then went on alert as he spied soldiers up ahead. He quickly began casting spells to aid the party, to make them more resistant to attack, physical or magical. Balthier flashed him a grin and took aim with his gun, then shot, hitting one of the soldiers right through the faceplate of his helmet.

Fran used a bow and also stayed well back, while the remaining three moved in to fight at close range, they wielding swords. The clash of metal rang in his ears, a not unfamiliar sound, and he kept scanning, ready to cast again to heal if necessary, and taking the occasional shot himself. It was over in minutes, thankfully, and Vossler took off again, leading them onward.

Harry opted to resume the conversation with, “To have? And do you know what this is yet?”

“I believe so.” Balthier’s tone was confident. “But do you?”

He refused to answer that directly. “I missed you.”

“Then I think we’re agreed,” Balthier said with a smirk.

Vossler paused by a door, waiting for everyone to catch up. “It should be the central brig in here, and within that the cells.”

Harry started casting almost before the man had finished speaking, preparing for a not unlikely fight with guards. Even so, he had to wonder, did Ondore have ship designs smuggled from somewhere to share? Or had Vossler done some investigating before he had come to their aid. Harry nodded absently as the others thanked him for the additional protection, then followed as Vossler triggered the doors to open and led them inside.

Halfway across the gargantuan room the three soldiers at the other end noticed them and began to advance. The leader, dressed not so dissimilar to Ghis, said, “Fear not their numbers! Take down the leaders, and the others will follow!”

Clanking behind revealed that another judge and two soldiers had moved in to bracket them. Harry swore under his breath and swung his staff around, fearful to use his gun and risk not being able to block any of those swords coming toward him.

Balthier held no such reservations and was already shooting, Fran standing at his side with bowstring twanging, while the swordsmen made for the first trio of soldiers. Harry debated what to do, then swore again as he realized one of the soldiers was a mage. He quickly prepped Flare and cast it at the mage, sighing in relief when it went down like lead. After that he backed up and switched to his gun, taking careful shots to help the others, and healing as necessary.

When it was over Basch searched the fallen roughly and came up with a key to the cells, which was promptly used. Inside were six cells, one of which contained two moogles. Harry stopped to talk to them while Basch checked the other cells, finding out that one of the creatures was a merchant before the two of them scurried off.

The princess was there in another. Harry waited at the door with Balthier and Fran to keep an eye on the entrance while Vossler approached Ashe, who had jumped up from her seat on a cot.

“You are unharmed,” Vossler said.

“Vossler! I—” She lurched to the side, causing Vossler to grab her shoulders and steady her. After scanning her quickly Harry determined she was in fact all right, and probably just dizzy.

“Majesty!”

“It’s nothing,” she said dismissively. “I’ll be fine.”

Basch moved closer, and stopped when Ashe huffed in anger. “You,” she snarled.

Vaan, who Harry was beginning to think was a very impatient sort, said, “Come on, come on! Let’s go! What are you waiting for? Penelo’s still out there!”

Balthier checked the entrance again, then said, “We should hurry. They won’t be long.”

“We will talk later,” Vossler declared, to which the princess nodded. He handed her a sword before waving her out, as she had been disarmed. Harry had to assume they had not wanted to leave her so easy a path to suicide.

An alarm began sounding just as they exited the cell area, prompting Basch to declare, “Majesty. We will cut you a path.”

Ashe rounded on him and gestured angrily. “I will not place my trust in the sword of a traitor!”

“Yet trust his sword we must,” Vossler said calmly, gaining her attention, “traitor or no.” She looked down as he continued, “We must track back, commandeer a ship, and make our escape.”

Ashe huffed again and headed off, not waiting for anyone to ‘cut a path’ for her.

They were almost back to the launch area when two unarmored people ran across their path in one of the larger junction rooms. Everyone stopped to assess the situation, then stepped back in surprise. The two in question were Lord Larsa and Penelo.

Penelo had, Harry thought, the most peculiar expression on her face. Sad, and yet. . . . “Vaan!” She rushed toward her friend to hug him.

Larsa moved toward Ashe, sparing Harry an arched brow, and said, “Ghis knows you’ve escaped. You must hurry.” To Vossler, standing at her side, he said, “You are Captain Azelas. You will follow me. We must reach the airships before they do.”

*‘How does he know the name?’*

“You would let us leave knowing who we are?” Vossler asked incredulously.

Larsa turned back to Ashe and said, “Lady Ashe. By all rights you ought not even to exist. That you and Captain Ronsenburg were made to appear dead . . . is like a hidden thread laid bare. Your actions hereafter will pull at that thread, and we will see what it unravels. This is our chance. We must see this through, and get to the bottom of it. I believe ‘tis for the good of Dalmasca, and the good of the empire.”

Ashe stared at the boy intently for some few seconds before saying, “Very well, then.”

“Thanks,” came the sarcastic voice of Vaan, “Lamont.”

Larsa quickly turned to face the blond, seeming rather sheepish. “Uh, I must apologize,” he said, then approached Penelo, holding out a faceted, egg-shaped, glowing blue stone. “Penelo, for you. May it bring you good fortune.”

“Thanks,” she said as she accepted it.

“Let us go,” Larsa said to Vossler, then departed with him.

And while they continued on their way to the launch area, Harry had to wonder why, if Larsa was so keen to reach the airships, he had headed in the opposite direction.

There again, it was quickly noticed that Ghis was awaiting them, standing halfway along the walkway. He began moving toward them slowly. “Such a great shame. I must confess: I

thought you were the one who would help us restore peace to Dalmasca,” he said, clearly speaking to the princess, then moved his head in such a way as to make them look back.

A contingent of soldiers was headed their way at a full run.

“No matter,” Ghis continued as he came to a stop almost on the platform. “We hold proof of your royal lineage. A maid of passing resemblance will serve our purposes now.” He lifted his right hand, a swirling mass of red light forming above it. “As for you, my dear. . . .”

Ghis released the light, casting it above their heads where it expanded into a whirling vortex of flame. “The empire requires you no more!” He gestured again, the vortex exploding and raining down upon them. However, a blue light arose, somehow absorbing the attack, causing Ghis to growl in frustration.

Penelo fetched out the stone Larsa had gifted her. “What was that?”

“The nethicite,” Balthier said shortly.

Ashe looked away sharply from the glowing stone and darted toward Ghis, coming to a stop at the edge of the walkway.

“Your majesty does not disappoint!” Ghis said. “Ever quick to spurn an honorable surrender, as was your father.” He readied his weapons and began to advance.

“You know nothing of my father,” Ashe shouted, slashing a hand down in negation, then brandished the sword Vossler had given her.

Harry sighed and backed out of the direct line of danger, then began scanning to see who needed his support. He stuck to the door end of the room, expecting those soldiers to be less dangerous than Ghis, and therefore likely to be taken down earlier.

And he was correct, though his services were required, especially once Ghis got within range. The judge was not only capable of casting air-based magic, but could also inflict blindness, so Harry was kept busy healing and dispelling negative effects as the others fought to take Ghis down.

After a time Ghis staggered back, his body hunched over either in great pain or exhaustion. His helmet was ripped off and tossed to the ground, revealing an older man with iron-grey hair, and Ghis raised a hand to rest against his face. Before anyone could decide to act, Ghis looked up sharply toward the doors.

Vossler was approaching at a run, not breaking stride until he had made it just inside the doors. “We’ve secured an atomos. Come!” he shouted, motioning with one hand.

“An atomos?” Balthier said disdainfully as he ran toward the doors. “All skiff, no ship. Hardly fit for a leading man.”

Another hard run through hallways and rooms Harry had seen too much of brought them to the ship. Fran slung herself into one of the front seats and began the start-up sequence, Penelo hovering nearby and asking anxiously, “Can’t we go any faster?”

“Not yet,” Fran replied, then shifted as the ship launched straight into innumerable enemy craft, large and small, many of which were headed right for them.

Everyone hastily followed suit, ducking behind whatever was handy, until Ashe peered over the edge of the console and said, “They passed.”

“Any faster,” Fran said, “and they’d have noticed.”

“Well,” Balthier offered, “we can be grateful that the fleet is far enough away from Bhujerba to not likely notice when we head there.”

“Oh!” Penelo said, suddenly searching her pocket. She looked up again with a folded square of fabric in hand and held it out to Balthier. “Your handkerchief. I thought you might want it back.”

Balthier accepted it, bringing his hand up to his chest as he bowed a gallant thanks, causing Penelo’s expression to turn rather insipid. “I shall wear it close to my heart.”

Harry looked away in vague irritation. Toward the back stood Ashe, Vossler, and Basch in a triangle, and he was close enough to hear their speech.

“Perhaps you forget all that Ondore has wrought,” Ashe was saying to Basch.

“I do not forget,” Basch denied. “Majesty, it was by his counsel, dangerous thought it may have been, that we were able to free you. You must meet with him, your highness, and give ear to his words. He may act in league with the empire, but his heart is not.”

“It is as he says,” Vossler affirmed, briefly resting a hand on one hip. “I ought not have kept Ondore at so great a distance for so long a time. I have played the fool!”

“You were only being cautious,” Ashe said evenly.

“Majesty, I would ask you for some time,” Vossler said. “On our own, we struggle in vain to restore Dalmasca. I must search out some other way. Until I should find it, I would have Basch remain at your side. Doubt him you may, but I measure his loyalty to Dalmasca no less than my own.”

He seemed to have great influence on the princess, for Ashe clasped her hands together and replied, “I know you would not speak so lightly.”

To Basch Vossler said, “Keep her well. Go to Ondore, and there await my return.”

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## 2 : VIATICUS

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They arrived in Bhujerba as the sun was setting, at which point Vossler left them. And to Ondore's they went, gaining entrance easily enough after speaking with one of the Sainikah guards. It seemed that Ondore had left word to admit them should they show up again.

Ondore awaited them in his office, once again seated. He said nothing as Ashe walked the length of the desk, Basch, Vaan, and Penelo trailing her. When she got within easy speaking distance she briefly recounted the events on the *Leviathan*, then said, "When Vossler learned my father had been killed . . . the night of the treaty signing, he returned to Rabanastre to aid my escape. There was still time before Vayne's reach extended too far. We thought that you could protect me."

Harry followed Balthier and Fran along the opposite side, stopping halfway down when Ondore decided to speak. "However, when I then made the announcement that you had taken your own life . . . I must have seemed a model citizen of the empire."

Ashe slowly inclined her head in acknowledgment.

"The announcement, you see, was Vayne's suggestion. Of course, at the time I was reluctant, but I could not perceive his reasons. Now it is clear: he meant to drive a wedge between us."

Ashe looked up quickly. "Halim, we are past all this. Bhujerba must stand with us. We can stop Vayne."

Ondore heaved a sigh and rose slowly, then stared at Ashe for a time. "I once knew a girl whose only wish . . . was to be carried in her uncle's arms," he said as he began to walk toward the windows at the side of the room. "Your majesty is a grown woman now."

"Then Bhujerba will aid me?" Ashe asked hopefully.

Ondore reached the windows and stopped, clasping his hands behind him. "Suppose for a moment you were to defeat Vayne. What then? You cannot simply rebuild your kingdom with the only proof of your birthright stolen. Without that, the Gran Kiltias on Bur-Omisace cannot and will not recognize you as the rightful heir."

He turned to her, then continued, "You may yet be a princess, but without proof of your identity, you are powerless. You will remain with me. We do nothing until the time is right."

"I cannot just wait!" she objected fiercely.

"Then what does your majesty propose we do?" Ondore asked reasonably.

She huffed in disbelief. "Uncle Halim—!"

Balthier, ever the jester, inquired, “Incidentally, what is the going rate for rescuing princesses these days?”

Ashe shook her head slowly and turned from her uncle, starting a measured walk toward the doors.

“Food would be a start,” Balthier continued as he sat on the edge of the desk. “The good stuff, mind you.”

Ondore responded, the corner of his mouth quirked, “This can be arranged, though it will take some time.”

“Time enough for a bath, I hope. Dirty business, you know. Ah, best bring a change of clothes, too.” Balthier slipped off the desk as Ondore murmured to his aide.

Shortly, they had all been shown to guest quarters (though Harry used his own), and availed themselves of the amenities before assembling for a meal. Ashe, it seemed, was taking dinner in her room.

The conversation was pleasantly light until Ondore gazed at Harry and said, “Ah, Hallam, I must apologize. The guard are ever enthusiastic. I trust you took no harm.”

“I’m fine,” he replied automatically.

Balthier gave him a funny look, and Penelo said, “That’s right. You were here before.”

That made Vaan look at him oddly, as well. “Walking, huh?”

Harry shrugged. “I am more accustomed to listening than speaking,” he said vaguely.

Balthier reached up to rest a hand on his shoulder and said, “Enough of that. I want to know if you’ve anything special with you this time.”

“You two know each other?” Vaan asked, his eyes flicking briefly toward Ondore.

Harry ignored that and turned to face Balthier, brow arched. “You’ll not ask for a discount again. And you’ll simply have to wait and see.”

“Oh,” Penelo said sadly. “You must not have had a chance to finish your work. Those feathers were so beautiful.”

Vaan frowned and quickly engaged her in hushed conversation, keeping her attention on him. Because he felt threatened, or distrusted Harry, Harry was unsure.

Balthier, on the other hand, had gained a certain gleam in his eyes. “You’ll show me?”

Harry flirted his brows up briefly, then nodded. After dinner he and Balthier retired to his room for a long overdue talk. "So you stole an airship and fled Archades."

"And became a sky pirate, yes. So tell me, Hallam, what brought you to Bhujerba?"

"I don't understand."

Balthier arched a mocking brow. "Don't be so coy."

Harry shook his head. "You're well aware this is a regular stop on my route."

Balthier's expression went chilly. "That is less than acceptable. You know many of my secrets, and I would have something more concrete between us than suspicion."

He heaved a sigh and dropped down onto the window seat. "Suspicion?"

Balthier crossed his arms. "You are no mere merchant."

"I would not have you think I betrayed your trust," he replied rather lamely.

His friend laughed at that, regaining his usual warmth. "Hallam, I have long suspected you were an agent for someone, though Dalmasca or Rozarria I could not decide. We were and are friends, yes? But do you think I'd have been quite so open had I not thought it would alert others to the depredations of my people? Those actions I could not abide, so much so that I ended up fleeing?"

His mouth opened to speak, then closed, and he heaved another sigh. The worst that could happen was that Balthier would shut him out of his life, and he did not seem inclined to do so. "Rozarria. I'm an agent for a son of House Margrace."

"Ah. You seem to have more than one friend in high places," Balthier said, gesturing at the room.

Harry shook his head again. "I assure you, making the acquaintance of the marquis was pure coincidence. One of his people apparently bought something from my wares and showed it to Ondore, who was curious enough for some reason to extend an invitation. He proved to be quite a wily man, and quickly enough realized I was not quite what I presented myself as."

Balthier arched a brow and began pacing the room rather aimlessly. "Then would I be right in assuming that it was no accident you were captured with us?"

"Yes. Ondore had word that members of the resistance might truly be in the city, and knew he might be placed into a position where he must hand them over to the imperials. He asked me if I wished to be included. I had to think about that, so I took a walk in the city. It's not like I'm

helpless, but the potential for great danger or even death was much, and for what? I was headed back to the estate when I ran into you.”

Balthier paused to say, “And that decided you?”

“Yes. Are you . . . going to expose me to the others?”

Balthier snorted. “I think not. After all, they are unaware but for Fran that I used to be a judge. Besides, I’m sure Rozarria has as much interest in Dalmasca as the princess does, however self-serving that may be. So long as Dalmasca is in contention, Archadia must focus there, and may stave off looking beyond. And from what I understand, House Margrace has been working to limit their military’s power and restrict the scope of their authority.”

Harry nodded slightly, feeling a great deal of relief, though mainly because they had not so many secrets between them. Somehow, he did not think Al-Cid would be upset, any more than he had been when informed that Ondore had figured things out.

Balthier approached him with that gleam in his eyes again, prompting Harry to slowly stand in anticipation. His friend had just reached out toward him when a knock sounded at the door, causing Balthier to swear and quickly stride to it and pull it open. “Yes?”

Basch was there, looking concerned. “Have you seen Lady Ashe? She is not in her room, and I have not been able to locate her. Nor Vaan.”

“I wonder. . . . The princess was most unhappy about the idea of being made to remain here,” Balthier said, then reached into one of the pouches strapped to his thighs, taking from it a device, as Harry approached to appease his curiosity.

Balthier thumbed a switch and pressed a few buttons, then studied the tiny screen. A few moments later he chuckled and hit several more buttons, then said, “It seems your princess is on the *Strahl*, quite possibly with the intent to steal her. She’s locked down, so she’s not going anywhere. Vaan may have noticed her leaving and followed. Basch, gather the others and come to the aerodrome. We’ll go on ahead.”

Basch nodded and disappeared down the hallway, so Harry quickly gathered up his things and followed Balthier. The hurried walk along the approach to the aerodrome was rather creepy at night with so little light to guide their way. Balthier put a finger to his lips as they boarded and pointed to a spot Harry could leave his things for the moment, then crept off down the narrow corridor.

As they approached what he assumed would be the cockpit, voices could be heard, male and female, and Balthier paused to fetch out a different device and conceal himself close to the open entrance.

“Are you crazy?” Vaan could be heard asking.

“This is something that I have to do! For myself and all those who have fallen. I will not be made to hide!” Ashe huffed, then continued, “I’ll fight alone, if I must.”

“You still have Basch, right? Besides, you can’t just go around stealing people’s ships. What are you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to concentrate!” she snapped.

Balthier raised the device and thumbed a switch, then said, “That’s quite enough, your majesty.”

Harry was surprised, for Balthier’s voice was that of Ondore.

Balthier stepped out of concealment, into the doorway. “What do you think? A bit over the top?” he asked still using Ondore’s voice, then thumbed the device off. “In my line of work, you never know when something like this might come in handy.” He switched it on again long enough to mimic Ashe’s last words, with her voice. “I’m trying to concentrate!”

Harry could hear an inarticulate sound of frustration as Balthier walked into the cockpit. He moved in for a better view as Balthier said, “I’m leaving you with the marquis.”

“You can’t,” Ashe replied, shocked.

“Trust me,” Balthier said, turning back toward the door, “you’re better off staying here.”

She sighed. “Suppose you kidnapped me instead?”

Balthier paused, angling his head back slightly.

“You’re a sky pirate, aren’t you?” she said almost mockingly. “Then steal me. Is that so much to ask?”

“What do you have that I would want?”

“The Dynast-King’s treasure,” she said promptly. “The Dawn Shard is but one of the riches that lie waiting in King Raithwall’s Tomb.”

Balthier turned around and whistled. “King Raithwall, you say?”

Harry stepped back to give an arriving Basch room to advance into the cockpit, then looked back down the corridor to see that Fran and Penelo were not far behind.

“Kidnapping royalty is a serious offense,” Basch said to Balthier. “It won’t do much to lower the bounty on your head.”

Balthier's tone was amused when he replied, "How much is the price on your head these days, I wonder?"

"Allow *me* to escort you in Vossler's place," Basch said to the princess.

Ashe gave a slight nod as the two females finally caught up, and Fran inquired, "Will you be joining us?"

Vaan took a seat on the arm of one of the seats and slung his arm over the back. "What, are you kidding? I don't wanna stick around this place."

Penelo darted through the door and dropped into a seat, grasping the arms tightly. "Then I'm coming, too!"

"Penelo?" Vaan seemed confused by her pronouncement.

"Don't leave me here," she said worriedly.

"Of course not," Vaan replied with a sigh.

"Then it's settled," Fran said, moving into the doorway and placing a hand on the frame. "We should leave before the marquis realizes she's missing. Like proper kidnappers."

Fran seemed able to pilot the *Strahl* solo, so Harry nudged Balthier and motioned him back through the door. "Is there someplace I can stow my things?"

Balthier nodded and took the lead down the corridor, Harry retrieving his packs along the way, and guided him to a section of the airship hosting the cabins. "A choice, my dear Hallam. You can share with me, or take a berth."

"Then should I assume that Fran's your partner in a platonic sense?" he asked, unable to keep the edge from his voice, and hating himself for it.

Balthier smirked and pulled him into the nearby cabin, shutting the door behind. "Platonic, I assure you. She is a good friend and ally."

Harry sighed and dropped his things in a corner. "I'm sorry."

Balthier grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. "Jealousy does not become you. Yet, I am the one who vanished after that—dare I say it—magical night, and the one who should apologize. I mean it, Hallam. I'm sorry I hurt you. I would not do so again, as these two years have shown me how dear you are."

Harry nodded and tried to let go of his irritation. There had been no promises, after all. "Tell me, just exactly how did you get involved in all this?"

Balthier grinned rather naughtily. “Ah, well, Fran and I decided to invade the royal palace at Rabanastre seeking treasure. As it so happened, Vaan had also that idea, and we encountered him in the treasury, him having already obtained that stone.”

“So you tried to take it?” he asked.

“Yes, but Vaan fled. We gave chase, of course, and that was when all hell broke loose, Vayne clashing with the resistance. The night of the consul’s fete was very exciting.” Balthier smirked. “To make a long story short, we ended up in the waterway beneath the city, where we encountered ‘Amalia’, and she joined us for a time, having been separated from her group. On exiting into Lowtown we were captured by the imperials, Amalia taken away, and Vaan, Fran, and I dumped in the dungeons of Nalbina.”

“Oh,” he breathed, remembering that tidbit from earlier. “You obviously escaped. Where does Basch come in, then? Was he down there also?”

“In Nalbina, yes. I can’t say that I necessarily believed his story, but he seemed very determined. How often do you hear tales of one brother betraying his twin, hm?” Balthier went on to recount events and caught Harry up, then said, “And that’s when you stumbled over us.”

“Then I must believe you’ve continued because every step along this path leads to opposition of Archadia. More specifically, the senate, Vayne, and your father.”

“Exactly so. And now that’s out of the way. . . .” Balthier pulled him in close and kissed him. “It has been too long,” he murmured, then pushed Harry back until he was pressed against a wall.

He groaned when Balthier began grinding against him insistently and captured his lips a second time, his own hands finding a place on his lover’s hips as Balthier braced his forearms against the wall to either side of Harry’s head. *‘Oh god,’* he thought as they indulged in the base act of frottage, his rising desire quickly taking over reason.

Balthier released his mouth to attack his neck instead, occasionally murmuring, “I missed you so.”

Harry struggled for breath, not the least denying his body’s primal instincts, and indeed surrendering to them, until he began to shudder in blissful climax, bringing up a fist to stifle his cries of pleasure. And when he began to calm Balthier reclaimed his mouth briefly, then pulled back enough for them to meet gazes.

“You are delightfully debauched, my dear Hallam,” Balthier said teasingly.

He tried to work up irritation over the rapidly cooling stickiness in his trousers and failed, feeling far too sated. Balthier kissed him again, then stepped away, yanking on a handle nearby to reveal a storage space filled with clothing.

Harry crouched down to rummage in one of his packs for spares and then to change, also making use of the small sink tucked into a wall niche. Once refreshed he gazed at Balthier and smiled faintly. "I'll share with you, thanks."

Balthier slung an arm around his shoulders and said, "What say we go make sure the others haven't gotten into trouble. Vaan is ever curious, and aspires to be a sky pirate himself. I can only hope he has not induced Fran to maim him due to endless questions."

Harry grinned and nodded, and let himself be led back to the cockpit. Time enough later to get a better feel for the layout of the airship. As it turned out, Vaan was still among the living, though he was hovering over the control systems.

"How do you wish to do this?" Fran inquired, not looking back.

"Well, it is the middle of the night, and we won't be there until morning at best. We can split the duty," Balthier replied. "Which would you prefer?"

"I'm fine," she said.

"All right. I'll show everyone to quarters, then, and relieve you halfway." Balthier reversed back toward the rooms, the others following, then pointed out which doors hid what and let them figure it out.

Harry slipped into Balthier's cabin and sat on a fold-out ledge so he could remove his boots, and was half stripped down for sleeping when his lover came back in.

"You can have the inside," Balthier said as he removed his waistcoat. "I'll try not to wake you, either."

He nodded and switched to the bed; it was inset into one wall and surprisingly comfortable, and he settled in under the covers happily enough, his lover joining him shortly, though Balthier had only removed the essentials. And, while Harry had nearly never spent the entire night with someone, he fell asleep easily, waking only briefly when Balthier left.

By the time he awoke he knew they had arrived, as he could no longer feel any motion. Perhaps the lack was what woke him? Harry got up and made use of the admittedly tiny facilities, dressed and gathered things necessary, and attempted to find his way to the cockpit. On arrival he found Balthier conversing with a moogle.

"Ah, Hallam. Excellent timing," his lover said, then addressed the moogle. "You'll keep an eye on her, Nono?"

“Of course! Shall I go wake the others, then?”

“Please, and I will put the ship under shield once outside.”

Nono nodded and slipped past Harry, at which point Balthier rose from the pilot’s seat. “Let’s go await the others.” At the hatch he trailed his fingers down the side of Harry’s face, only to pull back at the sound of Fran’s voice.

“Save your mating displays for places more private,” she said, what sounded like affection in her voice.

“Yes, yes, silly Humes,” Balthier replied and punched the hatch release, then flipped a switch, which caused a section of the lower hatch frame to open and release a ladder.

Harry carefully got on to it and began the climb down, starting to perspire almost immediately from the desert heat. At some point he would have to find a moment to record and send off another message. Al-Cid was likely wondering what had become of him, and he felt like smacking himself for not having made one prior to leaving the cabin.

At the surface he looked around, but it was like any other pocket canyon. The only thing that made it special at the moment was the *Strahl* looming overhead and providing some shade. The others joined him one by one, Balthier last, who then fiddled with one of his curious devices.

The ladder retracted, the hatch closed, and then Vaan and Penelo both stepped back in inarticulate surprise as the *Strahl* vanished entirely from view.

Ashe glanced over and said, “This ‘come in handy’ often?”

“It’s tough being popular,” Balthier replied breezily. “Wouldn’t want admirers dropping in while we’re away. Well now, that’s as far as she goes. We’ll be in Jagd from here onward.”

Ashe turned to face west and said quietly, “Across the Sandsea, to the Valley of the Dead. And to King Raithwall’s Tomb below.”

“At least we thought to bring along entertainment,” Balthier said, indicating a playfully quarreling Vaan and Penelo.

Ashe sighed and glanced at the two with clear uncertainty, then headed off after them, Basch her silent defender. Fran shook her head and followed, too, which left Balthier and Harry to bring up the rear.

“You’ve been here before?” Balthier murmured.

“Yes, though only once straight through it. Can’t say I much care for the place.”

“Vaan!”

He looked over to see that the blond was crouched at the ‘shore’, though he quickly got up and raced back to the group. “It’s all just nasty, sand gets everywhere. . . .”

Balthier chuckled as they headed up a ramp, bringing better to view the huge cisterns and seemingly endless walkways that dominated that part of the Sandsea.

Harry remembered something and shouted, “Everyone! Gather up a moment.” When they clustered nearby, somewhat puzzled, he said, “I’m sure there are traps in this region. I can maintain Float on us to relieve that danger.” Thankfully nobody asked how he knew that, and merely nodded agreement, so he cast the spell, feeling childish delight in the sensation of hovering millimeters above the metal grids that comprised the walkways.

He was relieved when Basch said as they started off, “These are constructs to draw oil from the ground. Abandoned many years now, it seems.”

“Did Dalmascans build this?” Vaan asked.

“No. The Rozarrians,” Basch replied. “Their empire lies far to the west, ever at war with Archadia. Heedless of the kingdoms caught in their midst. Dalmasca. Nabrada. Landis.”

Harry bit his lip at that; no sense in protesting when he was well aware the man had been imprisoned for two years, and would likely have no true sense of Rozarria anyway, even had he not. But there had been a treaty, damn it, though even he knew the military of his adopted homeland was at times not so much better than Archadia’s.

“So, where exactly is Raithwall’s Tomb, then?” asked Penelo.

“Far to the west. We must first cross this, the Ogir-Yensa, and beyond that the Nam-Yensa, before we reach the tomb. An expanse of desert larger still than all of Dalmasca. We must pace ourselves. If you grow tired, we stop and take rest.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” she said firmly. “I’m tougher than I look.”

“I’m sure you are,” Basch replied diplomatically.

They had barely made it to the second cistern when came the sound of footsteps, of metal on metal, causing all to turn swiftly.

“Vossler! Why are you here?” Basch inquired.

Harry renewed Float while Vossler replied, “Imagine my surprise . . . when upon my return to Bhujerba, I find both you and the Lady Ashe have vanished. I thought you above consorting with sky pirates.”

“Balthier is a man worthy of our trust,” Basch said. “And it was the Lady Ashe’s decision. I am content to lend my arm. As I could not when Rasler died, when her throne was taken. Never again. I will defend her this time.”

Harry cast a glance at Fran, wondering if he was missing something. True, he had not known her name in conjunction with the ‘infamous’ Balthier, but was that her decision, or was it sexism or racism at work?

“You walk the knight’s path,” Vossler finally said. “Lady Ashe?”

Ashe beckoned him away a short distance and they spoke quietly for a while.

“We should leave this place,” Fran said suddenly.

“Let me guess: sandstorm?” Balthier asked.

“Something far worse,” she said, and pointed, drawing their attention to innumerable Urutan-Yensa riding forth to battle across the shifting sand-sea on their fish-like mounts, the yensa.

“Right, time to go.” Balthier turned toward Ashe and Vossler and shouted, “We leave at once! This is Urutan-Yensa territory, and they are unfond of visitors.”

They all hastened to get moving, though Harry knew from experience that once the creatures had been aroused, it would be a long, hard haul across the structures. And yet, even with the danger so clearly in sight, Ashe remained still and said, “Vossler!”

Vossler backtracked, but Harry could not overhear what was said at that distance, and shook his head at the woman’s sense of timing. Eventually they left behind the endless-seeming walkways and cisterns, and the endless battles against Urutan-Yensa intent on their deaths for trespassing—at least, for a while—ending up back on the ground, at a small shore area where they could rest. It had to be safe, else a moogle would not have chosen to loiter there.

He flopped down without hesitation and detached a waterskin from his belt to ease his parched throat. He perked up slightly when he overheard Ashe proclaiming that they would abide there a while to properly rest, which pushed his estimation of her common sense back up a notch. On the other hand, he wasn’t so sure about Basch. Harry clipped the waterskin back to his belt and dug into his packs to locate the tent he kept for emergencies, then tossed that on the ground.

Balthier came over to confirm that the area was something of a safe zone and eyed the folded canvas a bit disdainfully. “Mine is bigger.”

Harry arched a brow. “Your tent, I assume,” he said playfully.

His lover smirked and planted a hand on one hip. “You’re welcome to share what I have.”

Harry chortled and picked his back up to stow it. “By all means. Learn anything of interest in the past few minutes?”

Balthier held up a finger and walked away, then returned with a much larger collapsed tent and set of flexible poles, and began to set it up. When Harry moved to assist him Balthier murmured, “Only that Vossler agrees that Lady Ashe must retrieve the Dawn Shard. But nothing of what he was doing prior to his return to Bhujerba to find us gone.”

Harry finished guiding one of the supports through a channel and replied, “Is it just me, or is there something. . . ?”

“Strange about Vossler?” Balthier finished. “It’s hard to say. I wonder how he got aboard the *Leviathan*. He could have ambushed an imperial and stolen the armor. Ondore would have been able to tell him where Lady Ashe would likely be, and where Basch had gone.”

“He couldn’t have had much time for that sort of plan,” Harry pointed out, threading another pole. “I don’t know. I just feel a bit uneasy. Maybe I’m simply too used to wondering what’s below the surface. I hate to sound like an alarmist.”

Balthier shrugged and shifted the tent around so they could continue. “Basch trusts him, and Vossler did keep the princess safe for two years. I suppose we’ll see.”

Harry did not press the point further, though he could not help but think of a certain man named Peter. They eventually got the tent set up and realized that someone else, thankfully, had decided to build a fire and set about breaking out their stores of food, sparing Harry the agonizing decision of whether or not to do so himself.

Later, after they had settled in for the night, he realized he was being remiss in his duties. He waited until Balthier’s breathing had evened out into that of sleep and carefully retrieved a memstone and carrier before slipping outside. Harry found a spot well away from the tents to record his report and send it off, then returned and edged back in.

“You could have done that here,” Balthier murmured sleepily.

Harry slipped back under the sheet and inquired smartly, “And if I was taking a piss?”

“Right, sure.” Balthier yawned and draped an arm over Harry to rest at his stomach. “Sleep.”

The next morning they packed up and set across the Nam-Yensa, which was far less occupied by the remnants of Rozarrarian industry, but certainly not devoid of locals, who took every opportunity to scuttle up on their peculiar legs and attack almost mindlessly. There were other creatures as well, which gave them all an excellent workout, and Harry was kept on his toes making sure that everyone stayed in fighting condition, even if they were becoming exhausted.

A tunnel up ahead gave rise to a second wind, and they reached it a short time later, it opening up into a defile, and then, ahead, stood a massive building. They were at least a few hundred feet below the surface. Harry knew from his geography that they had passed from the desert into an almost mountainous region. The space before them, a smaller square fronting one larger, was cut from that rock, allowing for Raithwall's Tomb, a gargantuan structure bristling with carvings and ornamentation, surmounted by what resembled a grandiose guardian.

A series of columns, five to a side, led up to a grand staircase at the entrance, and as they walked between them a light shined overhead, and a huge flying beast swooped in threateningly to prevent them from continuing. Harry groaned softly and began casting as the others moved into position, though three of their number were almost useless—well, unless they planned to throw their swords at the beast.

Balthier, Fran, Ashe, and Penelo immediately started attacking with weapons and magic. When Harry was able to pay closer attention, he pulled out his gun and took aim, peripherally noticing that Basch had enough sense to ready a few potions in case they were necessary. Some time later the beast was defeated and they all dragged themselves up the stairs after Ashe toward the entrance. Something up there glowed momentarily, piquing his interest for a second, but truthfully, all Harry wished to do was take a nap.

“Long ago,” Ashe said, pausing halfway up, “the gods granted their favor to King Raithwall, who would oversee the subjugation of a territory spanning from Ordalia to Valendia. Here he forged the Galtean Alliance. Though he is called the Dynast-King, upon establishing the alliance, he showed compassion for his people, and disdain for war. A philosophy passed on to his successors. One that would bring peace and prosperity for hundreds of years to follow.

“It was during this time of peace that the city-states of Archadia and Rozarria—each members of Raithwall's alliance—took root and flourished. Raithwall left three relics signifying descent from the Dynast-King. Of these, the Midlight Shard was given to what would become House Nabradia, and the Dusk Shard to my ancestors, the founders of Dalmasca. The last of these relics was the Dawn Shard. It remained hidden here, known only to those of royal blood.”

“As though the Dynast-King foresaw the very plight before us now,” Vossler observed.

“None save descendants of the king are suffered within. If we attempt to enter without proof of such lineage—”

“There's no guarantee we'll make it out alive,” Balthier finished for her. “Vicious beasts. Fiendish traps. Something like that?”

Ashe turned and said, “Mm-hm. But you must consider the prize. The Dawn Shard lies within, and Raithwall's treasure.”

“And here I was thinking this was going to be hard,” Balthier responded. “Well, I suggest we rest first. It's been a long, difficult day.”

“But we’re so close,” Ashe objected.

“Majesty, he speaks wisely. We know not what to expect within, and zeal can only take us so far,” Basch said.

She huffed and headed back down the stairs, much to Harry’s delight. He only wished she had not insisted on climbing halfway up in the first place to give a history lesson. At the bottom he looked around for a bit, then eyed Penelo speculatively.

“What?” she asked a bit warily.

“Have you any control over water yet?”

She looked surprised, but nodded.

“Wonderful. Care to try an experiment? I was wondering—if we were to dig a hole and line it with canvas, do you think you could fill it?”

“I don’t know,” she replied slowly. “But I don’t see why we can’t try.”

“I’ll also try,” Ashe said, obviously having overheard. “It would be nice to wash up, and we can’t risk the water we have rationed for drinking.”

Harry blinked in surprise, then smiled. “Excellent. And if it works, we should be able to refill the waterskins, too.”

They tried it after they had set up for the night and eaten, and while it did work, it wasn’t entirely successful, as both ladies found it difficult to control the spell against its usual purpose. Water splashed everywhere, but there was enough to fill several makeshift basins and give them a chance to wash away a decent amount of sweat and dirt.

Ashe approached him afterward. “That was an inspired idea. . . .”

Harry furrowed his brow, then realized she was angling to know his name. “Hallam Laurifer.”

She nodded, thanked him, then wandered off, which made him wonder if she left it at that because she assumed he was a part of Balthier’s group, even if he had not been in Rabanastre. Harry gave a mental shrug and made for his tent. The next day was sure to be fun-filled with excitement, and he wanted his rest. He would also like to molest his lover, but figured that was best saved for when they had more privacy. He forgot about the part where Balthier was an adventurous sky pirate, right up until his lover, flush against his back, slid a hand down Harry’s stomach and undid his trousers.

He was reluctant to get up once he awoke, especially as he was very comfortable draped over Balthier’s chest, but gave in with only a small amount of mumbled bitching to necessity.

Packed and ready to go, the party climbed up to the entrance and stood there for a moment, staring at a strange device. Balthier and Fran walked right up to it, so the others followed and circled the device, and Balthier touched one of the dimly-glowing crystals at waist level.

Yellow light sprung up around them and exploded outward, the design on the floor illuminating, as well, and there was a few seconds of nothing but white before Harry could see they had been transported. Presumably, he thought, to inside the tomb.

“What was that thing?” Vaan asked.

“A contraption you’d find in all but the most rudimentary ancient ruin. One touch, and off you’re whisked to you know not where.” Balthier shrugged and began to walk forward. “The finer points of their operation elude me, but they’re handy all the same. What more need a sky pirate know?”

Ahead of the device was another, that one radiating a muted bluish light, and beyond it some sort of structure with steps to either side leading down. Off toward the back of the space, at either side on a lower level, were doors, with no obvious way to them, while down the center stretched a walkway with a set of large arched doors at the end. There seemed to be another level, that one higher, but if there was a way to reach it, it was not possible from where they were presently.

However, they were in a tomb allegedly filled with the potential for horrific retribution, so before anyone could get too far away, Harry began casting protections like mad. He was exceptionally glad he had when they descended a set of steps and started down the walkway, only to jerk to a stop at a rumbling noise behind them.

A look back showed a massive guardian statue coming to life, its arms uncrossing, blades brandished, and its talon-like ‘toes’ stretching. A second before those claws started moving it forward, the thing’s eyes glowed red. *‘Holy fuck,’* Harry thought and immediately scanned it, then prepped and started flinging Holy at it as the others unleashed a barrage of attacks.

They were forced to keep edging backward as the thing advanced, and Harry realized they did not have a lot of time to spare. Taking a chance he cast Reflect on everyone and began bouncing Scathe at it. Penelo caught on first and started casting Aero, then Ashe followed with Dark. Between them all it went down before they were crushed.

As Harry was healing their wounds with potions, Penelo turned around and said, “We could have ducked through the door and avoided it?”

Ashe looked exasperated, but Basch said, “Perhaps so. But is it not better to take care of what might come back to haunt us?”

Penelo shrugged. “There’s a second device up there. Surely it’s not for show.”

“It was unresponsive,” Balthier said. “I checked. But something may be ahead to cause its awakening. Let’s go.”

A collective groan arose once through the doors. At the end of the walkway, this one much longer, was another of the guardians. They raced forward to get within range and began to take it down, finishing it off several minutes later. That one, like the first, disintegrated into sand and collapsed, the fine particles disappearing. Reflect was dispelled and healing was performed, and they continued, taking a set of steps at the other end, and then the doors.

Everyone paused to take in the sight; a massive square room, cavernous in nature, looking almost as though it had been carved from solid rock. Stairs led down, walkways making circuits around on multiple levels with yet more stairs that seemed to have no support whatsoever except for their terminating landings. Torches pierced the gloom at regular intervals, and far, far below was a square platform, and what looked like another set of magnificent doors.

“Incredible,” breathed Vossler, slowly walking forward. “It wounds me to look on as they pillage so solemn a place.” He was staring at Balthier and Fran, which angered Harry and made him even less inclined to like the man. Neither seemed to realize he was listening, or would even care.

“Yet without help,” Ashe pointed out, “you and I are as nothing. Is this not so?”

Vossler appeared unable or unwilling to comment.

“He thinks ever and always on his own profit. Assure him of it, and he shall remain true to his cause.”

“I do not share your majesty’s trust.”

*‘And I don’t trust you,’ Harry thought. ‘It’s not like anyone has pillaged anything, either. I know your type, and you are steeped in arrogant, righteous indignation. Better a man whose price is known than the quality of mere loyalty to a cause, which is so much more easily shattered.’*

“We will continue this later. Now we should concern ourselves with finding the Dawn Shard. It sleeps, in waiting. Somewhere deep within.”

“How can you be certain?” Vossler inquired.

“I can hear its call,” she said, almost awed, then turned back to the stair.

Down it stood three of the ancient devices, one bathed in blue light like the one nearer the entrance, one in green, and one in red. Harry made the quick assumption that they would be

forced to discover the mystery of this place before they could ever approach the prize. To either side of that landing were stairs leading down.

And it was so. There were two altars in the warren of connected rooms to the north and south of the landing that were hidden, stretched beyond the walls of the central chamber. As each was activated a decorative statue shifted position, the first to drop to half its height, the second all the way, opening a new path, deeper into the tomb's embrace.

They had almost made it to that platform far below when Penelo saw fit to comment on the strangely reflective qualities of the unclear air. "Fog? Underground?"

"Not fog—Mist," Fran corrected.

Penelo looked from the phenomenon to the Viera, puzzled. "You can see the Mist? With your eyes?"

*'Well obviously,'* he thought, then recalled that Penelo had spent her life thus far in Rabanastre, not out in the wider world. *'It is, I admit, creepy to see yourself reflected in midair without benefit of mirrors.'*

"Where it is thick enough, you may," Fran explained. "The nether runs deep in this place."

"So . . . is the Mist dangerous?"

"Yes, but it is also an aid. A dense Mist allows the working of powerful magicks."

Penelo nodded, a look of interest on her face. "I'll keep that in mind."

They continued around the perimeter walkway and descended the final set of stairs. Again, Harry began casting, spying an imposing beast up ahead, planted solidly in front of a set of doors, an appropriately large weapon propped up beside it against the wall.

Once he nodded they advanced, and sure enough, the thing came to life, red light springing up around it as though to match its colouration, and it took up its weapon and stomped forward to meet them with a roar. The torches at each corner of the platform exploded in fire at the same time. Harry was kept very busy while the others launched an all-out attack, and did not dare to assist the female mages with Reflect to magnify the damage from their spells, not with the amount of fire that thing was flinging about.

After its defeat it sank to one knee, its weapon falling to the stone floor and vanishing, and it erupted in a cloud of fire. From it emerged a faceted crystalline shaft capped by rock, which shattered to free the glyph within. That . . . of an Esper.

"In vainglory they arose, shouting challenges at the gods," Fran said. "But prevail they did not. Their doom it was to walk the Mist until time's end. A legend of the Nu Mou."

There was silence for a moment, then Ashe said, “My family tells a story of the Dynast-King and an Esper. The story goes that in his youth, the Dynast-King defeated a mighty gigas, for which the gods took heed of him. Thereafter, it was bound to him in thralldom.”

As she approached the now unguarded door Balthier said, “So all this time it’s been guarding the Dynast-King’s treasure.”

Ashe stopped and looked back. “Not so. The Esper *is* the Dynast-King’s treasure.”

“That’s your treasure?” Balthier asked incredulously.

“In this Esper we now command rests a power whose worth is beyond any measure.” She held up the glyph, then pressed it to her breast, whereupon it disappeared.

“Is that so?” Balthier countered, seeming entirely unimpressed. “Call me old fashioned, but I was hoping for a treasure whose worth we *could* measure.”

*‘And given what she just did, it’s as well, since that’s one treasure Balthier won’t be owning.’*

Ashe shook her head and turned back to the door, then opened it. Within were several short flights of steps, leading up to a small platform upon which rested a pedestal, and on that, a sculpture bearing a glowing rounded stone.

Basch stepped forward to Vossler’s side and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Vossler declined to answer him, instead angling his head toward Ashe. “Your majesty, we must go.”

Harry felt confusion at that, but decided the man must be urging haste as the princess nodded and proceeded with measured steps toward the final flight. As she drew nearer the stone, it began to glow, as though reacting to her. *‘Much like the Dusk Shard earlier?’*

Ashe stopped suddenly, breathing out, “What?” Then, “Rasler.”

He could see no reason for her reaction, her awed tone, not even when he moved closer. He was further puzzled when Vaan exhaled in wonder and began walking toward her, as though he was privy to some sight denied them. Ashe turned and reached out quickly, as though to grasp something, a look of longing on her face.

“You will be avenged,” she vowed, then seemed to notice that Vaan had shared her experience, and made a surprised noise before facing the pedestal and taking the Dawn Shard for her own, which glowed more brightly at her touch. She said nothing more, merely headed for the doors, quietly leading them back toward the exit of the tomb.

They emerged into the Valley of Death, to light that threatened to blind them after the gloom within. Adjustment came quickly enough, and down the stairs they went to cross back to the Nam-Yensa. However, halfway across the packed earth they were confronted with shadows flitting over them, and looked up to see a fleet of airships looming overhead. Smaller craft descended quickly to land, surrounding them, and they were captured, taken to one of the larger ships and escorted by guards to a control room.

Ghis was there, unhelmeted, like a bad penny turned up. “Such a tremendous honor to again be graced with your presence, majesty. You left us with such great dispatch upon our last encounter that I must confess, I had begun to worry that we may have given some cause for offense.”

“Such a heartfelt display of remorse,” Ashe said mockingly. “Now what is it you want?”

Ghis took several steps forward. “I want you to give me the nethicite.”

“The nethicite?” Penelo asked, clasping her hands behind her back.

Ghis’s head snapped around to her. “That which *you* have is a base imitation! We seek Raithwall’s legacy, the ancient relics of the Dynast-King: deifacted nethicite.” He then addressed Vossler. “Did you not tell them, Captain Azelas?”

Ashe gasped, and she was not alone in doing so. Vossler stepped up behind the princess and said, “Majesty, he speaks of the Dawn Shard. That is nethicite.”

She whipped around to face him, shock writ clearly on her face. And betrayal.

“Are you mad, Vossler!” Basch growled.

“If we are to save Dalmasca, we must accept the truth. I will fight this profitless battle no more!”

*‘So much for your loyalty to queen and country,’ Harry thought snidely. ‘Seems you would rather play puppet to a cruel master than retain your pride. And you have the audacity to sneer at pirates?’*

“Captain Azelas has struck a wise bargain,” Ghis said. “In return for the Dawn Shard the empire will permit Lady Ashe to reclaim her throne, and the Kingdom of Dalmasca will be restored. Think on it. An entire kingdom for a stone. You must admit, ’tis more than a fair exchange.”

“And when all is said and done, your master will have another pet,” Balthier drawled.

Ghis stared, then addressed the princess. “Lady Ashe, let us take him for the people of Dalmasca. Your majesty wallows in indecision on peril of their heads!” He drew his sword and sliced it forward to stop with the edge near Balthier’s neck. “And his shall be the first to fall.”

“Well at least your sword is to the point,” Balthier snarked.

Ashe stepped forth and offered up the stone in a resigned manner, then snarled when Ghis took possession.

Ghis studied the stone in his hand as he said, “To think the relics of the Dynast-King were defacted nethicite. Dr Cid will be beside himself.”

Balthier’s attention was snapped from a conflicted Ashe to Ghis, his body suddenly tense. “What did you say?” he demanded.

Ghis ignored him, still staring at the stone. “Captain Azelas, take them to *Shiva*. They should have leave to return to Rabanastre soon.”

They left with their escort, not speaking, and were taken away to be cuffed again like common criminals. A transport was secured, which then flew them to the light cruiser *Shiva*. Disembarking, they began a slow progression along the walkway, toward, Harry had to assume, prison cells.

“When we return to Dalmasca,” Vossler said to the princess, “we can announce that you are alive and well. I will then continue our negotiations with the empire.”

Harry descended into another snide moment; Vossler acted like a regent, negating what little power Lady Ashe could even lay claim to, she the rightful ruler of Dalmasca.

“I believe Larsa is the key,” Vossler continued. “He’ll listen to us. We should trust him.”

Ashe stopped, her head jerking sideways toward the man. “Who are you, Vossler, to talk of trust?” she demanded before facing front again and resuming the walk.

“A son of Dalmasca. . . .”

*‘Like bloody Cain, maybe.’* Halfway to the doors Fran snapped up her head and gasped for no reason he could discern, then sank to one knee, struggling for breath. “Fran?” he asked.

“Such heat. The Mist—it’s burning!” she wailed and crouched over, whimpering and moaning in pain.

A soldier swung his spear toward her and barked, “You! Stand!”

So fast that Harry could not track it, Fran knocked the soldier away with unholy strength.

“Hold her down!” Vossler shouted to the guards.

Fran seemed to go berserk, letting loose an inarticulate cry of rage as her shackles shattered. She launched into the air at their approach and slammed a kick into one’s head, then used his body to push off at another, smashing him down as well with another fierce cry.

“What’s wrong with her?” Penelo cried.

“I always knew Fran didn’t take well to being tied up,” Balthier quipped as he picked the lock on his shackles and slipped them off, then took care of Harry’s. “I just never knew how much.” He faced to the princess and said, “How about you?”

She turned and lifted her arms so he could free her. “I like Fran’s idea. Let’s get out of here!”

By then Vaan had duplicated Balthier’s trick and had freed himself, Penelo, and Basch.

“No farther!” shouted Vossler, drawing his sword. “Sky pirates! The future of Dalmasca will not be stolen!” As he brought his sword up in readiness he asked, “Why do this, Basch? This struggle is futile. You must know where it leads!”

“I do know. All too well,” was the calm response.

Harry did not wait for anyone to make the first move. He did, by casting his little heart out, the battle inevitable, then threw a Dispel at Vossler to negate his buffs. That same scan showed him that no particular weakness could be found, so Harry hung back with his gun and concentrated on keeping everyone healthy.

Vossler eventually sank to his knees, pain writ on his features. They took that opportunity to flee back along the walkway, though Basch lingered for precious moments, but also joined them. Balthier appropriated the first craft he saw that could carry them and launched. Behind them could be seen the *Leviathan* exploding in a blinding light which quickly turned to fiery red, projectiles flying outward and shredding the other ships of the fleet.

“This might get a little dicey!” Balthier said, hands tight on the controls as they attempted to outrace the blast range.

“The Mist. It manifests now,” said a still pained Fran.

“Is that what you call this?” Vaan said rather sarcastically.

Balthier’s sure piloting brought them away safely, and he steered their stolen craft in an arc so they could see more clearly. A strange, gaseous sphere seemed to be all that remained at the fleet’s location, like wisps of fiery Mist.

“What’s that?” Penelo asked, gazing at one of the monitors.

Balthier reached over to increase the magnification, and Ashe gasped and said, “I think it’s the Dawn Shard!”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Balthier said, and accelerated toward to retake the stone. And, even with the power of the craft at their command, it took almost as long to reach the *Strahl* again as it would have taken on foot, it not being intended for long-term transport, and certainly not for that many people. By that time they were all glad to be able to spent the night in relative luxury, and Harry took the opportunity to send off another report.

In the morning, while down on the surface to investigate the wares of a passing merchant, he was surprised to receive a carrier from Al-Cid, which informed him that that Marquis Ondore had quit Bhujerba, citing illness, and that they had assembled forces under the guise of military exercises. He cleared the stone of its message with a faint groan and tucked it away, unable to tell if the emperor had been unable to stay the hand of the military, or if this had some connection to Ondore’s own resistance. After completing his interrupted business with the merchant he boarded the *Strahl* again, dithering over whether or not to say anything, as revealing his knowledge to anyone but Balthier would expose him, and finally decided to remain quiet.

From there they proceeded to Rabanastre on foot, where word on the street echoed Al-Cid’s message regarding Ondore, and made it known that Vayne had departed the city. They took up temporary residence in one of the buildings at the terminus of the Muthru Bazaar, a private enough place.

“So it was the Dawn Shard that brought down the imperial fleet,” Basch stated, glancing at the dark grey stone, it lying on the table next to a seated Ashe.

“You know your stuff,” Balthier said, and Harry was hard pressed to determine if his lover was being sarcastic or not.

“Destructive power of such force—I’ve seen it once before.” Basch glanced at the princess and said, “Lady Ashe, you know of what I speak.”

“Nabudis.”

“The capital of Old Nabradia—Lord Rasler’s fatherland. At the time of the invasion, a division of imperials entered the city—there was a mighty explosion. Friend and foe died alike. Something was there—one of the Dynast-King’s relics. The Midlight Shard was in Nabradia.”

“More nethicite. Well, no wonder they invaded,” Balthier commented.

Ashe took the Dawn Shard in her hand. “That ridiculous war, the trap at the treaty signing—all because Vayne wanted power. He must not be allowed to claim the nethicite. The empire must never hold it.”

Balthier pushed away from his pose propped against a wall and faced her. “Oh? They already do,” he reminded her. “The Dusk Shard—most likely the Midlight Shard, too. Besides, can’t they manufacture nethicite now?”

The princess shot up from her seat. “Very well, then the path set before us is clear. We’ll use the Dawn Shard to fight them!” She bowed her head slightly and brought the stone to her chest. “Dalmasca does not forget kindness nor ill deed done. With sword in hand she aids her allies. Sword in hand, she lays to rest her foes. This nethicite I hold must be my sword. I will avenge those who have died. And the empire will know remorse.”

Harry suffered a moment of dizziness. Greater good, those who are not us are nothing. The entire imperial city could be destroyed in the catastrophe wrought by one of those relics, most of the citizens entirely innocent of their government’s actions. Just like the people of Nabradia. Somehow, he did not think that pointing that out would be fruitful. He could only hope she truly did mean their military might, and not the people.

Vaan broke the ensuing silence with a rather pertinent question. “You even know how to use it?”

Ashe half turned, looking lost. “I—”

“The Garif may know,” Fran spoke. “The Garif people live by the old ways. Magicite lore is a part of their culture. They may hear it. The cry of the nethicite’s power. Whispers of the stone’s menace.”

Ashe rounded the table to stand before the Viera. “Dangerous though it be, what we need now is power. Should we declare Dalmasca free without the means to defend our claim . . . the empire would crush us. You must take me to meet with the Garif.”

Fran slipped off the table and said, “They live beyond Ozmone Plain, the closest in Jahara.”

“But still not exactly close,” Balthier commented.

“Compensation—is that what you want?” Ashe asked him, her voice tinged with disgust or exasperation.

“Straight to the point, aren’t we. I like that. Compensation? How about that ring,” he said, indicating her hand.

Harry mentally applauded the move. While he believed in her cause, he thought her too entrenched in the past, and that was no way to live while attempting to move forward. You could love a man long since dead, but you could not live with one.

Ashe looked up from her hand and said rather desperately, “This? Isn’t there something else?”

“No one’s forcing you,” Balthier pointed out, his manner straightforward, but a subtle reminder that allies were not necessarily subjects, and thus could not be treated the same.

The princess dithered, then set the stone aside and slowly removed one of the silvery rings. She dropped it onto his palm and hesitated, fingers curling, before pulling away.

“I’ll give it back to you,” Balthier said blithely. “As soon as I find something more valuable.”

Ashe turned with a huff and walked away as Vaan asked, “What do you mean ‘something valuable’?”

Balthier motioned and headed for the door. “Hard to say. I’ll know when I find it. What is it you want, Vaan? What are *you* looking for?”

“Me? What am I looking for? I—I guess—well, I, ah—you know. . . .”

Harry heard a sigh, but then he was through the door, out into the sunlight and heat and the sound of hawking cries from the merchants of Rabanastre.

“The Garif are said to dwell in Kerwon,” Basch said.

“So they do,” Balthier agreed. “We’ll need to head south, past the Giza Plains.”

“It is the rains now in Giza—the wadis will be swollen with the deluge,” Basch replied. “Passage may be difficult.”

“But those same waters may also lay open new routes to us,” Balthier countered.

Ashe impatiently butted in. “Regardless, we must go south, yes?”

Balthier arched a brow at her. “First things first. You’re eager to be on your way, I realize, but we should see that we’re prepared before setting out.”

“I made my resolve two years ago. I swore to overcome any hardship I may face,” she said fiercely.

“Man cannot live by resolve alone, princess.”

Harry bit his lip, then touched his lover’s arm. “I’m going to look for practical supplies. You know, like collapsible containers for water or even cooking in?”

Balthier raised a finger in a motion to wait, then turned to the others. “Let’s supply and meet back here. We can head out in the morning.”

The princess made a face, but turned away when Basch cleared his throat, so Harry and Balthier slipped off through the crowd to begin checking each stall. “I shouldn’t complain, I know, but I’m bloody tired of jerky, handfuls of nuts, and traveler’s bread. I’d just about kill for one of those overpriced frippery meals right now.”

“Shall I buy you dinner, my dear Hallam?” Balthier asked as they moved on to the next stall.

“That would be a beautiful thing,” he replied absently as he reached out to snatch a contraption up that was more or less what he was after. It was easy enough to flatten it down, and it would stand on its own when expanded. They could not cook in it, but it could be used for catching fresh water for transfer to drinking containers, or for washing up. He bought and tucked away a half dozen before Balthier guided him off to the next set of offerings.

They ended up at the Sandsea, which was not known for extravagant meals, but they were able to score a table on the upper level. Vaan was lurking by the notice board across from the bar, but quickly disappeared, even before their food arrived. Their conversation was, of necessity, low voiced and secretive.

“So why are you sticking with this?” Harry murmured. “Your father?”

Balthier nodded. “It seems I can’t escape that. All this revolves around nethicite, something he lost his heart to. His humanity, I think.”

“What do you think of Lord Larsa?”

“Him? He seems a peaceable enough sort, which is surprising considering his elder brothers. He’s young, though, so I question the amount of influence he can bring to bear on matters at hand. I wonder, if perhaps it’s simply that the senate has not yet managed to corrupt him.”

“You mean to be their puppet, as Vayne has been? As the elders were before they got out of hand?”

Balthier nodded. “And I wonder if Vayne will also be struck down as being too unruly, too unwilling to let them guide his actions.”

“Perhaps that is why he’s left the city? He’s in charge of the fleet, and one has just been destroyed. Not by his hand direct, but. . . .”

“Ah, but, the senate could use that as an excuse nonetheless. Still, Vayne is more viper than his elder sibs. He may not make the same mistakes as they, those that brought their downfall.”

Harry was silent for a time, concentrating on his food, then said, “I mentioned the younger. Perhaps some accord can be made. And I think he holds suspicion of me. It certainly seemed so in Bhujerba, and then again on the *Leviathan*.”

“He probably suspects you ‘belong’ to Ondore.”

They moved on to less weighty topics, bantering instead, and Harry began to get worked up over some of the more salacious comments tossed back and forth, until Balthier suddenly seemed to realize something. “Those ships, at the tomb. They came through Jagd, damn it. What have they discovered?”

“Are you sure? Couldn’t they have come from the north, over the sea?”

“Wrong approach vector,” Balthier countered. “And besides, we were over the Jagd Yensa when the fleet was destroyed.”

Harry felt like slapping himself for being an idiot. “Let’s return? Answers will just have to wait until later, hey? Well, unless you want to quit all this and go investigate that craft.”

“Ah, fine.” Balthier tossed his napkin on the table and signaled a server, then dropped also a handful of gold.

They took their own sweet time getting back, Harry pausing to purchase some fresh fruit for the morning, then joined the others. Balthier stayed in the common area to spend some time with his partner, while Harry found an untenanted bedroom, seriously considering turning in early. He wasn’t feeling very sociable. But, he could hardly rely on his lover to be his ears, so he dropped off his things and pulled some minor work from a pack, then went out to sit at the table with Penelo and Vaan.

“Oh, you must be happy,” Penelo said. “You haven’t really had any time for that.”

He glanced up and smiled. “I’ve done it so often that I don’t have to think about it anymore, but the repetition is relaxing.”

“You said you harvest stuff yourself? Isn’t that difficult?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t go after anything very dangerous, not unless some of my clan members are willing to help me out.”

“You’re in a clan?” Vaan asked, suddenly interested.

“Mm-hm. I’m not very active, though, since I do wander rather a lot to various cities to market my wares. But if a clan team is nearby and knows I’m around, they drag me along to cover their backsides.”

Penelo giggled behind her hand.

“So how did you get mixed up in all this, then?”

Harry jerked his head toward Balthier. “We go way back. But really, I just happened to be in the right place at the wrong time. Or something like that. I can’t very well let Balthier get into trouble without me to make sure he doesn’t get his fool self killed, right?”

He picked up the pendant he’d been working on and set it in front of the once again giggling Penelo. “Here. It will help with your magic. You’ll just have to find a cord.”

“Hey,” Vaan said, frowning slightly.

“What about you, Vaan? You wish to be a sky pirate?” he asked, then began work on another small item, this one purely decorative.

“Yeah, for years. I keep hoping Balthier will teach me how to fly his airship.”

Harry chuckled. “I dare say he might, but don’t quote me on that. Flying is like . . . being utterly free.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Vaan said enthusiastically.

A hand came down on his shoulder. “What exactly are you promising on my behalf?” came Balthier’s amused voice.

Harry smirked and looked up at an angle, “I would never presume.”

“So, Vaan wants to learn how to fly. But what of Penelo?”

She kind of shrugged, quite possibly never having thought much beyond the moment.

“You can be my partner,” Vaan declared, though it came across as slightly condescending.

“Oh,” she said blithely, “I thought I’d become a tavern dancer.”

“Penelo!”

She started giggling again, causing Vaan to look sheepish.

“There might not be much time for me to teach you, Vaan,” Balthier said, “but we’ll see.”

“Preferably over a wide open space with nothing to crash into,” Fran added, then said to Balthier, “I rest. Morning comes early enough.”

“Sweet dreams, Fran.” To an open-mouthed Vaan he said, “She was teasing, you know.”

“How can you tell?”

“She’s that good a friend.” The hand on Harry’s shoulder squeezed, then Balthier said, “Are you done yet? Unless you plan on peddling wares to the Garif?”

Harry snorted and swept his things up. “You never know. I take it you’re ready to turn in?”

The hand disappeared as Balthier said, “Mm. Evening, folks.”

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### 3: ENITOR

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Giza Plains during the rains was a lovely place if you did not mind feeling like a drowned rat. Or you were an amphibian. Harry was incredibly grateful his packs were waterproof. And speaking of amphibians, they could barely go ten feet without a gigantoad popping up from a wadi to attack them. At least they could cross south to Ozmone Plain without wasting an entire day. Through rain, hyenas, tortoises, flying fish. . . . Oh, and pesky elementals. It was great fun, and Harry bitched under his breath the entire way, much to Balthier's amusement.

The Ozmone Plain was a nice place to visit, actually. Green grass, nice trees, strange wreckage sticking up out of the ground, vipers slithering out of the grass at a moment's notice. . . . Harry rather liked the place, even if it did rain intermittently, and he got his fair share of gems that were wrested from creatures along the way.

They continued south, eventually running across a Garif Warrior out for a bit of hunting, or perhaps exercise. Harry buffed him as they went by, more out of habit than anything, and they eventually found their way to Jahara, a village on the bank of a river, access via a wooden bridge that was guarded by two Garif. They seemed to be inordinately fond of tents, he noticed. And masks. With huge horns that must weigh a ton. However, they did have the luxury of a chocobo stable, something that Harry promptly ignored in favor of watching Vaan approach the bridge.

One of the Garif asked, "Who are you? This is Garif land. No place for Hume children to play at games."

A voice came from behind them, commanding in tone. "They are wayfarers. They bring no harm." A look back revealed that it was the warrior they had passed just a short time ago, and the Garif came close enough to be heard comfortably. "I saw them cross the Ozmone Plain. They are warriors of great distinction. The fiends of the plains troubled them not at all."

The first Garif said, "You ventured upon the plains alone, War-Chief? Again?"

The War-Chief said nothing for a moment, then looked at the group. "What business have you with the Garif?"

Ashe stepped up to briefly explain, and the War-Chief nodded and turned back to the guards. "Let them pass. The responsibility will be mine."

"If this is your wish, War-Chief," responded the second Garif as the War-Chief passed by and onto the bridge and beyond.

"Then, you may pass," said the first. "These days see many Humes wandering through our lands."

Harry wondered about that as they crossed the river. The War-Chief was waiting at the other end to say, "Ah, I have not made introductions. I am Supinelu, War-Chief of this village. We Garif have been friends to all since long ago, however, lately the Hume world is in much turmoil. We must protect our village, and our people. As War-Chief, and protector of our village, I ask you: why have you come to this land?"

*'Didn't we just do that. . . ?'*

Ashe stepped forward again, this time to explain in greater detail.

"Hmm. . . . I see. So you too have come to ask about the nethicite. You must speak with the elders. Though our masks may make it difficult for you to tell us apart, walk through the village and look with your eyes, listen with your ears." Supinelu turned and walked onward.

The group entered the village and walked up a slight rise, passing two sparring Garif with another watching, and his eyes were drawn almost magnetically to a merchant not far away. Balthier cuffed him gently, causing him to mutter, "It's not like I've been here before."

"Time enough," his lover responded. "Let the princess ask her questions, and then you can talk shop, all right? *I wonder who else has been here asking about nethicite.*"

After a bit of wandering they found High-Chief Zayalu, one of the elder Garif, which Ashe approached. He, however, said, "What is this? More Humes come to visit us? A little bigger this time, but no matter."

Balthier exchanged a look with Harry and mouthed, "Larsa?"

"You need not tell me anything. I know you have come to our village to learn of the stones, the nethicite. We Garif have knowledge of this, passed down from father to son, mother to daughter. Some of it remains, some has been lost in history's sands. I . . . know nothing of the stones. You must speak to the Great-Chief. He alone holds the deep knowledge of these things. He alone remembers all the tellings. Cross the bridge to the north, and there you will find him. There are watchers at the bridge, so I think it best to speak with War-Chief Supinelu. May you find all the answers you seek."

Ashe thanked him graciously and led them off toward the now-familiar form of Supinelu, who asked, "Did you learn what you wished? No, do not tell me. It is written clear upon your face. So, even the High-Chief could not help. Then, you must meet with the Great-Chief, who may know something that would aid you. Yet, arranging an audience may be quite difficult. . . ."

"I must learn more about the nethicite," Ashe pressed. "I cannot turn back now. Please, tell your Great-Chief that I am of the royal line of Dalmasca, a direct descendant of Dynast-King Raithwall. If the Garif have passed down knowledge of the stones, they must know of the nethicite that the Dynast-King once held."

“Do you have *proof* of your heritage?” Supinelu asked.

“I—I do not,” she said and sighed.

“Hrm. . . . I have looked into your eyes and seen that you speak the truth, Hume child. I give you my trust. The Great-Chief is ahead, across this bridge.”

Harry could only assume she spoke not of the Dawn Shard because it no longer reacted in her presence. And also, that the War-Chief might be possessed of the same ability as Al-Cid.

Ashe thanked him and they proceeded across the bridge, the path ahead leading to a large circular palisade back-braced by massive, inward-curving monoliths at regular intervals, and fronted by a wide, thin arch two stories high. At the center was a fire, and against the back wall was a set of square, narrow columns, a carving of some sort between them, and poles perpendicular to either side from which hangings were displayed.

Inside, just behind the fire sat another Garif, his mask adorned with massive branching horns, the presumable Great-Chief. Ashe walked to him, the Dawn Shard in her hand. “We come to seek your wisdom, the knowledge passed down of nethicite by your people.”

The Great-Chief extended his arm, and Ashe deposited the Dawn Shard in his palm. He examined it, then said, “This nethicite—you have used it.”

“It was not I who used it,” she said with a shake of her head. “Indeed I had hoped you could show me how. Thus I’ve come.”

“You do not know the workings of the stone. Then we are no different.”

Ashe jerked forward. “What!?”

“In ages past, the gods made a gift of nethicite to my people. But the manner of its use eluded us. Displeased by our failure, the gods took back their stones. They chose instead to give them to a Hume king. Called the Dynast-King, he used the nethicite’s power to bring peace to a troubled time. It is a curious thing. Though the blood of Raithwall flow through your veins, you cannot wield nethicite.”

“Cannot wield it?” she said incredulously. “So then, am I to understand you can’t tell me how to use the stone?”

*That is what he just said.’*

“Though it shame me so to admit,” the Great-Chief affirmed. “Here before me stands a descendant of the Dynast-King himself . . . and I can accord her no help at all. Still, even if you knew how to use the nethicite, you would find it of small avail.” He handed her back the Dawn

Shard, then continued, “The Mist collected in the stone over ages past is lost, and with it the stone’s power. It will be your posterity who wield the stone in ages yet to come.”

Ashe was silent.

“This stone is devoid of power. Empty, yet full of thirst. A terrible longing to drink the world dry. The power of men, and of magic. Of good, and of evil. It is often those who desire nethicite whom the nethicite itself desires.”

The moment was shattered by soft footsteps, then Penelo saying, “Larsa?” Everyone filed out, leaving the Great-Chief without so much as a word.

Larsa smiled. “I was going to wait for my escort, but meeting you presents a great opportunity,” he said, then approached Ashe specifically. “This terrible war can be stopped, but I will need your help to do so.”

“A war?”

“You know Marquis Ondore leads a group of insurgents—your pardon, he leads a large resistance force against the empire. Lady Ashe, neither of our countries can afford this right now. The Rozarrian empire would stir. They would aid the resistance and use this aid as a pretext to declare war on Archadia. And, Archadia would have no choice but to answer.”

He paused, and when she remained silent, continued, “Lady Ashe, let us go to Mt Bur-Omisace. With the blessing of Gran Kiltias Anastasis you may rightly wear your crown, and declare the restoration of the Kingdom of Dalmasca. As queen, you can call for peace between the empire and Dalmasca, and stop Marquis Ondore.”

Ashe took a step back in anger. “For peace? How dare you say that! The empire attacked us, stole all we hold dear—and you would have me save them from war?”

Larsa took a step forward. “Dalmasca would be the battlefield! What if nethicite were used on Rabanastre? You know my brother would do this!”

She looked almost thoughtful at that, dropping her gaze to the stone in her hands.

Larsa sighed slightly and said, “Forgive me, I presumed overmuch. I could think of no other way to avoid bloodshed. If you cannot trust me, then please, take me as your hostage. We could leave tomorrow.”

Ashe opted to slowly walk away, Basch choosing to follow, and Penelo surged forward to take up Larsa’s attention.

Harry considered the situation, biting his lower lip, and allowed himself to be led away by Balthier, who then murmured, “I’d say this presents an opportunity.”

“Hm?” He realized they were slowly circling around behind the palisade. “Oh, yes. The question is how.”

“What exactly does Rozarria want?”

“Ah, the military or the emperor?” he countered.

“Either.”

Harry chuckled. “In layman’s terms? The military is still sharpening weapons in a brightly hopeful manner. House Margrace wants Archadia to back the hell off and stick to their damn own country, and stop invading others.”

“House Margrace?”

Harry nearly jumped out of his skin. Turning he saw Larsa, head tilted curiously. “Don’t do that,” Harry growled. “I’m too bloody young to die of heart failure.”

Larsa gestured, to continue the stroll, and kept with them as they did. “I received a letter from what I presume is a friend of yours—a certain member of House Margrace.”

“Was it interesting?” he asked innocently.

“Very, especially as it seemed no secret to him that I prefer peace over the increasingly despotic behavior of my brother. It’s funny about the name, though.”

Harry glanced over, brow arched inquiringly.

“Similarities of a sort,” Larsa said vaguely. “One to you, I presume, and obliquely”—he looked at Balthier—“one to you . . . Ffamran.”

It was Balthier’s turn to have a moment, making Harry feel that much better. “I didn’t think one so young would recognize me.”

“Young in age,” Larsa said, “but not so much otherwise. After all, I joined you in the mines for a specific purpose.”

“Yes, nethicite. We did wonder if it was you the Garif kept mentioning. So, what shall we talk about?”

Larsa stopped, then faced Harry. “I’d like to speak to your friend directly, if possible.”

“I could—” He blinked slowly, wondering if he was hallucinating. “Oh my stars and whiskers,” he breathed.

“Hallam? Where do you come up with these phrases?” Balthier was giving him one of those looks.

Harry flapped a hand negligently. “Cultural thing. Look,” he said and pointed. “Hiding oh so innocently away from prying eyes.” A gate crystal was there, only visible from specific angles due to its location.

“Now *that’s* opportunity knocking,” Balthier drawled.

“But not now,” Harry murmured. “In fact, let’s walk back a ways, hm?” A minute later he said, “You wish to *meet* him?”

“Is that not the proper way to attempt negotiation?” Larsa countered.

Harry eyed the boy speculatively as he wiped his brow, then gazed off toward the horizon. “Well, there’s no sense in playing coy, is there. Lord Larsa, I would have to take you to him. To Rozarria.”

Larsa nodded. “I have already offered myself as hostage to Lady Ashe. And I am willing to take the risk for a short trip to Rozarria. I understand that you would need to obtain authorization first.”

He purposely did not look at his lover. Even if Balthier was all for the idea, it was truly up to Al-Cid, and frankly, he could not suddenly start looking to his lover for answers to things he had no part of. Eventually he nodded. “I’m going to need cover at some point, to do so. If we do this, it’ll have to be at night, when the others are sleeping.”

“I could do something wicked,” Balthier murmured.

Harry turned his head sharply, eyeing his lover suspiciously.

“You’ll play along, won’t you?” Balthier asked of Larsa, who nodded, then gazed around to see who, if anyone, was nearby. Balthier smirked and pulled Harry to him for a kiss, then dragged him back to the crystal. Though, it was another minute at least before he actually released Harry, leaving him thoroughly breathless.

“Bloody hell.”

“Go on. Hurry,” Balthier urged.

He rolled his eyes and reached out to the crystal, and gated to Schpariel. Once there he took off at a dead run so as not to waste a minute, and arrived at Al-Cid’s usual haunt nearly out of breath.

“Hallam! I did not expect to see you, hey? Has something gone terribly wrong?”

“Lord Larsa wishes to meet with you here,” he gasped. “He was with the Garif, and brought up the letter you decided to send him.”

Al-Cid’s face blossomed with a smile. “Such a daring child. He will make a good ruler someday, I think.”

“Yes, well, he’s very concerned that the Rozarrian empire will back Ondore’s resistance, only to use Dalmasca as the battlefield in a war against Archadia. He’d rather see Lady Ashe reclaim her throne and sue for peace with Archadia, stopping the incipient war in its tracks. I don’t know how damn naïve that is, but. . . .”

Al-Cid nodded. “You have permission, my friend. However, I shall go to Ambervale and await you in your cottage, hey? Bring him there.”

“Not until after dark,” Harry said. “I can’t risk it until the others are sleeping. And, I should like to bring Balthier with me as well.”

“Balthier—Ffamran?” When Harry nodded he said, “That is fine. I will await you there, and assure the young lordling for me that he will be safe.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’d never have even come here to ask if I thought otherwise.”

Al-Cid laughed gaily and shooed him off, so Harry took off at a run again and gated back, only to be pulled into another kiss the second he materialized. *‘Oh merciful heaven.’* Damn the man knew how to kiss.

Balthier released him, looked him over, then frowned slightly and reached up to muss his hair a little. Harry slapped his hand away irritably and said, “We’re good.”

“Fantastic. Now, let’s stroll back around and play nice with the other children.”

Harry snorted and allowed his lover to walk him back into the populated sections of the village. Larsa was innocently hanging about not far away, chatting with Penelo and Vaan, and smiled when he saw them, that smile brightening a touch when Harry nodded.

Having had enough of being dragged around, he dragged Balthier along to that merchant he had spied earlier, and was soon engaging in conversation with the Garif about how well his business did. Predictably, Balthier became bored and quickly wandered off to speak with some of the others. Harry tore himself away after a while and rejoined Balthier right about the time they were invited to partake of dinner. And afterward, they would be shown to accommodations for their rest that evening.

He wasn’t sure what the main course actually was, but it tasted like chicken. Much later Harry and Balthier retired to one of the tents, coincidentally, right next to the one Larsa had been

staying in. They passed the time with quiet talk, and after two hours slipped from the tent and fetched Larsa, then proceeded to the gate crystal.

In front of it Harry waited for them to grab his forearms (as they could not possibly go unaided to where they had never been), and gated them to Ambervale. “We’re going to my house,” he murmured, then guided them through a darkness pierced only every so often by lanterns hung from poles. He went first through the door (unlocked as always) and closed it behind them, then led them to the main room.

Al-Cid, who was sitting in an armchair with a book in his hand, looked up and smiled. “You come sooner than I expect, hey?” he said, then practically singsonged, “I made sure to bring some fresh fruit for you, Hallam.”

Harry grinned when he noticed the bowl on the coffee table. “Thank you. My lord, allow me to introduce Lord Larsa Solidor, and Balthier. Lord Larsa, Balthier, this is Lord Al-Cid Margrace, son and trusted adviser to the emperor. Please, be welcome in my home.”

He waited until they had seated themselves to do so himself, then greedily pulled the bowl closer and took a mango to eat, ignoring the sounds of mirth coming from Al-Cid.

Larsa got straight to the point. “I am honored to meet you, Lord Al-Cid.”

“Nay, nay, call me Al-Cid.”

“And you may certainly call me Larsa.”

Harry sort of tuned out at that point, never having been a politician. He did, however, snap back to complete attention when Al-Cid said, “Hallam. I would have your opinion of this princess, hey?”

“Polite or brutal?” he inquired.

“Brutal, my friend.”

Harry nodded. “She’s extremely determined, but despite the prior two years in hiding she seems to be rather naïve, forgetting several things in her quest to free Dalmasca from Archadian control. She doesn’t seem to quite live in the same world as the rest of us—but I don’t find that so surprising—and is more focused on black and white issues, unwilling to see where it would not necessarily be untrue to her kingdom to compromise somewhat or make allies in unlikely places.

“Two of the people with her right now are common folk of Dalmasca, her subjects. And, while I understand she feels she must be in control, she does them and herself a disservice in treating them with what amounts to disdain. Vaan and Penelo represent her kingdom, her people, and if to no one else, a ruler should answer to those people. I can’t tell if her attitude

there is mellowing yet, not really. I also think that Captain Azelas fostered her behavior, so with him gone that might change.

“Two of her present allies are sky pirates, and we all know what their reputation is like. They present a vexing situation for her, rather like a slap in the face, because they don’t fight for loyalty to monarch and country or duty. They’d like some compensation, thank you very much, for their time and effort. The princess doesn’t want to deal with someone she has to appease in order to have them keep helping her, despite the fact that she *needs* them.

“At our earlier talk with the Great-Chief at Jahara, she heard what she wanted to hear, and had to be told again that they could not help her. Lord Larsa also appealed to her, and she reacted with as much anger as I would have expected, and as much unwillingness to deviate from whatever plan she has in mind. She’s a little too focused on the damn nethicite, as though it alone holds all the answers.

“I understand the concept of meeting power with power, but those relics are a menace. She did not want to hear Lord Larsa rightly point out that Dalmasca could become a Nabudis. However, she did look very thoughtful after that conversation. Honestly, she should remember that Raithwall forged the Galtean Alliance, something perhaps she also should work to bring back into being.

“I am concerned that in her quest to regain her throne, with her anger at Archadia, that she will forget that the people are mainly innocent. It is the senate and the upper echelons of the military she must deal with. She also seems to forget that Nabradia had a treaty with Rozarria, even if that was prompted somewhat by fear, though fear of Archadia was much stronger. At the same time she vows that kindness to Dalmasca will not go unforgotten.

“All in all, I find her to be a very frustrating and confusing person who spews denial of reality unthinkingly, and frankly, if Vaan and Penelo got pissed off at her attitude and left, and then Balthier and Fran became fed up. . . . Well, she would have her loyal Basch.”

Al-Cid nodded thoughtfully, then said, “I will do as you request, Larsa. I would see with my own eyes this princess, so I shall journey shortly, after I speak with the emperor.”

“I am grateful.”

“And now, I think we have places to be, hey? Hallam, I did not bring the fruit for you to pine over it at just one piece,” Al-Cid said teasingly as he stood. “Take it with you.”

“You didn’t really think I’d leave without it?” Harry already had a cloth container open so he could transfer them over.

“Balthier, it has been a pleasure to meet you. Take care of Hallam, hey?”

Harry snorted softly and stood up as Balthier chuckled and said, “I am more than happy to.”

On the walk back to the crystal Larsa murmured, "He seems a nice man, without affectation."

"Yes. And he sees the truth in things, which makes it near impossible to be blind to the world and the people in it. His excellency is a lucky man with Al-Cid for a son."

Back in Jahara they stealthily slipped off to their tents and finally got some rest, and the next morning the group reassembled, Larsa included. And Ashe still seemed to be thoughtful.

"I will accompany you to Mt Bur-Omisace," she said to Larsa.

"I had hoped you'd say yes," Larsa replied with a smile. "I am glad."

"My heart is not set," Ashe cautioned. "I still have questions. I hope to find answers along the way."

Larsa nodded and replied, "I had other reason to invite you. There is someone I'd like you to meet waiting on Bur-Omisace."

"Who is that?"

"An enemy, and an ally also. You will just have to wait and see for yourself," he said, then made for the bridge across the river.

"That Larsa likes his secrets," Vaan commented.

Ashe huffed slightly and strangely, defended Larsa. "He does not mean ill by it."

"He's not bad. At least for an imperial." Vaan rubbed his nose, then followed the boy.

As Ashe and Penelo also traversed the bridge, Basch said, "Holy Mt Bur-Omisace stands at the northern end of the Jagd Ramooda. Once we're in Jagd, we need not fear pursuit by their airships."

Balthier shook his head. "Don't get your hopes up," he warned. "You remember the *Leviathan* and *Shiva* sailed straight over the Jagd Yensa, right up to Raithwall's Tomb. Skystone that works even in Jagd. You know nethicite's behind it. Little wonder they're so keen on the stuff."

Basch turned. "And what is it you're after, Balthier? You're a welcome hand, and a great aid, but why?"

Balthier gazed off toward the village's exit as he said, "Worried that I'm out to steal the nethicite, eh? Can't say I'm unaccustomed to people doubting my intentions. Nothing could be further from my mind." He shook his head lightly. "Shall I swear by your sword or some such?"

After a short silence Basch said, “Apologies. But I needed to know where you stand. Her majesty depends on you. And you seemed to have an interest in the stone.”

Balthier gazed over with a faint smile. “I’m only here to see how the story unfolds. Any self-respecting leading man would do the same,” he said, then made for the bridge.

Harry, of course, had to wonder how it was that Basch was satisfied with such an answer. *He* knew Balthier spoke truth in this matter, but there were far too many people who lied without remorse, and with Vossler barely out of the picture, he thought it strange for Basch to be so accepting. Perhaps he really did see the truth there.

After they caught up Basch lagged back to walk with the princess as the others paced along farther ahead. The three youngest were leading, bantering back and forth, there seeming to be no friction between Dalmascan and Archadian. Harry was able to overhear snatches of their conversation, much of which focused on Penelo teasing Vaan. Behind Ashe and Basch were discussing an alliance, and the consequences to be expected, like potential shame. However, Basch seemed to see hope due to the three youngest, which raised Harry’s opinion of the man.

They made their way roughly east through the Ozmone Plain, Larsa lending his sword, eventually coming to a forest of extreme old growth, Golmore Jungle. The trees were massive, blocking much light, and flowering vines stretched everywhere. Walkways of wood provided means of travel, as the ground was far below, and mysterious tiny pinpoints of light flitted about.

Fran took the lead, walking unerringly along the paths, and generally slamming half a dozen arrows into malicious beasts before the others could even haul their weapons up. She was, as they say, in her element. However, as they approached one of the junctions a magical barrier blossomed into view, eliciting a gasp from the Viera.

“What is it?” Vaan inquired.

“The jungle denies us our passage.” She sounded almost irritated.

“What have we done?” Ashe asked.

“We? No,” Fran said, turning around. “I.” She proceeded to backtrack a ways, the others lagging behind in confusion, toward a short flight of steps that led to a dead-end landing.

“Making an appearance?” Balthier quietly asked her.

“I am,” she confirmed.

“I thought you’d left for good.”

“Our choices are few,” she replied, stepping down the flight. “This is as much for you as it is me.”

“Oh?” Balthier inquired, brow arched.

“You are ill at ease. The nethicite troubles you? You’ve let your eyes betray your heart,” she murmured, then began tracing patterns in the air with a finger, trails of light following her movements.

Vaan stepped closer. “What are you doing?”

“Soon you will learn.” And indeed, moments later, the patterns—symbols—exploded backward and caused a grassy pathway to appear, curving off into darkness.

As Vaan expressed his shock Fran said, “We go to seek the aid of the Viera who dwell ahead.”

“I bet they’ll be glad to see you after so long,” Penelo offered.

Even Harry knew better than that, though stranger he was to Kerwon.

“I am unwelcome,” Fran replied after a pause. “An unsought guest in their wood.” She headed forward, along the path, which brought them to a village full of sunlight, wooden walkways circling more of those monstrous trees, and teeming with Viera, many of whom glided around with slow, seeming indifference.

Fran stepped off to the side slightly and said, “Eruyt Village. Ahead you will find her: Mjrn. Bring her to me. She will know why you call her.”

Balthier nodded and took the lead, even though he was as unlikely as any to know his way around; what place had Humes there? Toward the back, up several curving staircases and past many Viera who acted as though they did not exist, they came upon one of the few ‘buildings’ they had any access to, at which point those dwellers nearby surrounded them loosely, causing Penelo to cling lightly to Vaan in trepidation.

“Hey, Mjrn lives here, doesn’t she?” Vaan asked. “We’re here to see her.”

The Viera stared at him blankly, not deigning to answer. That is, until from the building a Viera dressed unlike the others emerged and approached.

“It is not allowed for Humes to walk on these grounds,” she informed them.

Vaan stepped forward and said, rather belligerently, “We’ll go as soon as we’ve seen Mjrn.”

The Viera crossed her arms. “If you can find her.”

“We’re not leaving until you let us see her,” Vaan persisted.

The Viera huffed and looked away in denial.

“Fine, then. We’ll look for her ourselves,” Vaan said, then turned to step back toward the others.

Just then the Viera said, “Ah!”

Fran was approaching, the Viera behind them not hindering her passage, and came to a stop at the back of the group. “I’ve heard the voice of the wood. She says Mjrn is not in the village.” She walked to the front of the party, saying, “Jote. Where has she gone?”

“Why do you ask? The wood tells us where she has gone. Or . . . can you not hear her?” When Fran did not respond, and in fact bowed her head slightly, Jote continued, “You cannot. Your ears are dull from hearing their harsh speech, I think. Viera who have abandoned the wood are Viera no longer. Mjrn, too, has left her embrace.”

“And you forsake them in return?” Balthier inquired, rather solemnly curious.

“It is the will of the village. Viera must live always with the wood. So is the Green Word, and so is our law.”

Vaan reacted rather snottily. “We’ll let you worry about keeping your laws. Just do us a favor and stay out of our way. We’ll find her ourselves.”

Harry, of course, wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about any of it, the situation hitting a little too close to home in some ways. He, however, had enough tact to stay quiet.

And it seemed that Jote did feel compassion, even for those who had gone against the law—to some extent, anyway. She raised her arms and face up in a posture of supplication, a mild whirlwind of light and leaves surrounding her. After a short time she relaxed. “Our sister has left the wood and gone west. She wanders warrens among men who hide themselves in clothes of cold iron. Thus to me has the wood spoken.”

As Jote walked away Fran said, “The Viera may begin as part of the wood, but it is not the only end that we may choose.”

Jote replied without stopping, “The same words I heard fifty years ago.”

Fran turned and headed back toward the village entrance. They followed, pausing for a few moments before exiting back to the jungle.

“So then, what was she saying about men in a warren?” Balthier mused.

“The Henne Magicite Mines—maybe that’s what she meant,” said Larsa. “They lie in Bancour, south of the Ozmone Plain. The entire region is a colony of the Archadian empire. There would be soldiers.”

“Is that a problem?” Balthier said with a shrug. “Let’s move.”

Along the hidden path Vaan managed to make an absolute ass of himself inquiring about Fran’s age, causing pretty much everyone to scoff at his rudeness. Seeing that the young man had no clue what he’d done, Harry sidled up and murmured, “For your own sake, don’t ever do that again. Most women find it incredibly offensive if you ask about their age. And they will look upon you as being nothing more than a tactless, immature brat.”

Vaan gave him a look of confusion. “But what’s the big deal?”

He shook his head. “It’s a female thing. Don’t even try to understand. You’ll only end up with a headache. Another word of advice: if a female ever asks you about her weight, find a way to disappear. No good ever comes of that query.” Harry grinned at the even more confused Vaan and quickened his pace to catch up with Balthier.

They returned to Ozmone Plain only to stumble over two wounded imperial soldiers. The conscious one implored, “T-traveler. Have you a potion on you? My friend is badly wounded. I fear that, untreated, he’ll die. Please, just one potion. . . .”

Harry had a spell prepping before the man was halfway through his speech, and quickly healed them both, not caring one whit for what the others might think.

The man was embarrassingly grateful. “Thank you, thank you! I’m in your debt. Thanks to you my friend’s life is saved. We are in your debt, sir.”

Harry wanted to hide at that point, but Balthier was holding his arm by then, probably terribly amused by it all. The man did have some useful information for them, though.

“We fled here from Henne Mines. We were attacked, you see. It was all we could do to make it this far. We’ll rest here until my friend is able again. If you like, we could lend you the use of our chocobos until then.”

Two chocobos, eight people. Hm. Ashe looked at them all, lingering for a few extra seconds on Larsa and Fran, then nodded. “They can ride two each, yes?”

“So it’ll just be several trips,” Balthier murmured.

Ashe approached the soldiers. “We would like to, yes. Which way should we be wary of?”

The soldier promptly informed her of exactly where to go. “You do know that some paths are only accessible by chocobo, right? A sure sign that such a path is nearby is the presence of

chocobo tracks. Keep that in mind and you won't go wrong. You want to avoid the Henne Mines, so be careful not to veer off to the left as you head into the plain proper, okay?"

Ashe smiled her best smile as Balthier and Basch gathered up the reins of the two mounts, and they moved along, finding that exact spot. Several trips later they were all assembled in front of a tunnel into a mountain, gazing at five corpses sprawled on the grass. Two were clearly soldiers, but the other three were dressed in the same uniforms as some of the people on the *Leviathan*.

Larsa let out a gasp at the sight. "Researchers from the Draklor Laboratory. What were they doing here?"

"Nothing good, I imagine," Balthier said grimly.

Within was a place that brought to mind the Lhusu Mines again, which was not a happy thing in Harry's opinion. They were forced to deal with the locking system installed by the imperials to progress farther within, there being two sets of gates. If one set was open, the other was closed, which meant a lot of useless extra walking in order to circumvent tunnels barred to them.

Eventually they emerged into a tunnel not much different from some of the others, except for that no monsters lurked around to attack them, and Larsa found the spot interesting. "Look at the magicite. These mines much resemble the ones at Lhusu. Of course. . . . Draklor must be searching for new sources of ore. Should the resistance forces move, the rich veins of magicite in Bhujerba will be forever beyond their grasp."

Larsa gasped suddenly, having spotted another corpse, and ran toward it, but Fran gave one of her own, bringing a hand to her chest. "Is it her? What is . . . this Mist? Mjrn!"

A Viera walked into view, her gait like that of a marionette in the hands of an inexperienced puppeteer. "The stench of Humes. The stench of power."

Ashe stepped aside Fran and said, "What's wrong with her?"

Mjrn whipped her head around toward the sound and pointed, then spoke, her voice like that of two people at once. "Stay away! Power-needy Hume!" She left, a staggering, lurching run, and they followed her, down a short tunnel and into a large circular room with many barred exits.

They were just processing that the room was far from unoccupied when Mjrn stumbled off behind the huge dragon that was just then awakening, disturbed and ready to deal with whatever had encroached on its sleeping space. Harry snapped out of his somewhat dazed state and started casting. Much later, a more or less exhausted group watched as the dragon crashed to the ground and dissolved into motes that vanished, leaving behind no sign.

Sounds, however, reminded them of the missing Mjrn. Fran sucked in a breath and reversed herself, then dashed forward toward a staggering Mjrn, who was holding something in her hand that looked suspiciously like manufactured nethicite. It fell from her grasp and bounced a few times before rolling to a stop, then shattered into fine dust.

Behind Mjrn, as though rising *from* her, a ghostly shape appeared, not human, but it had eyes of a sort. Fran jerked to a stop at the sight, then dashed forward again as the thing faded out and Mjrn collapsed to the ground.

“Thing thing inside her. What was it?” Vaan mused.

Fran had dropped to the ground in order that she might cradle Mjrn and lift her upper body.

“Is it you?”

Fran nodded, and a moment later Mjrn passed out with a sigh.

After she awoke Mjrn explained. “When the Hume soldiers came to the wood, the village took small heed of them. So long as the wood herself is safe from harm, the Viera give little care to goings on beyond her. But in me, an uneasiness stirred. I had to discover why they had come.”

“So you came here hoping to find something out, and got yourself caught,” Balthier said. When she nodded he smiled faintly. “You’re as foolhardy as your sister.”

Mjrn got up from the crate she’d been sitting on and walked a few steps. “They took me then, and set close beside me a stone. They said its Mist would be drawn into me, that the Viera well suited this end.” She looked back at Fran. “I saw the light coming from the stone, and then—”

“We have seen this,” said Fran. “From *Leviathan*, the Mist released from the Dawn Shard drove me, too, into such a rage. She was taken not by the Dawn Shard.”

“Manufactured nethicite,” Larsa stated. “Then that means—Penelo, the stone I gave you, do you still carry it with you?”

“Sure, it’s right here,” she said, and fetched it out.

Larsa snatched it from her hand almost rudely and turned away. “This is a thing more dangerous again than I had imagined. I should never have given it to you. Forgive me, I—I didn’t know.”

Penelo gave a little shrug. “I’d always thought of it as a sort of good luck charm. And even if it is dangerous, on *Leviathan* it kept us safe.”

“There is a place for all things,” said Ashe quietly, “even danger such as this.”

Vaan, from his vantage on a crate, said, “I hope you’re right about that.”

“We should return,” Fran stated. “This place is not for us.”

On that note, they retreated from the mines, to Ozmone Plain to spend time ferrying people via chocobo, and then returned the birds to the soldiers. From there they made their way to Eruyt Village and back to the building where Jote had spoken with them.

And Jote was waiting, two Viera to either side behind her. “I heard the wood’s whispers,” she said as one of the Viera began walking forward, something cradled in her hand. “Take it.”

The Viera handed something like a pendant to Vaan, who happened to be standing closest. Strung on a long cord, it was fairly small, an elongated object of faintly-glowing blue.

“Lente’s Tear is a permission,” Jote said. “Pass through the wood and leave. To other places go.”

Vaan let out a sigh and retreated, and Mjrn rushed forward. “That cannot be all!” she cried. “I saw it when I left the village! Ivalice is changing! How can the Viera stand and do nothing at all?”

“Ivalice is for the Humes. The wood alone is for us.”

Harry thought that was rather outrageous given that ‘the wood’ *was* a part of Ivalice. He might understand their reluctance to have much of anything to do with other races, but there were many, many Viera who had forsaken the wood to live in the wider world. There were even rumors of Viera who had been driven from the wood. For those truly content, however. . . .

“But that is wrong! How can we just hide here in the trees, when all the world outside is on the move! I, too, wish to live freely—to leave this wood!”

“Do not do this,” Fran said, and Mjrn turned to face her. “You must remain away from the Humes. Stay with the wood. Live together with the wood. This is your way.”

“But, Fran—my sister!”

“I am no longer of you. I have discarded wood and village. I won my freedom. Yet my past had been cut away forever. No longer can my ears hear the Green Word. This solitude, you want, Mjrn?”

“Sister—”

“No, Mjrn,” Fran said with a shake of her head. “Only one sister remains to you now. You must forget my existence.”

Mjrn let out a choked sob and ran off; Jote's gaze followed. "I am sorry to make you do this."

"She goes against the laws of the wood. I threw down those laws. It is better that I do this. Better I than one who must uphold these laws herself."

Jote glanced over her shoulder and nodded at a Viera; moments later they all walked away.

"I have a request: listen to the wood's voice for me," Fran said. "I fear—I fear she hates."

Jote opened herself to the wood again, then said, "The wood longs for you. For the child born from under her boughs."

Fran seemed to consider that. "A pleasant lie, that," she said, and turned away.

"Be cautious," Jote warned. "The wood is jealous of the Humes who have taken you."

Fran angled her head back. "I am as them, now. Am I not? Goodbye . . . sister." And then she walked away, prompting the others to follow.

They were almost through Golmore Jungle, according to Fran, when they happened upon a sort of clearing featuring a massive mound covered in grass and moss and flowers—a mound that came to life, actually. However, they defeated the wyrm after a long, nasty fight and Harry was surprised and delighted when the destruction of its body revealed a gate crystal, which he promptly keyed himself into. They continued on, eventually emerging from the jungle into the start of a mountain pass.

Ashe, surprisingly, called for a halt. The area appeared to be completely free of monsters, and they had been going strong for quite some time. Or as she put it, "We should be well rested before we brave the Paramina Rift."

Tents were broken out and set up, water provided for washing up, and food handed out to everyone. Harry found a reasonably comfortable rock to lean against and was pleased when Balthier and Fran came to sit with him. "You have any idea why the princess suddenly changed her mind about Larsa's suggestion?" he murmured, then wolfed down half a bread roll.

Fran discreetly pointed at the three youngest, and Balthier replied, "We overheard Vaan telling Penelo about a little chat he had with the princess that night. I guess Vaan explained to her why he was on this little jaunt, what was motivating him. I suppose it didn't hurt that he apparently told her he was going to face reality, to stop running away and making excuses."

"Wise words, from him," Fran added.

"Sometimes, the wisest words of all are from the young."

Balthier shot him a dark look. “Please tell me you aren’t going to add something sappy about the innocence of children?”

“Heavens no. What do you take me for? A bleeding-heart, starry-eyed romantic who wallows in bad poetry? Children *might* be innocent, but in my experience, too many of them never get that chance. They aren’t exempt from pain and suffering and truly heinous conditions. But they often haven’t yet become so hardened to life that their minds are closed to the possibilities.”

“You mean cynical and jaded,” Balthier drawled.

Harry grinned. “Those, too. As utterly aggravating as naïvety can be, it can also be refreshing. In small doses.”

Balthier smirked. “Now that’s the Hallam I know and love.”

Harry froze with his bread halfway to his mouth, but recovered a split second later and wolfed it down. “Even without a favored customer discount?” he quipped.

“If you two are going to descend into mating displays. . . .”

Balthier chuckled. “Sorry, Fran. I wonder where we’ll end up next? After Bur-Omisace, I mean.”

“You ever been there?”

“No reason to, really, but I hear the view is spectacular. You’ll like it, I’m sure.”

It would be a while before he found out. Their tent had been set up a bit extra away from the others, which afforded slightly more privacy for nighttime frolics. Harry did become a bit starry-eyed when Balthier repeated his earlier sentiment, and this time not in the context of affectionate joking.

“So that’s what this is?” he whispered.

“Isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Huh.”

“Three of the most difficult words to say?”

He smiled even though it was almost completely dark, and said, “Yeah. I love you, Ffamran—Balthier. That feels good to finally say.”

“Is this the part where I take advantage of you?”

“I certainly hope so,” he said breathily, then leaned in to kiss his lover.

In the morning they packed up and set off, eating on the way. As they walked the terrain rose while the temperature steadily dropped, prompting Harry to break out a cloak and internally whine that he could not manage something like a warming charm for himself and the others.

In the rift itself they began to see people limping along, most of them wearing ragged clothing and helping each other to keep moving. Balthier was moved to say, “Empires parade down city streets, while refugees walk barefoot through the snow.”

Larsa’s head dropped, then he turned. “And so I sue for *peace* to stop short war and ease their suffering. My father *will* choose peace.”

“Will he now? You sound so sure of yourself. You can never know another,” Balthier said with faint bitterness as he started walking again, “even your father.”

Larsa just stood there, and Vaan said, “Don’t take it the wrong way, okay?” When the boy grunted softly he moved away.

Harry stepped up beside Larsa. “Some have due cause to be cynics. Do not let that destroy your trust,” he murmured. “Come?”

Larsa nodded and turned around.

They continued to see refugees, and Harry cast the odd healing spell as they trudged through the snow at a faster pace. Thankfully they needed only to hug the northern reach of the rift, and were soon enough above the snowline and into clear weather and rock and packed earth beneath their feet. Mt Bur-Omisace was collection of spires and upwellings of grey rock, rising even above the clouds. Here and there were floating masses, some bare, some sporting greenery and even buildings. The temple itself was carved into the very face of the largest peak, a multilevel structure that dwarfed its surroundings, with a sheer drop from the platforms and walkways to the Naldoan Sea below, crossing which was a common means of access for pilgrims and refugees.

And there were many. The priests of Kiltia provided, the numerous refugees all having at least a place to sleep and food to eat, as was evident by the sights along the approach to the temple. Harry was absolutely beside himself at the view and had to be dragged away from soaking up the wondrous experience by an openly amused Balthier. “We can return, you know, at some other time. You can gaze to your heart’s content then.”

Inside the temple they slowly approached down a walkway of light stone. To either side were shallow pools of water with lily pads and flowers as adornments, and beyond soothing mosaic walls. They came to a stop several lengths away from the Gran Kiltias, Ashe and Larsa fronting the group a foot ahead. The white-haired elderly male (Harry thought he must be a Helgas) stood there, eyes closed and hands folded at the waist, with no visible reaction to their

presence, at which point Vaan blundered into the realm of rudeness again by whispering a little too loudly to Penelo, “Is he sleeping?”

“No, my child,” said an aged, slightly hollow male voice. “I do not sleep. I dream. For reality and illusion are a duality, two parts of a whole. Only the mirror of dreams reflects what is true.”

Ashe took one step forward. “Anastasis, your grace, I am Ashelia—”

“Lay down your words,” he said. “Ashelia, daughter of Raminas, I have dreamt your dream. Who better to carry on the Dalmaskan line than she who bears the Dawn Shard? Your dream of a kingdom restored is known to me.”

Larsa took his own step forward. “Gran Kiltias, then give us your blessing. Grant the Lady Ashe her accession—”

“I do not suppose”—they all looked back to see the speaker—“this is something you might . . . reconsider?” Al-Cid confidently walked forward, his sunglasses proud on his face, saying, “My little emperor-in-waiting. You called and I have come.”

Larsa moved forward quickly, extending a hand, which Al-Cid disdained to reach out and pat the boy on the head. Larsa brushed him off with a faint scowl and turned back to the princess with a sigh. “This is the man I wanted you to meet. Believe it or not, he is a member of the noble House Margrace, rulers of the Rozarrian empire.”

Al-Cid approached Ashe, saying deprecatingly, “I am but one of very, very many. Try as I might, I could not stop this war alone . . . thus I came seeking Larsa’s assistance.” He reached up and removed his sunglasses with a flourish (something that made Harry roll his eyes discreetly) and handed them off to the dark-haired woman accompanying him.

“Al-Cid Margrace, at your service. To think I stand before the Lady Ashe. It is truly an honor.” He dropped to one knee and took her hand to kiss it (something that made Penelo clap both hands to her mouth). “I see it is true after all,” he said, then lowered his voice a touch. “Ah, stunning is Dalmasca’s desert bloom.”

Larsa made a sound of acute frustration at the grandstanding as Al-Cid released Ashe and stood back up.

“In Archadia, Larsa,” spoke Anastasis. “In Rozarria, Al-Cid. They dream not of war. Should empire join with empire, the way will open for a new Ivalice in our time.”

Al-Cid brought his arms up with a short bark of laughter. “Gran Kiltias! You speak much of dreams. But in the real world, war is upon us.”

“Gran Kiltias,” said Ashe, “I was told my coming here would prevent this war. I was to assume my father’s throne and announce the restoration of Dalmasca, treat with the empire for peace, and persuade the resistance to stay their hand. I have not come all this way to be asked to reconsider!”

Al-Cid gestured again. “A word from you and the resistance would stop cold, and Rozarria’s pretext for joining the war . . . scattered, off to the four winds. This was what we had hoped. Alas, circumstances change. A full two years have passed since your reported death. Were it to become known you were still alive, I fear it could only worsen our situation.”

“Because I am powerless to help,” she said resentfully.

“Ehh! Nay, in fact it has little to do with you,” Al-Cid replied.

“Then what?” Larsa asked. “If Lady Ashe were to extend her hand in friendship, perhaps then I could persuade the emperor. His excellency will solve things peacefully—”

“Emperor Gramis is no more,” Al-Cid bluntly informed the boy. “His life was taken.”

Larsa’s face drained of all colour, his eyes widening. “Father!” he gasped.

As if to make up for his unkindness in even the smallest of ways, Al-Cid squeezed Larsa’s shoulder before releasing him. “Let us suppose you approach the empire with a peaceful resolution,” he said to Ashe. “The late Emperor Gramis would have lent you his ear, that much is certain. But we are dealing with Vayne Solidor. Should the princess return, he would claim her an impostor—all to tempt the resistance into battle. Vayne wants this war, that much is also certain. As our ill luck would have it, the man is a military genius.”

Larsa’s face was a study in heartbreak, his eyes glossy with unshed tears, something Harry couldn’t bear to see, but knew must be endured. He stepped up quietly to place a hand of his own on the boy’s shoulder for that cold comfort.

“The dreams have told me thus,” Anastasis spoke. “To reveal yourself would imperil us all. I see war, and Vayne’s name writ bold on history’s page.”

“Archadia’s banners fly high. They are making ready for the coming war.” Al-Cid reached back without looking, his companion placing a piece of parchment in his hand. “According to our latest reports. . . .” He scanned it and continued, “The Western Armada prepares for war—under Vayne’s command no less. The newly formed 12<sup>th</sup> Fleet has already been deployed. Oh, yes! The imperial 1<sup>st</sup> Fleet stands ready. They’ll be underway as the *Odin*’s refit is complete. And there is more: the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kerwon Expeditionary Force is being called in to replace the missing 8<sup>th</sup>, so there will be no gaps. The largest force ever seen!”

“And then,” said Ashe breathily, “the nethicite is the coup de grâce.” Al-Cid nodded as she turned to face Anastasis. “Gran Kiltias, your grace. I spoke to you of my succession—let us put that aside. Should I become Queen of Dalmasca now—powerless as I am—I can protect nothing. With a greater power at my disposal, perhaps then.”

“Is it the nethicite of which you dream?”

“I require something far greater,” she replied.

The Gran Kiltias opened his eyes, a shock, and when he spoke his voice was normal, lacking that hollow quality. “To wield power against power. Truly the words of a Hume child.”

“I am descended from the Dynast-King himself,” she reminded him unnecessarily.

“Indeed. Then you have but one choice. Seek you the other power Raithwall left.”

“Does such a thing exist?” she asked incredulously.

“Journey across the Paramina Rift to the Stilshrine of Miriam,” he said, arms coming up to each side, palms upward. “There rests the gift he entrusted to the Gran Kiltias of his time. Seek it out. The Sword of Kings can cut through nethicite.”

Ashe started to leave, but was stopped before she could even turn around by the Gran Kiltias speaking further. “Why he would entrust the power to destroy nethicite, the instrument of his greatness, to another and not his own progeny, I cannot say. Awaken Ashelia B’nargin and take up your sword, or your dream will remain but a dream.”

Ashe turned away again to leave, but paused aside a pale Larsa. She inclined her head, then continued on. Harry squeezed Larsa’s shoulder and let go. As he walked away, the Gran Kiltias said, back to that hollow voice, “My dream, too, fades into day.”

That cast a pall of foreboding over things, as much as the incipient war, though Harry was not sure if anyone but himself, Larsa, and Al-Cid had heard it. Even so, he hoped that Al-Cid could do something, anything, to soften the blow that he had been forced to deal Larsa.

The Paramina Rift was just as cold and unpleasant, but it served to take his mind somewhat off what had just happened. According to the map purchased for the area, they were headed south, through snow light and heavy, frozen streams, and any number of creatures out for their blood. At least the fighting warmed their blood and kept them going until they had descended low enough for the air temperature to begin rising, signaling a sure change of circumstance.

Snow slowly gave way to bare rock, and then a gorge, beyond which was their destination. It was another tomb-like structure, cut into rock, though the approach to this one was not of death, but almost welcome. Cascades of water fed shallow features to either side of the main

walkway, which was blue-green stone flanked by beige and rust stone, and pillars rose, some supporting arches. At the entrance to the shrine were several acolytes, who gave no trouble as they passed through the massive double doors.

Cavernous, the room, if one could even give it such a tepid name, with stairs descending at either side to doors. Directly before them was an open area, cut from the floor to reveal the level below and secured from casual misfortune by a low stone paling. Another was beyond, a walkway between bisecting the room and containing a small pedestal, and beyond that a raised area with an ancient device. And, where one could hardly miss it, prominent was a massive stone statue, a silent colossus. It held a sword before it, perpendicular to the floor, the oddly-curved tip blocking egress between the statue's firmly planted legs below.

Investigation showed that the ancient device was inactive, and the doors were locked, so they went to the pedestal instead. Nothing seemed to have any effect, until, that is, Ashe fetched out the Dawn Shard and placed it atop. They were whisked away to a new place within the shrine. A second pedestal was found and activated, though that one did not teleport them. However, backtracking slightly they came to realize that they could descend either of a set of stairs now which had appeared, and they did, following the 'corridor' and exiting west.

After a short walk they came to a junction, north barred by a locked set of doors, so south they went, fighting temple guardians along the way, to come to a stop in front of the massive sword of the colossus. Ashe touched it, and a sound echoed through the area, originating from farther north, but the sword itself remained as is.

They found that their progress north was now possible, the doors unlocked, and inside a medium-sized square room was an ancient device, perhaps to match the earlier one? As there was no other way to go, they used the device, and indeed ended up at their starting point. That occasioned a trip down the western set of stairs and through the now unlocked set of doors. And, a dizzying journey through rooms packed with guardians eager to rip themselves free from their stone embraces to do battle.

A statue was found, it facing south, one that could rotate, as they found out when Vaan touched it curiously. When it came to face east its eyes glowed, making them stop to consider.

"If my bearings are correct, it's now facing the center of this place," Balthier mused. "That colossus out there?"

"Perhaps we'll find more," Basch said, and off they set again, south, and into a confusing array of walkways and pseudo-hallways. At the southern end they located another statue, this one facing east, so they rotated it to face north, toward the colossus, at which point its eyes also glowed.

"I think we're on the right track, then," Ashe observed. "One more to the east?"

“Maybe,” Harry said, “if there is that third to position, it will cause some reaction with the massive one?”

“You mean, like that bloody sword moving out of the way?” Balthier drawled.

“Can’t think of anything else. For all this place is huge, there doesn’t seem to be much to it.”

“Let’s continue,” Ashe said, then headed east, though they were quickly forced to turn north.

At the upper end of the area was egress to a new section of the shrine, a mirror to where they had ended up descending the western stairs. A promising sign, and it had both doors to the north, and a set to the east halfway up.

“I’ve got a feeling about this,” Balthier said. “Let’s be ready for anything, hm?”

Everyone readied their weapons and Harry began casting just in case, and when they were set the doors were opened and passed through. Sure enough, in a circular room that Harry would have called interestingly-designed had he the time to pay attention, a huge guardian emerged from one of the cutouts in the floor and attacked. After its defeat they moved through the doors it had guarded, to find a third statue. That one rotated to the east, they retreated and exited to the north, ascending stairs back up to the shrine’s main room.

There, the eyes of the colossus glowed purple, and it shuddered into motion, lifting the sword up until the hilt partially obstructed its face, and opening the way between its legs. They hastened to the ancient device and used it, then rushed down the length of the room to pass under the sword and climb a short flight of steps to the revealed set of doors.

The room within was enormous, and stalactites and stalagmites of ice decorated the space, an accompaniment to the huge creature resting at the center, which rose from its perch on the ground to meet them. An Esper, Harry thought. It, too, was soundly defeated after a long, hard battle, and he was proven right when a crystalline shaft appeared in victory and shattered, releasing the Esper’s glyph.

That collected, they proceeded through the unguarded doors to find themselves within a narrow room which sported two short flights of steps illuminated by pillars of glowing blue. But the wonder was ahead—a series of rotating gear-like objects limed in that same blue, surrounding a central, likewise limed plate which held a large, ornately-designed sword.

Ashe approached, holding the Dawn Shard. It began to glow, and one by one the lights dimmed, including the pillars, as though the nethicite was absorbing their power. As it did so the gears stopped one by one, and the central plate’s light moved inward, toward the sword, which then levitated from its cradle to be captured by the princess’s hand. And immediately she lurched forward, grunting, the spiked tip striking the floor with a resounding clank.

“You should try it on the Dawn Shard,” Vaan suggested. “See if it can destroy nethicite or not.”

“What?” Ashe replied incredulously.

“He may just be on to something,” Balthier said. “The Dawn Shard’s no use to us, after all, and this is presumably the Sword of Kings.”

Ashe stared at the stone for a while, then backed up and placed it on one of the steps and prepared to heft the sword. The Dawn Shard began to glow blue again. “The stone bleeds Mist,” she said.

“It has been roused,” Fran replied. “It fears the sword.”

As they watched a cloud formed, like smoke from a fire, in a mix of blue, yellow, and green. Ashe lifted her head, perhaps seeing something they could not, then hefted the sword over her head. After a pause, she slammed the sword down, hitting just to the side of the Dawn Shard, by design or bad aim. Seconds later the stone went inert.

“The stone is quiet,” Fran stated.

Ashe straightened. “This is the sword,” she said confidently. “The nethicite destroyer.”

“Should it find its mark,” Balthier drawled, then turned to head down the steps.

“Vaan!” Ashe cried.

Vaan moved closer to her, but Harry could not hear their quiet conversation as he followed his lover. They followed soon enough, anyway, Basch having strapped the sword to his back, and they exited, finally, to the outside, to fresh air and sunlight. Barely they had exited when shadows covered them, causing them to look skyward.

Overhead was an ominous sight; a fleet of airships, one quite intimidating in appearance, rather like a metal insectival dragon, headed north across the Paramina Rift. Fran gasped and pointed. “There!” Far north, framed within an arch of the shrine’s approach, could be seen smoke, as though from a massive bonfire.

“What could it mean?” breathed Ashe.

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#### 4 : INQUINO

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Arrival back at Bur-Omisace was disheartening; the imperials had obviously attacked, injuring and killing refugees, priests, and acolytes alike, and shattering parts of the area. “What could possibly be the cause for this?” Ashe wondered. “This is a holy place.”

They hastened back to the temple and entered, only to see that even that had not escaped damage, decorative railings having been shattered and great scorch marks and gouges like wounds in the floor. Up ahead was a judge, standing over a body. The judge turned at the sound of their footsteps and said, “Ah, our vagrant princess. Swift has your lust for revenge led you to the Sword of Kings.” His confident movement forward revealed the corpse to be that of the Gran Kiltias. “You will surrender it to me. Too late, and to their sorrow do those who misplace their trust in gods learn their fate.” From him briefly appeared another of those ghostly beings.

“There it is again,” Vaan said quietly as Penelo’s hands flew to her mouth.

The judge’s body became enveloped in a foul dark cloud striated with dulled blues, greens, and yellows, prompting Balthier to say, “Fran, I don’t like the look of that.”

“This Mist—he holds a stone! It controls him as it did Mjrn!”

The judge laughed. “No. No, the power of manufactured nethicite is the power of man! A weapon forged by his wisdom, who would challenge the gods themselves! A fitting blade for a true Dynast-King. Raithwall did but pretend the title, a cur begging nethicite scraps from his master’s table. Hark! Ivalice hails her true Dynast-King, Vayne Solidor! He shall defy the will of the gods, and see the reins of history back in the hands of man! His time is nigh! The new Ivalice holds no place for the name Dalmasca. The stain of Raithwall’s blood shall be washed clean from history’s weave!” He readied his weapons and began to advance.

Three other judges burst in through the doors behind them and began attacking, and were immediately set upon as the judge up front was taking his own sweet time in advancing down the walkway. They were duly defeated, allowing them to turn to meet the remaining judge, and giving Harry the opportunity to scan him and immediately fling Dispel his way. Sadly, this judge, though coming across to Harry as some sort of zealot high on faith for Vayne, seemed to have more brains than the others, and targeted Harry specifically, probably because he was healing his allies like a speed demon.

“Penelo,” he shouted as he dodged yet another swipe from one of the judge’s nasty weapons, “I gave you that pendant—hit the bastard with Stop!”

The judge laughed heartily at that and took another swipe, which Harry deflected with his staff before skipping backward hastily. At least with the judge so focused on him, the others were able to attack him from all other sides with only collateral damage.

Penelo landed her spell, causing the judge to freeze in place; she whooped in excitement as Harry took a moment to catch his breath and aim a tired smile her way. The others practically dogpiled on the judge in his weakness and battered him down fiercely with weapons and magic, bringing about his defeat.

They all stepped back as the man seemed to go berserk, jerking around as though harried by some unseen foe. Again the dark cloud emerged, and a bright blue light erupted from the judge's chestplate, sending off sparks and then exploding outward as the man collapsed backward to lie unmoving.

Balthier moved forward to crouch down and check the judge over as Ashe, Vaan, Basch, and Penelo raced for Anastasis. He looked away in disgust after a moment and stood up, then walked toward the others, Fran and Harry trailing along. "He set his very bones about with manufactured nethicite. The Gran Kiltias?"

Penelo shook her head, then gasped and looked up at him. "Wait—what about Larsa?"

"Gone," came the voice of Al-Cid. He was being helped up the walkway by his aide. "Spirited away by Judge Gabranth."

"You okay?" Vaan asked as the aide helped Al-Cid to take a seat on the floor against one of the squat supports.

Harry immediately dashed over to start healing the man, then frowned slightly as he realized it was not so bad. A twinkle in Al-Cid's eyes made him roll his eyes eloquently, but he healed his lord of the wounds he did have without verbal comment. His condition could be passed off as exhaustion, he supposed.

"So he was here," Basch mused.

"Ah, as for our young lordling, he went along—to avoid trouble, you see. But Judge Bergan had other ideas. He flew into a rage, and I was left to fend for myself."

It was only then that anyone took notice of the numerous corpses of imperial soldiers marring the temple interior. Harry flashed Al-Cid a wry smile.

"Please, princess. You must permit me to take you back with me to Rozarria."

She came to crouch nearby, a faintly concerned scowl on her face. "So that you can protect me?"

"I would lay down my life at a single word to be sure, but I harbor no maundering delusions of valiant grandeur. Vayne has our war pavilion jumping at shadows. They favor a preemptive strike. But you—you will convince them otherwise. You will see that they do not start this war."

Ashe's response was without hesitation. "This I cannot do. Forgive me. But my errand here is not yet done," she said as she stood back up. "I must wield the Sword of Kings, and with it bring an end to the Dusk Shard."

"Ah, this stone. Do you even know where it is?"

"I can venture a guess," Balthier said confidently as he approached them. "The Draklor Laboratory. In Archades. The empire's weapons research begins and ends there." To Ashe he said, "How soon do we leave?"

"At once," she said with a nod, then looked to Al-Cid. "As for matters in Rozarria, I bid you luck."

The female aide helped Al-Cid up, causing Harry to discreetly roll his eyes again. "So you would leave each to fend for his own," Al-Cid said. "Let us hope that you are not disappointed. Ah, that's right. Larsa left a message. 'The differences between our two lands will fade before the shared dreams of men.'" He deftly plucked his sunglasses away from the aide and put them on with a flourish, said, "My leave I take, my best with you," then let her 'help' him off down the walkway.

"Bloody drama queen," Harry whispered to Balthier.

"Should we, maybe, help clean up around here first?" Penelo asked hesitantly.

Ashe nodded, surprisingly, so they spent quite a while dragging imperial corpses outside and pitching them over the far edge, leaving the priests to see to the body of the Gran Kiltias as was proper.

"How do you propose we reach Archades?" Ashe asked as the last soldier was cast away. "Archadia's borders will be well guarded for fear of Rozarrian invasion. We dare not approach by air."

"And their navy will see that the coast is watched as well," Balthier said, then turned to eye Harry speculatively. "We could go afoot, through the Salikawood north of Nalbina, and then east."

Harry cleared his throat uncomfortably at the scrutiny, but anted up his knowledge. "There's a much faster way."

Ashe whipped around to face him. "What?"

"I'm a merchant. I worked very hard to gain access to certain gate crystals within Archadian territory, though I admit, I usually take an airship from Balfenheim Port to the imperial city. We're going to have to walk a distance no matter what, at least to Golmore Jungle. But from there, it's a fairly simple thing."

Ashe eyed him strangely, but nodded slowly. “We’ll spend the night back down the mountain,” she declared, then walked away. Basch followed her, but not without a vaguely suspicious look cast over his shoulder at Harry.

At the campsite Harry was pleased enough to immerse himself in the usual tasks, happy to be warm again after the ‘bracing’ walk through the Paramina Rift’s northern reaches.

“So, where will we end up?” Balthier murmured as he helped to set up their tent.

“The upper end of the Sochen Cave Palace system,” he muttered. “Merchants have long used that as one way to enter Archades, at least until they happen upon that gate crystal up there. That I know of, nobody else seems to bother with it, and the imperials don’t have it guarded.”

Balthier was silent for a time, then nodded. “Old Archades, then?” When Harry nodded he continued, “And we’re both nobles, which means we can ascend into Archades with little trouble.”

“Exactly.”

Balthier did not go on to state the obvious about Harry’s other reasons for favoring that crystal, thankfully. They were just finishing up when Ashe wandered over, looking vaguely curious.

Balthier preempted whatever she might have said. “So, you intend to destroy the nethicite.”

“I *must* destroy it,” she said firmly.

“Are you sure?” Balthier asked. “You don’t want it for yourself?”

She gasped.

“Use its power to restore Dalmasca—something like that? The best intentions invite the worst kind of trouble.”

“Lusting for ever greater power, blinded by nethicite. Is that how you see me?”

“That does sound like *someone* I know. He was obsessed with nethicite. It was all he cared about. He’d babble nonsense, blind to aught but the stone’s power. He’d talk about some ‘Eynah’, or was it ‘Venat’? No matter. Everything he did, he did to get closer to the nethicite, to understand it. He made airships, weapons. . . . He even made me a judge.”

She gasped again. “You were a . . . a judge!?”

“Part of a past I’d rather forget,” Balthier said with a nod. “It didn’t last long. I ran. I left the judges, and him. Cidolfus Demen Bunansa. Draklor Laboratory’s very own Dr Cid. He lost his heart to nethicite, lost himself. And I suppose that’s when I lost my father.”

He stood when she said nothing, extending a hand to assist Harry up. “Don’t follow in his footsteps,” he advised. “I ran away. I couldn’t stand seeing him like that, a slave to the stone. So I ran. Free at last. . . . Funny I went for the Dusk Shard. How could I have known that it was nethicite? And then, of course, I met you. All that running, and I got nowhere. It’s time to end this—cut my ties to the past.”

At that she nodded, absently thumbing the ring she wore. “It’s hard to leave the past behind. I know.”

“The choice is yours to make. But don’t give your heart to a stone.”

She nodded again and wandered off toward the fire that had been built, leaving Harry to wonder why she had come over in the first place. Then again, the revelations that Balthier laid on her might have temporarily addled her brains.

“Of course,” Balthier said, causing Harry to look at him, “you’re a part of my past I’d rather not be parted from. Shall we eat?”

The next morning they packed up and proceeded into Golmore Jungle, back to the gate crystal revealed by the passing of the wyrm. “Okay, I can only take two at a time,” Harry said.

Ashe and Basch promptly stepped forward.

“Each of you, hold an arm,” he instructed, then gated them away.

“Where are we?” Ashe asked, gazing around the circular room.

“This is the upper end of the Sochen Cave Palace, princess. This end leads to Old Archades, and the lower entrance to the Tchita Uplands. Please wait while I bring the others?”

He quickly transported Vaan and Penelo, then made the final trip with Balthier and Fran.

“Hey, you sure this is really the way into Archades?” Vaan asked, wrinkling his nose.

Harry nodded, but it was Balthier who said, “If you’d prefer to go knocking on the front gates of the city, be my guest.”

“But what about once we’re inside?” Penelo said. “Won’t the city watch find us?”

“We’ll do what we can to blend into the crowd,” Ashe said, clearly having no idea how inappropriate their Dalmascan garb was in Archades. “Our names may be notorious, but our faces are not far-known.”

“True, true,” Vaan said. “You’re our princess, and we didn’t even recognize you.”

“I noticed,” she replied edgily.

Harry clapped his hands. “Right. Please, follow me.” He pulled out his sandalwood chop and affixed it to his tunic, noticing that Balthier did the same, then led them down the corridor and triggered the door. A minute later they had emerged into bright sunlight. The place didn’t look any nicer than it had before; downtrodden people still drifted about aimlessly and the stench was an affront to any unused to it.

Vaan immediately wrinkled his nose again. “Smells less like a capital, and more like a sewer.”

“Even empires have need of sewers,” Balthier said. “The runoff from Archades proper pools here: those who lack papers to live in the city itself. The mighty who have fallen, and the fallen who would be mighty. Their eyes never leave Archades.”

“I guess it must be a lot nicer than this place,” Vaan replied.

“Oh, to be sure. Archades reeks of a different filth. Let’s be off! We can follow our noses to Draklor.”

Harry took the lead through the warrens, but drifted to a stop at the sound of a man’s voice.

“Well, well, well. There’s a sight for sore eyes. Didn’t think I’d be seeing you again. Not here.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Balthier said dryly. “Enter the streetear.”

The man, dark-haired and very confident in posture, said, “A pirate would do well to smile. Wouldn’t want to sour his reputation.”

“You know this guy?” Vaan asked.

“An old . . . friend. He’s a streetear—a peddler of rumor and hearsay, by the name of Jules. He’d bite a gil given him by his own mother, and shave it by half to pay for her funeral.”

Jules smirked. “Sometimes an ear with tight purse string’s the order of the day. Like when a pirate decides he fancies going up in the world.”

“Oh? Unless you’ve something of interest to sell, I’m afraid we’re not about to dally,” Balthier said, then motioned to Harry, who promptly led them away.

Eventually they arrived at the entrance to Archades and were stopped by two guards. “Entering the capital? You have credentials?”

Harry and Balthier both indicated their chops.

“Hm? All right. But what about this lot?” the guard said, gesturing at the others.

Harry imagined himself as a Malfoy for a moment and sneered. “Our retainers, you fool! Now let us pass, or I’m sure your commanding officer would love to hear how you’ve been harassing nobles for a bit of idle sport!”

He must have done it right for the guards stepped aside with alacrity, so the party proceeded up the stairs without further ado. At the top Harry paused to murmur, “Sorry,” mostly to Ashe.

Vaan certainly did not seem to care; in fact, he raced forward to gape at the city like a proverbial country bumpkin. They followed at a decorous pace, catching up to him a minute later, at which point Penelo began another round of teasing.

“I’m just checking out the city,” Vaan replied defensively. “Even if it is the empire. Hey, Larsa’s here somewhere, isn’t he? I wonder how he’s doing.”

“We go our separate ways here,” Balthier interrupted. “I’ve some business to attend to. We’ll meet again later.” Then he pulled Harry aside to say, “I know you will anyway, but keep an eye on them? I need to see the best way for us to get to Draklor.”

He nodded, and watched as his lover strode away quickly, then turned back to the others. “There’s plenty to see here. If he takes too long we can wait at my home.”

Ashe’s brow went up at that. “Then you *are* an Archadian?”

Harry shook his head. “No, actually. But I have small homes in more than one place. It’s not much, but Balthier knows where it is.”

“Can we go shopping?” Penelo asked excitedly, practically bouncing on the spot.

“Er, I guess so.” A couple of hours later he was feeling exhausted by Penelo’s unflagging energy, and Balthier had still not come back. “I think we should move along,” he said.

“I agree,” said Ashe.

Harry paused at a vendor to purchase some fresh food and led them toward the nearest aircab station, where the attendant tried to bilk Vaan out of an outrageous amount of money for a ride. Before he could point out that he had free passage, he was stopped by the voice of Jules, so he turned around and approached the man, the others following.

“I’ve a message from Master Balthier,” Jules said. “He’s waiting in Central. He says to come quickly.”

“On that?” Vaan asked, pointing at the aircab. “But he wants chops? What’s a chop, anyway?”

Jules smirked. “When a boy wants information, a boy pays. 2500 gil sounds about right.”

Harry’s hand shot out to grab Vaan’s arm. “Don’t,” he muttered, then let go. “You seem to be very unobservant,” he told Jules. “A marked failing in a streetear, I’d say.”

The man finally recognized that Harry bore one of the aforementioned chops and chuckled lightly, then strode away lazily.

Harry turned to Vaan and quickly explained that pine chops were used as a type of currency, and were often traded for favors rendered. And, if one should be so lucky as to gain enough of them, they could be traded at any shop for one of sandalwood, such as the one he wore, serving as a mark of nobility and free passage on the aircabs.

“Sounds kind of stupid.”

Harry shrugged. “These are a peculiar people, Vaan. You could be the richest man in the world, but they’d consider you a peasant if you didn’t have one of those sandalwood chops. Most of them spend their lives in useless gossip. And anyone that rich can afford to simply purchase one. Anyway, let’s go.”

He made sure to be at the front this time and the attendant was instantly more obsequious. “Tsenoble, sir?”

“Yes.”

The attendant opened the hatch so Harry waved everyone on ahead, then boarded as well. A short ride later they exited into an even ritzier section of the city. They didn’t make it very far before Balthier appeared. “Ah, so pleased you could join me. Jules had a morsel for us: a light airship used by Draklor researchers is just up ahead. We’ll take that and go in through the service entrance. Let’s make haste, shall we?”

Balthier took the lead, but they all ducked off to the side as a group of imperial soldiers clinked by at a run, directly toward where they were headed.

“The complices of the senate have been quelled, your honor,” said one of the soldiers to the judge standing there. “Our forces sustained but light casualties.”

“You have leave to withdraw,” the judge responded. “One detachment will remain here to guard Draklor.”

“My lord.” The soldiers all saluted in their peculiar fashion, which seemed to involve pushing one hand into the other at chest height, then clinked back off at a run.

“Do you think they’re on to us?” Vaan asked as Basch crossed his arms.

“It would seem not,” Basch said, “though this will make our task more difficult still.”

Balthier shook his head and led them off again, but the judge up ahead said, “No entry to Central at this time. And refrain from suspicious behavior until things settle down. You know what I mean.”

They backtracked, and Balthier said, “That judge wasn’t there a short while ago. What took you so long in getting here? Off seeing the sights, perhaps?”

Harry stared at him, brow furrowed. “We got your message only minutes ago.”

“What’s that? But I told Jules an hour ago. . . .”

“Jules!” Vaan growled.

“Tsk, tsk,” came that voice again. “A squad of judges has been sent to Draklor. You’ll find the service entrance rather a difficult proposition, I’m afraid.”

Balthier frowned. “Your doing, no doubt. You knew how the Ministry of Law would move, so you delayed until the judges could reinforce Draklor.” He sucked in a sharp breath. “Of course. . . . Tell me, how much did the ministry pay for word of the prodigal son?”

“The Ministry? Oh, judges make poor customers, my friend. Too many rules, too many laws. Perhaps you didn’t know, Master Balthier, that Draklor is a toy box these days, filled with your lord father’s conceits—all developed without the senate’s knowledge, of course. Why, not even the emperor knew the full extent of Dr Cid’s operations. Now, here’s the catch: since Vayne had himself declared dictator, nary a peep has come out of that laboratory. I know people who would sell their own mum for the merest scrap of information about the goings-on inside Draklor.”

Balthier arched a brow. “People like . . . Rozarrarian sympathizers worried about the empire’s weapons programs, and anyone else who might be opposed to House Solidor hegemony. So, we create a disturbance, and you get your windfall of dirt on Draklor.”

Jules smirked. “And in exchange for your service, I’ve spoken to a cabbie. When he asks where you want to go, tell him: ‘You know where to go.’ Simple, no?”

Balthier sighed and shook his head. “Ah, a deal, brokered in true Archades fashion. Why, it’s just like old times, Jules. Brings a tear to my eye.”

“Good to be back, eh?” Jules said insolently. “My regards to your lord father, Master Ffamran—er, rather, Master ‘Balthier’. Anon, anon.” He loped off quickly, losing himself in the crowd.

Balthier growled and headed for the cabbie, who seemed to be entirely too chipper as he asked, “Anyone for Nilbasse?”

“You know where to go,” Balthier said irritably.

“You want to go there, eh? You sure?” On getting a nod he opened the hatch and said, “All right. All aboard.”

“So,” said Vaan hesitantly to Balthier once inside, “this Jules, he’s a . . . friend . . . of yours?”

Balthier frowned and addressed the cabbie. “Driver! Faster, if you please. I would be loathe to expend any of the violence of my present mood on my companions.”

“S-sir? Yes, sir!”

They were let off near the top of a very tall building. The moment they were out Balthier said, “Come, this way.” He led them through a conveniently close door, whereupon Harry groaned softly.

It was like one huge lock system, hallways and small rooms separated by circular bulkheads which glowed blue and red; he was reminded of Henne Mines. The walls and floors were fashioned from various types of marble, with grandiose embellishments in dark wood and cream plaster, not to mention, for some inexplicable reason, murals.

“It’s too quiet,” Basch observed.

“Passing strange,” Balthier said, confusion evident in his tone. “There are supposed to be guards here.”

“Maybe we’re just lucky, huh?” Vaan said.

“Maybe you’re just optimistic,” Balthier shot back.

“Something may be afoot,” Basch said. “We proceed with caution.”

Balthier shook his head. “No time for caution. Step to it! Cid’s chambers are on the top level.” He took off at a jog, leading the way to a lift. After a short ride (the lift only allowing them to go so high up) he led them on another confusing jaunt to one of the more normal doorways, passing by more than one downed imperial soldier, then entered. It was an office of sorts, but it looked as though someone had searched it roughly.

“What happened here?” Vaan asked, gazing around.

“He’s had visitors,” Fran said. “Ones lacking manners, by the look of it.”

“Someone after nethicite?”

Balthier approached the desk and began perusing the documents on its surface. After a time he murmured, “The Jagd Difoehr was it? Six years, and ever since you got back, this. . . . What madness found you there? Mm?”

They whipped around an urgent voice sounded outside the door. “Up! Above us! Drop bulkheads five and eight! Be to it!”

“They found us!” Vaan hissed.

“His earlier visitors, more like,” said Fran. “We should lie low for now.”

Balthier snatched something up off the desk. “No, we’ll use their confusion. We need to find Cid. Now. And this card key will help us to do that.” After a very confusing trip (which involved much tinkering with the bulkheads), they emerged from the lift onto the 70<sup>th</sup> floor.

They had barely stepped out when Basch was attacked by a strange man with dual blades. Basch dodged the first swipe, and blocked the second, his forearm engaged in a contest of wills with that of the other man. He was bald, with a peculiar set of wide white sideburns combined with a beard narrow at the jawline, and was dressed in what Harry thought was a fruity combination of lime green, red, and pink leather leggings topped by a white and brown canvas shirt that exposed the man’s shoulders.

“Ah, my apologies,” the man said. “You bear not the stench of Cid’s lackies.”

“And you are . . . our earlier visitor,” said Basch, stepping back as the man eased off.

“Yes, a valuable man,” came an unctuous voice, “one I’d sooner not lose. Yet he knows too much.”

The man growled and charged up the nearby stairway, so they followed, to arrive in a large room open to the air at the back, and where Harry’s eyes were immediately drawn to five huge, green-glowing, inverted pyramids. And, Harry assumed, to Dr Cid, who was up on a platform with the strange man standing on the floor before him.

“Cid! You know the deifacted nethicite brought down the *Leviathan*! How can you persist in this folly?”

Cid chuckled creepily. “And you’ve come here to stop me? I’d fain see you try.”

“Consider your bones, old man,” Balthier called out. “You’re outmatched.”

Cid's brows flirted up briefly. "Pirate scum of the skies. What brings you here?"

"Treasure. What else would a pirate want? We'll take the Dusk Shard."

Cid laughed. "You've come all this way for that trinket?" he said disdainfully. "I thought you above this." He looked to the side suddenly, saying, "Hm? What's that?" After a short pause his head swiveled around toward Ashe. "Ah. The princess of Dalmasca, come to visit? Mm. She's not entirely without merit. A test of sorts for our princess?" He angled his head to the side for a moment. "Ah!"

"You're a babbling fool," Ashe replied.

"Ah!" Cid cried, raising his arms up. "A trial for Ashelia B'nargin Dalmasca!" He abandoned his pose and exultant tone, and leaned forward. "You lust for the stone's power, do you not?" he asked, a sly grin on his face.

"Lend him not your ears, m'lady," said the stranger as he stepped to block her from Cid's sight. "He means to use you."

A growl from the platform caught their attention; Cid's body was glowing, rich yellows and oranges surrounding him rather like the oddities of Mjrn and Bergan, and also snatches of blue and red. Cid jumped down and began laughing wildly as four strange devices flew in to surround and circle him, and he produced a set of guns, one for each hand.

"Manufactured nethicite! Like Bergan," Fran said, pulling her bow off her back and nocking an arrow.

"How could you do this? How could you fall this far?" Balthier asked, clearly disappointed, then readied his gun.

Cid just laughed. They quickly realized that they had to destroy those flying devices to get anywhere with the man, so those were taken down with alacrity. Harry came to find out that those peculiar pyramids served an actual purpose besides being light sources when Cid hauled back and shot at them. They soaked up the energy discharge and sent it back more strongly at the group. Even so, Cid was eventually defeated, his devices gone and the guns slipping from his faltering grasp as he dropped to his knees.

The stranger took that as reason to charge, launching himself into the air to strike a finishing blow, but was blasted back by a blue-white sphere that burst into being as Cid slowly got to his feet and adjusted his gloves.

"Venat, you shouldn't have."

A ghostly shape emerged from Cid, settling behind him and slightly to the side.

“This creature,” Balthier said. “So this is your Venat?”

The thing devolved into gaseous red and vanished as Cid shook his head slightly. “Ashelia B’nargin Dalmasca! Just how far will you go for power?” He extended both arms, a stone in each, one dark and one glowing pale red. “Does your lust for nethicite consume you?”

Ashe’s only response was an inarticulate sound.

Cid lowered his arms and adopted a confiding tone. “Am I right? I am, aren’t I. A worthy daughter of the Dynast-King. You would do well to go to Giruvegan. Who knows? You may receive a new stone for your trouble.” He turned and stepped off to the side as an air cutter swooped in.

“Your words mean nothing to me!” Ashe shouted angrily.

Cid paused at the cutter, one hand on its exterior. “The reins of history back in the hands of man.” He glanced over at her. “I, too, make for Giruvegan,” he said, making it sound like some grand adventure. “Give chase, if you dare it!” he taunted, then boarded the cutter and escaped.

Balthier scowled. “Hate it when he does that,” he muttered.

“Mayhaps you think me remiss!” said the stranger. “The Lady Ashe of Dalmasca?” he inquired as he approached, sheathing his twin blades across his back. “The sky pirate Reddas, at your employ.”

“Let’s go,” Balthier said with a sigh. “There’s nothing more we can do here.”

“To Balfonheim, then,” Reddas suggested. “We can there, in my manse, discuss the situation.”

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They were arrayed in a room at Reddas’s manse, though one entire wall was missing, the roof supported by wide columns, and wooden deck beyond. Harry wondered if there was an elemental paling in place like at Al-Cid’s gazebo.

Ashe, who was staring out at the sea, angled her head slightly to the side and said, “They choose to supply the resistance, yet raise not a sword in aid. What city could do this?”

“A city of men without countries. Pirates of the sea and of the sky. Few are they who would fain lay down their lives for a friend, let alone a king,” Reddas replied.

“The marquis—he is set on war?” she asked.

“The time approaches when he must make his position vis-à-vis the empire clear. When he helped you off the *Leviathan*, he spited the judges full sore. He cannot sit in idleness and

expect to avoid a reckoning. The marquis shares my distaste for war. Yet if it comes to it, he will show no quarter.”

“It’s just what Vayne wants,” Basch said, entering the conversation. “He lures the Rozarrians and the resistance to the field, then crushes them both with the nethicite!”

“I think not,” Balthier said. “Cid has the stone. We grab it and smash it to pieces with the Sword of Kings. Vayne will be left holding nary a thing.” He sounded so confident. “We follow Cid. He’s heading toward Giruvegan.”

“It is told of in a song of my people,” Fran offered. “On the farthest shores of the river of time, shrouded in the roiling Mist, the holy land sleeps: Giruvegan. Who knows the paths? The way to its doors?”

Reddas straightened up from slouching against a column. “Then you seek the Jagd Difohr. Deep within the jungle of Golmore, in a corner of the Feywood, a Mist-storm surges and seethes.”

“Then that’s it. Let’s go!” Vaan said, then grabbed Penelo’s hand and dragged her out of the room. The others but Balthier, Harry, and Ashe followed.

Balthier asked, “Not coming, Reddas? Forget your precious nethicite already?”

“Cid’s words rang hollow to me,” Reddas pronounced. “I will follow another course.”

“Ah, another lead, then, is it? You’re well informed.”

“I could well say the same to you, pirate.”

Balthier narrowed his eyes slightly, then turned as the doors swung back open to reveal an impatient Vaan. “Hurry it up, or we’ll leave without you.”

“Ah, Vaan!” Reddas said. “Check with my men outside. Best ask what they know of the Feywood.”

“Okay. Thanks for the help, Reddas,” Vaan said before disappearing again.

Reddas laughed. “Fly first, ask questions later. Your apprentice is more pirate than you.”

“I don’t have an apprentice,” Balthier said testily over his shoulder as he headed for the door, grabbing Harry’s hand on the way.

Outside Harry murmured, “I don’t know if you picked this up, but word on the streets says that the senate has been dissolved, many of them killed.”

“Leaving Vayne the sole power and voice of law. How utterly thrilling. Still, if he’s taken out of the picture, the only person left with any solid right to rule is Larsa. House Solidor has had a stranglehold on the Ministry of Law for ages.”

“Then we can hope that judges exist who would protect him,” Harry said. “He may no longer need be concerned with the senate, but Vayne did ferret out enough dirt on their two elder brothers to see them dead. We can only hope the same won’t somehow happen to Larsa, child though he is.”

“Shockingly, there are some judges who truly uphold honor. I remember one that—”

“Hey, hey!” Vaan interrupted, they having finally caught up. “What took you guys so long? And where’s—oh.”

Ashe came up beside them. “What have you learned?”

“There’s some hidden trial of the Feywood we have to pass to open the gate to Giruvegan. And the place is said to be really dense with Mist.”

“It’s been a tiring day already, but there’s plenty of it left to get a head start,” Balthier said.

Harry cleared his throat. “We just need to get to a spot I know of in the Tchita Uplands. I suggest we ride chocobos to save time.”

“Another gate crystal?” Ashe asked.

“Mm-hm. We can use that to return to Golmore Jungle.”

An hour or so later they were back in the green-filtered light of the wood. Fran took the lead, taking them west, then south along the curving walkways, to eventually arrive at a section that was a sudden contrast. The trees were just as massive and mighty, but they walked then at ground level, and a dense Mist that coiled through the area brought visibility down sharply. After one mistaken turn down a path that threatened to return them to the Paramina Rift, and avoiding one that looked to go into a mountain, they ended up balked at further passage south by a barrier of roiling Mist.

Ashe suddenly looked up and walked forward; the Mist whooshed toward them like a visible wind, the barrier disappearing. Ashe stepped forward again, quite possibly seeing something they could not, then walked straight ahead, into the previously barred area.

There, unfortunately, was a massive plant-beast that dropped from overhead who was not happy to be disturbed. It was defeated in due time, so they carried on, emerging into an area with Mist so dense it was difficult to see more than a few feet ahead. They wandered around for quite some time, dispatching monsters that appeared without warning from the Mist, and

finally became frustrated enough at finding no exit other than the one they came from to stop in one of the strange gazebo-like structures for a break.

“Maybe it’s that trial?” Penelo said. “There’s more than one of these things. Maybe one of them has some kind of clue?”

Fran turned in a slow circle, then froze. “Yes. Join me and look.”

Harry was amazed to realize that the view was not of the area itself, but rather a beautiful green wood—perhaps what the place might look like not steeped in Mist?

“We go this way,” Fran declared, and started walking.

They were led to another gazebo, where Fran stood at the center and slowly turned again, then set off through one of the arches. The third one led them to an exit not before there, gaining them access to a new section of the Feywood. And, a new set of gazebos. The first of them provided no clue, so they searched until they found one that did, and followed the trail until they almost literally bumped into a massive gate.

There was writing on it, which Fran examined, then turned to say, “Gigas Gate, this is.”

Ashe brought her hand up to her chest, a thoughtful look on her face, then summoned the treasure of Raithwall, that Esper being a gigas. It, somehow, was able to command the gate to open, allowing them passage, which they quickly took.

It was breathtaking. A long walkway stretched out before them over water, of some curious blue substance braced by grey, and arches of different shapes every so often, using those same materials, and frequently half-covered in vines and mossy growth. Floating alongside at intervals were stone objects tipped with glowing amber pyramids. The sky was blue but for a band of strange pink-red clouds that hovered almost like a circular shield, and Mist was thick enough to reflect their images like funhouse mirrors. Far off in the distance appeared to be a city.

“On the farthest shores of the river of time, shrouded deep in the roiling Mist,” Ashe breathed.

“Fran?” Harry asked.

“This Mist runs thick here. But do not worry, I will behave myself. The Mist here is cooled.” She paused a moment, then added, “I sense something like the shadow here.”

“Venat,” Balthier stated. “It appears Cid has yet to arrive. We’ll lie in wait for him here.”

Penelo shot him a puzzled look. “So we’re not going inside?”

“Not unless you want to end up twisted. Like the old man.”

Harry frowned, wondering how on earth Cid could have made it even this far if he had not a gigas to command as Ashe did. Was it possible that this Venat had sensed his presence and investigated?

Balthier shifted as Ashe started walking forward anyway. “Something there?”

She kept walking, ignoring him.

“What is it?” Penelo asked.

“She can see him,” Vaan said. “Prince Rasler. Let’s follow her.”

They made use of an ancient device at the terminus, it being their only option, and were transported to a new platform, much closer to the city, but still not actually there. A massive arch bisected the space, and at the other end was a statue, which, in a burst of Mist, went from stone to living and made to attack. Naturally, they defeated it as quickly as possible; it dropped to a kneeling position and returned to stone as a new ancient device sprung into existence.

That took them inside the city itself, or so they assumed, a confusing place like switchbacks on a mountainside around a central core of nothingness, though they could see more of the like around the perimeter, and faint lights making feeble attempts to pierce the dark. There were seals blocking some of the paths they could take, necessitating them finding the controls, and they ended up at the lower end of the tiers at a dead end, where they were forced to fight two guardians before looking around for some sort of clue.

Harry stepped up to the end to peer over and nearly fell on his ass when a bright green platform of light appeared in front of him and Penelo shrieked in startlement. More appeared, forming a path, and while Harry was hardly the sort to be afraid of heights, even he was leery of walking on the damn thing. Balthier stepped forward as though he had not a care in the world, proving it was safe enough, so the group followed it to . . . another set of tiered paths.

“I don’t think I like this city,” Harry muttered. “No wonder it’s deserted. They all flung themselves into the abyss out of sheer frustration after murdering the architects.”

Balthier snickered and squeezed his hand.

At the end was another walkway of glowing green platforms of light, except . . . this one had rather a different view. To their right was a prodigious stone hanging in midair, points of white light coming from it and smaller shards in stationary orbit.

“I can’t shake the feeling we’re somewhere we’re not meant to be,” Penelo mused.

“Yeah, it’s exciting,” Vaan said.

“Exciting?” she said, casting him an odd look.

“You are not troubled by the unknown?” Basch inquired of Vaan. “Who can say what lies ahead. We may encounter the very creators of nethicite.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what we’ll find,” Vaan agreed. “I like it better that way.”

Basch snorted very softly. “You’re sounding more the sky pirate every day,” he said, then continued on.

They had to pause to open a bulwark, and then a second, and then they were forced to navigate a slightly different version of the tiers, but did find another of those spots to trigger a pathway, which led them to a dead end, where they were immediately attacked. The two mages started flinging Blizzaga as the others attacked normally, and Harry was kept busy healing, though he did briefly considering using Reflect, but discarded the idea when it was seen to use a mixture of magic and physical attacks, one of which would heal it. Maybe if he had a pack mule carrying a stock of x-potions. . . . But he didn’t.

Afterward the creature fell backward off the final circular platform into the abyss and an ancient device appeared, which they activated, ending up inside (Harry assumed) that huge stone. They were standing on a circular platform enringed by wide arches, broken in three places, a hint that they could trigger more paths, and other platforms could be seen some distance away. All around them was brightly glowing crystal and thick Mist.

Penelo turned to Fran and said, “Are you all right?”

“I am fine. Thank you.”

“Is that nethicite?” Penelo asked, pointing at a spot up high that scintillated like a small sun.

“I wonder.”

“With that much nethicite in one’s grasp—” Ashe said, cut off by Fran.

“You could destroy all of Ivalice. If you wished it.”

Thus began a monumentally confusing journey from platform to platform, triggering paths, using ancient devices, fighting hordes of monsters, and in some cases, turning off barriers. And getting very, very lost. By then several of them had headaches from the obnoxiously bright, unceasing light, and Harry wished for nothing more than a sleeping mask and a nice nap, but he would settle for Al-Cid’s sunglasses and a headache potion. However, they were lucky enough to stumble over something different finally—a blessedly dim room with a bulwark ahead.

They all paused to rest briefly, and to let their eyes adjust from being suddenly half blind, then moved forward to open the bulwark. It revealed a circular (what else?) room with a patterned floor of stone and a curious substance that glowed muted red, and at the other end was another bulwark.

They were just taking that in when something dropped from overhead and ‘stood up’, some twisted amalgamation of woman and horse. And she was very nasty as they quickly found out, as she had the ability to heal herself with magic attacks on a rotating basis, making the two female mages next to useless. Harry, on the other hand, could fight fire with fire, as the saying went.

So he divided his attention between tossing Scathe at her and healing the others, while Ashe and Penelo divided their time between attacking with their weapons and correcting any unfortunate status effects. The horse-lady went down after quite a while, seeming almost surprised at her defeat, and a lozenge-shaped crystal appeared in her wake, then shattered, revealing an Esper glyph.

Ashe sat down right where she stood and said wryly, “All right, Balthier. Resolve only carries a person so far. We need to rest a bit.”

Balthier chuckled wearily and nodded, sitting down as well.

Harry broke out the remainder of the fresh food he had purchased and shared it around, then sat at Balthier’s back so they could use each other as a prop; he had almost fallen asleep when his lover nudged him back to full wakefulness with a sigh.

They opened the bulwark and heaved a collective sigh on seeing another ancient device, but surrounded and triggered it, which was when everything went white. When Harry could see again he was standing at the edge of yet another platform, though this one was hovering in midair and was ringed by stone statues that rose up higher than their heads. The sky around them was pleasantly blue with wispy clouds—though, there seemed to be twin suns. Everywhere were signs of some civilization. Below were much larger platforms, almost like islands, connected by curving bridges, and floating here and there in the air were more platforms like the one they were on. Above was another series of masses. It really was quite beautiful, and eerily, deathly silent.

Ashe was standing in the center, and suddenly asked, “Where is every—one?”

That made no sense, as Harry could clearly see all of them.

“Fear not, princess of Dalmasca,” said a curiously choral voice. “We Occuria have chosen you, and you alone.”

The statues abruptly bled blue-green light, or Mist, it swirling around each, and then across the platform to converge before the statue Ashe was facing, a wavering, writhing mass of Mist. It was about then that Harry realized he could not move, nor speak.

“Ashelia B’nargin Dalmasca,” said that same voice. “We see your heart desires power, and power most holy shall we grant. Seek you the Sun-Cryst, slumb’ring star. In tower on distant shore it dreams. The mother of all nethicite, the source of its unending power. The Dynast-King, his fallow shards, coarse trinkets cut from Sun-Cryst’s light.”

“Such power exists?”

“In times that are long passed away, we thought to save this Ivalice, and chose Raithwall. He took the sword, and cut the Cryst. Three shards he took from its gilt grasp, and so became the Dynast-King. His words and deeds run through your veins.”

Ashe tilted her head down for a moment, hand coming up to her chest. “That’s why I was given it—the Sword of Kings,” she said, as though finally understanding.

“The treaty held with kings of old is but a mem’ry, cold and still. With you we now shall treat anew”—an ornate sword appeared before Ashe—“to cut a run for hist’ry’s flow. Now take this sword, this Treaty-Blade. Occurian seal, mark of your worth.” The sword began to slowly descend. “Cut deep the Cryst, and seize your shards. Wield Dynast-King’s power! *Destroy Venat!*”

Ashe made no move to touch the blade, instead saying, “But Venat—Venat’s an Occurian. A being like you.”

“*Venat is a heretic!*” the Occuria thundered, a sudden force of wind blowing toward Ashe, causing her to raise her hands to protect her face. “The nethicite is ours to give, to chosen bearer or to none. The heretic trespassed, and set the rose of knowledge in man’s hand. With imitations they profane, it is anathema to us. We give you now the stone and task. Administer judgment: destroy them all!”

“Judgment?” Ashe gasped softly a moment later. “Destroy them all? The empire?”

“The Humes ever skew hist’ry’s weave. With haste they move through too-short lives. Driven to err by base desires, t’ward waste and wasting on they run. Undying, we Occuria light the path for wayward sons of man. Oft did we pass judgment on them so that Ivalice might endure. Eternal, we are hist’ry’s stewards, to set the course and keep it true. The chosen is our hand, our fist, to let live some and crush the rest. Princess, you have been chosen. Take revenge against those who stole your kingdom. Fulfill your role as savior.”

Ashe lifted a hand, and hesitated, then wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the blade, lifting the other hand as well.

“Attain to your birthright!”

As both hands took the hilt a flash of white obscured everything. A split second later Harry’s vision returned to normal, the sound of the blade hitting the platform accompanying it.

Vaan dashed forward, making Harry realize he could move again. “Ashe! What’s with these Occuria? What gives them the right to tell you what to do?”

Fran strolled to her, asking, “Will you take revenge, as they ask?”

“Huh?” Ashe seemed to be confused by their appearance.

“We could not see them,” Basch explained, “but we heard the Occuria speak. They may be gods, but we are the arbiters of our destiny.”

Harry nearly snorted at that, distinctly remembering his unscheduled trip and the ‘arbiter’ of his ‘fate’.

Basch continued, “Your highness, I am against this. The empire must pay, but destruction?”

His estimation of the man went back up again.

Penelo sidled up to ask haltingly, “Um . . . does anyone know what happened to Dr Cid? Wasn’t he saying he’d be here?”

“He should’ve arrived by now,” Basch noted.

“And *I* should have realized by now,” Balthier said, chagrined. “He’s not coming. He laid out the bait, and we bit. Remember what he said? He wanted Ashe to get the stone. He wanted that all along. That’s why he flaunted his nethicite, and reeled us in with his story about Giruvegan. All to bring Ashe to the Occuria.”

“But wait,” Penelo protested. “If we got ahold of the nethicite, wouldn’t that be bad for the empire?”

Balthier shrugged. “Maybe he wants to see what happens when foes with nethicite collide? That’d be just like *Dr Cid*.”

Ashe gazed at the blade, then lifted her chin. “I will search out the Sun-Cryst.”

“‘History is built by our hands.’ That’s his favorite line,” Balthier said. “He’d never stand by and watch the Occuria stones shape things. . . . So, he was talking to Venat all along. He wasn’t mad at all, then, was he.”

They moved to the ancient device that had appeared and used it, returning to their previous location. In the center of the room where the Esper had been was now another, which they took, and were relieved when it sent them to the start of their journey at Giruvegan, all the way back near the Gigas Gate.

“In tower on distant shore dreams the Sun-Cryst,” Basch said and turned to Fran. “Do those words mean aught to you?”

She shook her head.

“Didn’t Reddas say he was going to follow some ‘other course’?” Vaan reminded them. “Maybe he found out something that can help.”

“I’d rather stay out of that sky pirate’s debt, thank you,” Balthier said cryptically.

“What’s wrong with Reddas?” Vaan inquired. “I mean, if you can’t trust your own kind, who can you trust?”

“You’re an expert on pirating now, are you?”

Nevertheless they made the trek back through the Feywood and to the gate crystal in Golmore Jungle, then lured wild yellow chocobos into serving as mounts to take them to Balfonheim from the Tchita Uplands. There, however, they headed for the inn, not the sky pirate’s manse, and settled in for the night with a decent meal, baths, and real beds.

They were lying there, hunger sated and bodies bathed, when Harry sighed gustily. “So, the good news is that your father isn’t suffering from a mental disorder. The bad news is that it’s worse. He’s a mad scientist with a rogue god on his side.”

“It makes you wonder: why would a god rebel? Does it truly think the others are wrong? Or does it want all that power to itself?”

“It makes *me* wonder if it’s got something to do with Vayne’s behavior, too, and not just your father’s.”

Balthier rolled onto his side and propped his head against one hand. “What about your father?”

Harry blinked slowly. “Huh?”

“You’ve never said much of anything about your family.”

Harry frowned before saying, “I’m an orphan. But I know they loved me. They died a long time ago, far away. It’s one of the reasons—besides you, that is—that I’ve stuck with this, I

guess. They were killed by someone trying to stir up fires of war and killing nearly indiscriminately. Anyone who didn't fit his vision of what things should be like."

Balthier reached out to play with Harry's hair. "Doesn't ring any bells."

"I'm not from Ivalice," he said repressively.

"Mm. Then let's talk of other things, as surely it cannot be groundbreaking news that people are actually born on continents other than these three."

Harry snorted and rolled his head to the side, the better to see his lover's face. "What of the *Strahl*?"

"Oh, I sent a message to Nono when we were here in Balfonheim before, asking him to bring the ship along. He mainly acts as one of the mechanics, but he is able to fly her. He just doesn't like to unless it's necessary."

"Well, if a moogle can fly an airship, surely Vaan can be taught."

Balthier chuckled. "One assumes so. I don't want to talk about him, though. I'd rather talk about us."

"Oh?"

"Definitely. So, once this is all said and done, just how charming will I have to be to convince you to take up the life of a sky pirate with me and Fran, hm?"

Harry eyed his lover thoughtfully. "What's the lure? Really?"

"Everything, I suppose. Flying itself, for one. Finding long forgotten places, for another. And, the thrill of being able to sneak into places others have tried and failed to."

"And treasure?"

"A bonus, really. Besides, stuff like that pays for upkeep on the *Strahl*, food, and other such things."

"Oh, I see. So you're telling me you don't have a cache of glittery things somewhere you play in from time to time whilst cackling madly," he said teasingly.

"I might have stored a few odds and ends under a deck plate here and there," Balthier admitted. "At any rate, if we all come out of this well and a sudden rash of peace breaks out. . . ."

"I'm still a merchant," Harry said firmly.

“I would never dream of trying to stop you doing what makes you happy,” Balthier assured him. “Just think of all the interesting new things you could find to transform into salable items.”

He grinned and reached up to pull his lover’s head down for a brief kiss. “I could probably be convinced.”

“For more than just that, I hope,” Balthier said huskily.

“Mm. Try me,” Harry invited, and was promptly drawn into a hungry kiss, his lover moving to half cover his body with his own. Harry welcomed the warm weight, reaching around with his unimpeded hand to slide down Balthier’s back and tease the man’s backside with his fingers. He groaned when Balthier shifted again, that time to press a leg between Harry’s own and grind his hip against Harry’s quickly aroused interest.

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The next morning they walked about Balfonheim rather aimlessly, having learned that Reddas had not yet returned, though when Nono scampered up to them Balthier decided to give Vaan an impromptu flying lesson since the *Strahl* had arrived, with Penelo tagging along. Harry, not actually interested, retrieved a selection of his wares from the ship and set about his work in their inn room, humming to himself all the while.

Though, he supposed, he really ought to record a report and send it off. On that thought he made the report, then found Fran to let her know he would be going on a ride. He was back several hours later, duty out of the way. He only hoped that Al-Cid wasn’t on a damn airship somewhere out of reach.

It was sunset when Balthier returned, and they all gathered for dinner at the inn. Vaan was very excited and babbled ceaselessly to Penelo about their day while she listened indulgently as she ate, even commenting from time to time. Vaan’s meal grew steadily more cold, but he didn’t seem to care and ate it anyway.

Harry and Balthier spent another night in self-indulgent hedonism, and arrived at breakfast to hear that Reddas had returned from his ‘other course’. So they ate quickly and hastened off to the manse, in time to hear the man shouting.

“Ships in the water! Send fishing dories if need be, I care not. Glossair engines are as good to us as sky to a fish! Leave what boats have foundered. I want souls saved, not driftwood!”

His people came racing out the doors just before the group reached them, causing them to split in half to allow them passage, before entering. Reddas turned to face them as they walked closer. “Our armada ran afoul of bad water near the Ridorana Cataract. All engines stopped asudden, becalmed. Trouble with a Mist thick as death, it seems. Those seas *are* Jagd,” he said, rubbing his head. “I expected airship trouble. Not a fleet foundering midst the waves.

Tell me of what happened in Giruvegan. From the lay of your eyes, I measure all did not go well. Cid—was he false as I feared?”

“Yes,” said Ashe. “But we may have caught a glimpse of his true intent. We may now know what it is that Cid searches for. When we arrived at the heart of Giruvegan I was spoken to by beings called Occuria. They charged me to use the blade they gifted me with attaining new stones, new nethicite, from something called the Sun-Cryst. And with passing judgment on the empire. These Occuria are those that initially treated with Dynast-King Raithwall, or so they say. They called themselves the undying, the stewards of history.”

“So the deifacted nethicite was only a fragment?” Reddas took a seat on the edge of his desk and shook his head. “And these Occuria—I know not, and care to know even less. Cid may seek to follow, then, now that you have this sword?”

“If we strike this Sun-Cryst with the Sword of Kings,” Fran said, “no new stone may be born. We say the Sun-Cryst is the source of all nethicite’s power. If we might break it, the Dusk Shard would be as a thing lifeless. As for the manufactured nethicite, who can say?”

“Or, we could use the Treaty-Blade to cut a new stone from the Cryst—use that to fight the Dusk Shard and the manufactured stones,” Balthier said.

“Would you like to know the best use of nethicite?” Reddas asked. “Will or nill, I’ll tell you. You pick it up, and throw it away.” He gestured with his hand as though doing just that.

“Either way,” Vaan said, “we gotta find this Sun-Cryst first, right? Don’t we? Across the sea, in a tower on a distance shore. Reddas?”

“Familiar words, Vaan. I saw something of the sort written in some documents I chanced upon during my visit to Draklor. The Naldoan Sea, the Ridorana Cataract, and the Pharos Lighthouse. I sent my fleet to fish out the truth behind those words . . . and caught trouble.”

“Then proof is ours,” Basch stated. “This lighthouse on the Naldoan Sea is the tower on distant shore. The strong Mist that becalmed your ships is a grim and yet clearer sign than any we might’ve hoped for. The Sun-Cryst is there.”

“All well and good, but how do we get there?” Balthier pointed out. “Those seas are in Jagd.”

Reddas rounded his desk, opening a drawer and retrieving something, which he tossed to Balthier. “Try putting this in your ship. ‘Tis a skystone made to resist Jagd.”

Balthier examined it, then looked to Reddas. “More spoils from the Draklor Labs, is it? Why not use it yourself?”

“That’s just the thing. My ship’s a Bhujerban model—it will not work. But, should it fit the *Strahl*, she’ll fly in Jagd.” Reddas faced the princess and said, “Lady Ashe. I would accompany your highness. If you do not object.”

She nodded. “I am in your care. But, tell me one thing: why do so much for us?”

“The Nabudis Deadlands,” he responded flatly.

“Nabudis . . . was your home?”

“Nay,” he said, looking away. “But a memory forever burned in my heart.”

“Well, I need to get this installed, then,” Balthier said. “We won’t be able to leave for a bit. Shall we shoot for just after lunch?” He turned and headed for the door, Fran following, and was gone moments later, leaving them to sort themselves out for a few hours.

Harry returned to the inn to wile away that time doing assembly work, and was quick to clean up when Balthier came in to tell him it was noon already. After gathering up their sparse belongings they joined the others for a meal, then headed for the aerodrome. They were admitted through the gate for private airships and were onboard shortly, Fran slipping into one of the pilot seats to begin the start-up sequence.

The Pharos was rather an impressive structure, the ‘lighthouse’ perched atop a spire of rock just at the edge of the equally impressive Ridorana Cataract. The Pharos seemed to play fountain, as well, given the many streams of water which emerged from somewhere within to spill over and add to the flow dashing downward into the seemingly endless depths, like a jaggedly-circular waterfall. It was like being at the end of the world, Harry thought. Balthier flew them around the structure once before finding a suitable spot to anchor the ship. Once down they could see the Pharos off in the distance, shorter structures nearby partially obscuring it.

“A tower on distant shore,” Fran said. “And about its peak, a piercing Mist.”

“And in that Mist, the Sun-Cryst awaits,” said Ashe, gazing up at the peak.

“My lady,” Reddas said, causing Ashe to look away. “Your words still sound of doubt. Pray you reach your answer, ere we the Sun-Cryst.”

“And?” she responded. “Should I choose revenge, what then?”

He began to walk. “Then your woe shall be your own.”

It was not a very long trip to that distance, though they were hindered by a host of monsters intent of having them for a meal. Off to their right stood what looked to be a colosseum, which they avoided in favor of bearing more to the left, as the lighthouse was over that way.

Eventually they reached it, a flight of steps their last to ascend. But up there, before a set of tall golden doors, was the skeleton of some beast or other. A skeleton that started to move, standing up with a hollow roar, then began descend those steps, clearly some kind of undead dragon. A barrier sprang into existence behind them as well, cutting off any hope of escape.

Quite a long time later it collapsed with a final roar, then began to dissolve as though some wind blew across it, pieces flaking off to vanish into thin air. And after a short rest, for it had truly been a difficult battle, they ascended to stand before doors several stories high.

While Ashe was staring up at them in awe, Vaan walked over to a large reddish stone to the side, one that had words engraved upon it. “Hey, Fran? Can you read this?”

Fran approached, drifting to a stop at his side so she could study the inscription. “Hm. It’s quite old. Lo, seeker in days unborn, God-Blade bearer. Know you: this tower challenges the sky. Ware the watcher; the ward of the three waits, soul-hungry, unsated. He without power, want it not. He with power, trust it not. He with sight, heed it not. Rend illusion, cut the true path. In blood, Raithwall.”

Ashe gasped took a step forward. “The Dynast-King?”

Fran turned. “Does it startle you?” she asked, amusement clear in her voice for once for any to hear. “The Dynast-King took his sword from the Occuria. It was here he claimed the nethicite. He must have known he was not the last the Occuria would choose. He left this for *you*. Rend illusion, cut the true path. Words of such mystery. Yet his blood runs in your veins. Perhaps it whispers to you the truth?”

Ashe exhaled audibly and walked slowly to the doors, and without even touching them, a bright blue light came into being at the center of their joining, the light racing up and down along the seam. And then, all the symbols carved into the golden surfaces lit up, and what had seemed like a high relief carving began to rotate, revealing that the ‘doors’ were actually three layers. As the front rotated left, the one in back rotated opposite, opening the way and forming a path for them to cross inside by.

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## 5 : DIVINITUS

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Inside the lighthouse, Harry took one look around and muttered, “And we get to climb *all* the way up, right?”

“Battling monsters, solving ancient puzzles, defeating guardians of old,” Balthier stage-whispered.

They were in a vaguely octagonal area, like a hollow spine of the Pharos, with a walkway circling what looked like an open shaft in the center with an upward-swirling vortex of water. There were doors to either side of them, and squinting, Harry could see two more on the opposite side of the room. Nearby was a non-functional ancient device, and up ahead something that looked vaguely like a lift, also non-functional.

Exploration revealed an altar with an engraving above it, saying something about needing black orbs for the Altar of Night. In fact, there were three of the altars, though they had to navigate the labyrinth of rooms around the core to reach the other sections of the walkway, parts of it being blocked by debris or fractured off that they could not possibly jump across. Occasionally, one of the monsters they fought would leave behind what looked like a small black pearl—the orbs, they assumed.

Also found was an emblem-emblazoned door that resisted being opened, so they collected orbs and placed them on the altars, then returned to find that the door had unlocked. Within seemed to be another place entirely, a light-dim craggy desert. It was not large so they reached the terminus fairly quickly, and there was a tall pillar with a glowing orb atop it, and before them a huge rock that rather resembled a hedgehog to Harry—a rock that began shuddering and lifted, revealing itself as some variant of a rocktoise.

“One of your aforementioned guardians?” Harry murmured.

After its defeat the area changed to that of a simple rectangular stone room, and there was no place to go but back out.

“We should try the device,” Fran suggested, so they did, and it was now active, transporting them to an area which contained numerous square landings connected by staircases, and false walls and monsters much like ones found back at Raithwall’s Tomb. Killing enough of those caused pathways to appear over thin air, which allowed them to progress. The emblazoned door there had a green emblem and opened into another illusionary room, roughly circular and bounded by rock, a marshy area filled inch-deep with murky water and patches of sodden turf, and with a depressingly brown sky.

The guardian rather resembled a gargantuan yensa, and it took less damage while over water, though it could be lured onto one of the drier areas. After its defeat they backtracked again to activate a now-working ancient device, ending up much higher in the Pharos if the view down the shaft was anything to go by. Eventually they fought another guardian—something that

resembled an anthropomorphic, behemoth, horned snow tiger—and defeated it. However, there was no ancient device to activate; instead the lift was seen to be glowing invitingly when they backtracked to the core, so they rode that up.

A lot of running around later, an Esper battle, and more teleporting and lift-taking, they were walking upward along yet another set of stairs and landings when Fran decided to speak. “The din of Mist grows nearer.”

“The Sun-Cryst must be near,” Basch opined.

“I wonder if she’ll really do it, take revenge against the empire,” Penelo said, glancing at Ashe up ahead. “I mean, I know how she must feel. It’s hard losing someone you care about.”

Vaan sighed. “Something we all got in common.”

“But, you know, no matter how hard we try, we can’t change the past. There’s nothing that can bring them back. Still, sometimes, when I close my eyes . . . I can see them so clearly.”

“Illusions of the past,” Reddas said in his rich voice. “You think to have cast them off, only find them years later, unwearying, unrelenting. The past can bind a man as surely as irons.” Reddas also glanced at Ashe. “Cut the truth path. But will she?”

At the top was another ancient device, but this one seemed to lead to their actual destination, a large, circular room bearing a stone glowing like a miniature Mist sun. The walls were broken frequently by wide arches open to the outside and the floor was elaborately patterned with numerous varieties of coloured stone.

“So this is the Sun-Cryst,” Reddas said.

Ashe slowly approached the stone, Treaty-Sword and Sword of Kings in hand. “King Raithwall stood here. With this sword he cut the Sun-Cryst, and took its power in his hand.”

Vaan stepped up. “But you’re going to use the sword to destroy the Sun-Cryst. Aren’t you, Ashe.”

She huffed. “Don’t interrupt me, Vaan,” she said, but quietly, not snappishly like before.

Harry thought she sounded like someone who was weary of having her ‘moments’ deflated.

She took a deep breath, the Treaty-Blade in her hand glowing sudden blue. She took a step forward, thrusting the sword toward the sky, spirals of Mist—or something like it—shooting upward. Through the arches could be seen more Mist, pinkish-red, converging on their location, as though the Jagd that protected the Ridorana Cataract was being absorbed, then blasted out. The sky turned dark and threatening, lightning flashing and Mist-clouds

sweeping around the Pharos peak as Ashe walked even closer to the stone. A ghostly form had appeared for all to see.

Basch gasped. “Lord Rasler!?”

“You want revenge,” Ashe said, faintly incredulous. “You would have me use the stone?”

The figure stretched out a hand toward her.

“You would have me destroy the empire?” she asked, voice rising. “Is this my duty? Is this what you want? I cannot!”

“Why do you hesitate?” asked a hollow voice, causing everyone to swiftly turn. “The Cryst is a blade. It was meant for you.” A judge wielding twin weapons stepped into view, cape snapping in the wind. “Wield it! Avenge your father!”

The judge began to approach, taunting her. “Yes, it was I who wore Basch’s face—who cut down the Life of Dalmasca. Lady Ashe! Your father’s murderer is here!”

“You!” she snarled.

“And Reks!” Vaan said angrily.

“I slew your king. I slew your country,” the judge said, fitting the butt ends of his weapons together to form a duel-bladed pole. “Do these deeds not demand vengeance?”

Ashe let the Sword of Kings drop to the floor with a clank and struggled to bring the Treaty-Blade before her.

“Yes. Good!” the judge said as he kept walking closer. “Find your wrath! Take up your sword! Fight, and serve those who died before you!” he shouted, just as he lunged to take off Vaan’s head.

Reddas was there in a heartbeat to push Vaan away and block the attack with his own weapons. “A judge magister there was. . . . Two years past, he took the Midlight Shard, stolen from Nabradia, and used it not knowing what he did . . . and Nabudis was blown away. Cid ordered this of him to learn the nethicite’s true power. That man swore never to let such terrible power be used again. He forsook his judicer’s plate, and his name.” Reddas bunched up and pushed, forcing the judge back.

“Judge Zecht!”

Reddas readied his blades, not denying it. “It’s been too long, Gabranth. Reach out your hand, Lady Ashe. But remember, that which you must grasp is something beyond revenge, something greater than despair. Something beyond our reach. Try as we might, Gabranth,

history's chains bind us too tightly." They clashed again, taking several measuring blows before separating, Reddas knocked on his ass by the force of Gabranth's parry.

"No, we cannot escape the past," Gabranth said. "This man is living proof. What is your past, daughter of Dalmasca? Did you not swear revenge? Do the dead not demand it?"

Ashe looked down, then gasped, her gaze going back to the ghostly form of her husband. The sound of metal scraping stone made her look over her shoulder to see Vaan with one of Reddas's blades facing Gabranth with an angry and determined look. They held a bit of a staring contest when Vaan looked at her, with Ashe indecisive and Vaan with an almost pleading expression on his face.

Ashe turned back to Rasler, who opened his arms, either in supplication or as to invite her embrace. "Rasler. My prince. Our time was short. Yet I know this"—her voice raised to a shout—"you were not the kind to take base revenge!" She lifted her sword and slashed through his form. "The Rasler I knew is gone."

Rasler stepped back a pace, a line of sparkling blue tracing the path of the sword across his midsection, then began speaking with the voice of the Occuria. "You are our saint, Ashelia B'nargin. You must use the nethicite. You *must* be the one to straighten hist'ry's *weave!*"

Ashe took another swing at him, and that time he vanished into motes of blue light. "I am no false saint for you to use!"

Vaan dropped the blade he was holding. "Ashe. . . ."

"In all Dalmasca's long history, not once did we rely on the Dusk Shard. Our people resolved never to use it, though their need might be dire." She sighed before saying, "That . . . was the Dalmasca I wanted back." The Treaty-Blade dropped with a clank to the stone. "To use the stone now would be to betray that."

She turned to face them. "I will destroy the Sun-Cryst! I will discard the stone!"

Gabranth obviously wasn't satisfied with that. "You claim no need of power? What of your broken kingdom's shame? The dead demand justice!"

Harry was forced to wonder exactly which dead, and just how guilt-riddled the judge was over his own betrayals.

"You're wrong," Vaan objected rather patiently, almost like he was explaining something to a child. "What would change? I can't help my brother now. My brother's gone. He's dead!"

"Even with power we cannot change what is passed," Ashe said, walking slowly toward them, inert Dawn Shard in her hand. "What is done is done." She let the stone roll off her fingers to hit the floor; it came to a stop at Gabranth's metal-shod feet.

“Yet without power,” the judge persisted, “what future can you claim? What good a kingdom you cannot defend?”

“Then I will defend queen and kingdom both!” Basch asserted loyally, facing his brother.

Gabranth made an inarticulate sound of disbelief. “Hah! Defend? You? You who failed Landis, and Dalmasca? What can shame hope to keep safe?” He split his weapon back into two and brandished the blades. “Your shield is shattered! Your oaths poison those you would protect!” He attacked, causing the whole group to hastily start moving to defeat his zealous self.

They came to a brief standstill where Gabranth taunted, “Hear me, Basch! Do not think killing the king-slayer will win you back your honor! When you abandoned home and kin, your name was forever stained with blood!”

The two brothers went at it alone, Basch deftly parrying and attacking as he responded, “Aye, this stain is mine to bear. But I will bear it willingly, knowing that I did all that I could . . . for hope!”

“Preen and strut as you like!” Gabranth shot back. “In the end, we are the same. Blood-thirsting carrion birds, hell-bent on revenge!” He parried Basch with enough force to knock him away, then went for the others, causing them to rejoin the effort. Eventually he was brought low, hunched over and breathing heavily. “So you, too, would leave your debts unpaid?”

“Enough of this!” came a familiar, unctuous voice. “I can bear no more!” Cid had arrived, nethicite in his hand. “You disappoint me, Gabranth,” he scolded, walking up to the judge to place his free hand on the man’s forearm and push him roughly aside. “He trusted you. When you bared steel against the princess, you foreswore your obligations to your emperor. You shame yourself and make mockery of Lord Larsa’s trust. You are unfit to serve him as sword or shield. And so I release you from that service. Your presence is neither required nor welcome.”

Gabranth growled and charged as Cid walked away, bringing down a swift blade to meet only Mist-warped air. A second later he noticed Cid standing just off to the side, a funny smile on his face, and then Gabranth was flying through the air to slam into one of the supports, then drop down to the floor in a heap.

“You were only a tool of this Venat,” Balthier accused.

“How quaint. We are allies!” Cid corrected. “The Occuria give men power as a master feeds his dog: it is meant to tame us.” He turned his gaze on Ashe. “How well have you resisted their wile. By turning your back on their stones, you give us free hand to write out our own history.”

“And at what price?” she asked angrily. “Dalmasca’s freedom for your nethicite? I shall not suffer you to have it. The Sun-Cryst be damned!” She whipped around as Cid warped over to stand near that same stone.

He laughed. “Be sure that it is! For what other purpose do you think you’ve brought us here? But, m’lady, I would have you stay your Occurian sword! The Sun-Cryst is glutted with Mist, and so precious a thing must not be squandered. Let us use the stone!” He held his nethicite, it glowing for a heartbeat, then tossed it straight up into the air. “Finish this, Venat!”

The Dusk Shard appeared to be calling forth all Mist from the Sun-Cryst, causing them to stagger with the force of it swirling around.

Cid was staring upward with a crazed look on his face, laughing maniacally. “Shards of nethicite! Cocoon of the Sun-Cryst! Spill forth your Mist upon this Ivalice! Let sea and sky be awash by it, that *Bahamut* may come and drink his fill!”

Three distinct orbs of light stood out from the general Mist, of blue, green, and red. One by one they swooped away from the convergence point, and causing the group to brace themselves against another wave of force.

Cid, unaffected but for the fact that he was slowly rising into the air, cried in that same fervent voice, “And lo! How brightly burned their lanthorn. Casts it back the shadow of Occurian design! Testament that man’s history shall be his alone!”

“You made your nethicite for this,” Balthier said bitterly as he helped shield Fran. “You mimic your Occuria’s stone for what? To become a god yourself?” he shouted.

“On whose shoulders better to stand than those of the would-be gods?” Cid replied. “Ah! Such high hopes I once had, but you ran, and they with you! Alas, the hour of your return is late. Come, Ffamran! Revel in the glory of my triumph!” He lunged, like diving from a height into deep water, to attack.

They had barely weakened the man when he whipped a glowing red stone from his pocket and shook it at them. “Behold the manufactured nethicite, the fruit of our power and knowledge! See what the stone of man is capable of! Witness its power with your own eyes! Famfrit! To me!” Cid half turned and cast the stone behind him.

From it came something alarmingly like an Esper, which made Harry wonder just exactly who Cid thought he was kidding. However, they couldn’t even touch Cid while that thing was hanging about, so it had to go first, and then they concentrated on the man. Cid was reduced to being no longer able even to bear the weight of his guns to fire, and collapsed face first to the floor. And shockingly—not—they received the power of another Esper to their command.

Balthier ran forward ahead of the others, but was stopped by the appearance of Venat.

“Let him by, Venat,” Cid gasped. “It is done.”

The Occurian began to drift to the side to show Cid crouched on all fours and slowly getting to his feet. “Ah, how I have enjoyed these six years.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” Venat stated, and drifted yet further so that Balthier could approach his father.

Cid’s body was beginning to dissolve, his hands more like Mist than flesh, the effect slowly rising up his arms.

Balthier bowed his head briefly, then asked, “Was there no other way?”

“Heh. Spend your pity elsewhere,” Cid replied, more and more of his body transforming. “If you are so set on running, hadn’t you best be off? Fool of a pirate.” His body vanished at that, the Mist remaining swirling up toward the stone still hovering above the Sun-Cryst, which blazed with renewed light.

A thud caught their attention; Fran had collapsed. Penelo raced over to crouch by her side, calling her name. Fran opened her eyes to say, “The Mist burns. To bursting it beats. The cocoon!”

Balthier backtracked hastily to converge on Fran along with Harry. Penelo quickly moved to give them room, and Balthier reached down to cradle his partner, who said, “The Sun-Cryst burns. You must run. As far as you can.”

“Easy, Fran,” Balthier said softly, then hefted her up. “You’ll be no martyr on my watch, so I suppose you’d better hang on, then.”

And indeed, the Sun-Cryst was pulsing with light and more Mist flowed from its seemingly endless depths. “Ashe, the sword!” Vaan shouted. “We have to stop it!” Vaan and Ashe attempted to hold up the Sword of Kings before the thing and approach, the force of Mist like great winds against them.

Reddas dashed forward, his greater weight giving him easier passage, to place a quelling hand on theirs. “You must quit this place. It’s reacting. I have not seen its like before! Nay, never this large. Never such threat impendent.” He took the Sword of Kings from them and raised it, then forced his way forward, blade like a shield for his face. “For Nabudis.”

“Reddas!?” shouted Vaan.

Reddas launched himself against the flow of Mist, shouting, “I, judge magister, condemn you to oblivion!” He brought down the blade at the heart of the Sun-Cryst, and for a moment, everything went utterly silent, the Mist vanished. Then it exploded, taking the pirate with it.

And by then they were sensibly racing for the ancient device to get them the hell out of the way. Thankfully, it took them back to the base of the Pharos, and the group ran like blazes for the *Strahl's* anchoring point and boarded, knowing there was nothing else that could be done. Once they were a decent distance away they could look back at it. The peak had been blown apart, and there was no longer any glow of nethicite.

Back in Balfonheim they were a rather slow procession to the manse, unhindered by any of Reddas's people for entrance, though they did confirm that Reddas was no more. On arriving in the room Reddas had held his meetings in, Harry was surprised to see Al-Cid sitting in Reddas's chair, feet up on the desk, his aide standing nearby.

"We let ourselves inside," Al-Cid said insouciantly. "The situation is one demanding some haste, you understand."

"How did you know where we were?" Vaan asked.

Al-Cid swung his feet down with a short laugh and stood up, rounding the desk. "My little birds, they tell me many, many things." To Ashe he said, "My lady, the war begins now."

She furrowed her brow and said, "Then you were unsuccessful in stopping the Rozarrian fleet?"

"I used a variety of methods. All went according to plan until it came time to request withdrawal of our most devoted generals," Al-Cid informed her. "In their enthusiasm for war, our great military leaders went behind my back, straight to Marquis Ondore's resistance."

"The resistance!?"

"During training, a division of the resistance ignored their orders and disappeared. They were next found exchanging broadsides with the imperials over Old Nabradia."

"Why would they go there?" Basch asked, moving closer. "They were asking to be found!"

"You misunderstand," Al-Cid said with a shake of his head. "Those ships most surely belonged to a Rozarrian division. They may have joined Ondore's resistance forces as patriots, or even mercenaries. . . . But in reality they are regulars of the Rozarrian army under direct command of our war pavilion. This fifth column has invaded imperial airspace and provoked a response. Unable to abandon them, his excellency the marquis was obliged to give his main fleet the order to attack. And the battleground . . . is Dalmasca."

Ashe gasped, and Balthier logically stated, "Should this fight drag on, Rozarria will enter the fray, the defense of Dalmasca as their excuse . . . and we will have a war between empires."

"Correct. They will bide their time—waiting to strike until the empire has spent itself against the marquis. But Vayne—he will crush them and the marquis both between his hands."

Basch brightened slightly. “Wayne holds the Dusk Shard no longer. His advantage is lost.”

Al-Cid shook his head slowly. “Wayne has advantages enough. He stands in higher ground, and my birds tell me he has awoken something quite large.” He dropped his chin to peer over his sunglasses a moment, then continued, “*Bahamut*, Lord of the Sky. There was a stirring in the Mist, in the direction of Ridorana, I am told. *Bahamut* awoke soon after this.”

Which was, as Harry recalled, what Dr Cid had been blathering about earlier, though he had not specified what exactly it was.

“It is the Mist that came before the Cryst was undone,” Fran said. “All went according to Dr Cid’s designs. It breathed life into this *Bahamut*. If Reddas had not stopped it when he did, how much more Mist might it have drunk?”

“Yes, the man’s last ‘great’ accomplishment, I fear. And so it falls to me to put an end to the thing,” Balthier said.

Harry glanced at his lover, thinking he was far too prone to bearing a burden better shared. And even after mentally rolling his eyes at such a sentiment coming from himself, he still thought that Balthier should not feel so responsible for the actions of his father.

“Wayne commands *Bahamut* himself?” Ashe asked of Al-Cid.

“He comes to Rabanastre.”

Her face transformed with determination writ clear. “Then I will defend Dalmasca and stop this *Bahamut*. This is my charge—”

“That’s our charge, actually,” corrected Vaan as he stepped to her side.

Penelo dashed up as well and turned to face her. “It’s our home. It belongs to us all.”

Ashe seemed slightly taken aback, and slowly turned around to assess the others, then nodded and released a faint sigh—of relief? Harry was pleased that she was finally approaching understanding on certain things. There was a parallel there he did not wish to examine so closely, however.

“And my charge,” said Al-Cid as he made for the door, his aide at his side, “is to hinder and delay this Rozarrian invasion for as long as possible. I will do what I can.” He paused suddenly and looked over his shoulder. “Ah, yes. . . .”

Al-Cid removed his sunglasses with a flourish and faced Ashe, taking her hand in his. “When this unpleasantness is done, you must come to Rozarria. I will take you to Ambervale, of Clan Margrace. Such things I will show you! Until then, I will be waiting.” The sunglasses went back on with another flourish as he released her, then he continued on out through the doors.

Balthier heaved an irritated sigh, causing Harry to look at him closely and sidle over to whisper, "What?"

"You're right. He's a bloody drama queen, a ham extraordinaire."

Harry smirked as the others began to file out. "And you're not, Mr Leading Man?"

Fran, close enough to overhear, made a sound suspiciously like an amused snort and hastily strolled off before Balthier could call her on it. Outside they were accosted by some of Reddas's people.

"Lo, Vaan! Word from the resistance! The imperial sky fortress *Bahamut* is on the attack! This . . . could be bad. We have no chance of fighting it from the ground. No, the only way to fight the *Bahamut* is to go to it, by airship!"

'*And kudos to you for being Captain Obvious,*' Harry thought snidely. "Well, we can hope to get there in time to be of help, if not be a solution."

"Thanks, Rikken," Vaan said absently.

"Right, let's get prepared and we'll head out directly," Balthier said.

Sadly, Harry had no opportunity to track down Al-Cid; the man had vanished into the crowds, and was probably already halfway across the Cerobi Steppe. Well, unless Reddas had been hiding a gate crystal in his home that Al-Cid had ferreted out. On the *Strahl* again, Fran was content to take the helm, and Vaan sat in Balthier's seat to further educate himself, so Harry retired with Balthier to their cabin.

"And then there were two," he murmured.

Balthier slammed a fist against the wall. "You never do stop hoping, do you, right up until the very end."

"No. But you need to remember that you're not responsible for him. He was his own person. His sins are not yours. And if you could have made him stop, forced him, he'd be naught but a pale shadow of your will."

His lover dropped down to sit on the bed and heaved a sigh. "Too much to hope for that he could have seen reason?"

Harry shrugged. "Some just can't. And consider, plenty of people would see you as a crazed fool, lusting after things not yours by right, as he lusted after the power of gods."

"Yes, so spare me any lectures on perspective," Balthier said with a wry smile. "Do you even think they are gods?"

He pulled down a fold-out and had a seat. "I don't know, but I tend to think they are, and with influence more widespread than any imagine. It concerns me, actually."

Balthier shot him an odd look. "What do you mean?"

"If they're gods, or certainly god-like, what is to say they cannot create another Sun-Cryst, and at some time distant ahead, find another 'saint' to do their bidding? We sit here, thinking we go to fight Vayne and his new toy, and if we accomplish our goal, everything will be sunshine and flowers. But is that truly so?"

"That's a depressing thought. Does this have something to do with your madman from a distant land?"

He stirred uncomfortably. "Obliquely, I suppose. Perhaps we needn't concern ourselves. Surely should it be so they would wait a time, for memory to fade."

"I sense a mystery," Balthier drawled. "I'm beginning to think you've been taking all this so well because you know exactly what it's like to be in the middle of a war."

"I'm a bit more detached, is all. The only people I hold deep feelings for are you and Al-Cid, so I can afford to stand back a pace." When his lover arched a dangerous brow he added, "Not like that, you ass! Honestly, was it not you who spoke of jealousy? Dear to me he is, yes, but not anything like you are to me."

"Touché." There was a pause, then, "Influence widespread?"

Harry shook his head. "When you look up at the sky at night. . . . We surely do not abide alone."

Balthier slipped off the bed to step close and pull him up. "What are you on about?"

He sidestepped that with, "All I'm trying to say is that these gods, Occuria or not, exist, even if we don't know the extent of their power. And if Venat, one of them, is helping Vayne. . . ."

Balthier dropped his gaze. "The undying."

"So they say."

"All right. I'll give you those words on my 'lamented' father. But that doesn't mean I won't still help," Balthier said, raising his eyes.

Harry half smiled. "Never said you shouldn't. Just don't make the mistake of thinking it's entirely your problem. Or, did you miss the memo on that when Vaan and Penelo stepped up to correct Ashe?"

Balthier snorted and leaned in to kiss him. “And you’ll be there to cover my backside?”

“Someone has to,” he answered with a smirk. “Fran seems to be an eminently sensible person, but even she must need help with you to deal with.”

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When they did arrive it was to a dizzying array of craft zipping through the sky like swarms of insects, darting around much larger ships, and all around were bursts of energy and projectiles like a deadly light show. It was a wonder anyone could move two inches without being shot out of the air. And most prominent was the presumed sky fortress *Bahamut*, a tall structure circled at intervals with glossair rings and bristling with weaponry, especially a rather large cannon aimed straight at the bulk of the resistance forces.

They swooped in straight toward the monstrosity, right after *Bahamut* unleashed a blast from its cannon, one that shaved the side of the resistance flagship and blew a smaller vessel apart. Ashe had the communicator in hand when she said, “Uncle, it is I! I’m crossing to the *Bahamut* to stop Vayne!”

Ondore instantly responded, his voice clearly heard through the speakers. “*What are you saying? You are too rash! Your duties come after the battle is over!*”

“If we allow them to destroy us here, there will *be* no after. You must assist our charge.”

“*Stop. You must pull back!*” His voice became slightly muffled. “*Stop the Strahl!*”

Vaan grabbed Ashe’s wrist and pulled the communicator closer, a device in his other hand. “Hold it! I mean, w-wait! This is Larsa Solidor! I’m going in with her! So, we’re fine! I got the princess covered!”

Harry blinked slowly at the blond, then grinned.

“*Larsa Solidor? So you hold him as a hostage?*”

Ashe pulled her hand back and replied, “No, uncle. He will fight with us against Vayne!”

Vaan grabbed her wrist yet again to add, “Leave it to us!”

“*Understood. Our fate is in your hands.*”

Vaan slipped into a seat and crowed a quiet, “Yes!”

“I got the princess covered?” Penelo said incredulously.

Vaan shrugged and shot her a look. “Larsa’d say that.”

Balthier reached over to take the communicator and said, “We’re relying on you for fire support. Give them something to think about. We’ll pick our moment and make our move!” He hooked it into its holder and urged the *Strahl* faster, weaving through the myriad craft littering the field ahead, even going so far as to drop altitude sharply at one point to shake off a pursuer, then spiraled up the height of the *Bahamut* in search of a likely dock. “There one is!” Balthier eased them into position and flipped a few switches, then jumped up and ran out the back.

Inside was a proliferation of symbols everywhere, red against dark copper and bronze. “Vayne will be in the fortress’s command tower. I saw something of the like on our way in here,” Balthier said, looking up. “Right above our heads.”

“We need not fight all the empire to win. If we can get to Vayne, we can put an end to this war,” Ashe stated.

“Let’s get going, then. Find Vayne, wherever he’s perched, and knock him off,” Vaan enthused, then jogged forward to descend a wide flight of stairs.

There, a seeming core, with a shaft rising up the center picked out with glowing orange spots. Around it was a catwalk of metal grating, and they were barely halfway down when everyone staggered, the entire structure shaking like the *Bahamut* had been hit with something powerful, or had suffered a collision.

“The resistance fights their battle well,” Fran said. “We dare not fail them. We dare not falter.”

“Stop worrying. We just have to clean up here, and then Ashe’ll be the queen,” Vaan said with all the naïvety of youth.

“It’s kind of hard to believe,” Penelo said as she righted herself. “I can’t imagine trying to rule a whole kingdom.”

“A queen might always ‘run away’ with the help of a sky pirate looking to raise his bounty a peg,” Basch said.

Balthier snorted. “Didn’t we already do that? Besides, I doubt the queen would need the help of any sky pirates.”

Ashe walked down a few steps and said, “Do you really think me as strong as all that?”

“Who said anything about strong?” Vaan said. “You’ll make it. You got good friends.”

Ashe hesitated, then nodded, and proceeded down the stairs to the catwalk. On the opposite side of the central shaft was a lift, and as they were examining the controls they heard the sound of someone approaching, the ring of metal on metal.

Basch turned and said, “So you have lived.”

Gabranth approached, weapons in hand, but staggering. “I am a judge magister. Even in disgrace. My just reward for aiding the empire that destroyed my homeland.”

“Gabranth. Do not blame yourself anymore.”

“You confound me, brother!” Gabranth raged. “You failed Landis, you failed Dalmasca, all you were to protect. Yet you still hold on to your honor. How?”

“I had someone important to defend,” Basch replied calmly. “And defend her I have. How is it that you have survived? Is it not because you defend Lord Larsa?”

“Silence! All was stripped from me! Only hatred for the brother who fled our homeland remains mine.” Gabranth twisted the shaft of his pole, splitting it to dual blades. “Tell me: why do you forsake that which you must hold most precious?”

“I do as I must, brother. Or is that not answer enough?”

Gabranth howled and charged, forcing them to battle, and taunting them during with the fate of the resistance fighters outside. But rage was not enough, and Gabranth was reduced to panting impotence, one blade dropping to the floor. He pointed the other at his brother. “Have you your fill of this?”

Basch tilted his head. “I would ask you the same. Let this end, Noah.”

Gabranth dropped to one knee on the catwalk, his remaining blade a steadying force against the grating. “I’ve no right to be called by that name.”

“Then live. And reclaim it.” Basch turned and walked away, leaving his brother behind, to again examine the control panel for the lift. Within a minute they were rising up, to exit onto a higher catwalk, and to ascend another wide flight of steps.

There, in a room circular, stood Vayne and Larsa facing each other. Vayne turned to them as Larsa gasped, and extended an arm sideways briefly, like he was showing the place off. “I bid you welcome to my sky fortress, the *Bahamut*. I must apologize for my delay in welcoming you aboard my ship.” He bowed to them, a mockery. “Permit me to ask: who are you? An angel of vengeance? Or perchance a saint of salvation?”

Ashe stared at him before saying evenly, “I am simply myself. No more and no less. And I want . . . only to be free.”

Vayne extended his arm forward, his hand fisted. “Such a woman is not fit to bear the burden of rule. Weep for Dalmasca, for she is lost. Observe well, Larsa. Watch and mark you the suffering of one who must rule, yet lacks the power.”

“No.” Larsa slowly raised his sword and pointed it at his brother, the blade wavering. “No, brother, I will not. Though I lack your power, I will still persist.” He brought his other hand up to steady his trembling grip.

“Bold words, child,” Vayne said with a snort, then advanced on the group. “Your lives are forfeit, and your insurgence with them. Dalmasca will again know order. For good and all, I shall bring your futile attempts at rebellion to an end.”

Except that he did not. After a seeming endless fight Vayne staggered back, gasping, then pitched forward to hit the floor with a thud.

“Lord Brother!” Larsa shouted and raced forward, Vaan futile in his attempt to stop him. When he was a few feet distant Larsa was engulfed in what looked like lightning, and he, too, fell forward, unconscious, his outstretched hand a mere foot from his brother’s.

Penelo gasped as a sullen red light enveloped both Larsa and Vayne, like a demonic presence, and Vayne began slowly levering himself up. However, he kept jerking, and Harry was not sure he was seeing things correctly when it appeared the man’s skin began to darken to an unholy grey and his body began to bulge with suddenly developing muscle.

There was an explosion of sorts, a beam of light issuing straight up as Vayne let out an agonized yell, and they were forced to protect their faces against an onslaught of that red Mist as it burst outward. When Harry could see again a hunched over Vayne was hovering above the floor, a red aura surrounding him. And, all around the room, red Mist lurked.

“Manufactured nethicite!” Ashe cried.

Vayne began to float toward them, head still bowed, and another beam of light issued forth, this time from above. A pentad of swords appeared and started a swift revolution around Vayne as the light dimmed and disappeared. Vayne suddenly straightened and threw back his head, arms raised, as though in exaltation. The pentad spiraled upward in a line, then back down, and came to a rest, arching over Vayne’s head and shoulders like a forward tilting fan of death. Harry was disgusted to note that the man had gone rather veinous.

“Behold the power left me by our fallen friend,” Vayne intoned, and shifted his attention off to the side, where Gabranth was dragging himself into view. “Gabranth, you will defend my brother. He will have much need in the hell to follow.”

The disgraced judge pulled himself up and drew his sword, pointing it at Vayne, to that man’s surprise. “Yes, I will defend Lord Larsa!”

“The hound strays. Treason bears a price,” Vayne responded.

“One I gladly pay!” Gabranth shouted, then joined them in the renewed fight.

“Ivalice will know a new Dynast-King, and man will keep his own history!” Vayne declared triumphantly. “The tyranny of the gods is ended! We are their puppets no more! The freedom for which we have longed is at hand!”

That might be so, but once again Vayne was diminished, despite his transformation. He clapped a hand to his upper chest and grunted, staggering back once more. Gabranth took that opportunity to rush him, a blade ready, inarticulate battle cry on his lips. Vayne raised an arm to block, but was too ineffective, and Gabranth’s blade, then a brightly-glowing yellow, impaled him right through the stomach. Vayne reached up and gestured; a sword of light appeared and slammed into Gabranth’s helmet, cracking part of it off to expose the man’s left eye.

“Even a stray has pride,” Gabranth rasped.

Vayne growled and began to glow orange-red, and gestured again, that time his attack sending Gabranth flying away to land on his ass and bounce before sliding to a stop. Basch ran to him, crouching down to lift his brother’s head, the helmet having been destroyed to clearly reveal they were twins.

“Burn in hell, Gabranth!” Vayne thundered and summoned a triad of swords, sending them on a deadly swift arc at the judge.

However, they did not meet their mark. Larsa stood there in defiance, blue-glowing manufactured nethicite held high in one hand. The swords stopped in an instant, then were, one by one, absorbed into the stone. Had the situation been different Harry might have laughed at the absolutely gobsmacked look on Vayne’s face. A moment later Larsa’s stone shattered and dissipated.

As Vayne stood there gaping in incomprehension, Vaan swept up one of Gabranth’s blades and charged—which Harry thought was a completely insane thing to do—and managed to impale the man a second time, though his effort saw Vayne launched through the air to land on the walkway below a stair opposite the one they had arrived by. Vaan dashed over, dropping the blade, then vaulted the retaining wall.

Intent on giving chase, they followed, forgetting for the moment Gabranth and Larsa. At the other end, through a door, was another flight of steps, where Vaan was waiting for them, unwilling to make another potentially suicidal run at the enemy. It was only then that they realized Basch and Penelo were not with them, and they waited impatiently as Vayne staggered along before them, arm across his midsection.

Basch and Penelo caught up, and as a group they hastened forward, as Vayne looked up to the sky and bellowed, “Venat!”

Venat wavered into view facing Vayne, drifting backward at Vayne’s forward pace, then slid off to the side after a few moments and around him. “Won’t Cid be eager to learn what has

happened here,” Wayne said as Venat began . . . dissolving . . . motes of light flowing toward Wayne. “History begins anew.”

“Are they . . . fusing?” Harry mused as they jerked to a halt, unsure if whatever was happening would adversely affect them.

“If so, might it be that Venat becomes mortal?” Balthier said.

Wayne straightened up, as though Venat’s being was infusing him with further strength, and exuded even more red Mist as points of yellow light impacted and caused his earlier aura to flare up and swirl around him. Tendrils of it shot off in all directions, some to pierce ships overhead and destroy them, others to crash into the *Bahamut* itself.

Another transformation began, Wayne throwing his head back with a yell, streams of light lashing out to secure bits and pieces of metal from any source and bring them back to attach to Wayne like armor, as weapons, and even as wings, attached to protrusions that had developed to either side of his spine. When formed enough Wayne let out a roar and launched upward to hover midair, where yet more metal was drawn to him, red light weaving around him in a gaudy display, and his wings were trebled, his arms no longer ending in hands but in blade and cannon. He was, in a word, a monstrosity.

And then he turned, spotting them, and roared a challenge.

“This better be it,” Balthier muttered, then lifted his gun and aimed.

The battle seemed to do as much damage to the *Bahamut* as anything, with Wayne’s restless aura of Mist frequently reaching out to steal and adhere more metal to the man, but it was not enough in the end. A god he might become, but only with enough time, and that was a luxury he did not have, not with seven very determined people trying to prevent his ascension.

A bright red light burst outward from Wayne after a torturously hard struggle, metal flaking off his body and his wings disintegrating just as quickly as they had been formed. It was just as painful in reverse it seemed, given Wayne’s agonized and tortured yelling, and then . . . an explosion. Moments later what remained of Wayne hit the walkway with a clank, then vanished.

The sky was peaceful blue with wispy clouds to adorn it; everyone was smiling in relief and joy, clapping each other on the backs and making other gestures of happiness over a job well done. Harry idly wondered if Wayne would surface again some day in the form of an Esper, torture and penance for his presumption. And then reality set in as a small craft buzzed by overhead, copious clouds of smoke billowing from it. There was still a battle being fought.

As one they turned and raced back inside, pausing long enough for Basch to heft his brother into his arms and Penelo and Harry to hustle a dazed Larsa along with them to the *Strahl*. Fran and Balthier slung themselves into the pilot seats and started fiddling with the controls.

Persequor

“Well? Can we fly?” Balthier asked Fran.

“No fuel goes to the glossair engines,” she replied.

“Damn!” Balthier said, rising from his seat. “Vaan, you’re in charge. I’m checking the engine room.”

“Right.”

“Fran, with me!”

She got up as well, and just then an explosion caught everyone’s attention.

“Look! *Bahamut*’s glossair rings are stopping!” Ashe cried.

“Vaan! As soon as the *Strahl*’s rings move, you take off. Understood?”

The blond slipped into Balthier’s seat with a nod.

“You can fly her, Vaan. Just do it like I told you.”

“Don’t worry.”

Fran reached out and pulled Penelo closer by the shoulder and pushed her at her own seat. “Watch for interference from *Bahamut*’s skystone. The *Strahl*’s a fickle girl. You keep her working for us.”

Penelo nodded and sat down. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Harry took one of the passenger seats as his lover disappeared, not wanting to be in the way, and knowing he could do nothing to help Balthier or Fran, or anyone else for that matter. A hasty check on the way to the ship had revealed that Gabranth’s wounds were fatal, the trauma too much even for him to fix, and Basch had taken his brother off toward the cabins, with Larsa following. That didn’t prevent Harry from fidgeting, wishing they were away, and Ashe seemed similarly restive.

“Vaan, the power’s back! We can go!” Penelo said.

“Right! Let’s go! Grab onto something!”

And they were off, Vaan piloting the ship without any sign of uncertainty in the way the *Strahl* handled, and Basch and Larsa arrived within minutes. Basch hastened forward and snatched up the communicator, gesturing impatiently at Vaan, who gasped and offered up Balthier’s device. Several moments of fiddling with it produced the right results, so Basch turned on the

communicator and said, “This is Judge Magister Gabranth! All quarters cease fire! I repeat: all units of the Archadian army, hold your fire!”

Vaan brought the *Strahl* to a hover as Basch continued, “The battle is over! As of this moment, we have signed a cease-fire with Her Royal Majesty Ashelia B’nargin Dalmasca.”

Larsa took the communicator to say, “Attention. This is Larsa Ferrinas Solidor. My brother Wayne has died with honor in battle. The imperial fleet is now under my command!”

“*Sir! Your orders, sir?*”

Ashe was next. “This is Ashelia Dalmasca.”

“*Lady Ashe!*” It was Ondore. “*Thank the gods you live!*”

“I confirm what Judge Magister Gabranth and Larsa Solidor have said here. Please. Stand down your attack. The war is over. Ivalice look to the horizon. A new day has dawned. We are free!”

As the fighting around them ceased and vessels drifted to hover in waiting, Ashe lowered the communicator and let out a choked sob. Basch reached forth to lay a hand on her shoulder and squeeze.

Right about then Harry realized that Balthier and Fran had not yet returned, but was distracted when Penelo cried, “Look, Vaan, the *Bahamut!*”

Standing up he could see the fortress descending toward Rabanastre, causing the city’s paling to flare up.

“*This is Judge Zargabaath, captain of the Alexander, flagship of the 12<sup>th</sup> Dalmascan Fleet of the Archadian army. I address all ships in Rabanastre’s airspace. The Bahamut must not be allowed to fall on the city of Rabanastre! We are preparing to ram her! Do not interfere!*”

“*Madness!*” cried Ondore.

Larsa sat down heavily in the seat across from Harry, head bowed—grief, Harry assumed.

“*Should she fall, the paling will not hold, and all Rabanastre will be obliterated! All ships, concentrate your fire on the Alexander’s remains once Bahamut is clear of the city.*”

“*Hasty, aren’t they.*” It was Balthier’s voice, his transmission laden with static. “*I think it’s a little early to be throwing away our lives just yet.*”

“Balthier?” Vaan said as Ashe jumped back to her feet.

Harry reached forward to steady himself, feeling rather dizzy, finding it altogether difficult to breath properly.

“Wait, Balthier, where are you!?” Vaan demanded.

*“Ah, Vaan! Sounds like you made it out okay! The Strahl’s a fine airship, eh?”*

*“What does he think he’s doing?”* Ondore asked. *“Balthier!”*

*“Marquis! Stop that fool judge on the Alexander for me, would you? Just getting somewhere with these glossair rings. Almost done! Don’t want him ramming me before I fix them, do we?”*

Harry’s head jerked up at a touch to his arm; Larsa was staring at him solemnly, a hint of sympathy in his gaze. “That wasn’t just a diversion at Jahara, was it.”

He shook his head, sitting back down into the seat’s embrace, then startled as a burst of static came through the speakers along with a grunt.

Ashe snatched up the communicator. “Balthier! Do you understand exactly what it is you’re doing?”

*“Princess! No need to worry. I hope you haven’t forgotten my role in this little story. I’m the leading man. You know what they say about the leading man? He never dies.”*

Harry snorted quietly, his hands curling into fists.

*“Let’s fly! Fran! Power to the glossair rings. Fran?”* After a short pause came, *“Do I have to do everything around here?”*

“Listen to me, Balthier! Get out of *Bahamut* immediately! Please, Balthier! You mustn’t die! Please, Balthier. Come back.”

Harry suffered a moment of blinding, irrational jealousy at her words before he got ahold of himself. Ashe sounded like she was the one who would be bereft should he die. And what about Fran?

*“Vaan, the Strahl’s in your hands! You’d better take care of her, you hear? If there’s one scratch on her when I get back—”*

“Roger that. We’ll be waiting for you.”

“Balthier,” Ashe said again, making Harry want to bitch slap her. Instead he stood up swiftly and marched off down the corridor to vent his anger and upset in private. Balthier had better come back, for Harry had every intention of strangling him, and that wouldn’t be nearly as

satisfying if he was already dead! He was kicking a wall when he felt a hand on his shoulder and nearly had a heart attack. Slowly turning around, Larsa came into view.

“You all right?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “I should be asking you that. I’m acting the fool, I know.”

Larsa shrugged a shoulder, his expression rather wooden. “I knew the path my brother was taking.”

“That doesn’t mean you stop caring. Balthier . . . is the same about his father. You don’t just turn off love. And I’ve known a few people in my time that I cared deeply for, yet still managed regularly to make me want to commit violence.”

“I think . . . that the princess is simply overwrought.”

“I know. This is a very emotional time for all of us. So, what—”

“Hey, you two! We’re here!” Vaan was headed toward them, the others not far behind.

“We will go to the palace,” Ashe said, seeming to have regained her usual demeanor, which could only mean that while Balthier’s and Fran’s fates might not be known, the city was out of danger.

And so they did, Harry being able to see that the *Bahamut* had come to a stop outside the city. And while he could not see it in its entirety, he had the feeling it had lodged itself deeply into the sands, to be able to stand upright with only a slight tilt to it.

Others had been invited it seemed, for not only did Ondore show up, but also Al-Cid, and the remainder of the day was spent in peace talks. Harry just sat there listlessly, only half listening, and trying to decide what to do. Evening fell and dinner was brought out for everyone, he barely tasting his food, until finally he unleashed a bracing mental pep talk on himself. Sitting around having an internal pity party was accomplishing nothing, and it could be so that Balthier and Fran were alive but hurt, so perhaps he would be better off attempting to find out?

That idea was thwarted when an attempt to exit the palace was prevented by the guards, who insisted that no one be allowed to leave until daybreak. And Harry did not have the details which would allow him to sneak out via the waterway Balthier had spoken of, assuming he could even get past the guards sure to be near that little security breach without raising an alarm and causing a serious amount of upset.

Resigned, he turned in for the night, but not before recording a message on a memstone. He was up at first light and on his way, notes slipped under the doors of Vaan and Al-Cid,

intending to initially stop at the *Strahl*, Balthier having given him the means to access the ship earlier, to leave the memstone prominently on the bed in their cabin.

What he wasn't expecting was to see Balthier and Fran slowly walking up the approach to the west gate, looking each like death warmed over. He raced toward them after a startled gasp, prepping a curative spell as he ran, then unleashing it as he drew close enough. To his credit, he did not say something stupid about them being all right.

"I should not like to do that again soon," Balthier quipped quietly.

"You—" He shut up when his lover raised a quick hand.

"Let's save that for later? What I really want . . . is a nice place to lie down. Fran, too. Someplace that isn't this blasted desert."

Harry frowned. "Come with me, then. Unless, you'd prefer to just take back the *Strahl*. She's right there in the aerodrome."

Balthier shook his head. "Let Vaan work on her for a while. She sustained damage enough during all that, so the experience will be good for him, and for when he gets his own airship. We'll take her back when we've had a rest."

"All right," he said, and moved to support Fran's other side, she looking a bit woozy still. "But we're going to have to make a side trip to Bhujerba, unless you're hiding a gate crystal somewhere."

Balthier just smiled and jerked his head, so to the aerodrome they went to book passage. Harry occupied himself with work as they rested, but not until after he had checked them over carefully and healed any additional injuries he was able for. Of course, it was late when they arrived, but he woke them up and got them headed in the right direction, then gated them to Ambervale so he could bring them to his home. And by then, both Balthier and Fran seemed to be doing much better.

Inside he rummaged up something to drink and sat there sort of sullenly, knowing he was being an ass, but unable to shake the mood. "I'm afraid there's nothing here to eat, but I'll see what I can scrounge up in the marketplace. With the time difference, it shouldn't be an issue."

"I'll go with you," Balthier informed him.

"Fran, my spare bedroom is down the hall, first door on the right, and the facilities are the last door on the right. You're welcome to anything, but I don't know if my taste in books coincides with yours."

"It will be fine, I am sure," she replied.

He nodded and stood back up, grabbed several net bags from a hook, then led Balthier back outside. "I am a bit put out with you right now," he murmured.

"I know."

"Sadly, that makes me a hypocrite, because I used to play hero," he said when they were nearly out of the compound. "It drove others crazy, so I guess now I understand why. Bit of a nasty lesson, that."

"Does that mean I'm off the hook this time?" his lover asked in a faintly teasing tone.

"Only if you keep in mind that I don't seem to have quite the handle on things I thought I did," he replied seriously.

Balthier laughed at that. "You're one of the most collected people I know."

He snorted, then pasted a smile on his face when he was hailed by Milardros.

"Hallam! What are the odds you'll come out with us today?"

"Ah, I'm afraid not. I'm just in from Bhujerba and the time difference is messing with my head. That, and I have guests. Ffamran, this is Milardros, a member of my clan. Milardros, Ffamran is my dearest friend. We were just on our way to the marketplace to replenish my food stocks."

Milardros eyed Balthier curiously and nodded. "I shall not keep you, then, and pretend I didn't see you. That way, I won't feel obliged to tell the clan leader you're back."

An involuntary grin escaped him. "Thank you."

Milardros waved and loped off, so Harry resumed their walk. "It's rather unsettling to realize I have a bit of a jealous streak. I always thought I was above that sort of irrationality."

"You're focusing too much on the wrong things, my dear Hallam. As you've noticed, I'm not without that tendency myself on occasion."

"Mm. I'm sorry. It's no excuse, but I'm very tired," he said as they finally entered the marketplace, an area well populated at that hour. He made a beeline for the vendors with fresh produce and started picking over the offerings, Balthier taking one of the bags and making his own selections. It went almost without saying that Harry included plenty of fruit.

When they arrived back at the cottage Fran was nowhere to be seen, then Harry spotted her out back in his garden, a book in her hand. Balthier helped him to put things away, all but a selection of fruit, some of which his lover took to Fran as Harry slumped in a chair and ate.

His lover came back a couple of minutes later and said, "I've told Fran to raid the kitchen if she wants more. Now come on, show me your room."

"Our room," he said absently as he rose, then wandered off down the hall to enter the last room on the left. His bed sat centered against the wall opposite the door, directly beneath windows otherwise open to the breezes, though they were protected by screens and palings against insects and elements, with heavy curtains to either side for when he wanted to block out the light.

Balthier insistently pulled Harry to the bed and pushed him down. "You're the one who needs looking after right now," he said as he crouched to unlace Harry's boots and pull them off. "And I did tell Al-Cid I would."

Harry snorted in amusement and allowed himself to be pushed around, too tired to protest about being babied.

"You've my word, we won't burn the house down while you're resting, nor will we wander off and get lost. And to help you get readjusted, since we seem to be fine, I'll even wake you in a few hours so you'll be able to sleep tonight." Balthier leaned over to place a lingering kiss on his lips.

He woke back up to the sensations of a warm body against him and fingers carding through his hair, and snuggled closer.

"You came after us, hm?"

"Mm. Had to wait," he said sleepily. "Guards wouldn't let me leave the palace."

The fingers in his hair paused momentarily, then resumed their motion. "But, you set off to search us out by yourself. Like a hero?"

"You might have been h—" Harry blinked open his eyes and furrowed his brow, then closed them again. "Not fair to ask questions when I'm only half awake. Already admitted I'm a hypocrite."

Balthier chuckled. "You feel better now, don't you? Time to get up. I set out a cold meal."

Harry dragged himself fully to wakefulness and sat up, rubbing his eyes, then frowned at his lover, getting a smirk in return. "Yes, I do, so let's not talk about how we're both just as bad, okay? Fran is better, right?"

Balthier nodded and slipped off the bed. "She's fine. The effects of that knock to her head seem to have passed. Now come on. It's not a fancy dinner, but I'm sure you're hungry."

He did inquire at the table and Fran assured him she was perfectly well, so Harry turned his thoughts to other pursuits. “After you’ve ‘rested’, what do you think comes next?”

“Well, this is only the second time I’ve been in Rozarria, I admit. It’s like a whole new world to explore.”

Fran paused in her eating, and Harry assumed that his lover had kept his silence, so he explained to her his other role in life, to which she nodded and continued to eat. Given that she had known Balthier had been a judge, he was not surprised by her reaction. To his lover he said, “You might want to at least mention that to Al-Cid.”

“Where would be the fun in that?” Balthier said roguishly.

“This is my turf now, hey? You’ve not even a mere skiff to flit about in right now, and I know where all the gate crystals are in this land. Give me that much and I’ll become a lot more cooperative,” he teased. Fran made a noise of agreement, backing him up, and Balthier crossed his arms and damn near pouted.

Two weeks later Balthier was incredibly restless, having gone through every book Harry had on geography and accompanied him on several trips to gather materials, so it was probably a good thing that a knock sounded at Harry’s front door just before it opened and Al-Cid strolled in. “Ah, Hallam. I had wondered if I would find you here. Your note was somewhat lacking, my friend. And I see you’ve guests. A pleasure to see you both again.”

Harry supposed it was a good thing it was not *just* himself and Balthier, lest they be caught breaking in the sofa. “I didn’t think you’d mind. How have things gone?”

“Fine, fine!” Al-Cid said as he took a seat. “It appears that the gaping wound of the Galtean Alliance is well on its way to being healed. We shall all be friends again, hey? Though, it appears that steadfast Basch is headed to Archades.”

Balthier arched a brow.

“Yes, he looks to guard Larsa, so that the new emperor has one loyal and trustworthy man at his back. A promise to his brother, it seems.” Al-Cid filled them in on the various details, but it all boiled down to a serious case of peace breaking out. “I would still like you to keep your ears open, Hallam, though.”

“Of course. I couldn’t not.”

“Ah. . . .”

Al-Cid looked to Balthier. “Hm?”

“We were wondering, you see, about the myriad ruins in this land.”

Al-Cid laughed. “Try not to cause *too* much trouble, hey? The emperor I am not, though I wield influence in his name. By the way, the bounty on your head, it is gone. Larsa has seen to this. And now, I shall take my leave.” He stood and started for the door.

Harry jumped up and followed him, catching him just outside. “You said nothing about Vaan and Penelo.”

“Ah, they work on the *Strahl*, and Vaan dreams of his own airship. It will take them a while to correct the damage, I think. I can give you the use of a skiff, Hallam, for you and your friends in the interim. After all, I assume you go with them.”

He nodded, a faint smile on his lips. “That I will.”

— **The End** —