These Unending Alchemies of Honour
by justira

Summary

Gabranth lives, and there is nothing simple about it— not for him, nor Basch, and most especially not Vaan.

Notes

Title: These Unending Alchemies of Honour
Fandom(s): FFXII:OGC
Characters/Pairings: Vaan/Gabranth, Basch, Larsa, Penelo
Rating: PG13
Spoilers/Warnings: Spoilers through the end of the game. Full disclosure: canonically, Vaan is 17 and Gabranth is 36 so. Uh. Yeah. Pedobear seal of approval.

Feedback: Holy sweet jesus, yes please. For anyone who wants to give me some serious crit, I've put together some notes/concerns at the very end of the story.
Word Count: 38,500 WHAT IS THIS I DON'T EVEN
game, Gabranth lives to tell the tale and Vaan is stuck with conflicting feelings.

OKAY UH. I have a lot of people to thank here, and also a few notes on canon, not to mention my crit notes.

A huge thanks to [lj]first_seventhe for the gamma read, the beta read, the cheerleading. This story could not have happened with you and your awesome suggestions. Another huge thanks to [dw]renay, for beta reading, putting up with my woe and whining, and staving off my panic attacks for the past week. Thanks also go to [lj/dw]lassarina for help in the early stages of plotting and also for listening to my endless moaning. Finally, thanks to [lj]mithrigil for the advice on language; though I didn't have time to ask for a full language beta, the advice you gave me was very helpful.

See the end of the work for more notes

These Unending Alchemies of Honour

Basch’s memories were largely the textures of his life: cool wisps of a Landis night, the harsher sun of Dalmasca, the familiar chafe of armour. Later: cold iron about his neck and wrists, and the slow sick forever-warming to the clammy temperature of skin, always flush with the fever of his anger. Then, the feel of borrowed clothes, first those looted, and then those donated, grudgingly or open-armed; the scratch of each coarse thread against his skin and the ill-fitting tightness across his chest growing precious for the meanings behind the gifts.

But later, after the rest of those first, thick days had blurred together into endless hours of dizzy tension, he would remember something else: sights and sounds that would still make his throat go dry.

He would remember his head jerking up at the familiar feel of Fran’s magick mixing with his own as the Strahl juddered around them and Noah’s breath rasped from the bunk. Their eyes met for only the barest second, and then she was gone, her heels ringing down the ramp as she followed Balthier into the sky fortress. Her magick taking hold, meager—Fran never being as powerful a caster as Vaan—but precise with a century of skill, a clever mix of green and white. Pouring the dregs of his own after it, clumsily reinforcing her work.

He would remember Larsa’s hands, not shaking at all, steady and methodical as he tore open packet after packet of potions, mixing the powders with remedy gels instead of water, smearing the concentrated concoction everywhere, dabbing it at Noah’s lips, trying to entice him to swallow.

His white gloves growing filthy, stained with Noah’s blood, and his hands looking very small.
And he would remember that, even as their efforts let Noah cling to life, there was a war to prevent.

After so much toil, it had seemed almost easy. He would remember the chill that trickled down his spine as he issued Gabranth's orders, voice clipped (brother, do not leave me to this).

And Larsa hurrying up to do his part, his voice tense and solemn, and Ashe; and Noah lay dying behind them.

Ashe saying, "We are free."

Basch had watched her wilt, put a hand on her shoulder, and thought: nearly all.

The desperate bubble of fear rising from his gut as the Bahamut began to fall on Rabanastre; his heart stuttering as two pillars of his world crumbled around him.

Balthier. Balthier's voice, cocky and confident.

For all Balthier's talk and bluster— Basch would have no other but he, and Fran beside him, labouring to save Rabanastre.

Basch could do no more here; he swallowed down the helpless feeling. Noah.

He scrambled back into the cabin, Ashe's choked voice clutching at his heart, Noah's need yet drawing him away. Larsa was fast on his heels, and they knelt together as they reached the bunk, resuming their vigil. Noah's eyes were open; he had been listening, though Basch doubted his understanding, not with the pain filming his eyes, stretching his lips tight, reaving furrows around his eyes that made him seem far older than the years he shared with Basch.

Basch took his hand, threading the thin magick that had returned to him in his short absence, half an ear still turned to the cockpit where Balthier was entrusting Vaan with the Strahl.

And when the Bahamut crashed down into the empty sands, Basch's breath huffed out in a choked sound that was half cheer, half sob—Balthier, Fran, Balthier, Fran, Noah, Noah Noah don't you leave me, too.

But seconds after the crash had shuddered through the metal bones of the ship, up through Basch's knees to echo hollow in his heart— Penelo had vaulted over her seat, scrambling back to where Noah's bunk lay, and suddenly Basch's weak and failing magicks were flooded with a wave of white: Penelo's powerful casting, wave upon wave as she Cured, Cured, Cured.

Basch's heart hammered. For all of Noah's mistakes and misdeeds—Penelo, pouring all she had into him, face tight and determined.

And in strode Ashe, eyes red, but no tears, not for this nor anything else.

She stood for a moment, watching the frantic scene, watching as Noah's pain-glazed eyes turned slowly to her. Watching Larsa's hands, Larsa's hands that now held the reins of power, fluttering over his dying guardian.

Basch, with no right to ask this thing of her, watched her close her eyes, her hand rising for a moment to clasp loosely in front of her chest. Her head lowered, and in the dim light Basch still caught her frown. When her eyes opened, they sparked with anger, her brows furrowed.

But she said: "Live, dog. Ivalice needs Larsa's strength, and Larsa needs yours. Live and reclaim your honour, be it the harder path."
And she lent her magick, too; Basch could feel it, harsh but healing, holding Noah together with Penelo. Almost, almost enough.

Almost.

They wouldn't make it, not like this. Tired, all of them; the battle with Vayne had drained them, and Noah's injuries were great and deep.

A growl—incredulous, frustrated—scrapped out of the cockpit, and Basch felt the familiar dip of the *Strahl* going on autopilot.

And Vaan barrelled into the cabin. He stood there for a moment, silhouetted in the doorway, staring. At Larsa, at Basch. At Penelo, her hands hovering over Noah's chest, helping him breathe.

At Ashe, whose father and king Noah had killed. She stood stiff-backed and tense, but her hands were out and working, weaving curing magicks.

Basch had watched this play between them so many times, the one goading the other to greater acts of courage and honour through a backwards sort of pride, and again Vaan stood there, watching Ashe, and Basch's heart was in his throat.

Vaan's fists balled at his side. He bowed his head, too, unknowing echo of Ashe.

Basch would remember, later: though Penelo had turned, started to speak—"Vaan, come on, please"—

Vaan had already moved.

Vaan, their most powerful caster, and his white magicks flooded through Noah's body, indiscriminate but powerful.

Finally, powerful enough.

All of them there, healing, and it was a strange and quiet peace, a tense respite over the sick gurgle of Noah's breath.

Basch would remember, too: that was when Larsa had started to cry, when they thought that Noah might live after all. Silent tears, streaking down his dirty face, and Larsa not even noticing, his hands still moving: tear, mix, dab. His eyes darting around the cabin.

How clear and calm his voice sounded when he spoke.

"Captain Basch. You ordered the cease-fire as Gabranth."

Basch glanced up. Then down, at Noah, at Judge Magister Gabranth.

"Do you," Larsa continued, glancing around still, "have spare cloaks aboard? And—" a slight frown of calculation "—greaves, gauntlets, and a hauberk?"

Basch's mind raced, trying to keep up. "Aye, cloaks aplenty, and most likely the rest."

Larsa locked eyes with him. "When we land, throw one over Gabranth, and give him only to your most trusted physikers. Take his helm, don what armour can be found and fit in time; gauntlets and greaves at the least. And another cloak over that."

Ashe's eyes were flashing between them, lips parted in appreciation, and Basch's thoughts leapt
ahead: never enough to stand close inspection, but from afar, from across an aerodrome hangar—

But Larsa had moved on, raced ahead of him. "Penelo, can you land?" Vaan, the most powerful caster, must stay, Basch thought, dizzy with the quicksilver speed of Larsa's strategizing. Penelo nodded, wove her hands to seal what spells she could. She scrambled away, and Basch felt the faint jerk of the autopilot turning off. Ashe made for the cabin, too, to call for the healers; Vaan's face tensed, sweating as he took on most of the burden.

Ashe returned; Basch tested the healing meld before breaking with it—with Vaan in, his own meager magicks were of little use. He jerked around the unsteady cabin, dumped the cloaks by the bunk, scrambled into what armour he could unassisted. He nearly fell over as the Strahl juddered to the ground, Penelo calling "Sorry, sorry!" over her shoulder. Basch threw the other cloak over Noah as the door seals hissed open, suppressing a faint shudder. *Just keep moving.*

Healers swarmed over them, and Noah was bundled out; Basch made to don the helm and follow when Larsa snatched his sleeve and pulled him back inside.

"A moment, Captain," and Larsa pushed him to sit on the bunk. His eyes darted around, settling on Vaan's dagger. He held out his hand. "Vaan, Captain, may I?" Understanding dawned on Vaan's face, along with the vestiges of a frown. But he handed over the dagger.

Basch gave a quick jerk of a nod, and Larsa took his hair and sliced through it, shearing it short. Imperfect, like the rest of his disguise (*like the life of the man I replace*), but some improvement. Basch jammed the helm onto his head for the moment, regardless.

And the last of those memories, the ones he would remember for years, the last thing before hours and hours of waiting and talking and politicking and more waiting. The last he would remember: Penelo grabbing Larsa and leading him gently to a corner of the cabin. "Your turn," she said quietly, and took a clean rag and wiped his face.

Larsa's expression. Baffled, first, for he had not realized his own tears. The briefest flash of annoyance, and, even briefer: the first childlike expression Basch had seen on his face, a spark of lost, wide-eyed fright. For that bare moment Basch had thought that Larsa might crumple right there in Penelo's arms.

But the moment passed, and Larsa was again the Emperor, and they were all trotting down the ramp into the light, and it was time.

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They swept out of the aerodrome, and Vaan tried to focus instead on how this was the first time Ashe had done the *sweeping* thing and have it *work*, because people were throwing themselves out of her way, and no one was trying to arrest them, and Ashe was flinging orders all over the place *like she was born to do it*, and it made Vaan want to smile, even then, because it was better than thinking about that mangled thing the healers had taken away. So Vaan thought about Ashe instead, feeling the power just pouring off her— not magick but just as thick on his skin, just as incredible, because people *looked* at her, really looked. Vaan watched, trotting along with Penelo, as the orders flew and people went scurrying, and Basch clinking along trying hard to be invisible. But with Ashe and Larsa there— everyone looked at *them*, automatically, and the rest of them were just backdrop.
Vaan had wished, before, that people would see him that easily, instead of everyone's eyes always sliding over him, seeing whatever they expected or wanted or, worse: nothing at all.

He could feel himself falling for it, too, because he didn't realize until he was surrounded: Ondore was suddenly beside them, there are soon as he could be pried off his ship, and Al-Cid sliding in out of nowhere, and then they'd reached a room in one of the towers, the door rang shut, and Vaan was trapped in there with everyone who mattered right now.

Except Balthier and Fran, and his hands jerked into fists, and here came some more not-thinking.

He jerked out a chair instead, overstuffed and not matching any of the others in the room or the table or anything, and it all looked it had been thrown in here in a hurry, just like Vaan and the rest had been. Ashe sat across from him, ignoring him for Ondore. Penelo slid in beside Vaan, stared at him for a moment, and steepled her hands under her chin, pulling a stodgy-serious face so hard Vaan's lip twitched. His arms eased a little, falling to his sides, as Basch sat next to him, giving him an unreadable look. Larsa came last, talking quietly with Al-Cid, and claimed the other chair by Basch.

"Gentlemen," Al-Cid began, and then, with a flourish at Ashe (impassive) and Penelo (hands twitching up to her mouth, and stilled before they could be seen above the table): "Ladies. The war is over."

"Yes," Larsa said. "Let us forge a new peace. The Empire must not be allowed such ambitions again. The military has grown too strong, and the Senate weak. My brother Vayne dismissed the Senate for collusion in my father the Emperor's murder. I will revoke those charges, and reinstate the Senate."

Ondore cupped his hands over his cane. "The ranks of the Judges Magister have thinned." Yeah, Vaan thought. Just not enough. "Perhaps this will be the chance to break the power of the military in Archadia?"

Larsa nodded, all deliberate and decisive. "Yes. I will give the Senate back the powers it had before my father's reign."

"Ah, the Judges Magister," Al-Cid muttered. He looked at Basch. "Pardon me, but did you not give the order to cease fire as Judge Magister Gabranth?" At Basch's nod, he continued. "But this is... unfortunate. Gabranth is injured, no? It is not hard to see that he could not have issued that order."

Ondore tapped his cane on the ground, shifting his weight forward onto it. "The Senate must not find out that Larsa's guardian was not capable of seeing to his safety aboard the Strahl."

"A pirate ship," Ashe murmured. She looked up, and Vaan couldn't read her eyes, something that maybe could have been amusement any other day. "Larsa was alone with outlaws and renegades on a pirate ship."

Larsa grimaced. "The Senate believes still that I am too young. Or not young enough. I am never sure which."

"Wait a minute!" Penelo's voice rang across the table. "Are you saying that just because Larsa's young the peace might fall apart? Because he was with a bunch of pirates?"

"The Senate has ever been... doubtful of Lord Larsa's autonomy." Al-Cid put in, leaning back with a sardonic salute to Larsa, who accepted it with a nod and a small wry grin.

Assigning him a babysitter probably hadn't helped. Vaan swallowed that comment, listened to Larsa instead.
"The Senate will be displeased that the war is over, as will the military. They may look for any reason to invalidate my decision."

"Then they must not know that Gabranth was not at your side." Ondore's brows furrowed.

Basch's voice, when he spoke, was so quiet that it took Vaan a second to realize he was talking.

"Noah asked me to guard Larsa in his stead." Basch looked up, his hands upon Gabranth's helm. His hair was still messily shorn, and he looked—tired.

"Basch." Ashe's voice cut the air, in that way she had. She looked down at her hands for a moment, and Vaan remembered them weaving through the air, keeping Gabranth alive. His own hands twitched, but Ashe had looked up, folded her hands under the table. Her voice was low and intense. "You would leave my service for Gabranth."

Basch met her eyes (brave man), Gabranth's helm under his hands. "No, Your Majesty." And Vaan heard it that time, the capital letters there—Ashe's eyes widened, and Vaan realized that that was the first time she had been called that and no one could argue. "I serve Dalmasca first, and the good of Ivalice second. This peace must be preserved."

Ashe's brows drew down, her mouth tight. Vaan expected—one of her sharp comments, a command, maybe. But she closed her eyes, turned away for a moment, before meeting Basch's eyes again to say, "I will await your return to my service. General."

Vaan clamped down on the urge to whistle, and Basch bowed from where he sat.


Vaan watched, silently, this trade—they were dealing in people, in loyalties and allegiances and lives, and he wasn't sure if that made him angry or what, or if he was still mad about Gabranth or... if he was just feeling them all start to drift apart.

"Then it is settled," Ondore declared. "General Basch, you will be Gabranth?"

"Aye, Marquis. Until Noah recovers, when I will rejoin Ashe, and Noah will return to Larsa."

"My good General," Al-Cid interjected. "How badly is the Judge Magister injured?"

Basch's face rippled for a moment before steadying. "Badly," he said, all quiet and hoarse, and Vaan looked away.

"He nearly died," Ashe said flatly. "My healers say he will live, but he will not awake for days. They do not know when he will be well again." Her mouth pulled down tight at the corners, in a silent simmer of anger.

"But this will not do." Al-Cid's hand danced through the air, waving away their efforts. "Larsa must return to Archades as soon as we have a preliminary agreement here."

"I will go with him," Basch said, quiet and decisive. "To Archades."

This is when Vaan remembered that Basch never let go, and he sucked in a breath.

But Ashe only nodded, and Vaan could almost see it, the line of loyalty she held on him like a leash. She'd jerked it once, like bringing a dog to heel, and apparently that was enough.

"Then, General Basch, you must get Gabranth's armour as soon as possible." Ondore tapped his
"I will need squiring to do so quickly." Basch said it quietly, looking down at the helm under his hands, as if there was something there to see besides a stupidly elaborate bit of armour.

Larsa turned to Penelo. "Do you know how to put a man in full armour?"

Penelo bit her lip. "Sorry." Vaan had only seen her in the lighter brigandines, ever.

Fran would know.

Vaan's brows drew down, because Ashe would know, too. He ground his teeth, staring at her, because he knew she could suit up. But when she turned to look at him, she arched her brow, and Vaan realized: someone in this room. Someone here, someone here, living breathing and trustworthy, one of the tiny group in this room that was trading fates and loyalties around like trinkets, making Vaan want to punch things out of anger or sadness or being so damn proud. Someone here.

Someone who wouldn't blow the ruse.

And, well, maybe Ashe and the rest had let him come here, and trust him like that, and maybe she could look at him and decide he was useful, but she wouldn't ask, she would just expect, and—

Someone here. Someone who wouldn't blow the ruse. His teeth hurt from clenching so hard.

"I'll do it," he growled—and Ondore and Al-Cid blinked at him for a moment. But Larsa didn't, and Penelo didn't—and Basch didn't, just inclined his head in a nod of thanks, and maybe that was progress.

He sighed a little inside, and tried to listen to the rest, and tried not to think about the tingle in his hands that meant he had used way too much magick.

"Vaan," Penelo called softly, and Basch paused to wait, precious seconds. "I'm going to check on Migelo and Kytes and the rest, all right?"

"Yeah," Vaan answered. "I'll find you later."

She nodded and left, the exchange mercifully short—and unmercifully telling, and Basch's heart clenched at keeping Vaan from following Penelo to the only family left him. The necessities of peace as brutal in their way as those of war; Basch's gut clenched, at the hard set of Vaan's mouth, sullen and still coming to help. At Basch's own cowardice: too much to ask this of Vaan, and so forcing him to it anyway. Vaan fell in silently behind Basch as they traversed the palace complex, to the military quarters and the healers’ annex.

The scene upon reaching Noah's room was a quiet mummerly of horror: bloody bandages used and discarded in clinically precise piles, the concerted shuffle of the healers still attendant upon Noah, clever fingers and the feel of clever magicks in the air, blood still welling everywhere and the hint of the putrid smell of a gut wound, the glint of their precise instruments picking at his wounds; and, weaving unevenly through the room, over the quiet work of the healers and under the hiss that
escaped Vaan upon reaching the door: Noah's breathing, wet and laboured in a sick, heaving gurgle.

Basch had seen dead men less pale.

They could not cast their powerful curing magicks on him, not yet— first to clean his wounds, clear his lungs, lest the Cures force healing around the dirt and leather and shattered fragments of bone trapped within the wounds. They had done healing and damage enough, aboard the *Strahl*; now the healers must undo that work before beginning theirs.

The healers had at least granted him sleep, and Basch realized that the last words Noah had heard had been Ashe's.

Vaan hovered beside Basch, and Basch could not read the look on his face— fascinated or repulsed, or just stiff, and it sat oddly on Vaan's expressive features.

Basch turned back to the intent flurry by the bed, drawn to watching it, heart thick in his throat. There were only three healers there— all Ashe had felt safe mustering, to bear witness to this. Her personal healers, once.

They were about to cut the cuirass away, to work on Noah's lungs.

"Hold," Basch said.

The healers glanced up at him, irritated; the one at the cuirass straps spoke. "We must get him out of the armour, quickly."

And Basch into it, just as quickly. "Spare the straps, if you can. If—" his eyes darted across Noah's body, broken and bleeding still "—if it does him no further harm."

The healer gave him a hard look for a moment, unimpressed. *The necessities of peace*... Then nodded, shortly, turning it into a jerk of his head towards the bed. "Help, then, if you'd have this done so quick."

Basch tore off his gauntlets, stepped in, put his hands where healers told him, turned his strength to the task of bending the metal until it popped out again and brought relief and slack; and he could not tell if it was better to think of this as just another battlefield injury or as Noah, Noah's blood and Noah's life.

His stomach congealed, at the thought.

He glanced up, then, as the cuirass came free, at Vaan, to ask assistance— and swallowed the request: Vaan still rooted near the door, that same unreadable look on his face. Vaan was staring, and not at Basch.

Basch glanced down: a mess of a man, but surely not the worst Vaan had seen— the corpses below Nalbina, rotting with the Mimics picking at their flesh; the carnage at Bur-Omishace bleeding into the rain; Vayne at his last.

And none of them, Basch realized, had been Noah.

The healer thrust the cuirass at him, and they crowded him out again, his help not needed for the smaller pieces.

Basch glanced at the cuirass in his hands: it should have been beautiful. It still was, in a sick strange manner, the rich wet glint of blood pooling in the delicate scrollwork, red on gold on silver.
Basch's gorge rose as he thought of donning the thing.

A quick cleaning at least; armour this bloody would be as damning as no armour at all.

He glanced at Vaan once more, and quickly away. His heart felt tight at the wasted time, but it was beyond him to ask Vaan's help in *this*. He set to work, cleaning as the healers handed him each piece: quick, efficient wipes; only enough to make each presentable, noting for later where it would need to be hammered, buffed, polished. A more thorough cleaning, later, and tend to it with clove oil, and not his brother's blood.

It should have been calming, this routine task.

The rag came away redder and redder, and Basch's throat grew thick, the acid taste crawling up into his mouth.

The leathers were ruined. Basch would have to acquire his own set. Later, and a cold tremor rippled down his arms as he considered himself, donning bits of Noah's clothes, of Noah's life, of Noah; assembling a costume piece by piece and watching Noah's face whiten and grow waxy.

Basch set down the couters, last to be cleaned.

He had reached the limits of what he could spare Vaan; were it only a question of fit and comfort—but he had cleaned the armour alone, and slower for it; and now for the sake of haste...

"Vaan," he called quietly.

Vaan jerked, and turned quickly away from the bed. "Yeah," he said.

"It's ready."

"Yeah," Vaan said again, and Basch did not comment on his distraction.

Basch wanted to face the bed, watch the healers work.

But he looked at Vaan, and faced away.

He pulled off the hauberk, and as he felt the cuirass slide on in its stead, he was glad his gambeson was dark. It had been a very hasty cleaning.

Basch stood quietly as Vaan strapped him in, cuirass and pauldrons and couters, cuisses and poleyns and greaves, and almost every piece leaving a sticky feeling in his throat as he saw the blood in the joints and rivets and scrollwork, where he had not had time to clean.

And Noah lay behind them, his breathing still rasped and laboured.

Vaan knelt beside Basch, adjusting the greaves, back to the bed.

Basch waited until he could meet Vaan's eyes before saying, "Thank you." For everything.

It was not his place to ask why.

Vaan nodded, shortly.

They stood for a moment, watching and not-watching, before Basch donned the helm.

The darkness inside it swallowed him for a moment, and the smell: Noah's sweat and fear and anger,
metal and oil and the memory of how Nalbina's dim light had never reached inside this twisted thing.

The necessities of peace. The necessities of haste.

He left Vaan there, staring, with the healers and their glinting instruments, with Noah's rasping breath, with the bloodied rags, his heart pounding out his footsteps as he hurried down the hall. To Larsa.

Basch clanked out, and Vaan's eyes were pulled towards the man in the bed.

He looked... pathetic.

He looked like Reks had, lost and dying.

Gabranth, with the best healers in Dalmasca, and Balthier and Fran alone out there somewhere. Vaan ground his teeth.

Yeah, well.

At least there was something he could do about that.

The nearest Moogling station still took too long to reach, and Migelo was gone when he reached the store. Penelo was there, heard him come in, and turned, her arms full of jars and phials and philtres. "Vaan! Migelo's all right, and he said Kytes and everyone else—"

Not everyone. "Come on, Penelo. We're looking for Balthier and Fran."

Her eyes glinted. "Yes! This is for them, hold on a second!" She dumped her armful into a bag, and dashed to the back, and Vaan was relieved, because at least Penelo cared and remembered and was doing something. She came back with another bag. "I asked Migelo for some food, too, just in case. Let's go!"

They trotted towards the aerodrome, boarded the Strahl, and took off for the crash site.

They flew above the twisted wreckage, and Penelo covered her mouth with her hand. Vaan's heart sank, and his anger rose up to replace it.

The Bahamut lay beneath them, twisted claws of torn metal reaching between the ruined rings, glossairs shattered and sparkling in the desert sands like sharp hidden water-springs.

And there was no sign of anything living.

But Balthier would survive. He had to. He was Balthier. And he had Fran with him.

Vaan set the Strahl down on the shard-scattered sands. The Bahamut looked huge from down there, like a twisted man-made crag.

They called and called, and crawled and climbed and went as far down the torn hallways as they could. They saw things there: twisted corpses, and dead mastiffs lying broken beside their masters.
They heard nothing.

Penelo left her bags of food and medicines there, by the side facing Rabanastre, and there was nothing else they could do.

Vaan was silent on the flight back, lips tight.

"They'll be all right," Penelo whispered. "They'll make it."

Vaan's hands tightened on the controls, but the Strahl flew them safe and steady home.

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The snickt of the scissors slid by his ear, cold. Basch held still, letting Penelo smooth his hair down, inspect it, trim again.

His eye was drawn to the bed where Noah lay, unconscious still. It gave him a sick uneasy feeling in his gut, seeing Noah there, his presence crowding the room, and yet less than a ghost's. He remembered the cloak thrown over Noah like a shroud; this was better only by a little. He watched the shallow rise and stuttering fall of Noah's chest out of the corner of his eye, and tried not to flinch at the cold touch of steel against his skin.

Cosmetics, then, to cover the scar, and Penelo's gentle dabbing touch; Basch closed his eyes against the sticky powders. Erasing Noah's deeds. Erasing Basch's past.

He concentrated on learning the feel of it; memorizing for when he must do this himself.

"There," Penelo pronounced. She picked up the polished brass mirror for him to see.

A face only half-familiar stared back at him.

He did not look much like Noah. Aye, the hair was the same; Penelo had done a fine job of it. But Basch glanced back and forth between Noah's hollow cheeks and blue-bruised eyes, and his own reflection, and he put the mirror down.

"Thank you."

Penelo was watching Noah, too. "I'm sure he'll look better soon. The healers say he should wake up any day now, right?" Penelo stared for a few seconds more, before giving herself a small shake. She turned to Basch with a small smile. "I have to go dance. Would you like to come see?"

He looked at her, young, still full of dreams unbroken, moving on and taking up old routines. Living. Not putting their journey behind her so much as taking it in and going onwards, like the story never ended. And it hadn't, not for them—so much still left to do...

His gaze travelled slowly back to the wraith in the bed, and his fingers trailed absently over the helm he held in his lap.

"I'm sorry, Penelo. I cannot today."

"Well, any time, all right? And—" she cuffed him lightly, on the shoulder. "Don't run yourself to bits, okay?"
She was gone before he found words to reply, taking her implements with her.

He sat in the chair still, in the empty room that was too full with the both of them in it.

Basch pulled off the cloth draped across him to catch the hair, soft slither of fabric against fine, oiled metal. He had cleaned the armour, two nights before. It had taken him hours, though he had not realized at the time, how his hands would slow in the automatic circular motions as his mind drifted away from the beautiful scrollwork with the blood in the cracks and back down corridors of ages, to days when they were young soldiers, buffing their arms before a battle for their home. He would come to himself, distracted by a cold simmer in his veins: anger, perhaps, or longing for things long lost, or simple confusion.

He had traded sleep for those hours, and still unsure how much a fool for the bargain.

But he wore Gabranth's armour still; no time to take it off and suit up again for a simple haircut. They had snatched the chance to fix Larsa's hasty shearing upon finding a spare hour after meeting the new ambassadors from Rozzaria.

Even now, he should be going back. Preparing for the next meetings, assembling the next reports, attending upon Lord Larsa.

Basch ran his hand over the helm.

The irony of it would not undo him, but he yet wanted to huff his breath out in something that would bear no relation to a laugh. He remembered the darkness within this helm from the other side, watching in disbelief and deciding it must be hollow inside after all. He felt like he should be less at ease with himself, but he knew the truth for what it was: the same day that broke Noah was the day that saw Basch's fulfilment. For everything that hadn't happened—Landis, Nalbina, Rasler—that day he was healed, and Noah undone.

Basch had wondered if it would be different were Noah in Archades, recovering there under the ministrations of the Imperial healers. His presence haunted Basch here, dogging every ringing step in this armour— or Basch haunted him, thoughts ever turning to this room, the man in this bed. He could no longer tell. Ghosts, all of them, reliving endlessly the past, far from their long-ago homes, and changed near beyond recognition.

He thought he could see it still, under the bones of Noah's face, under the skin, maybe if his eyes were open: that boy he had sparred with, partner in crime and companion in spirit, contrary and diverging, sometimes the last company he wanted and always the only company he needed.

And now...

Basch had forgiven Noah in his heart the moment Noah had chosen Larsa over Vayne.

It would never be enough, for either of them.

Nalbina would lie forever between them, forever that darkness within this twisted helm, and Basch would bear those scars—his face, his neck, his hands, and places darker than he wished to see— forever.

And to Noah they would not be scars, he knew, but wounds that bled endlessly. It would not be enough. But in that choice, Basch had known that his brother had returned, that there was something of Noah in this Gabranth still, that somewhere maybe they could find a way to be again.

It was the finding that confused him. He wished he could summon anger, something pure and hot,
some clean burn to wash away the last putrid infection on these wounds. And perhaps he was angry after all, and not merely tired. He could no longer tell— the cold light of that rage had lit him from within for years, and it felt more like the strain that never left his shoulders than something that could be banished with simple vengeance, nor any amount of words.

And for all that, he sat here still, staring at thing that used to be his brother, and, someday, might be again.

Basch closed his eyes.

He donned the helm. It was time for Gabranth to do his work.

Gabranth woke alone.

When he crawled back to wakefulness, three sensations scrabbled into his awareness. The pain. The drugs. And how naked he felt, in unfamiliar surroundings without his armour.

The drugs dragged at his thoughts; ideas bubbled up slow and viscous in disconnected fragments. He stared blankly around the room, not understanding.

Then a healer in unfamiliar robes appeared, leaned over him, and Gabranth realized, muzzily, that he must be in Rabanastre.

Alive.

He closed his eyes against the healer's insistent queries.

*Live, dog. Live and reclaim your honour.*

Hard to hear around that, and the healer made no sense, garbled words and logic spattered everywhere, a slow drip of endless question marks.

Then, a voice that pulled him back to awareness— would have woken him anywhere.

"Noah. You're awake." A face drifted into view— not right for the voice, and Gabranth's brows pinched together in confusion. He tried to lift a hand, to touch his hair, his brow.

"Don't," Basch said, stopping the motion before Gabranth fully registered how much that aborted movement had hurt. Basch laid Gabranth's hand back on the bed, and took his own quickly away. "It is not you. I cut my hair, covered my scar. As you requested."

Gabranth blinked. "Larsa..." A croak; never from his own throat, that...

"I'm sorry, Noah. He cannot visit you; he cannot be seen here." A dull clink as Basch fished in a belt pouch, and the sound echoed dully in Gabranth's ears, the opposite of the hollow ring it should be, from the inside, and the smell of metal and clove oil sighing strange across him. "He gave me this for you."

Basch closed Gabranth's fingers around a potion packet. Gabranth nodded absently at Basch's words, distracted by the feel of the packet crinkling in his palm, the memory of Larsa using such on
him, white gloves at his lips with the bitter mixture...

Basch was still talking, Gabranth realized.

"He is reinstating the Senate, and we must not let word reach them that it was not you who issued the cease-fire."

"Reinstating..." Gabranth's voice came out parched and slow. He felt around for the idea that tugged at him through the mire of narcotics. The Senators... the peace... He closed his eyes, trying to remember. "Tell Larsa... Ladare invested in Draklor... Aldebrand... his glassworks... access to the Sandsea..." There was more; he couldn't remember, not past the buzz of Basch's presence and live dog, live, and the crinkle of the potion packet between his fingers, a dripping whiteness at the edge of sight and all the sounds going hollow...

He could see Basch's throat work for a second, weird slide of shadows distracting. "I will tell him. Noah, you must rest."

True. Perhaps.

Perhaps not. There were no certainties right now, as Basch loomed dark over his bedside in borrowed armour that smelled wrong, the room too white behind him.

One truth, perhaps. He rubbed his fingers across the potion packet, sharp crinkle amidst the soft slow drift of his senses.

One truth, two white-gloved hands, live, dog, and the eyes of a true orphan— orphans and stray dogs the lot of them, but not all without a blood-bound soul left them in the world, however incomprehensible...

Gabranth's lids fluttered against the encroaching grey, the healer's indistinct face hovering over him again before Basch shook his head and shooed the man away, and then it was the slow grey drifting again, and the pain.

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It felt quite inadequate to send his greetings and well-wishes through Basch, a few words and a potion packet at a time, but Emperor-Presumptive Larsa Solidor had little reason to visit "Captain Basch fon Ronsenburg" in his convalescence.

Nor to send him missives that said little of substance besides get better or I require your services or some better way of putting it. Like simply, thank you.

So Larsa heaved a small sigh, and crumpled up the note before he got any farther than From Larsa Ferrinas Solidor, and considered the appeal of the written word as compared to secondhand messages from another's lips.

Another time. Gabranth would recover soon; in this Larsa had to believe.

__________________________________
With Noah's armour shielding their deceit, they met now openly: used the council chambers and not abandoned tower rooms; invited dignitaries, advisers, representatives.

And Basch ever at Larsa's side.

It had begun the very day they'd landed: a public proclamation of the peace, and exchange of courtesies between Ashe and Larsa and Al-Cid, in the great open square of Rabanastre, with Basch hovering behind. Sweating in the armour, and his sweat mixing with the blood still slicking the inside.

With Noah's waking, it changed.

For with Noah's breathless, anguished attempt to help, Basch realized his own shortcomings in the role.

He knew nothing of Noah's work.

It sat strangely with him, realizing that for all the things that bound them... Basch could not even begin to truly fill his brother's place.

He paced his room in Larsa's suite that night, thinking.

Finally, he knocked upon the door that connected his room to Larsa's; his on the outside and Larsa's room deep within the suite, protected by thick walls and Basch's presence. It was the room given a ranking bodyguard; Noah's duties multiplied in his head at the thought.

"Enter," Larsa called through the door.

Basch came in, and shut the door behind him— their private signal.

Larsa looked up from his desk at that, and set down his pen, and Basch had his complete and unsettling attention. "What is it?"

"I spoke with Noah today, and gave him your message."

"My thanks." A slight tilt of the head, waiting for what had prompted Basch's visit.

"I told him of your plans and he— he tried to help. He named Senators he thought we must watch. Ladare, and Aldebrand."

Larsa frowned. "I know the men."

"And I do not." Basch took a long breath in. "Larsa, I must ask you—" a strange urge to kneel, and Basch was uncomfortably aware of the armour, weighing him down as if encouraging the thought.

He swallowed, and shook it aside.

"Teach me."

Larsa sat up.

"Teach me about Archades. About Noah's position. I must know these things, to play my role in negotiations. And..." Basch hesitated, but of all people Larsa needed and deserved the truth. "Noah recovers slowly. It may become necessary that I accompany you to Archades. It... may become
necessary that I do so for longer than we thought. Long enough to need to do Noah's work."

Larsa nodded, and Basch nearly missed the fleeting trace of worry. "You must ask him of the details, once he is well enough. But of the Senate and of Archades—" his gaze focused, the disconcerting intensity of a born ruler, disorienting in that young face. "Let us begin tonight. Delegations arrive soon."

"Yes. The Senate first. Noah's words worry me."

Basch had a rudimentary knowledge of Archadian politics, and that tainted by the war and the changes of Gramis's lifetime. Larsa—Larsa's knowledge was encyclopaedic.

"So the Senate must ratify treaties?" Basch interrupted at one point, adjusting his preconceptions. "A Dalmascan ruler can accept terms by decree, though most bow to the council's wishes out of courtesy."

Larsa's eyes were alight; a passion, this. "The Senate represents the interests of the people, and the Emperor those of the state. It is a balance. One my brother broke."

"Then what of the Senators Noah named? He said—" Basch closed his eyes, remembering, "Ladare invested in Draklor, and Aldebrand had a glassworks."

Larsa grimaced. "Personal interests influence the Senators in their duties."

"Then Ladare and Aldebrand will oppose the treaty?"

Larsa's grimace deepened, and grew wry. "It has become traditional to pursue such affairs in a more discreet manner. And such involvements are generally not known. It is considered... impolitic for a Senator to display outside interests openly."

"Noah's territory, then."

"Yes."

They were silent a moment, and Basch wondered if Larsa was thinking the same as he: how large a gap Noah left in the world. His world. Their world.

Such realizations—how little Basch knew of Noah's life these past years, how large Noah's role. He had thought he understood Noah, as an enemy at least, as someone who could be predicted and planned around. Even in Nalbina, even then, near-blind with rage, even then there was a sick understanding in it: somewhere, sides had changed, but maybe they sought the same things still, at cross-purposes. Such a faithful hound, to cling so to a fallen kingdom. And yet—You threw away our homeland. Both of them clinging, still, to fallen countries, fallen dreams.

Almost, almost more than Nalbina; these things he never knew about the commonplace customs of Noah's life, each one begged of Basch a question: when had they grown so close again, that Basch would feel the lack?

Basch cleared his throat into the silence. "Tomorrow, then. Tomorrow, we can speak of Noah and the Ninth Division."

Larsa started a little; Basch pretended not to notice, and marked it for himself: it was not he alone, lost in thoughts of a position unfilled, of a ward who must instead advise his guardian, of a broken man in an empty room.
The next time Gabranth woke, it was not Basch who came.

He dragged his eyes open. His thoughts swam slowly together, reassembling themselves after his hazy, painful sleep.

And he saw: Vaan, leaning against the doorway, arms crossed before him, staring out into the hall.

He could make no sense of himself at this. His feelings floated, disconnected atop a sea of pain and... shame. _Live, dog. Live and reclaim your honour._ Vaan had said nothing to him, but he remembered seeing Vaan's face, how it had echoed Ashe's. Ashe, if he were any judge of her, would not come to him so, now or ever.

But here was Vaan, haunting his room. _Boy,_ he thought muzzily, _I understand no better than you do._

Gabranth had not thought he had made a sound, but Vaan turned to face him regardless, countenance stiff.

They stared at each other for a time, random thoughts ringing slow explosions in Gabranth's head. Thanks and apologies were beyond inadequate, and he felt lost, sinking in a sea of debt and confusion.

"My brother died in this building," Vaan finally ground out.

"I'm sorry." Inadequate. Painfully inadequate. And nothing else for him to say.

"Yeah, well. 'Sorry' doesn't fix anything does it?"

"No," Gabranth said quietly, watching Vaan. He remembered Reks, and his hazy thoughts coalesced around the memory of that face, flooding his vision for a moment, overwhelming Vaan's presence right there before him and Gabranth wanted to claw it this, at this sinking into the past, at these things he could never fix or change; at Reks, Vayne, King Raminas, Basch, Dalmasca, Landis, and everything else that fell apart when he touched it.

_Stay away, boy. Come no closer, or I will destroy you, too._

Vaan, there, in front of him, hateful and tense, and still he faded to one he had destroyed already, Reks' betrayed eyes staring at him from Vaan's face.

"You killed the king, too. You made all this happen to Dalmasca."

"Yes," Gabranth breathed, the word scraping out of his throat automatically. What could he deny this boy, in the end?

Vaan's head tipped back against the doorway; his eyes slid closed. "I really," he began, swallowing, and Gabranth watched the painful slide of his throat, the lines tightening his mouth, before he continued, "really hate you."

It was only fair, and only expected, and in this boy, in Basch, in Larsa, lay Gabranth's only hopes of honour. Forgiveness, atonement, a place where he could be of some use and worth; and they slipped through his fingers, for his faults, his deeds, the weakness of his body.
Gabranth closed his eyes. There was nothing he could say.

His eyes flew open again at the sound of an angry thunk: Vaan had gone, and the rough wall stained with red where Vaan had torn open a knuckle.

Vaan threw his pack together, tossing in packets of potion powders, remedy gels, ration bars "donated" by the army, not that he would eat them as anything but a last resort. His hand brushed the two esper glyphs, and he felt a thread of their questing thoughts, seeking light and freedom and to walk the earth once more, clutching at the reality of his life and whispering, whispering: What darkness festers in these burning rifts, oh shall I flood these riven wastes and wash with sorrow all your toil; and: oh let us see oh let us see, what sin is not forgiven here, for we are all corrupt and lost. He twitched his fingers away as they pulled at his most recent memories, peered at his encounter with Gabranth.

Quiet, you. He doubted Ashe had this much trouble with Belias. Figures he'd get the chatty ones. Although maybe Balthier's Shemhazai might whisper to him, too. He hadn't taken another, and Vaan got the impression he hadn't wanted an esper in the first place. Fran carried three, and seemed serene with it, her eyes going far away sometimes, as when she felt for the currents in the Mist.

He wished the stupid things could be useful to them now. Ashe had sent a company to search for them, for some sign.

Nothing.

Stupid espers. Useless outside a fight, and disturbing. Basch's Chaos made Vaan uneasy, and he was glad that had not been his.

But the glyphs went in the pack, Famfrit and Mateus both, and the pack went on his shoulder, and his feet hit the paving stones. The trip to the Sandsea was made short by the Moogling, and so Vaan was still fuming by the time he reached the bulletin board to stare at the posted bills.

Lower ranks, mostly. He wanted a bit of fight, but something fast, something now, not one of Montblanc's lengthy excursions. Something solid he could beat on for a while. Something strong and fast and dangerous.

He realized he'd been staring at the bills for minutes without seeing them, absently rereading the same one five times and not remembering a thing about it. He scowled, and made to snatch one at random when a hand slapped on his shoulder.

"Ah, Vaan!" Tomaj's voice rang out as Vaan tried to suppress his startled jerk. "A long time since last you came!"


"So I hear! Clan Centurio has prospered since I recruited you."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess we ran into a few marks on the way."
"Looking for another, by any chance?"

"... Yeah. I'm going alone."

"I have the perfect tip for you, then. A rogue Saurian in the northern reaches of the Estersand, beyond the Broken Sands— think you can take her?"

"Sounds perfect." Big, mean, dangerous, isolated. Great. His hand tightened around his pack, and Mateus sang in his head.

"Excellent, Vaan. The poster is a friend, gave me custody of the bounty. I'll stand you a round when you come back for it."

"Sure, thanks." He nodded absently, taking the bill.

His head still buzzed, despite Tomaj's interference, and when he reached the Strahl he only realized once he was in the air that he'd gone through all the flight checks and takeoff routines without an ounce of attention. He smiled sourly. Balthier would be proud at how automatic flying had become.

Vaan's stomach sank like a sick thing at the thought, and he jerked the Strahl slightly east, to pass over the Bahamut one more time. Even after Ashe had tried. He flew low, weaving between the broken teeth of the sky fortress.

Nothing.

He could see where Ashe's crews had passed over: the footprints of an entire company dotted the sands, and some of the slagged pieces had been broken off and hauled away, revealing twisted, crushed corridors.

Still, nothing.

His grip tightened around the controls.

It was not a long flight to the mark's last sighting, and still too long for Vaan.

He reached the broken sandy hills, aiming for a pocket canyon he thought a likely hideout for a big predator. It was a hidden little gorge in an out-of-the-way corner, by a flatter stretch of sands where smaller animals often went to forage. Not even the Strahl would fit in the canyon; he planned to land her at the farther mouth, beyond a bend. A good place to sneak up on the mark.

Vaan reached the lip of the canyon, and stared.

This was where the mark was supposed to be found but... really?

The canyon walls tilted in, and he couldn't see the wider bottom under the overhangs from the air, but he could see enough. The walls of the canyon had great chunks taken out and scattered as rubble on the floor—huge claws, maybe, or powerful hind legs, big jaws? And the floor was scoured, sand piled in odd places and the rest bare rock, craggy and treacherous.

He could call it off right now. Mark not as billed; Clan laws allowed a default then. Or he could nab the mark and demand a higher bounty for it.

Vaan glanced at the blasted canyon. He thought of Balthier, and Fran, and Reks, and that room in the healer's compound. His hand crept to his pack, fingering the esper sigils through the cloth.

He could take it; with two espers and all this pointless anger that no one would listen to.
He landed the *Strahl* as planned, and wound his way silently through the canyon, sword out, pack on his back and ready for use.

He paused at the sharp bend, breathing through his mouth and grateful that the wind tunneled towards him from the wider end.

He could hear her now: the dry skritch of giant claws on sandy rock, and the vague mumble of a dissatisfied predator.

Vaan risked a peek around the bend, and there she was, and she was *huge*, even for a Saurian— but not *that* big, not big enough to bust up the whole canyon like that. She was under an overhang, scrabbling in one of the holes right now, digging at it with her foreclaws, seeming annoyed with the state of her hideout.

Was she one of those beasts that went into a berserker rage? Had she torn up the canyon in such a state?

...Maybe.

He could still take her.

He edged back around the corner, and took a moment for some serious green magicks, feeling his strength swell and the protective shields fall in place around him. He felt his heart start to buzz as he cast Haste on himself, and there it came, that tingle in his limbs, and this was going to be *good*, this was going to be *exactly what he needed*.

Then he took his esper sigils out of his pack, popping them into slots on his belt, ready at a moment's notice.

He would rather work with sword and hands and sweat today. But he wasn't stupid.

Vaan checked her position again, to be sure.

Then he flung an Aero at the thing; Saurians were weak to wind and he figured this one for it, too, and then he was out into the storm he'd caused, flurries of sand particles bouncing off his Shell and Protect so he could see, and while the thing was still clawing at its eyes he was on it, hacking at the tail and racing up its back to get at its vulnerable neck.

It twisted, that deceptive sun-drenched speed of a reptile, and Vaan leapt off having only nicked its neck. He landed on the jagged rock floor, slipping on the not-enough-sand spilled over it; but he rolled, ignoring the smaller cuts and bruises, and came up between the thing's legs, slicing at its belly before dropping to roll again, away away away.

The thing was *pissed*.

Vaan felt the grin stuck on his face, and he wanted to laugh as he dodged away, heart thud-thudding all crazy with the Haste and the Bubble and the sword hilt hot and solid in his hands, sun warm on his back and the sand-blizzard still going; chaos everywhere, and the anger flushing through him directed at this monster, and the sword in his hand to fix it all.

The Saurian was thrashing now, blinded by the sands Vaan's Aero had kicked up, bleeding from the shallow cut on its belly. Which made it *dangerous*, and Vaan jumped the wild sweep of a tail, skidding over the sand again when he landed, the scrape of his boots alerting the monster and it *lunged*, wild and a little to his right, but Vaan still had to twist to get out of the way. Thick fire erupted up his left arm as a foreclaw scored him, and he danced away, breath hot and fast and
thrilling, let the thing stumble to the end of its lunge and there, right there and then as it tried to recover: he flashed in for its ankles, took a two-handed grip on his sabre and slashed, and there went the thing's right ankle; he heard the tendon snap even over the dying howl of his sandstorm.

The Saurian screeched, mad as anything and hurting, and this was the part Vaan would never get used to.

He killed it quickly, having lamed it. Immobilized it, now that it was weak, and cut its throat, and stood there panting.

There was an empty feeling in his stomach, and for all that it felt like it might try to crawl up his throat.

Vaan scowled, and ran a Cure across his arms. A jerk of annoyance as he realized it had also fixed the knuckle he'd torn in Gabranth's room.

Then he stared at the carcass.

Plenty to poach for the bazaar, but it looked sad, lying there in its ruined den.

He went to it, nauseously relishing the grisly task: claws, fore and aft; the best parts of the hide; the rows of fearsome teeth; and he split the great thighs to get at the enormous tyrant bones there.

And in the end, it looked pathetic. Broken.

His stomach lurched.

He blew out his breath, and stared at the sky for a moment.

Then he pushed the remains together, and called down the fires.

Firaga, Firaga, Firaga, the hottest fires he had, and he couldn't watch it burn after all.

He was using up his magicks pretty quickly. But he still had enough to cast a Float on his bundled bounty, and he pushed the thing through the air all the way back to the Strahl—a lot easier than dragging. A trick he had learned from Fran.

He checked the Bahamut one more time on the way back.

Nothing.

His blood still buzzed after he had presented his haul at the Muthru Bazaar, keeping the receipt to show for the mark. The hot burn of his anger had dimmed to a slow dark thick oil in his veins, simmering and unsatisfying and not better at all.

Vaan remembered Tomaj's offer. A drink sounded really, really good.

________________________

Fran materialized in Basch's room one day.

It was not until he saw her that he realized what a relief it was to have her quiet, stoic strength beside
him again, and to know that as she was here, Balthier lived, too.

He melted onto the couch, opposite the end on which she perched. Closed his eyes.

"Fran," he said. "You're all right."

She said nothing of herself. Instead: "And you are not."

His breath trickled out in a sigh, and his head tipped back over the couch. He stared at the ceiling, and didn't reply.

They were silent together for a time, not uncomfortable, until he felt a slight stir from her. A thread of her magick reached him; a clever mix of arcane spells: a gentle influx of energy, draining herself a little to support him, and a small bubble of strength welling up inside and around him. He felt lighter; or else the world felt lighter upon his shoulders.

He turned to face her.

"Thank you, Fran." Then, reminded by her magick: "And... thank you. For Noah."

She nodded slightly in acknowledgement.

And this time, now, with Fran, Basch could not help asking. "Why did you?"

She tilted her head. "You carry Chaos, Walker of the Wheel. Do you not?"

"Yes."

"I carry Cúchulainn." The Impure, and once a healer, and swallowing all of the vagaries of men.

"Fran..." Basch breathed, and then was unsure what he meant to say. *I am so tired*, or *there will never be thanks enough*, or *there are times I wish you hadn't*; and he knew each one useless to say, as she could doubtless read them on him as if limned into his skin, these things he could not say aloud.

Instead he said, "Vaan and Penelo still have the *Strahl*. They've been taking care of her."

She smiled; Basch had long learned to look for her smiles in her eyes and in her voice, as her mouth was ever set and serious. "Balthier has gone to see them."

"Do you plan to stay long?"

"No."

"Are you taking the *Strahl?""

"No." Another smile in her voice. "We do not need it. Let the children play a while."

"Fran... thank you. You and Balthier. For Rabanastre."

She said nothing to this, a quiet acceptance.

Then, as if reminded, a flatter statement: "Basch. You are unwell."

Basch grimaced at his unsuccessful avoidance of the subject.

"Merely busy."
He could feel her stoic stare upon him.

"Noah's job requires much work," he amended. "Gabranth has much to do, with the Judges Magister dead but for Zargabaath."

"You are not at ease with your brother."

"No," he agreed. There was not much more to say of it.

"Time is only time," she said. "It will pass, as will all else."

Basch sighed, and nodded. A viera knew time as no other.

And Fran knew him, too, and knew platitudes for worthless. There were things broken between him and Noah that perhaps could not be mended— but time would pass, and with it, all the things that nothing else would touch. Perhaps they would never be able to speak of Nalbina, of Raminas, of Reks— but every day the scars upon his wrists and neck and face grew fainter.

Time, if nothing else.

Fran had passed the moment in silence, and spoke again only then, as if she could see the understanding of her meaning upon him. "I must go now to meet Balthier."

"Convey my thanks to him. And... be well, the both of you. Wherever you are going."

"I shall tell him." A last, small smile in her voice.

He heard her rise from her end of the couch, and his eyes slipped closed against the sound of her leaving.

But a wisp of magick reached him as he heard his door shut; another small gift, silent and unasked-for.

Basch stared at the ceiling.

He realized he had yet to take off his armour. Gabranth's armour.

He rose.

The task was routine, in this and a thousand other variations.

No pressing urgency this time. No need to involve reluctant boys with brothers even more lost than his own. Basch closed his eyes a moment, against the memory of Vaan kneeling at his feet, against the stiffness that had held his tongue from asking the question he could ask Fran. *Why?*

Tonight, merely a routine, slow and silent.

And it gave him time to think.

About Larsa.

And the Senate.

Senator Aldebrand worried him. And Senator Ladare more. If the Senate must ratify the treaty... But Larsa had said they were unlikely to act openly— and that was the cause of his disquiet. Basch had ever preferred to face the declared opponent, open and honest.
But that was not the way of things in Archades. And Basch, his simple soldier's heart, unable to
guide Larsa through the mire.

What forms would their deceit take? No spy, he; a soldier, a captain, a prisoner, a renegade. No
subtlety in his soul for these tasks, this delving into the depths of mens' dishonours to find the threat
that lurked there. It made him wonder at his brother; how Noah managed the task.

Aldebrand he might guess at: smuggling, perhaps, some more subtle form of evasion.

But Ladare...

Larsa had spoken of dismantling Draklor's military branch. Larsa was bold, with a confidence in his
own politicking that kept Basch awake at night with the thought of how its first failure may come.

This, too, he wondered: how Noah had stood the guardianship of such a boy.

The armour done; only the leathers remained, and he peeled those off before hanging everything on
the armour stand.

Basch felt still that Noah's duties were beyond him, and Larsa's coaching, however well-versed, no
remedy for Basch's inexperience. And they had been weeks at the negotiations, here. It was time to
return, to begin the long work. But Noah lay in the healers' compound still.

They would need Noah. They would need some way to speak to him, over the leagues and leagues.

Basch's hand brushed the pouch where he kept his esper sigils, and in the middle of removing the last
of his arms and armament Chaos's wind howled through him, in circles upon circles upon circles.
Basch made to jerk his hand away— but instead he felt himself tugging the pouch open and fishing
the stone out, ignoring Zalera's beside it.

He held the sigil before him, and his eyes slipped closed.

*Once-fellow trav'ler of the Wheel, with hands and heart unbroken come, and mourn to me about this pass?* Chaos whispered to him, a fell wind through his heart. *I live and live, ever reborn.*

Basch watched the light flicker within the stone, wondering. *Do I not walk with you still?*

*Once ever-warder of the weak, what failing dogs your journey now? You guard, and fail, and guard once more; can you not smell the changing winds?*

Basch closed his eyes. *I sense no change. And I am tired.*

Chaos' winds howled, angry and full of contempt. *You, with your journey near its end, would come seek sympathy from me? Die first a thousand deaths and more; oh mortal, tell me then if still you bend to breaking 'neath the weight.*

Basch sighed, set the stone aside. His journey near its end? He still felt tired, as before, and he still
guarded, as before, and the work before him seemed endless.

Basch sat on his bed, and stared at his hands.

It would be, he realized, a long time yet until they felt once more his own.
When Basch found Vaan and Penelo in Lowtown, his news didn't come as much of a surprise to Vaan. Vaan had seen Gabranth, and the man looked like hell. Warmed over. Twice.

Vaan still wasn't used to seeing Basch in neither the armour nor his crazy collection of donated clothes. Basch really didn't do undercover that great—too much of that quiet driven intensity—and Vaan wondered how Gabranth had ever managed to be a spy if they were both like that.

And he looked tired. Well. Maybe that part made a good cover. Most everyone Vaan knew looked tired lately.

"Vaan, Penelo. I must ask something of you." He sounded tired, too.

Penelo gave him an encouraging nod over her armful of packages.

"Is there a place to speak here?" Basch asked, quiet and casual and distinctly not glancing around.

Penelo exchanged a quick look with Vaan. "Storehouse Five?"

Agreement, and they made their way there, through the emptying dregs of Lowtown. People had begun to move back up, when they could, and the crooked streets were slowly losing the dim light of life, the knickknacks and hanging carpets and ribbons and running children and all those little things that had made the place seem livable. Barely. There was an impending quiet here, a small death of spirit, and though Vaan knew it should be this way, that everyone should be living up above in the Dalmascan sun and Lowtown should just be barrels and boxes and rats— still, it felt strange and sad to him.

Still, they went for even more privacy, and slipped into Storehouse Five, and beyond, into the old hunting grounds of someone who'd been called Vaan Ratsbane by old men who smiled at his sky pirate dreams, it felt like ages ago now.

Vaan frowned. Weird, to be down here again, where everything had both started and started going wrong.

Penelo sat on the steps, cradling her packages in her lap, and Basch hunkered down across from her, clasping his hands, elbows on his knees.

"Larsa must return to Archades soon." He really sounded damn tired. Vaan leaned against the stairwell wall, crossing his arms and watching, listening. "The negotiations proceed, and as soon as a preliminary agreement is reached, he must bring it to Archades. And there, he must persuade the Senate to accept it."

Basch took a deep breath, and looked up at Vaan, then across at Penelo, meeting both their eyes.

"It is the Senate that worries me. Noah has given me two names already, Senators that may cause trouble. But—I do not know enough." His hands fell apart, a small helpless gesture that made Vaan shift uncomfortably. "We need Noah's knowledge. But he recovers slowly. I must— I must have a way to speak with him, while in Archades."

And again, meeting both their eyes, face open with the discomfort of the coming request, and Vaan knew it, really, he knew what was coming, and even if Basch realized that— well.

That didn't really make it better. And the request came anyway.
"Would you be willing to carry information between Archades and Rabanastre, in secret?"

"Us?" Vaan frowned. "Why us? Why not Balthier and Fran?"

"They are too notorious. Balthier would be arrested on sight in Archades, let alone the palace. Your faces are not as well-known."

"Not yet, anyway!" Penelo laughed. Vaan shot her a tense look. Did she really want to spend their first months as sky pirates playing messengers for the royals and hanging around Gabranth?

But something in Basch's face... eased, and it occurred to Vaan to wonder how much of the way she was acting was just Penelo and how much was... for Basch. He guiltily unhunched his shoulders a little.

"I have discussed the possibility with Ashe and Larsa. They will reward you for your service."

Penelo waved that aside, smiling. "You don't have to do that."

"We'll take it," Vaan declared, because of the glint in Penelo's eyes and the guilty look in Basch's, because that was just how it kept happening, because they were there and they were trusted and they would end up doing it anyway, whether or not Vaan wished they'd dropped Gabranth somewhere between the Bahamut and the Strahl, and possibly set him on fire on the way down. He twitched up a smile. "It can be our first take, as sky pirates." Penelo's frown at his contradicting her melted into a grin. Then, because Ashe and Larsa were easier than— everything else, and when had Ashe become easier to deal with than the rest of his life? But still, it was better, so: "How does our mighty Queen feel about hiring sky pirates for messengers?"

A smile, small and a little pathetic, twitched across Basch's face. "Her prejudices have been dulled somewhat lately. Larsa, at least, finds it more than a little amusing." Basch's face grew serious again, the smiles dropping like stones.

"Thank you. Thank you both."

Penelo waved that away, too. Vaan said nothing.

"I shall ask Noah to tell you of his contacts and some secret ways into the city. Ashe will send someone to Migelo's to trade dispatches for a specific combination of items when she needs you." He handed Penelo a slip of paper, and she unfolded it for a quick look, showed it to Vaan. The items, he saw, were completely unremarkable as a group, but in very specific quantities and— just the right stuff to pack for an overland trip to Archades. Vaan wanted to smile, except: "Noah dictated the list. It is not uncommon practice, he tells me."

A silence at that. Vaan wondered when he'd stopped being able to talk around Basch.

Penelo tucked away the paper with a slightly ostentatious fuss, and tilted her head at Basch over her lapful of packages. "Would you like to stay for dinner? It's just us and Migelo and Kyes tonight, and Migelo got some Madhu in last week."

Basch grimaced apology. "I must be present for the court dinner with Larsa tonight; he is being feasted for his leavetaking."

Penelo's teeth clipped her bottom lip for a moment before her mouth stretched into an easy smile. "Some other time, then okay? You're always welcome down here, Basch."

Not Captain, or General, or Judge, Vaan noted.
"I shall try, before leaving."

Penelo grinned up at Basch as he left.

Vaan sighed, and considered the trip to Gabranth's room, tipping his head against the clammy stone at his back.

Penelo watched him for a moment. "I'll go," she offered, quietly.

Vaan didn't know what to say to that, and that made him angry, because this was Penelo and dammit, why was this getting in the way of everything that should have been simple?

He jerked his head in a nod, and they made their way out of the storehouse and into the too-quiet halls of Lowtown.

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Basch watched as Penelo hopped onto the railing and sat, kicking her heels against the balusters. Rabanastre lay below them, bridges and archways and people everywhere, and beyond, the Estersands, the view pedestrian and magnificent. Basch leaned against the warm stone beside her, some of the stiffness leaking out of his back, to be replaced with a dull ache. He hadn't realized how much tension he'd been carrying...

Penelo smiled at him and patted the spot beside her. "Come on up." At his hesitation her smile widened into a grin. "It can be part of your disguise."

Neither Captain Ronsenburg nor Judge Magister Gabranth would be sitting on the railing next to the bazaar dancer, watching the people pass above and below and all around. Basch grinned, too, and slung himself over, only a little awkward. Penelo made him feel both young and old; had it been that long ago that he and Noah would spend time like this...?

Penelo was too much like a sister to him.

She tapped him on the shoulder and thrust a rich-smelling meat pasty under his nose. "Eat," she commanded. "I know you haven't been."

He took it and ate, obediently, and for a while it was just a companionable silence of chewing and the sun setting over their city. His city. His home, now...

She finished hers first, hungry after her performance, and fastidiously flicked the crumbs off her outfit. Strange, to see her in her dancing clothes. It had been weeks since she had invited him to come see her dance; scant days since he had had to refuse her dinner, and when he'd had a spare moment... Or perhaps he had conjured one for her, on this last day in Rabanastre. Or for himself. He was no longer sure. The past days had blurred together into a routine that wasn't, a pattern that he still couldn't discern. When he'd found all of half of an unscheduled hour this evening, with the lure of something simple and easy— he had pushed and shoved and stretched that little slice of time until he could just feel less strangled.

And then he had made his escape.

He felt a twinge of guilt even now, even after he had made sure he would not be needed, and he
brushed the last crumbs off his own plain trews, resisted the urge to tug at his fraying brown vest.

"I'm glad you could get away," she said softly.

"As am I." True, despite his misgivings. Entirely too true.

"You shouldn't feel bad for wanting a break, you know."

He startled, turning to face her, to be met with her eyes, concerned and amused. He never knew anyone else who could laugh and worry at once like that, both with perfect sincerity. He suspected it had something to do with growing up around Vaan.

"How is Vaan? I am sorry he... got caught up in the middle of this."

Penelo heaved a sigh, rolling her eyes. "He put himself there. Oh!" Her hands fluttered halfway to her mouth before she stilled them, balling them into loose little fists. "Okay, maybe that's unfair. I would have smacked him if he hadn't. But... well..." She sighed again, sounding less exasperated and more simply tired. "Honestly? He's still mad. But I think... I think he'll be okay. He's— thinking. Starting to. A little." She made a strange little face, as if that concept sat strangely with her experience of Vaan.

Basch was still sorting through his own feelings. He couldn't blame Vaan for taking his time, too.

Penelo looked to be about to say something, hesitated. Then, a little too quickly: "How's Larsa?"

Basch grinned. "Busy. Tired. Magnificent." Glad she had asked— that clear-eyed frankness that saw through the titles and honours, down to the core of a man. It was not that she was unimpressed by titles, but perhaps that their glamour wore off so quickly for her. It was, he realized, little wonder that he felt such ease around her, or that Larsa valued her presence so.

"Gabr— Noah... really did a good job keeping him safe, didn't he?"

Basch's grin faded. "He did."

Basch was under no illusions— it was not just Larsa's person Gabranth had been given to guard, but his innocence, the hope that welled within him, the purity of his intentions unsullied by the dire politicking that was the lifeblood of Archades. Basch wondered at it again: Larsa perhaps less in need of protection now, but Basch would soon be in Archades with him, where he feared it would be he and not his charge who needed help staying afloat. A discomfiting feeling.

"He'll be okay," Penelo said quietly. Basch remembered her saying the same after she'd cut his hair, staring at Noah in the hospital bed. But Basch wondered, for a dizzy moment, who she meant now— Noah, or Larsa, or Vaan. Or, likely all of them, the men her life had grown to touch. Her life had grown larger, these months, and still she took it in stride. Basch felt sometimes his own life had grown smaller, down to something that could be encased in one metal coffin that he carried about him.

Penelo dusted her hands of the last of her meal, smile back in place. "You take care of yourself in Archades! Make sure Larsa's okay, but you make you're okay, too! Eat, sleep. Or I swear on Hashmal's horns, I will go over there and tuck you both in myself!" She scrunched her face at him, sticking out her tongue.

Basch smiled, surprising himself with a small chuckle, even. "I shall try."

"You'd better!" She hopped up, balancing easily on the balustrade. "I've got to get back to Migelo's.
But we'll see you soon in Archades, right?” Basch nodded, and Penelo peered at him for a moment in stern suspicion of his ability to take care of himself.

Then she hopped off the railing, and deposited something by his side, before waving and trotting away.

Basch unwrapped the bundle, to find another meat pasty within.

A smile tugged at his lips, and he sat there on the balustrade for a while longer, staring out over the city as he chewed.

Gabranth heard the familiar clank of his armour coming down the hall. It was strange, still, to hear it from the outside. Strange, still, to see his twin looking like a mirror of himself again—or a window into what could have been but for his own mistakes.

Basch knocked lightly on the door; a courtesy none of the healers observed. And Gabranth was strong enough now to call out a response. Though he wondered, sometimes, if it was more a stiff formality than a courtesy, or both, and Basch just needed a moment to collect himself before facing Gabranth.

The door creaked open, exposing a thickening line of Basch’s face, and Gabranth saw him take a breath before stepping inside. Gabranth's swallow stuck in his throat, but he smoothed any expression away from his face as Basch entered the room.

"Noah,” Basch said. He always seemed to get that far and stop, Gabranth thought. As if asserting that bond was the only thing he could think to do before Gabranth, and beyond that he was lost. Fair enough, Gabranth thought with a purely internal grimace. Gabranth did not even know where to begin. Basch, at least, had a place to start.

Noah.

The silence stretched.

Finally: "Larsa's airship departs upon the hour. I... thank you, for your help. Vaan and Penelo will come when they need to know how to reach me."

Gabranth nodded. He reached for the table at his bedside, for the parchment there.

A list of agents, painstakingly written out with his awkwardly bandaged hands.

They still shook, when he was tired, when he had to handle something small.

Basch took the paper, unfolded it. Gabranth looked away from the sight of his unsteady scrawl, glowing through the warm translucence of the parchment.

"Burn it," he whispered. "Memorize it, and burn it."

Basch's look— Gabranth's wished he could not read it, but he had never lost the trick of it, not with Basch. Determined, but mostly lost, confused and stiff and Gabranth wanted to turn away from this unwanted understanding.
The silence grew thick between them.

His heart beat on, measuring out the slow and endless seconds.

_Breathe, dog._

Basch closed his eyes, finally, a breath before battle. When he opened them again, he looked at Noah, straight and hard and almost pleading but for the traceries of anger still behind it.

"Noah. I chose my country. You chose your family. There is no dishonour in this."

Gabranth’s eyes slid shut, in pain, or something like it. He could hear Basch shifting near the bed, out of arm’s reach.

"A speedy recovery to you, Noah."

Gabranth heard Basch turn, and his heart leapt stuttering in his chest— the words tumbled from him, quiet and urgent as his eyes flew open. "Be well... Basch."

Basch stopped, and half-turned, opening his mouth as if to speak. But no more words came, and in the end Basch nodded, and left.

Gabranth stared at the ceiling.

What honour left to him? He could not even protect Larsa, now.

What now of Landis? Of Dalmasca? He had thought to save them both, in different ways, and each time proven wrong. He had fought for his land, and seen Landis raped for it; he had killed to subdue Dalmasca with two deaths and nothing more, and Dalmasca had fought on despite him. And for his role, the boy Vaan and the Lady Ashelia hovered as ghosts around him, the one distant and the other just out of arm's reach, accusing stares holding the debt of his life in their hands.

Gabranth stared at his own bandaged hands. Honour ran through his fingers like the endless Dalmascan sands; and it changed, every time he thought he understood it. These unending alchemies...

The last echoes of Basch's leavetaking brushed down the hall, and Gabranth stared at the ceiling, hands flat and useless on the bedspread.

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The ride aboard the Imperial cruiser was quiet. The ship belonged to the ambassador, Larsa’s presence at Ashe’s court having been exchanged for that of the trusted diplomat, and the ship the man rode in on given them for their return to Archades.

The lull before the storm, Larsa thought.

And a storm there was.

They landed in Archades among a flurry of officials; Larsa watched their convoluted dances about him, hiding his smile. The Senate—or former Senators, for now—had come to greet him. Stripped of their authority, they did not wear their robes of office; Gabranth would not be hindered by this, but
harder for Basch to pick them out of the crowd, then.

They all flocked to him, Senators and advisers, ministers and marshals; faces anxious or sly, politic-smooth or equally-politic determined. Larsa noted Aldebrand among those who approached him: a heavyset man, of middle years for a Senator, face arranged into an expression of welcome. This viper concerned Larsa less; likely Aldebrand would follow polite Archadian tradition and merely pursue his interests on the black market.

Ladare, on the other hand, hung back a little, his thin height distinguishing him more than the bland expression on his pinched face. The more politically dangerous of the two.

But all the Senators were present, and most other officials of note. And all wanted to know when to schedule his formal investiture.

Larsa waved that question aside.

"My first order of business is to reinstate the Senate. Senators, your first task will be to vote on the treaty I bring to present you—" Larsa held out the satchel, tooled with the designs of Houses Dalmasca and Solidor—not the Royal or Imperial arms of either state.

An agreement between Houses, as it stood; pending the Senate's approval: an agreement between states. Another dance, one that had made Al-Cid's brows quirk in appreciation. He had called Larsa Emperor-in-Waiting, and added his seal as a witnessing member of House Margrace with even more flourish than was his wont. A representative of contentious factions and not a vested ruler in his own right—Al-Cid would know something of such plight, balancing authority and diplomacy.

Everyone who had come to greet him took a collective step back at the sight of the arms.

Larsa gave them all a level look for a moment before continuing.

"After a vote is taken on adoption of this treaty between Houses as a state agreement, the Senate may vote to confirm a new Emperor. I remain your faithful servant of the Empire, Larsa Solidor." He executed a short bow. "Gabranth, to me."

Basch snapped to a species of attention, blurring for a moment between Dalmascan and Imperial before settling into the latter. Larsa doubted anyone not looking for it would have noticed.

Basch swept after him into the cool hall, and Larsa made quickly for the little-used House quarters in the palace. Minor branches of the House used the suites on occasion; Larsa himself knew where they were but had never been inside.

They arrived at the suite to find it properly aired—as all House suites in the Palace were at all times—but with an air of disuse and slight stodginess; obviously his sudden occupation of the quarters had not been expected. Larsa sighed, a little—did they really except him to grasp for power, after what Vayne had done?

His blood chilled as the answer breathed at him from the unused rooms.

Larsa resisted the urge to flop upon a couch, and instead sat at the courteously-provided work desk. "We have," he announced to Basch and the empty room, "much work to do. Let us begin."

Basch had been silent since they had left Dalmasca.

And it was there, in the disused privacy of the Solidor suite that he uttered his first words as Gabranth-in-full.
"As you wish, Lord Larsa."

Larsa turned to face him, and saw: helm off and tucked under his arm, as Gabranth had always carried it; the same expression; and a trickle of fear ran down Larsa’s spine, because for a moment he could not see Basch anywhere.

"Basch."

It slipped out of him, on the small surge of fear, an unguarded word in Archades of all places, and drat it, Larsa felt... the age the Senate treated him. And wanted to laugh.

Basch started at that, and a small, slow smile, and it was all right again; Gabranth was still in Rabanastre, recovering, and Basch was here.

Larsa smiled, as Basch sat across from him at the desk, and the work began.

"Judge Magister Gabranth!"

Voice a breathy rasp of age, and the shuffling swing of heavy robes behind him. A Senator? (And when had he learned these subtleties of sound?)

Basch turned.

Yes, a Senator. Not Ladare or Aldebrand, the two he had marked for personal attention. Gemall? Gelmes. He remembered the man from Larsa's confirmation: a full Senate vote, no quorums, and every Senator with some complaint to voice; about the treaty, about Vayne, about Larsa. He remembered Gelmes for his cutting remarks on military discipline. Larsa, in a move near unprecedented for either an Heir or sitting Emperor, had disclosed his agenda regarding the military and Draklor— at his confirmation session— and before the vote, no less. Basch remembered suppressing his grin at the titters.

And it amazed him, now, that he could recall Gelmes from that crowd— Larsa's careful coaching, perhaps, or Noah's halting briefings, or maybe that Basch had been in Archades for near a week. Gelmes had distinguished himself in a series of questions about how military discipline would fare in a culture less martial. Yes, this was the man.

"Senator Gelmes," he replied.

The man caught up to him, and Basch waited a little impatiently for the obsequious little bow; he and Zargabaath had exchanged irritated plaints about their sudden rise in status as the only remaining Judges Magister. Or, rather, Zargabaath had voiced his plaint, and Basch had remembered Noah's closed face and had said little, nodding a jerky agreement.

But the man stood erect upon coming even with Basch, and swept a hand out, inviting them to walk on.

"I was hoping to ask, Judge Magister— have you heard aught from the rank and file, in your Division?"
Basch, having grown uncomfortably adept in too short a time, translated this as *Do your spies have any information I would find useful?* A question asked every day in Archades, back and forth. *Noah...*

"My apologies, Senator. I have had nothing such to report to Emperor Larsa for some days." A reminder. *Watch yourself, Senator. I report to Larsa, and my loyalty stamped on every page, on every word.* Then, a sudden dissonance: *Ashe...*

Basch tightened his grip on the helm.

A sly glint in Gelmes' eye, and Basch cursed himself a little; the knowledge of one's loyalties was also stock in trade here, and he had been too open with his, not leaving the Senator room to wonder if he could be traded. A mistake.

But Gelmes pressed no further, and arranged his face into an apologetic expression. "I regret to bother you then, Judge Magister. It is merely an old man's anxious worrying."

"We all do our part for the Empire." A half-automatic response, now.

"Indeed. Good day to you." A short bow, now, and Senator Gelmes swept on down the hall.

Basch stared after him for some moments, marking it in his mind to ask Noah about the man.

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Well, at least Gabranth's agents were less annoying than Balthier's friend Jules. No chops this time, just some back alleys and a quiet little appointment with the Judge Magister. When they reached Gabranth's office, Basch looked up and nodded the agent away. As soon as the door closed, one of those small smiles warmed his face.

"Basch!" Penelo skipped up to him, and Vaan would have sworn she was about to throw herself at him. She hesitated, and held out her box of Dalmascan pasties instead. "I bet you're as bad at feeding yourself here as you were back home." She grinned, and tapped her nose.

Basch smiled then, really *smiled*, and how rare was that?

"Thank you, Penelo." He took the box, juggling it with the helm he was tucking under his other arm as he turned to lead them away. "Come, Larsa has made sure to have time free today."

They wound their way down back corridors from Gabranth's office to Larsa's rooms.

Larsa waited for them, working at his desk (Vaan wanted to shake him a little; the kid was *twelve* and he was sitting at a desk in the middle of the day running a country). At their entrance, Larsa glanced up, then stood up, and *him* Penelo pounced on with no hesitation, an enthusiastic hug that made Larsa's face spasm in a moment of twelve-year-old-boy panic. Vaan wanted to laugh, maybe; it just made it more obvious how seldom Larsa was treated— not even as someone his age. Just. As a friend.

Penelo set him down, and he was wide-eyed and a little breathless for a moment. Vaan decided to come to his rescue.
"Larsa." He stepped up, offering his arm for a hand-clasp. Very manly and mature, and Larsa looked a lot more collected afterwards.

Even if Penelo was making "so serious" faces at Vaan from behind him.

Vaan resisted the urge to stick his tongue out back at her and totally ruin Larsa's moment. Basch saved them with a discreet cough; Larsa recovered completely with invitations to sit, sit.

Penelo bounced to one of the couches, and sank into it, shameless enjoyment melting across her face. Basch joined them with more dignity, setting his box of pasties down beside him.

"Unfortunately, my time is short this afternoon." Larsa grimaced. "There is a session of the Senate later today, to redistribute the funding that once went to Draklor."

"Well, it's great to see you anyway!" Penelo practically beamed, and Vaan quirked an eyebrow in her direction. She ignored him. "I'm sure we'll have more time to visit some other day."

"I hope so," Larsa answered with a small smile.

Vaan was a little lost here.

Basch rescued them again, shepherding them gently in a less... radiant direction. "Business, then," he said quietly. "And after, what visiting we may."

"Right!" Vaan picked up the lead. "Ashe gave us dispatches."

He fished in his pack for the nondescript message tubes—totally unremarkable, totally flammable, and kept as close by Vaan's person as his espers.

He handed them to Basch.

And— the one Penelo had handed him right before they'd left Rabanastre, the last one.

Vaan hesitated before reaching into his pack again.

But he took out the last message tube, distinguishable from the others only by the single potion packet tied to it.

"And... this one is from Gabranth."

He handed the thing over, quickly, and felt Penelo's eyes on him.

Basch accepted it, hesitated, and set it aside, atop Penelo's present.

They turned to the dispatches together, Basch handing them to Larsa and then reading them himself. They were brief; Ashe's clipped language did not make for long letters.

"Then the situation in Rabanastre is in control." Larsa looked up.

"Yeah," Vaan replied. "Things seem all right. A few little scuffles with the ministers."

"Only to be expected in a healthy government." Larsa exchanged a smile with Basch. "Were—" Larsa's eyes didn't dart towards Gabranth's unopened note, but Basch's hand did— "were there any other messages?"

"Nope," Penelo chirped. "Now— you tell us! How've you been?"
"Dismantling Draklor. Corralling the Senate."

"Not what I meant!" There was laughter in her voice.

Larsa blinked for a moment. "My— my groundskeepers have begun work on the garden," he offered. Penelo nodded her interest and approval. "It won't be ready for some weeks, but there is a plot they have allowed me to work myself."

"I'd love to see it!"

Vaan watched Basch's face, waiting for it.

But before Basch could step in to haul them on track again— Larsa and Penelo wilted together a little. "Some other time, right?" she said, a smile to soften it.

"Please. Your first visit when it is ready."

"Until then— did you guys have anything for us?"

Basch frowned. "Yes. Tell Ashe the Senate is stirring against the trade agreement; the taxes are not to their liking, and they may restart negotiations entirely, looking to push Larsa to change his terms. Tell her to keep to her side of the agreement when that happens."

"I will allow the Senate to begin the negotiations anew, but tell Ashe I will extract the rates we agreed on." Larsa's chin firmed. "My proposal to the Senate was pitched higher than we had agreed, to allow them the victory."

Vaan whistled. "We'll tell her."

"Anything else?" Penelo prompted; she was concentrating on memorizing it all, close to word-for-word. They had practiced for this, aboard the _Strahl_.

Basch nodded in answer, and Larsa too, and they launched into it, everything Vaan had never needed to know about politics and Archades. Larsa began with: "Senator Ladare is making all the expected objections to the dismantling of Draklor."

"Noah's agents have been unable to discover any covert movements behind the public noise," Basch put in. "I was given a report this morning for Larsa's Senate meeting about redistributing Draklor funding and... there were some irregularities, but nothing to link it to Ladare or his agents. A summary, for Noah, to see if he can make sense of it." Basch handed over a tightly-wrapped paper.

Larsa nodded. "Senator Aldebrand, however, is being unexpectedly cooperative. We expected him to be most outspoken on the trade agreement, but he is raising only mild objections. Refusing to distinguish himself."

"You think he's being sneaky?" Penelo prompted.

"We suspect so."

And on it went. Vaan memorized it, accepted another set of nondescript tubes for the missives more complicated and less sensitive, watched Penelo's mouth moving silently as she repeated names and connections to herself.

Finally, Vaan groaned and stretched. "That the last of it?"

"Yes," Larsa said.
But Basch hesitated. "One thing more. Ask Noah what he knows of Senator Gelmes. He has... caught my attention."

"Gelmes. Got it."

A discreet knock echoed from the outer apartments. Larsa glanced up, face furrowing for a moment, before looking at Vaan and Penelo again. "Forgive me, but it seems we have run out of time."

Basch stood up. "I will escort you out."

"Find me in the Senate chamber. Vaan, Penelo, allow me to convey my gratitude for your service."

Vaan almost sighed. *Allow me to convey my gratitude.* Right. For a few moments there, Penelo had almost had him, and then their time was up and Larsa was all Emperor again.

Basch ushered them out the private side of the suite.

Before handing them off to an agent, he said, "Penelo. Thank you, for Larsa. Thank you both."

Penelo nodded, and then they were trotting along, following the agent out of the palace.

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Gabranth was not one to count tiles, but by Vaan and Penelo's first visit, he had memorized the tread of all the healers, their voices, and what names had been called within his hearing. He had as yet only seen the three that had tended him since the beginning, but he reckoned he could recognize any other from this wing.

He had developed a sick and backwards sympathy for Basch. Twisted, twisted, to think of Nalbina so, but Gabranth was as trapped in this bed by the consequences of his choices and the fragility of his body as Basch had been confined by Gabranth's own irons.

The thought twisted his stomach, and he concentrated instead on making his body fit to serve again, the faster to escape this cage.

Vaan and Penelo caught him at his exercises, that first time they arrived to trade information over the endless leagues.

*Exercises.* If such activities could be called that; all he could manage, as yet. Stretches of his hands and fingers, simple lifts and pushes for his arms. Nothing that involved his torso. Not yet; the healers had caught him at it once and Slept him without as much as blinking.

He was sitting up, having shed the linen shirt and put his boots in it, clutching it between his fingers and slowly curling and uncurling them.

He heard unfamiliar steps coming down the hall; paid them little mind. Visitors and patients came and went all the time.

But then there was the whisper of his door, and he glanced up to see the girl—Penelo—edge in, followed by Vaan.

They both stared at him for a moment. Gabranth froze, and felt his eyes drawn to Vaan's, suspicious
and hard and sullen behind Penelo— he would be near about his brother's age now, his brother's age when—

"What are you doing?" Penelo asked, her voice light.

Gabranth's gaze cut to her, and his heart stuttered. Her face so open, no malice or conflict or shuttered shame.

"Finger exercises," he answered, automatically, surprised at the ease of it. Something in the girl's smile, her manner...

"Ohhhh. Well, just don't tire yourself out too much, or the healers are gonna be mad!"

"Indeed. I have... had the experience of their wrath once already."

The silence fell, he sitting on his bedside with his shirt in his fingers; they standing by the door, watching him.

He cleared his throat, put down his improvised weights.

"Did you... have anything for me?"

"Dispatches! They're mostly for Ashe, and we slip those in with those scripted purchases at Migelo's, right? Well, they're for Ashe except for—" she waved Vaan over, holding out her hand. "Except for one."

Vaan detached himself from the doorframe he'd been leaning against, and handed her a single message tube. He retreated quickly, neither turning his back on Gabranth nor deigning to look at him directly, not since their first exchange of glances. Vaan leaned against the frame, arms crossed, and seemed to stare at a point a little beyond Penelo's feet.

Penelo glanced at him, then rallied. "This is about the money in Draklor. Basch said Ladare's making some fuss, but not enough, and there was something fishy about the numbers here but they couldn't link it to him."

Gabranth took the report, unrolled it for a brief look. He would burn it, later, as soon as he had either memorized it or discovered the problem.

"Was there more?"

"Oh, yes!" Penelo took the remaining step to the bed, light-footed, only to pause, look around, and realize there were no chairs in the room. The one Basch had infrequently occupied had been taken away once those visits had ceased. Penelo hesitated a moment, then simply sat on the floor.

Vaan remained by the door, and Gabranth tried to look at Penelo instead, her open face and small easy smile, and not think about Vaan's face, or faces like Vaan's, or everything Vaan stood for so far beyond Gabranth's reach.

"Take another breath, dog. Let him go; there is no redemption for you there."

Penelo settled herself, clasping her hands around her knees. "Let's see..." She closed her eyes and drew in a breath, and her feet started tapping, softly. Gabranth remembered: she was a dancer. An old trick, associating complicated memorization with a motion.

The tapping continued, steady in the background, and she began to speak, and Gabranth started at
the strange echoes of Larsa's diction, of Basch's. "The Senate doesn't like the trade agreement but
Ashe should keep to her terms. Senator Ladare is making the expected noise about Draklor; agents
have been unable to discover any covert movements behind the public noise. Senator Aldebrand is
being strangely cooperative with the new trade terms on sand from the Sandsea. The generals have
raised an objection based on—on the Third Military Charter, forty-third section..." It went on,
Penelo's voice in a steady rise and fall, Vaan occasionally interjecting corrections, supplements, but
mostly a sullen silence in the back of the room, and Gabranth closed his eyes, taking it in, noting
responses, arranging his shattered memories into order again.

And this, this was exercise, this was almost work, something that gave point and purpose. Send
Betherel after Ladare; with her abandoned degree she would know best about Draklor. The twins as
merchants to the Ogir-Yensa Sandsea; Aldebrand must have agents there starting black operations to
evade the coming tariffs. The Charter objection a problem; sudden dismissal of troops—
reassignment? Reassignment, in stages, to less active duties, and perhaps to the militias in the outer
cities, the coast?

"... and your agent Firelle got hurt and Basch gave her leave." Penelo heaved a breath out, and
grinned.

"Thank you," Gabranth said, impressed. It had been good, very good, for a first time. He took a
moment to collect his responses, arrange them and pare them down for easy memorization. "Are you
both ready?"

"Yeah," Vaan said, looking off to the side.

"Almost, gimme a second." Penelo jumped up, dancing in place for a moment, shaking out the
stiffness.

"If it would help, memorize my words as steps. You dance, correct?"

She blinked at him. "Oh! Yes, thank you! That would help a lot."

"You are ready?"

Behind her, Vaan tipped his head back, closed his eyes, preparing to remember as well.

"Yes," she said.

Gabranth took a breath, and started on the measured cadences, close to pentameter, the rhythm that
made memorization natural. "Send Betherel after Ladare..."

Penelo moved around the room, small steps, an occasional turn for emphasis, and back across the
room. Vaan stood still, mouthing to himself.

Gabranth tried to make his words few. These were children, and untrained.

At the last, he took another breath. "Do you need anything repeated?"

"Don't think so!" Penelo chirped; she was flushed, a little energized from the movement.

Vaan stirred.

Gabranth glanced at him.

Vaan was looking at Penelo, almost expectant, but she seemed unaware, stretching a little and rolling
on her heels.

Finally, Vaan turned to Gabranth. Looked directly at him, for only the second time.

"Basch said to ask you about Senator Gelmes."

Penelo's eyes widened. "Oh! I'm sorry, I forgot that! He said it right at the end, after everything else!"

Gabranth's brows twitched up. "Gelmes?"

"Yeah."

Nothing more seemed to be forthcoming.

Gabranth's mind flickered through his mental notes on the Senator, and that felt good, he felt awake for the first time in days, Vaan's eyes expectant and doubtful upon him, a grudging respect, Penelo waiting beside him.

"Gelmes... an unremarkable man, in terms of activities. Once a general in the army, retired before the war. No investments that seem to have to do with our interests."

"So... you got nothing," Vaan said. Penelo's eyes cut to him at the tone. Gabranth held his peace.

"Nothing I know of him links him to the present situation, besides his military career."

"Well, we can tell Basch that, at least," Penelo said.

"Is that everything?"

"Yes! For sure this time, right Vaan?"

"Yeah." He was looking away again, fiddling with his pack.

"Then I will have a response to the Draklor report for you on the morrow."

"Thank you, Noah!"

The name on Penelo's lips startled him, and he realized that no response had come from Basch or Larsa to his awkward missive. But— likely there had not been time for them to linger in Archades after delivering it.

He smoothed over the twitch with a nod.

Vaan was already leaving, silent.

"Get better," Penelo said, waving as she followed Vaan out the door.

The door closed behind her, and Gabranth's breath blew out.

He turned to the Draklor report, and tried not to let his heart sink, or harden, or do anything at all in response to the way Vaan had refused to so much as look at him.
Vaan wanted to kick things, but the current choices included the healers' nice hallways and Penelo's shins, and he didn't think he could get away with either. And one of those, at least, hit back, so maybe it was just time for another Hunt, some other stupid creature he could kill too easily and make himself sick over.

Yeah.

And that bothered him, too—he'd killed that stupid Saurian all alone, her and her torn-up canyon, and they'd all killed wyrms and monsters and massive Solidor bastards that turned into huge veiny machine-things. So, yeah, he kind of wanted to kick things because Gabranth didn't seem to think they could do this courier-spy thing on their own and needed help and advice, as if they were stupid kids, as if Vaan had ever wanted to be a spy or have anything to do with these crazy politics ever again.

And he didn't really want to kick Penelo but he maybe wanted to yell a bit and ask her why she was being so nice to the biggest jerk this mess had left alive.

Alive.

Reks had died in room like that one, Vaan watching him fade and waste away and no amount of Galbana lilies would fix that, and Gabranth looked stronger every time Vaan saw him. He kept remembering how Noah's breathing had sounded, loud and sick and wet, but better every time Vaan saw him, and Reks' breaths had just faded quietly away to nothing. He wished he could forget the smells—Reks's room hadn't smelled like anything, as if it was already empty, just the faint clinical stink of the bedsheets, nothing that smelled like home or family, and even the lilies had seemed to just fade away after he brought them. But Gabranth's room smelled—like their rooms at the inns had, like a place to rest—smelled very faintly of armour and oil and weapons and all those pleasant-danger smells that meant they were safe and ready for battle. And even fainter than that, sweat, from those stupid exercises, probably, and that hurt most of all, because it was so—personal, so Gabranth, because it smelled like nothing else that Vaan could imagine was there instead—because it meant Gabranth was getting better, and Reks hadn't.

And he wished his hands would stop remembering that too-much-magick tingle around Gabranth, how it had poured out of him like a waterfall, as if Gabranth had been sucking it out of him—stop remembering the blood everywhere under his hands and that sick intimacy of feeling the heartbeat go all crazy and wrong right under his fingers, or the way Penelo had looked at him, the way Larsa had looked at him, the way Ashe had looked at him, and—the way Basch hadn't looked at him, not really, and what was he supposed to do, after all that? Even without the peace and countries at stake and all those innocent little people whose lives got all twisted sideways when big people forgot about them—people like Vaan and Penelo and Migelo and Kytes, people like Reks—even without that, what could he do with Basch not-looking at him like that, with Ashe with a ghost on each shoulder, Rasler and her father the king, standing there healing this man? So it had been the magick, and the bleeding, and now it was these visits and Gabranth staring at him like that.

Like Ashe had, for too long. Like Basch had, for such a short time, and that had been part of why he'd liked Basch so quickly, after he'd figured Basch was no traitor. No one, no one but Penelo, had ever gone from seeing through or around or over him or putting someone else where their eyes said Vaan was to just seeing Vaan. Except maybe Fran, but Fran saw through everyone, right from the start, and Vaan was maybe a little scared that Penelo would grow up to be just like her that way and Vaan would never, ever be able to keep a secret from her again.

So he put his hands behind his head, and tried to relax and just walk with Penelo, out into the
Dalmascan sunshine and into the dry heat of their city, noisy and a little smelly and alive all around, like it should be.

So the visits went, as Gabranth laboured to marshal his mind and body, reassemble something fit to serve out of this shattered husk.

He had done it once before. After Landis.

The report from Draklor worried him. He had noted the missing sums—small money taken from various accounts and departments that added to an alarming total. A lot of gil had gone missing somewhere, and Gabranth itched at not knowing where, or when, or why. He could only guess at how, and write it in his still-unsteady hand, and berate himself for not noting it earlier. For all that such a comprehensive audit of Draklor’s finances had never before been ordered, for all that neither Doctor Cid nor Vayne would have allowed it— still, Gabranth should have known.

When he had written what meager ideas he thought worth mentioning, he took the report and burned it.

He watched the Fire burn the damning evidence away, into ashes on his Shelled hand. What fragile things the future rested on: Larsa, Basch, the Empire, Dalmasca—all relying on him. And on Vaan and Penelo.

Penelo returned the next day, for his response about Draklor.

She stayed longer than necessary, giving him long soft looks and a short report on Larsa: tired but well, working in his garden, managing the Senate.

A strange kindness. Gabranth did not know what to say.

And, after a hesitation, she told him of Basch, too, in fewer words. Simply that he was well.

Gabranth did not know if this was kind or cruel. Or both.

And so it went.

In between their visits, he trained. It was pitiful.

But slowly, he was learning to walk again, upright with neither hunch nor limp, and he would close his eyes and swallow against the indignity, shuffling small circles around the support of his bed.

His hands continued to shake, though slowly his missives grew more fluid and less short.

And missives there were, back and forth in an increasing pile of worry.

The Draklor problem continued to bother him, and as the gil stayed missing, his concern for Larsa and the fate of the peace grew. Dangerous things had been born in Draklor, massive machines and subtle poisons, threats of every size and shape and method. Yet Ladare did nothing overt— nor nothing covert, that Gabranth could detect from half a continent away. What was the man planning?

Or, if not him— the military? Draklor had had close ties with the high command, and the scientists in
its employ members of the army as well, ranked and waged. It was the military that stood to lose
the most to this peace.

But no ties emerged, not to Ladare and not to the high command, even as missives continued to
arrive and vex him, as he sat in this room, far from Larsa and distanced—by leagues or looks that
grazed him and turned away—from everything that could ever redeem him.

Every week or more, the missives came, and with them, Vaan and Penelo. He asked for chairs, after
their first visit, but sometimes only one would be filled, Vaan either electing to stay by the door or...
not coming at all. Most often they came together, but when there was little news... then, Penelo came
alone.

Gabranth did not question Vaan's absence.

But Penelo's presence—her easy manner, the sad smiles she gave him. The way she would look him
in the eye, without challenge or agenda.

He wanted to ask her.


And one day, after she had sat in his room for near an hour longer than was necessary to deliver the
news, just talking about Larsa, and about Basch... one day, he did.

Vaan slumped onto the floor, crossing his arms across his bent knees and bunching over them. He
tapped the replacement length of pipe against his shin.

Penelo was tying a rag over her hair, eying the underside of the Strahl, and Vaan didn't understand
how she could do that, just keep going and cutting Basch's hair and working on the ship and dancing
at the bazaar and giving Gabranth those sad smiles.

"How can you just forgive him like that?"

Penelo jerked the knot tight and gave him a look he couldn't read. "You know, he asked me the same
thing."

"Yeah? And what, you told him everything's all right? It's fine that he killed Reks and the king,
because he's trying so hard to be nice now and he's just that sorry?"

Penelo chewed her lip, giving him a concerned look. "No," she said quietly.

Vaan blinked, but she was still talking.

"No. I told him I haven't forgiven him, and I probably never will. I told him what he did was
horrible, no matter his reasons, and if he never stops feeling awful about it, it'll be too soon."

Vaan stared at her for a moment, feeling as if the sands had just shifted beneath his feet. "Then why
are you nice to him? You even like him, I can tell!" He barely restrained himself from poking an
accusing finger at her, brandishing the pipe.
Penelo sighed. "Does it make any difference to Reks how I treat Gabranth now? He asked me, too, why I wasn't mean to him. Do you want to listen to what I said to him yet? You can go on another Hunt. I'll wait."

Vaan's brows drew down; in a staring contest he could come out on top about half the time, if only because she got annoyed and bored enough to concede the point. But she had delivered her piece, and then turned back to the Strahl's engine, tapping it gently with her wrench to find the loose pipe.

Apparently, she wasn't going to take silence for an answer. He resisted the urge to shuffle his feet, and settled for a fierce, secret clenching of his toes inside his shoes.

Penelo ignored him.

Finally, a touch belligerent: "What did you tell him?"

She slid out from under the Strahl again and gave him a long look. He wished she hadn't picked up that particular trick from Fran.

"I told him I hadn't forgiven him and probably never would—but I also told him it didn't matter if I did. There's no changing what he did." Her hands went to her hips, and Vaan could feel it coming, and he mashed his toes around inside his boots angrily, unwilling to believe that Penelo was about to lecture him about this. But she was. Here it came.

"I don't think forgiveness is what's important here, Vaan. And I don't want to forgive him." He looked up, at the soft tone of her voice—he had expected her to rev up into a full lecture, teasing and stern. But she was winding down instead, without ever really getting started. "We just need to... keep going. We need each other now, Vaan. Think of how many people need him right now. Larsa needs him. Basch needs him. Even Ashe needs him. Everyone in Ivalice needs him, even if they don't know it. And he's trying, Vaan. He nearly died all of a month ago, and he's turning himself inside out trying to figure out what everyone wants from him."

She sighed again.

"He's a good man, Vaan. He's done some awful things, but he's trying so hard right now. Are you trying?" She jabbed a finger at his chest, and a little of the hollow feeling there eased at the familiar gesture, before returning to the sullen simmer of this morning. "Have you seen him and Basch together? Think of Ashe, Vaan. He killed her father. She learned that vengeance is not the answer. You were right there. And... Vaan..."

She looked up at him, and spoke very softly. "We've killed people too."

He surged forward, opened his mouth to protest—but she held a hand up, silencing him. "I know, Vaan! I know. They weren't Reks. But think about it, Vaan—we have no idea who they were. Most of those Imperial soldiers? They were just doing their jobs. Some of them were jerks, but most of them we didn't even know. And all of them meant something to somebody out there. We killed them because we had something important we were doing."

Vaan ground his teeth; he knew Penelo could see it in the tightening of his jaw. She sighed again, and said, "Think about it, Vaan," before sliding herself back under the airship, tap-tapping until the loose pipe jangle-sang back.

"Now are you going to help me fix this or not? You are supposed to be the captain."
Vaan and Penelo had delivered their reports the day before, and no reply from Gabranth seemed required. It startled him, then, to hear Vaan's footsteps coming down the hall. Alone.

Vaan edged into the room, giving Gabranth the same wary, accusing look as a feral cat. *Prideful strays, the lot of us... Live, dog. Breathe.*

Vaan stopped just inside the doorway, and stared, mouth tight.

It was a long moment before Vaan spoke.

"Why are you doing this?"

Gabranth stared at him.

It was not that he did not understand the question.

No. He understood with a long and painful clarity, that Vaan would wonder at Gabranth's motives, his intentions.

But what hope of honour in excuses? What hope of honour, when those eyes, wary still, stared at him so?

And— did Vaan desire, an answer, truly? Or merely to curse at him?

"What are you doing, anyway?" Vaan stepped forward, fists clenched, accusing jut of chin. "Are you helping Larsa? Or Basch?" A step forward with every sentence, flung out like an accusation. "Is this for what you did to Dalmasca?" Another step, and this was the closest Vaan had come to him since those endless minutes upon the *Strahl*. "What you did to Ashe? To Reks?"

All these wrongs flung in his face, and yet only a fraction of his misdeeds.

"For all of them," he managed. *And for you.* He knew better than to say the last aloud, and an empty bleak despair, at that, small and quiet and familiar.

"And you think that's enough?!"

Gabranth did not flinch.

"It is all I can do," he said softly. He spread his hands, looked Vaan in the eyes. "What would you have of me, Vaan?" It tripped off his tongue, halting and honest and quiet. *You held my life in your hands. Only call me, and I will be your dog, too.*

Vaan blinked at him, and looked even angrier, and Gabranth realized he had called him by name.

"I wish you'd— !" Vaan sputtered, made an inarticulate noise of rage, jerked around to face away—and Gabranth saw his back for the first time, tight with anger, and that sight hurt, and heartened, and he said nothing.

Vaan's arms flexed, his hands, the slide of wiry muscle startling on his young frame, fingers uncurling and jerking into fists again, and he breathed hard as he faced away.

"I wish you'd at least leave me out of it!" he yelled, finally. He turned, to face Gabranth again. "I'm
not— I'm not part of this! Part of you! Part of whatever you're doing! So stop trying to make me a good little spy and stop acting like Penelo likes you and stop looking at me like that!" and the last shouted near-hoarse, close in Gabranth's face, so close, close like Reks had been, close enough for the slow slide of a sword—

It slipped out, faced with those accusing eyes, and it was only the truth.

"I'm sorry."

Vaan's eyes narrowed, darted between his own for a moment and then—

"I'm not your ghost!" he shouted. "I'm not Ashe's Rasler, I'm not a—a little copy of Balthier, and I'm not Reks! I couldn't be Reks for Basch, and I'm definitely not Reks for you. You didn't kill me, you killed my brother." His breath was coming fast, hissing between his teeth; his fists clenched, trembling at his sides. "If you're going to apologize, apologize to me, not whatever you think you're seeing!"

Gabranth jerked back, from the words, from the hot buzz of Vaan's proximity, from the awareness of his scent, clean and sharp in the small space between them— appalled and guilty and— angry, a hot surge he hadn't felt in weeks upon weeks, not the dead cold burn but something living, something livid— after everyone dancing around him, avoiding all mention, honest but careful, as if he were fragile, as if he would break from the simple fact of facing his own choices— to have someone yell at him for it, fling accusations, shout in his face; it felt terrible and incredible, gratifying and frustrating—

He stood up, clamping down on the traitorous tremble in his limbs. He was taller than Vaan, whose head tipped up to follow Gabranth's eyes, Vaan's brows low and angry, mouth set harder and harder. Gabranth spoke from that height, deliberate and clear, to cut across the thick air between them.

"I am sorry. What would you have of me?"

Vaan stared at him for a second, from his distance of handsbreadths away, pridefully not stepping back to meet Gabranth's eyes easier.

"Why?" he spat out suddenly. "Tell me why. Why did you do it."

Gabranth's voice was quiet with his formless anger, or with a dangerous hope, that maybe Vaan would hear, and maybe somewhere down this path lay expiation. "Did you see your country raped? Your brothers-in-arms slaughtered, their wives and children taken? Did—"

"I saw my brother die!" Vaan shouted across him, stopping Gabranth cold. "My king was killed! I followed his daughter around for months, and she kept looking at me like I was her dead husband! The one your precious Empire murdered! All my friends are orphans thanks to them! And yeah, I killed some people too, but they were people like Vayne! People—" his eyes narrowing, hot and angry, and he hissed the last:

"People like you."

And Vaan turned, and he was gone.

Gabranth breathed, and swallowed.

He sat on the bed, and that vital strength poured out of him, gone with Vaan's departure.

*Live, dog. Live and reclaim your honour.*
He put his face in his hands.

Basch stared out over the breathless view—the vista from the Empyrean Seat of the Mosphoran Highwaste lived up to the name, as grand in its lush, sweeping decay as the view of Archades had been magnificent, from the tall arches of Larsa's balcony. An Imperial seat, also; the irony was not lost on Basch.

The gods' sense of humour had never much appealed to him.

It was a fine place for the rendezvous, irony or no. Isolated. Beautiful. The neat little Atomos sat tucked away across the mesa, ready to be flown back to Archades. Basch had only to await the arrival of the Strahl.

There was a strange stillness within him, here, now.

These past weeks...

An awkward apprenticeship, almost. Basch had never believed his enemies to be inhuman, and faceless, devoid of those small routines that made up mens' lives. But it had been one thing to know, distantly, that Noah had duties, routines... reasons...

So much another thing to live it, haltingly and half-understanding, stumbling over the niceties that Basch had realized Noah breathed like air.

He was uneasy, still. For Larsa and his peace, his boldness with the Senate and yet his deference to them. For the Draklor funds and Ladare; for the military in its restlessness; for Aldebrand and Gelmis, whose games Basch did not understand.

There would be work for Noah, upon his arrival.

But even in that, there was a strange contentment. Basch had failed to mend all problems during his tenure, but in passing them to Noah he felt... a rightness, the sense of giving a duty to the ones most suited to it, a feeling remembered from trading duties among fellow captains.

He trusted Noah with the task.

It was a simple truth, but hard-won.

He was not sure there could be anything more there, yet. Ties strained past mending, and yet the stronger for it in the betrayal—unforgettable, such wrongs, coming from one so close, and binding them ever together, closer even than the bond of shared blood.

His scars still ached, sometimes.

He rubbed at his wrist, absently, and set his hand back upon his belt.

So 'twas upon this ancient Seat that Eldest Brother knew defeat, Chaos whispered.

Basch didn't jerk his hand away, realizing then it had settled upon the esper pouch.
He did not respond, but he let his hand rest there, a whisper of contact through the supple leather.

They had fought Exodus here. And after, Fran had claimed it. Quiet with it, taking the most ancient of the espers, citing a kinship to the Wood. Exodus, the Judge-Sal, and Basch remembered how Fran had judged Noah, and found him worthy, with Cúchulainn's hand guiding hers.

Time, Fran had said.

Time, if nothing else.

The gods' sense of humour had never appealed to Chaos, either.

The familiar whine of the Strahl's glossairs sang through the air, and Basch turned to watch the ship's smooth approach. Vaan was becoming a deft hand at the helm.

There was no room to land the larger ship; Vaan parked her neatly by the edge of the floating mass, and lowered the ramp.

Basch watched, from where he stood.

Noah stepped from the Strahl, and they simply looked at each other for a moment, from across the small and endless expanse.

Basch remembered holding a polished bronze mirror as Penelo hovered nearby, and thinking he looked nothing like his brother.

Noah looked nearly hale, if still tired, with the fading bruises of fatigue under his eyes. His hair was trimmed and neat; Penelo's work, Basch did not doubt.

Penelo herself emerged behind Noah, and Vaan with her.

Noah turned, briefly, with a nod of thanks for them, then set out to meet Basch, the deliberate stride Basch remembered, as if he wore the armour and office still.

Basch did not miss Penelo's restraining hand on Vaan's arm when he made to follow, but then Noah was there, before him. His eyes perhaps a little more shadowed.

"Noah," Basch said.

A silence, and Basch wondered if it would ever be otherwise.

Time. If nothing else.

"You look well," he tried.

"You look better." Something that might have been a small, wry smile, or a grimace, and it pulled at Basch's heart, echoing across decades to old jokes.

He wanted to look away, or stare into Noah's eyes for hours, as long as it took— for understanding, for one of them, at least, to see through all those things that had become cracked and crazed and misted.

Basch cleared his throat. "You are ready?"

A short nod, and Noah's eyes did not slide away, but they— shuttered, darkened. A moment, there, lost somehow.
Basch led him over to the Atomos, and retrieved the spare set of leathers there; Noah slipped them on over his light cotton tunic and trews, like a second skin.

Like a second skeleton.

For Noah seemed—taller, straighter. Basch watched, as Noah tugged on the gloves and stared at his own hand, flexing it into a fist, standing there atop the Empyrean Seat under the gentle sun, dark and dangerous.

Basch swallowed against the faint buzz in his head.

Trust. And time.

Basch handed over the helm.

They looked at each other, mutely, over the helm with both their hands upon it.

The sun slid warm around them, damper and cooler than Dalmasca, gentler and less hazy than Archades, and almost like Landis, green and cool around them.

And they were soldiers, and it was like preparing for any other battle, trading favours of fitting and nervous jokes, and Basch almost smiled. He to Dalmasca and the Generalship, and the long work ahead; and Noah to the Archadian front, to the Senate and the scheming.

They did not need to speak, and although Basch raised a brow in question, or invitation, he almost didn't need to do that, either: a minute nod from Noah, and Basch turned, and felt Noah's hands at his left side, tugging at the straps, as Basch began to strip the belt, the gauntlets, and then the pauldrons.

Basch remembered, for a moment, Vaan's reluctant assistance in near unto this same task, and he didn't know if that had been easier, or harder, or simpler.

"Betherel cannot find some of her contacts among the scientists," he said. Debriefing, as they prepared, a small and solid comfort, something familiar from so long ago.

"Unsettling," Noah murmured. "You have found nothing on Draklor?"

"It is rather that we find less with each passing day."

The cuirass came off, and the cloak, and Noah was silent.

It was familiar, and strange with it: here, now, after everything.

But maybe there was a healing in it, too.

Basch knelt to undo the greaves. Noah hovered, awkwardly, the small ease of remembered routine lost.

"I did not fare well in your place, truly." Basch spoke to his boots, tugging at the clasps, trying to make the self-deprecating smile sound clear in his voice. "I fear I may have made some situations worse. Gelmes, perhaps."

"It is not a trade for honest men."

Basch glanced at him at that; Noah's eyes were dark, and would not meet his.

"You bring honesty to it," he offered. "And honour. Your agents are well trained and cared for. And
Larsa is yet safe."

Noah said nothing.

He leaned down, instead, to where Basch had set the sword belt, and untied the esper pouch from it.

He straightened, and held the purse out to Basch.

Basch reached to take it; his fingers brushed the stones through the leather and—

Zalera and Chaos whispered in his mind, and he was caught, seeing Noah before him, preparing to take up again a past life, with the endless pound of Chaos's feet echoing in his ears, around and around and around, ever and forever, endlessly reborn...

He reached out on impulse, to Chaos. *You know something of starting anew. Would you aid this man?*

*So many times you walked the Wheel. You give me now to one so still?*

*I have walked many times. Noah... must start walking again. You know something of rebirth.*

Chaos was silent. But Zalera hissed in deep contempt, *Oh clutch him close to niggard breast; see then how far he walks, how fast!*

Basch took the pouch from Noah, and tipped out Zalera's sigil, tucking that into a pocket.

"Here." He held the pouch out again, with Chaos still inside.

Noah stared at it for a second, not moving to take it. "An esper."

"Yes. Use it to protect Larsa, if nothing else. But—" Basch did not know how to find words for it, around the shadows of the helm that Noah had already tucked under one arm, around the faint ache of his scars, around the deeper lines on Noah's face.

He swallowed. It was hard, still, always, to look Noah in the eyes, and hold the look, and speak.

"You must begin again, for yourself. You are—you are Noah. Let Gabranth lie by our mother's grave." He reached out, then. His arm felt leaden, but he lifted it, to grasp Noah's reluctant hand, and fold it around the sigil in its leather purse. "Begin again. Noah."

He took his hands away quickly, for the tense burn in them, for the hot, angry stutter in his heart, the confusion in Noah's eyes.

Basch held his eyes for a moment more, as long as both of them could stand.

Then he stepped away.

He knew, reading Noah's mood in a way that sickened him with its familiarity, the echo of days long gone, that Noah would not wish his help in donning the armour.

Basch retreated to the *Strahl*, where Vaan and Penelo had sunk to the floor to wait and watch. He turned, at the last, to see Noah still looking at him, Chaos's sigil in his hand and the helm under him arm.

They left him there, to put on the armour and office of Gabranth, alone on the Empyrean Seat, where Exodus the Judge-Sal had once dwelt and reckoned the value of all things and had found this world
wanting.

Archades.

He stepped out onto Larsa's balcony. Archades swept out before him—arches, skycabs, ardents; spires and alleys; the vista stretching out to every horizon.

The air was wet, he realized. After his time in Rabanastre, he could taste the moisture in the air, knowing it by its recent absence in his life.

He drew a breath in; in, in, all the way in, into lungs that no longer struggled with it.

His armour barely moved on him.

Once, at a full breath, he would have felt the cuirass tighter around him, pressing upon him, containing him.

His armour felt near hollow.

He felt out of place here. He had thought he would slip back into leading the Ninth and advising Larsa. But it felt like ill-fitting clothes. Like his armour, which now fit him ill. Even cinched tighter at the straps; and those looked strange, too, the well-worn grooves in the leather now showing as he had tugged until the fit was true.

Had Basch felt so, slipping Gabranth on like a suit?

His hand drifted to the small purse he carried now, and the sigil within.

Begin again, Basch had said.

You are Noah.

Gabranth, their mother's name. Could the name rest, now, with her bones; or in the shattered necrohol of a land that was once Landis?

Dalmasca was saved, in spite of him.

Basch seemed to think that was enough.

Vaan—

He could taste it still, the clean, angry relief of Vaan's words, harsh and honest.

So much easier to bear than Basch's disjointed attempts.

He took the sigil out; it glinted strangely in the light. Something of life, trapped within, but the surface dull and clouded, storms upon storms to contain the spark within.

The Walker of the Wheel. Chaos. He had read of the espers, after Cidolfus Bunansa's interest and acquisition. Chaos, ever reborn, ever reliving the same lives...
The stone was silent under his hand.

"Noah?"

Again, he started; his birth name on so many lips. From Larsa it felt most strange: one who had known him so long as Gabranth, and never as Noah.

When he turned, Larsa looked— the same. Had he expected the world to change, merely for the uncertainty of himself? He might have expected to see the weight of the Empire upon those young shoulders; something of unwonted age in the eyes.

But it had ever been so. It was no change; Larsa had embraced his birthright long ago.

Perhaps, Noah conceded, Larsa may have looked more tired.

And to his young and tired master, Noah knelt.

"My lord."

Soft footsteps, and Noah felt a light touch upon his bowed, bare nape.

"Rise, Noah. Please."

Noah looked up. A worried smile in Larsa's eyes.

He had meant to apologize. To kneel forever, perhaps, the faithful hound.

But even he could see the answer already in Larsa's eyes; Solidor eyes.

There was no forgiveness to seek here— granted before he could ask, and, in Larsa's eyes, scarcely even needed. A Solidor, thrown true of the line, would understand.

Noah swallowed, and stood, feeling the armour shift around him, unfamiliar as the day he had first donned it.

Larsa's smile grew at that, and relaxed. "You look well. I must thank the Lady Ashe's physikers."

"They were good men. Discreet."

"Tell me, would they accept this as payment?" Larsa flipped up a potion packet, holding it between two fingers, and grinned. A boyish grin, young even on his young face, and Noah almost smiled in return. Then Larsa tossed the packet to him— Noah caught it automatically. "Please do not make such payment necessary in the future, Noah. Or else I fear I shall run out."

Noah did smile at that, at Larsa's bottomless supply and messages carried through it, a strange bubble of lightness in him at Larsa's meaning, as well as his words.

"It is good to have you back," Larsa said, simple and plain.

A strange moment: it would be a handclasp now, among equal men, or he would bow, or kneel again to his lord.

Noah put the potion packet and sigil in his esper purse, and answered instead, "It is good to return. What news?"

"Not much of it since Basch's departure." Larsa went to the balcony, and leaned on the balustrade,
looking out over his city. "The treaty moves forward; the Senate meets again today." He glanced back at Noah, expectant.

Noah came to stand beside him, after moment. The same view as before, grand and endless. And so much less empty and alien now.

Larsa.

His heart eased, as Larsa spoke of politics, of domestic matters, of the future. Moving ever onward.

His hopes of honour. They rested here, in Archades, in his work. In Larsa.

In Basch. Noah dared not hope. But at his waist: a purse, and within, a sigil and a salve.

And in his heart, Vaan's words.

Noah's eyes slid shut for a moment, as Larsa's voice and the Archadian sun washed over him.

*I'm not your ghost.*

And all his other ghosts breathed through him.

No more of those very specific requests arrived at Migelo's for a few weeks, and in Vaan's opinion this was just fine.

He hunted, and trained, and taught Kytes how to fight, and worked on the *Strahl*, and teased Penelo about her letters to Larsa, and had the living wits scared out of him when Balthier and Fran showed up again one day and then disappeared as usual.

It... wasn't enough.

Basch was back, and maybe that should have made it better. But he was Ashe's General now. Busy. All the time. And Ashe was even worse, and Vaan knew all about how queens were supposed to act and what was proper and how royalty was supposed to feel about sky pirates (though that never seemed to stop Balthier), but maybe it felt just wrong or weird or just... sad. They'd gone around half the world and waded through at least two thirds of the muck and grime and snow out there, fought every kind of monster, including the ones with human faces and pretty smiles. Fought each other, too—some epic fights, and not all of them about Vaan's cooking.

They'd seen the world, and now they barely saw each other.

He talked to Penelo about it, once. They'd met after her dancing, to sit on the bridge and watch the people go by.

"I miss them too," she said, all quiet and soft and distant, and her hand strayed to her pack, where Vaan knew she'd put Larsa's last letter, written in his ridiculously neat hand and carefully devoid of political content.

And because he was tired of this feeling like the world had moved on without him, like he'd broken some promise to himself to move on and keep walking, he elbowed her in the side a little and said,
"You just miss Larsa."

She smacked his arm, laughing. "Shut up, he's my friend!"

"Yeah, you should ask him about that in a few years when you're queen of the sky pirates. Wear this outfit. He'd like that."

That time she punched him, but it was worth it.

And that made it a little more all right. Because Penelo hadn't changed, still teased him and ran to find him when she found leads on treasure for when they started sky pirating for real, and gave him those exasperated looks when he came back from a hunt with Kytes with sand and mud everywhere.

She had always, always seen him, clear and true and exactly as he was, if not always the way he wanted.

And maybe he noticed that more, now. Now that he never saw Basch or Ashe. Now that Balthier showed up for a day, maybe, and then vanished again.

Now that he'd been seeing Gabranth way too often. Even if it had been a couple of weeks, he'd rather it have been never, and so that was well, well within his personal, Gabranth-specific definition of "too often".

He was still mad.

He'd hated it when Ashe used to do it, and she at least had only been annoying and bossy.

It was messed up and sick, how people kept looking at him like he was dead.

And dammit, it hurt. He was right there, alive and pissed and yelling about it, and was he still invisible or something?

And he couldn't get away from it, out into the open sky where the only things that mattered were his ship, his navigator, and his name.

They were stuck here, planning and collecting and sitting on their asses because any day one of those very bland men would show up at Migelo's with a little list of stuff to buy.

It's not like they could just quit that, take off and leave. Oh, sorry, I take that back, I don't actually care about this peace thing. I'd rather go be a sky pirate. By the way, gimme all your money. It was like the council room all over again. Someone here, someone who could be trusted. Someone who wouldn't blow it.

Doing the right thing had really, really sucked lately.

So he felt a little left behind, a little stuck. A little sad. A lot mad, maybe.

Penelo noticed. Penelo always noticed.

"What happened with Noah?" she finally asked. "You've been acting weird ever since we picked up Basch. I thought you'd at least be relieved to have him out of the city." She sounded concerned and exasperated and— Vaan didn't even know. She hadn't talked about it since that first lecture.

He seriously, seriously considered not answering. Or telling her to stop calling the man that.

"What, you mean how Gabranth seems to think I'm part of whatever's up with him?"
"He's trying to fix what he did wrong."

"Yeah, and I don't need his help, thanks. I was done with running away, I'd— it's not like it was ever going to be okay, but for a while I felt like at least I could keep going. Stop talking about being a sky pirate and do it. Stop looking back. What right does he have to drag it all up again?" He remembered it, talking to Ashe in Jahara, and thinking maybe he knew where he was going, what he was doing. Now they were sitting still again, dragging around bits of the past that wouldn't let go.

"I don't know, Vaan." She looked so serious then, and sad even, staring out into the evening sky. "I don't know what's right."

"Yeah, well. I told him to stop it."

She looked at him, then. "Then give him a chance. Maybe he'll listen."

Noah's agents alerted him when the Strahl was parked discreetly in an anonymous aerodrome hangar, and the two young ardents with an appointment with the Judge Magister, all paperwork intact of course, wafted through the palace without challenge. They waited patiently (the girl more so than the boy) in the antechamber, and at the hour of their appointment, or perhaps a few minutes late, they were admitted into Judge Magister Gabranth's office without fuss.

Noah looked up at their entrance. Penelo smiled at him, and Vaan—

Vaan met his eyes, full of mute challenge. Noah let him; didn't close his eyes against the memory of Vaan angry and close and the air between them thick like a touch. You are not my ghost. I am yours. It is I who have haunted you. Forgive me.

Vaan's brows drew down; puzzled or irritated, Noah could not know. Instead, he stood, and led them through a discreet side door, down deserted back corridors, and into the Imperial suite.

The second the door had closed, Penelo danced across the room and threw her arms around Larsa. "Oh, Larsa, it's been way too long!" She cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. "Write more often! I know you're busy, but still."

Her smile softened the admonishment. Vaan shifted his weight from foot to foot until Penelo had finished her fussing; he stepped forward and gave Larsa a warm if awkward hand-clasp. Their standing with each other changing so quickly, Noah thought: both growing, the easy camaraderie of the road and the fight growing rough around the edges as time, distance, rank, and criminal records came between them. And age— Vaan near grown; almost odd to see him look so tall, beside Larsa. But for all that, Vaan smiled, and said, "Heya, Larsa."

"Hello, Vaan. It's been some weeks, but I see your notoriety has not preceded you to the point of challenge on sight."

"Working on it. Give us a couple of months— and some work that's not undercover."

Larsa grimaced. "My apologies, Vaan. Neither I nor the Lady Ashe mean to impose—"

"Nah, it's all right. It's been giving us time to get used to the Strahl and make contacts." Vaan
grinned. "Seeing a good friend isn't exactly torture, either."

Larsa's face brightened a little; so few chances, Noah thought, to hear reassurance that the burdens he must ask of others were carried willingly. He would be a strong ruler, and do as he must— but it lightened Noah's heart when such small courtesies could ease Larsa's.

"Yeah, come on, Larsa— we miss you!" Penelo put in.

Larsa took her hand. "Then come, let us conclude the necessary business so I can show you my gardens."

He towed her away to one of the comfortable sitting arrangements, and there the written documents were handed over, read first by Larsa and then by Gabranth before being set aside into one of his secure document cases. Vaan delivered the memorized verbal messages too sensitive to be written, prompted and corrected by Penelo, voice bored until he began to do impressions, mimicking Ashe's imperious cadences— and, making Noah's throat go a little dry, Basch's more tired, casual tones, and he thought he saw Vaan's eyes flicker towards him, for less than half a moment. "... so the proclamation of his innocence is doing about as well as they'd expect. Oh, and Basch started training drills with the reformed army, out in the Estersands. See and be seen as General, he says."

"That is the last of it?" Larsa asked.

Penelo pursed her lips for a second, thinking, but in the end: "Yes. Now show me! Your letters made it sound so wonderful!"

Larsa's eyes shone, and he tugged her towards the garden doors, gesturing and describing. Penelo glanced once behind, expecting Vaan to follow, and Larsa tugged again; her laughter rang across the sun-drenched air, and Noah's heart felt less heavy within him.

Vaan made to follow them.

He could not call it impulse, but neither was it calculated, perhaps just reaching for remembered heat: Noah reached out and snatched Vaan's vest, jerking him to a stop. "Hey!" Vaan snapped, shrugging his hand off, eyes sharp and hot, and a quick step back, almost to a fighting crouch.

Noah turned away, to watch Larsa and Penelo. Penelo turned once more, to see where Vaan had gone. Her eyes widened a little, at seeing them both standing in the doorway; Noah spread his hand in a minute wave of reassurance. Her head tilted in question, but Larsa was talking, showing her the tree he had planted himself, a thin and graceful sapling, and she turned again to him.

"Let them go," Noah said, watching Larsa kneel in the dirt, Penelo dirtying her knees beside him. "Larsa is Emperor with every breath. Let him now only be Larsa."

Let him be with one who sees him true. Let them be alone in the sun, while two souls wearied by the world and by each other stayed behind.

Noah could feel Vaan's glare upon him, thick as a touch against his skin, tense as a blow. But Vaan turned to eye the scene in the garden with some misgivings before his eyes snapped back to Noah, brows furrowed. "You really care about him, don't you?"

At that, Noah turned to look at him once more.

"Yes," he said, simply.

He held Vaan's gaze, direct as he could. These unending alchemies of honour... he had thought he
should seek redemption there, in these eyes. But it was the seeking that damned him. There was no redemption to be found there; these children's lives had run through his fingers and he had tangled those threads beyond hope. For them, now, to undo his work, make sense of their own lives where he had made them senseless. The least he could do was bear Vaan's scrutiny without cowering from it.

"Huh," Vaan grunted in the end, and turned to watch the pair again.

Noah sat at his desk, to prepare the reports Vaan and Penelo would take back to Rabanastre. Vaan glanced at him still, from time to time; Noah kept writing, his hand firm and steady.

It always went like that, from then on. Vaan and Penelo would deliver their messages, with Gabranth all silent and massive and metallic in the corner, or by Larsa on the couch, making only one or two all-business remarks like "I will see to it" or "we need confirmation on this" or "I have the entirety of the Zodiac Spear stuffed up my butt."

And it wasn't like it was... okay.

But. Vaan could admit when Penelo was right, because when he didn't there would be lectures, or smacking, or teasing at least, and those exasperated-laughing looks.

He still wished Gabranth would stop looking at him, ever, or maybe drop off the face of Ivalice maybe, except then Larsa would miss him. And probably Basch. So he just wished Gabranth wouldn't look at him.

Not that he did, much. But when he did, Vaan could feel it, and he didn't like it, it was like embers, under his skin and the air thick all around him, and maybe he didn't feel as much of a ghost in the man's eyes anymore but... that didn't mean it was okay.

And then sometimes Larsa and Penelo went— somewhere. Not always the gardens, but somewhere, and Vaan was never sure if he wanted to shake Larsa's shoulders and give him the kind of talk he'd always dreaded from older guys in his own life, and he wasn't even old, maybe he could ask Gabranth to do it.

Yeah.

But that was only half the time, since, geez, Larsa was all of twelve and whatever else was going on, Larsa and Penelo were friends who almost never saw each other. So that was okay. Sort of. It might also be that he'd rather spare himself Penelo's lectures and smacks and maybe punches and definitely looks for interfering.

But there they'd go, and there would be nothing for Vaan to do. Except maybe bug Gabranth. But even if Vaan could see the man cared about Larsa and his job and making this whole peace thing work out, Vaan still remembered how it felt to be up in his face, hot and unsatisfying and exactly what he wanted, so Vaan was pretty sure that if he got into that it would quickly go from bugging to slugging, and he would never hear the end of it.

So mostly he was quiet.
But it wasn't always Larsa and Penelo off by themselves. A lot of the time it was all of them sitting and talking—well, Vaan didn't talk much. And neither did Gabranth—Vaan could feel his silences, their silences, and it annoyed Vaan as if it was a wordless conversation, an argument, because talking to Gabranth, sharing even that quiet with him, was exactly what he didn't need.

But a lot of the time, it was sparring. He'd sprawl on one of the benches standing the length of the salle, and Penelo would sit beside him, watching. He remembered the first time especially, how he could tell she was excited by the way she pressed her knees together, her feet rising to tip-toe, her hands clutching the bench beside her so they wouldn't fly up to her mouth.

He hadn't really understood what the fuss was. They'd both seen Larsa fight, and they'd beaten Gabranth, themselves.

Then Larsa'd snapped his rapier in a salute, and Vaan'd felt a mild pang of appreciation for his style. And he saw, then, that Gabranth had set aside his massive dual swords, and wielded instead a rapier and dagger.

They engaged, and Vaan understood the difference. He had seen them both in the chaotic melees that had sprinkled their quest, but never alone, never in their element. Larsa shone, quick and fluid, and Vaan was caught between disdain for the flourishes—not suited to a pirate's life, though temptingly stylish—and a grudging admiration for the obvious grace.

It was Gabranth who drew his attention, though. Less graceful than Larsa with the rapier, but powerful, powerful and precise. Vaan could see him pulling his blows—but only slightly, judging them exactly to injure pride rather than flesh, letting Larsa know his mistakes. The man had a presence in battle, even without his giant blades, a force to be reckoned with. He reminded Vaan of Basch only a little—both shared the quiet stalker's style, sitting strangely on their frames. Vaan had expected Basch to be a berserker when they'd first met, by his breadth and the smoulder in his eyes—charging into battle, huge and swinging. It wasn't until later that he had begun to realize the smoulder was dampened by sadness, and lines of weary patience etched into his face, and Basch could wait outside an opponent's reach forever.

But there was something different about the way Gabranth fought—something made of intensity and power, something leaping and huge. Seeing him fight made Vaan realize how much *control* Basch had—because he could see the edge of it thinning on Gabranth, and it made him look dangerous out there on the salle floor.

And Vaan was surprised to realize that as far as Larsa's safety was concerned, this did not bother him at all.

It had been a frustrating Senate session, and Noah was still mulling over certain responses—*what* was Ladare up to?—and Gelmes' quiet worried him; he could sense the slyness of the man and nothing to link it to—such that he did not recall until reaching his office that Vaan and Penelo were to arrive that day.

He found them waiting, Penelo sitting in front of his desk, and Vaan—at his desk, in the only other chair.
Noah's eyebrow twitched up. Vaan threw him a look—maybe challenge, maybe just the usual thick, unvoiced tension. Noah let him.

It had grown late; by the time reports were delivered all around it was deep night. Vaan and Penelo were distributed about the Imperial apartments, in the guest bedrooms, and Noah lay awake late into the night, thinking.

Scientists.

They were missing scientists.

Betherel's contacts, missing; or their colleagues. Not many, but it was not hard for a handful of scientists to vanish, in Archades. And what had they taken with them? A material audit, then. But the scientists were a dangerous variable for their knowledge alone, wherever they had gone.

Gil unaccounted for, people disappeared, no links to Ladare unearthed, and Noah lay awake, feeling it fraying in his hands. Aldebrand's operation they had at least uncovered, and left it undisturbed for now, to see how far the scheme had gone. The treaty proceeded; the Ninth Division doing its work among the people, spreading the right information, the right opinions.

But Draklor, that den of the Bunanas, remained a mystery.

He got little sleep that night.

In the morning, Vaan and Penelo joined him and Larsa at morning sparring.

Larsa chose the rapier again; the weapon was as his native element, flowing out of his arm as if no difference existed between the boy and the blade. Even Gabranth could not always match him at it; and as the boy grew his grace would be compounded upon expanding reach.

Soon, he would be deadly.

An image of Vayne at his last flickered through Noah's mind: the smooth slide of those swords as they pierced him—

He blinked. It was nothing, and not Larsa. Soldiers could grow shy of the sharp end of the blade after as near a death as his.

He shook it aside, and jerked on his parrying glove. He preferred it to a dagger, to keep his left hand deft.

He saluted.

Larsa saluted, assumed the fencer's crouch, main gauche raised at easy waist height.

Noah waited, letting Larsa make the first move.

He saw the weight shift begin in Larsa's torso, his legs, readying for a deep, long lunge; a risky and stupid maneuver to open a bout with.

Which Larsa knew, and Noah marked it for a feint, translating into a quick shuffle instead, closing the distance fast and safe, and the match was on.

Rapier was a speedy art, and a bout could be over in seconds. With Larsa it was sometimes so; but Noah tried to press him when he could, to try his endurance.
Not this time—Noah didn't catch it, distracted; or Larsa had gotten faster, or better—but Noah misjudged a feint only a few exchanges later, and Larsa's dagger snaked around his blade—a neat twist, and Larsa was under his guard, small size to his advantage, and the blunt steel of the practice blade was at Noah's throat.

"Go Larsa!" Penelo whooped, jumping up from the bench.

Larsa grinned, young and pleased, and Noah smiled, and bowed his defeat.

"You improve daily, Larsa. Watch your disengages; they have become sloppy."

Larsa nodded, still with that breathless ingenuousness. "Thank you."

Then, Vaan's voice. "Yeah, good job, Larsa." Strange to hear him in the salle, where he was so often silent, watching.

Noah turned to him. Vaan had stood, rolling on the balls on his feet, arms swinging in light stretches. A strange expression, and Noah almost did not care to analyze it. But Vaan met his eyes, and the old challenge there, and something thick and dangerous, a low simmer instead of the hot hate when Vaan had shouted at him.

Noah saw it coming, but it still sent a slow thick thrill up his spine.

"Wanna try a match?"

"If you wish. With the rapiers?"

"Nah, I'm no good with those. Swords. I'll have mine. You take yours, both of them."

Noah quirked a brow. But he racked his rapier, taking Larsa's as well. Vaan ambled over to select a sword, testing the practice blades for balance and weight. He settled on a broad sabre, almost a falchion.

Noah took his own practice blades, weighted and balanced as his twin swords were.

He let Vaan stretch and warm up, and glanced around. Larsa had gone to sit by Penelo. She looked game, and a little worried. He gave them both a slow nod, and she twitched up a smile for him.

Vaan approached the center of the salle.

Noah joined him, calculating his advantages.

Vaan had spent all those bouts watching him and Larsa, Noah knew. He was under no illusions: Vaan had studied him. He had felt Vaan's eyes on him these weeks, thick and hard, like a wary hand upon his spine.

He, in turn, had seen Vaan only in those disastrous melees, a blurry impression of speed and untrained but effective style. But both of them, then, working under magicks; no knowing how Vaan fought bare.

Noah had reach, and experience, and Vaan had the advantage of the unknown.

So.

A short salute.
And Vaan was already moving, a jab for Noah's side, and darts away already and around, trying to
circle, and Noah whipped around, high strike from the turn blending into backhand low with the
other hand; Vaan ducked the first and danced away from the second, evading rather than blocking,
and Vaan was fast, faster than Larsa, even, and Noah recalculated his strategy, closing his blades to
block, playing on the advantage of his weapons for time.

Vaan hovered just out of range, darting in to slash and gone before Noah could counter; Noah let
him, studying him, letting him tire himself. His inexperience in fighting an opponent with two
weapons showed in his reluctance to engage, his exaggerated wariness of Noah's second blade.

Noah waited until Vaan had darted in for another jab, past the point of expected counter, until Vaan
had danced nearly out of range again—and then he moved, engaging in earnest, right blade
extending in a straight jab, the extended block, and the left under it, under the block, and Vaan
twisting out of the way just in time—the twist turning into a slash, trying to get behind him.

Noah blocked, the right again, and slid the left, following the sweep of each blade with the next,
letting the swords dance together, each after another, pressing Vaan back.

Vaan danced away, on the defensive—and annoyed by it, judging by the scowl on his face, the
tension in his arm. Good—perhaps annoyed enough to—

Yes, there, taking the bait, jumping in and aiming to counter against Noah's left—and Noah had
been waiting for it, leading with his right every time, presenting his left side as subordinate, and there
Vaan went, and Noah struck with his left, leading with it, snaking it around Vaan's counter.

A hit, and Vaan skipped away, glancing blow, shaking out his shoulder—recovering faster than
Noah expected, because he was there again, inches from his face, sabre swiping across both his
blades, occupying them both for a moment, long enough to reverse the sweep and dart behind both,
scoring a hit. A solid hit, and Noah could see it in Vaan's smirk.

They moved, again, Vaan growing sly too quickly against the unfamiliar weapons, and Noah found
himself close, too close for the broader sweeps he favoured; disengage or press, and he pressed,
against the heat of Vaan's battle smirk, against the uncanny speed of him—crossed his blades and
pressed, catching Vaan's sabre on the guard.

It should have worked, to push the boy back at least.

But Vaan held, and Noah's eyes widened at the slide of muscle under skin, shoulders and arms
bunching, feet planted and smirk grown toothy and sly around the panting breaths—meeting his
strength, if not matching it.

An impasse, for a moment, as Noah paused, taken aback by naked appreciation: near the strength of
a man grown in the boy.

And then he blinked, and split the blades, scissoring them apart and sliding quick behind, to end with
a blade at Vaan's nape.

They stood a moment, and breathed.

Noah expected a flicker of anger, the simmer in those eyes to deepen, darken, something.

But instead, something almost solemn, or the smallest smile, perhaps, or simply a lack of smoulder
there, and Noah remembered: Vaan shouting at him for not seeing him for himself.

They panted, into the breathless silence.
And then Penelo's whoop, shattering the stillness. "Good job, Vaan! You almost had him! Noah, you were great!"

"A fascinating match," Larsa put in. "Vaan, you have improved."

Larsa had fought alongside Vaan, Noah remembered.

"Thanks, Larsa." Easier, then, breath still quick with battle, but voice less rough. "I should try you, sometime."

Larsa grinned. "I would welcome it."

It was the first time, but not the last.

_________________________________

Larsa welcomed Vaan's inclusion in their sparring; he was an excellent opponent. Vaan favoured the falchion, but the last year had lent him skill with many weapons more besides, and Larsa savoured the variety. Vaan pressed him: against his rapier, the axe especially a mismatch of arms if ever there was one; but Larsa thought it good practice.

He could not, with all his other duties, seek skill in so many arts, and so he sought to master the one most suited him, and see that it served him well no matter the opponent. It was only prudent.

And... Noah's duties included also the guardianship of Larsa's person, and Larsa would spare him that, at least, if he could.

Another reason he approved of Vaan's inclusion, for it seemed to do... something... to Noah. Something that made him seem more awake and aware, less wrapped up in his duties.

Larsa found Noah in the study, where the man seemed to spend all his time when not on duty in his office, or attendant upon Larsa. He had seriously considered having the door to this place locked and magicked shut. But Noah could pick locks, he knew, and had far more skill with magick than did Larsa. He heaved a very small sigh.

Noah heard it anyway, and glanced up. "Lord Larsa. Is all well?"

"As well as when last you asked." Larsa smiled. "Are you well?"

"The healers told me it would be some weeks until I felt full hale. All seems on course."

"That is not what I meant," Larsa said gently. "The Lady Ashe sent on her physikers' report 'ere you returned. If I doubted their competence I could always simply pay attention when we spar."

A smile flickered across Noah's face and was gone, replaced with— wariness, perhaps.

"Lord Larsa, what— what do you ask after?"

"You." At the lack of enlightenment, Larsa stepped farther into the room to stand opposite Noah's desk. He ran his fingers across the papers scattered there, picked one up to scan its contents; a report on the military reassignments, with Gelmes' suggestions for specific duties.
"I..." Larsa did not look up at the confusion in Noah's voice, allowing him the dignity to recover unobserved as Larsa scanned the report. "I make progress."

Larsa looked up, and suppressed his sigh this time. Noah was a difficult man to draw out. "You often seem better during sparring."

Noah paused at that, throwing him a glance Larsa could not read. "It helps, sometimes."

"Only tell me," Larsa said softly, "if ever you should require rest. Thanks to your work, the treaty proceeds, as do the military reassignments, and well enough that you could rest, should you need it."

A short nod. "Thank you, Lord Larsa."

Larsa accepted that, and changed the subject. "Senator Gelmes has left to observe military maneuvers on the Phon Coast, and so there will be no Senate vote on the extradition clauses for some time. Will you report this to the Lady Ashe?"

"I shall include it." Noah shuffled the stacks of paper around until he reached a particular sheaf. "I received the material audit of Draklor today. Not all is accounted for, but we have little information on many of Doctor Cid's pet projects. We do not know what things he took with him."

Larsa nodded, frowning. "Troubling. Give priority to those projects known to be weapons, and see to it on the morrow. But, Noah—"

He waited until the man looked up at him.

"Please sleep."

________________________

Larsa had been right, Noah reflected, unsettled.

The sparring... helped. Or changed him, somehow.

Vaan joined them often, when he could, fighting Larsa and Noah both.

It was good for Larsa, to have a different opponent, one not mired in the formal nobles' styles.

And Vaan improved, as well, the remarkable speed honed slowly to real dexterity, growing cleverer in the use of his unexpected strength. Noah watched him: growing, advancing. It was easy to admire Vaan—his speed and strength, his quick battle-wit. The fierceness of his heart, shown clear and true in every angry word uttered off the salle floor, and every concentrated moment as they sparred.

The sparring matches were good for him.

And... good for Noah.

It was a strange peace, this. They barely spoke, but for the language of blades and footwork, and there was a strange heat in it.

Noah could not tell if it eased things between them, or made the tension worse.
But they met, most mornings when Vaan was in Archades.

Sometimes, they met even without Larsa, a silent agreement bringing them to the salle, donning padded armour and choosing weapons in silence, and in silence their bouts.

But it seemed to Noah something flowed between them anyway. Or perhaps he imagined it, in the mire of his guarded hopes, that perhaps Vaan had moved beyond the unforgiving quiet rage and into something that could be purged with words or blows, and tempted sometimes to let Vaan do it.

But he remembered the look on Vaan's face after their first bout.

And always, he sparred Vaan with utter earnestness.

This trip had been exhausting; harder and harder to sneak into Archades, and today they had barely made it before full dark. Vaan was almost impressed, how Gabranth kept managing to sneak the same people in to see him, and no one had caught on. But it wasn't just their increasingly familiar faces making it hard. Vaan paid attention to all that stuff they memorized and parroted back— the negotiations kept going, but it was pretty fragile and tense and Ashe's ministers were very cranky and they really, really did not need to know about Ashe's little arrangement. Or other things Ashe knew, like how not-well the Draklor thing was going. Draklor made the ministers nervous, and Vaan couldn't blame them even a little. But Larsa was working on it. And Gabranth, too. And Vaan and Penelo ran the information back and forth between them, even though it had taken them most of the day to even get into the city this time and sneak through it all the way here.

Penelo had delivered their reports and collapsed on one of Larsa's couches, asleep in minutes. Vaan valiantly tried to stay awake, but sleep pulled at him, weighing him down in the hot, close air of the capital.

He woke from confused impressions of a metallic tang in the air, that sobering smell that never quite left a man who spent his days in armour, feeling it pressing on him in the dense night. He thought that smell might wake him anywhere, now— it used to mean a good campsite, sleep and safety and everyone ready to defend each other. And now it just meant Gabranth was way, way too close to him again.

He dragged himself awake to see Gabranth kneeling by Penelo's couch, out of armour but the smell still lingering on him. He looked smaller in the leathers, like a half-starved dog, with how they clung to his ribs and back and shoulders: dark and dangerous in the night.

Vaan watched, through slitted eyes, alert, aware, awake, his throat a little dry with it, feeling the couch scratchy on his cheek, listening. The faint creak of well-worn leather, and a soft confused shuffle of fabrics— Vaan tensed, but then he saw: Gabranth lifting Penelo off the couch, walking slow and careful with her in his arms, disappearing around the corner.

Vaan slithered off the couch, grabbing his sword belt, and stalked silently after them, willing the last traces of sleep from his blurry senses.

He came upon them in one the suite's bedrooms, Gabranth laying Penelo, still asleep, down on the bed and turning to leave.
Their eyes met, and it was like a jolt, like Gabranth had thrown something and Vaan'd caught it and now it stretched the air between them, and Vaan retreated into the hallway, feeling as he held the man's gaze like a string, pulling them both into the hall where they could speak. The hot air hung heavy between them; the night felt solid and strange, and Vaan felt like they were all alone in it, the density isolating them.

"Would you have carried me, too?" He had meant something sarcastic, a little mocking. It came out — weird. Vaan wasn't sure why — he didn't want to be treated like a kid, carried to his bedtime, and maybe it annoyed him even more now because — because Gabranth hadn't been treating him that way, had never gone easy on him or pulled his blows and that had made Vaan feel almost better, and the strange feeling of something solidifying between them over the past months — something as stupid as a routine, something easy where it shouldn't be — he almost wanted to dare him. Go on. Touch me. See what happens.

But Gabranth only met his stare, and there was that thing, that huge leaping thing from their sparring matches, close and dangerous in the dark, and Vaan realized his hand had grown tight on his scabbard. Gabranth wouldn't — couldn't — break their gaze, but he took a step back, down the hall, and reach to the side to push a door partly open, back to the wall. "This was to be yours," he said.

Vaan stepped forward, expecting Gabranth to step back, all the way back against the wall. But the man held his ground, hand still spread against the door of Vaan's room. Vaan took another step forward, hot and aware, blood thrumming in his ears. He thought he was angry, but it felt more like when he was fighting, fierce and satisfying and a little fun and a lot terrifying. This is what you made me, he thought, glaring. I'm faster and stronger and I want to hate you.

They were handsbreadths apart now. Vaan could see the man's pupils, wide in his impassive face, mouth turned down and tight at the corners.

And then suddenly, it was like water, everything flowing out of the man for a second, and he looked like an empty vessel; if he'd been in his armour Vaan would have sworn the suit stood empty for that moment. And Gabranth closed his eyes, and his voice came faint and dry.

"Go to sleep, Vaan."

And Gabranth turned and stalked down the hallway, all the contained power Vaan had sensed in him enveloping him like a cloak, unreachable and controlled.

Vaan fingered his scabbard, frowning, flushed and hot in the stifling hallway. And then he turned and went into the room, and fell on the bed, and stayed awake for a long time.

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Noah shut the door to his room behind him. Turned, leaned his head against it, tipping back to stare at the ceiling, at the cruel vagaries of the stars unseen beyond it.

It was not beyond him, for all his years, what he had seen and known, to understand the roil of tensions between them.

And it was not beyond him to ignore it, because if Vaan ever understood it would be — more than either of them could bear, and what spare distance he had managed to close with Vaan, what dregs of honour dredged up from the murky depths between them — all would slide through his fingers like water.
He swallowed it all down, down and away.

It still lay there, under the surface of every word and glance and deed, every time they saw each other, mingling with the shades that Noah tried, still, to banish.

A rare moment of leisure: Vaan and Penelo had been smuggled into Archades again only to meet a lull in Senate activity, no crises pending, and a street performance blocking their preferred route back to the Strahl that day. They elected to make a day of it, and spent the time with Larsa when they could; when the Emperor was busy: sparring, or resting.

Late in the afternoon, Larsa arrived again, and they gathered all in the study. Larsa and Penelo sat on opposite ends of one of the couches, talking. Within hearing distance, just.

Noah sat at his desk, quill pecking at an intelligence report. Vaan was sprawled in a chair, hands clasped behind his head, staring up at the ceiling, feet up on Noah's desk.

"Basch misses you," Vaan announced.

Noah suppressed the urge to look up. "I imagine the Queen's new duties keep him busy."

"Yeah, but it's not like Ashe doesn't notice. I bet Balthier she'd let him come for a visit once the Rozarrians leave."

"And he took that bet?"

"Well. He said she'd let him go later, after the Bhujerban mining-rights negotiations. As a diplomatic envoy. Me, I bet she's letting him go sooner. And as himself."

"You presume to know the Lady Ashe so well?"

"Yeah," and Noah could hear the small smirk, "I do. I also know Penelo."

"Ah. Is that not cheating?"

"For a good cause," Vaan replied piously. "Don't tell me you don't miss him too."

Noah shut his eyes for a second against this banter that wasn't, would-be friendly but digging, and the flash in Vaan's eyes that he couldn't decipher: something still angry, something confused, and things he could not name. Restrained, with Larsa and Penelo there, but strange and cutting.

The air had thickened between them, these past weeks, as if the tense awareness of the sparring grounds had expanded outside the salle, pervading the space between them, always.

It was hard. It was hard then, not to hope. Noah feared it showed sometimes, in his eyes, when Vaan would catch him at it and his eyes would spark and the space between them would grow by miles without them moving.

And then there would be times when Noah would be preoccupied, worrying over his work— or he would simply be too tired to care, and Vaan would drift back within reach, speak to him, jab at him with words instead of blades.

Strange words. Words that could be traded between friends, were it not for the way Vaan watched him, the twist to his tone.

And Noah would try not to watch him, or at least not watch his eyes, watch instead for the shift of weight in his torso when they sparred, the telltales of his quick feet, the still-surprising bulge of his
arms when he braced a heavy block. A colleague, maybe, uneasy and tense, but a fellow secret champion of the peace. A capable warrior, by now a competent courier. A friend to Larsa.

Not Noah's ghost.

But there were times, still, when it escaped him, when hope crept up upon him in the night, and stole that shielding darkness from his eyes.

And then. Vaan became angry.

A close anger, personal and alive and making Noah's bones sing with the truth of it.

Vaan challenged him then, sometimes, to spar, and Larsa and Penelo would look up and let them go, and they would be alone in the salle to see what backwards understanding could be bought with blades.

They used the closer weapons then, almost always, dirks and daggers and short sword; hatchets, sometimes; maces; and Noah always with his parrying glove when they used blades. A poor choice, but Noah relished it, the chance to try his speed against Vaan's quicksilver knifework, the intimacy of a bare-handed block, for all the danger of the daggers' quick edges. A strange reversal, as Vaan would often try the doubled daggers, and Noah's off hand would flash between them, seeking the flats of the blades, seeking to make an opening for the single blade he bore. Vaan had less skill with doubled blades, come to it so late, but his speed tried Noah's skill, and sometimes Vaan would come close to victory, and glare, sometimes with something almost like an angry laughter behind it, or, rarely, with suspicion, as if Noah would throw the match to him.

And then on a day when the sun near matched the dry heat of their match, Vaan bested him with daggers.

Noah missed a parry, too slow to catch the flat, and snatched back his gloved hand, aborting the strike he had prepared— and then Vaan lunged, leading with his left, unexpected and unblockable, and Noah stumbled back until he hit the salle wall, and Vaan charging still, straight into him to pin him there.

Vaan's arm was across his neck, dagger poised by his temple. Noah kept his eyes fixed on Vaan's. He feared nothing from the dulled steel at his cheek; all true danger and mercy in this world came from these eyes—these and four others, but now, here, with Vaan pressing close, their breaths near mingling, misting the cold steel laid across his neck—right now, only these eyes mattered. Noah relaxed his hands, lowered his blade, but Vaan pressed them closer against the salle wall, arm firm against Noah's neck, uncomfortable but not dangerous. He could see Vaan's mouth tightening, his breathing coming fast after their bout.

And then Vaan squeezed his eyes shut, and their foreheads nearly touched as Vaan surged forward, slumped down— "Don't look at me like that."

Noah swallowed, and felt his own throat flex against the rock-tense muscle at his throat.

Vaan's voice was low and fierce. "I told you to see me for me. I'm not your ghost. Stop looking at me like I have something to give you. I'm here for me, not for you. Me. My life. My life," and it sounded like half a mantra to Noah, and who was he to judge when someone sought to find his place in the world?

Noah could speak, a little. It came out a soft croak. "What would you have of me, Vaan?" I owe you everything. He did not need to say it. We will never be rid of each other.
There were ties there that would not break, whatever they willed, though Noah could see Vaan chafing at them, at these bonds not all his making. *Proudful strays...*

"Leve me alone," Vaan hissed. "Stop tying me up in whatever you're going through."

Vaan's face, close and tight, was all Noah could see. "I have no hold over you, Vaan."

The eyes inches from his own sparked.

And then Vaan threw his daggers into the bin of practice blades and he was gone, the salle empty but for Noah's unsteady breathing.

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They considered leaving the *Strahl* behind that time; it was that bad. But they managed to find a dingy side lot in the cheapest aerodrome, sneak out of the high city and into Old Archades to find their contact and follow her through a winding series of alleys, tunnels, and detours through people's houses before reaching the bowels of the old palace, where she handed them off to another agent to be led through the servants' corridors.

They arrived, finally, late in the evening.

Way too late to do anything but settle on the couches and get the news out of the way. Penelo handed over the dispatches, and Gabranth buried himself in them, even after Vaan started reciting the other news. He felt the absence, Gabranth's eyes *off* him for once, like someone had been holding onto his arm, too tight, and suddenly let go, leaving behind bruises and an empty feeling and a whole lot of annoyance. Gabranth hadn't really looked at Vaan the whole day.

Good.

Vaan kept talking, and Gabranth kept ignoring him, up until the last piece of weird news. "Basch wanted to ask you guys about something. There's been something weird going on in the very north part of the Estersands, by the border. Something big, but Basch doesn't know what. There's never anything there by the time he can get troops up, just a bunch of kicked-around sand and rocks and —"

Gabranth's head snapped up.

"Did you say— the northern reaches of the Estersands?"

"Yeah, Basch couldn't get any troops out that far fast enough to see what was—" Vaan cut himself off because Larsa, steady, deliberate Larsa, had jumped to his feet.

"Senator Gelmes! Observing military maneuvers on the Phon Coast— it is not too far, with a troop transport—"

Gabranth swore; Vaan had a moment of naked appreciation for the colourfulness before his blood chilled. "It was Gelmes involved in Draklor, Gelmes through his military ties, to the scientists and through them— the machines! He must have something, on the Dalmascan side of the border—"

"Wait wait wait," Vaan interjected, his blood starting to buzz a sick alarm, "is this that Draklor thing?
But I thought that was that other Senator!

"We were misled," Gabranth bit out. "Gelmes likely knew of Ladare's investments, and let us think it was Ladare and not he—we missed the connections, Gelmes's career and interest in the military—he likely has the scientists, too, and some machine for them to work on." Gabranth bit each sentence out half-chewed, and his eyes darted about the room. They settled on Vaan, and a prickle of tension ran along Vaan's shoulders, singing over and above the fear-beat of his blood. "Vaan. Would you lend me the Strahl? I cannot take an Imperial ship—there must be nothing—nothing—to let word reach Dalmasca of this plot, else the peace will fail!"

Vaan stared at him.

"You want the ship?"

Penelo was turning to him, starting with the "Vaan, come on" but that was almost the last thing on Vaan's mind because: "Are you thinking of going after them alone?"

Gabranth's fingers flexed, as if he longed to grab Vaan and shake him, and Vaan tensed at that, like a dare. "I cannot take a battalion with me! This must be done quickly and quietly!"

Vaan glanced around, at Penelo's anxious eyes, at Larsa's determined expression, and oh no. No way. He knew that face. No way was Larsa going, and Gabranth could see it too, because he went on with, "Lord Larsa certainly cannot accompany me!"

Vaan stared for another second. He wasn't stupid, but maybe Gabranth was, because Vaan was right there.

_Dammit, see me. I'm right here. See me!_

And maybe Vaan still didn't know how he felt about this whole Gabranth thing, and Reks was still dead, but the man was about to run off into the desert alone, and not on some stupid Hunt, but going after something from Draklor and a however many troops—and Vaan had been paying attention to those reports, he knew how much money had vanished and how big a hole the thing had left in the budgets and the material audit and what the hell had the past months been for if the man was going to run off and die and leave Larsa alone after all? Gabranth was developing some serious noble suicide tendencies, and if Vaan had learned anything from Balthier it was that that deal was a load of crap.

Except when it wasn't.

And Balthier had had Fran, and they'd come out together, and alive.

The space between them crackled, with their breathing and the tinny smell of armour and the looks fierce and hard like blows, and Vaan's eyes narrowed.

_See me, Gabranth._

Nothing, and another second of tense staring before Vaan couldn't take it anymore. "Are you _crazy_?"

"Vaan...?" Penelo ventured.

He glanced at her before turning back to Gabranth.

"I'm coming with you. Come on!"

Gabranth blinked at him, but Vaan whipped around almost before catching his stiff nod, breaking the
thing that hovered between them.

He caught Larsa's eye, and pinned him with his best glare. "Larsa! STAY. PUT. You are not
Lamonting your way out of here again!"

"He's right, Larsa. You are in no way expendable now, if ever you thought you were." Gabranth
was collecting supplies already, efficient as ever.

"Right. Penelo, you got Hashmal?" Penelo popped the sigil out of her pack, holding it up in her
hand. "Good. You stay here with Larsa and keep him safe. Keep him here. If he so much as leaves
the room, you Sleep him without mercy."

Penelo nodded, the firm, determined line of her mouth contrasting with the slight twinkle in her eye,
despite it all. "Good luck, both of you. Be safe!"

"Judge Magister Gabranth," Larsa called. "I expect a full report on your return." His lips quirked,
captured between annoyed and amused and worried. "Be well."

"Thank you," Gabranth said, before striding out.

"Thanks!" Vaan called, jogging backwards away from them.

Be nice, Penelo mouthed.

Vaan waved his hand, turned and ran to follow Gabranth down the narrow, winding servants'
corridors.

Noah's eyes were wide and he was certain he must be a bit white, judging by the exasperated-
grinning-dour looks Vaan was throwing him as the boy made the Strahl dodge rock outcropping and
skim between canyon walls.

Vaan's voice startled him in the dead quiet air of the cabin. "I think I know where he went. I had a
hunt a few months back. There was this canyon, all torn up.

"Will the ship land there?"

"Not inside. There's a bend. I'll land her at the far mouth."

A hidden place, inside the Dalmascan border—the Archadian side too heavily patrolled, but the
Dalmascan side, in the far reaches, where few people lived and where Basch's fledgling reinstated
army could not yet reach—

And Gelmes had taken something from the bowels of Draklor, something from the list of
unaccounted-for equipment. And scientists to finish and perfect it, and a place to test the thing as they
worked on it.

Along with a military company. This must be the time for the final move, final tests, before Gelmes
took the soldiers to whatever village he intended. Noah wanted to hiss. Mutiny. An ugly word. But if
Gelmes thought he could cause an incident, restart the war, were there not enough discontents in the
military to make the maneuver viable?
Noah spent the flight tight-lipped and silent, planning a strategy. The division Gelmes had been with on the Coast was not heavy with mages; magickal attacks then, and spells for themselves that would then not be immediately removed.

Full night had long fallen by the time Vaan slowed, and Noah's blood beat in his ears at the thought that they might yet be too late.

"I can park her here and cloak her. They shouldn't see us."

"Do it."

When his feet hit the desert sands, he started forward, towards the dark looming tear of the canyon.

But Vaan's hand on his shoulder stopped him with a small shock; he turned to see Vaan's eyes glinting in the dark. He looked wholly dangerous now, mouth tight, eyes narrow and alert.

Noah ceded the lead to him, on his land, his terrain.

Vaan led them creeping through the dark, sidling along the canyon walls; the night winds blew into their faces the faint sounds of men, and a mechanical hiss that made Noah's blood run cold, and hot, and then as ice again.

"They will have posted sentries," he whispered.

Vaan nodded. "Sleep."

"When we reach the company—"

"I do Darkness, you do Silence."

"Good. Can you cast, after that? You are the stronger caster."

Vaan stopped at that, turned to him, for one long look. Then his eyes flickered back down the canyon, and he said, "Yeah. First, hold still."

Noah obeyed, and saw Vaan's brief gesture, and felt the shield of protection flare around him—and a guard against magick, a bubble of strength—a barrage of magick, more than Noah would have ever spared, and Vaan simply rained it down upon the two of them—and, lastly—the battle-haste, that made his blood beat red and hard, his breath quicken—

"Ready?" Vaan's grin was wide and white and hard in the darkness, and Noah's heart skip-stuttered over a hasty beat.

Noah jerked a nod, and donned his helm.

And they ran, startling the sentries and Sleeping them before they could cry the alarm, quick and silent on the sand, until they reached the bend—

And there the scene unfolded: a full company of the Archadian army, some hundred men, and with them—

Noah could not fathom what it might do, but the machine was thrice the height of a man, like a tower, floating some handsbreadths off the ground. The canyon wall before it was a blasted ruin. And standing atop it—Gelmes, and four scientists, controlling it.

Noah stared at the shattered terrain. They could level a village with that—and the Nebra so close,
with its fertile fishing settlements—

Beside him, Vaan hissed.

And then the Darkness poured from Vaan's hands, blinding the startled platoon nearest them, and Noah joined him, weaving a blanket of Silence for the mages, running in Vaan's wake. Vaan jerked to a halt at twice the reach of a polearm, and shouted "Go!"; Noah did not pause, and ran for the rallying soldiers, and behind him—

Behind him, a firestorm erupted.

The Firaga shot over his head and into the ranks between him and the machine; men screamed and dove and the smell of charred flesh reached Noah upon the wind.

But there was no time to marvel at the strength of the magick; the disciplined Archadian ranks had closed again, and advanced, half blind but coming still; Noah cut down the nearest man and backed up, luring them to the bend, the narrow place, where maybe he could handle their numbers—

Be well, Larsa had said. Be safe.

Vaan seemed to know his purpose, and backed up with him, throwing spells to cover their retreat—dizzying variety, enormous strength, and the haste buzzed through him, chills of appreciation and battle-fever and fear as they reached the narrow bend to hold it.

The ranks advanced, only room for five abreast; and still the strength of a company, a hundred men yet waiting fresh behind them, and Vaan was sweating and cursing at his side; no longer casting in the close quarters, his falchion drawn and singing through the air.

They could not hold it. Not for long.

Vaan seemed to know it, too. "Cover me," he yelled, and stepped back without waiting for a response, sheathed his sword and closed his eyes, and the air seemed to quake around him, thicken and darken, but Noah had no eyes for it, he had stepped forward, swords dancing through the air, buying whatever seconds Vaan needed— one of the soldiers landed a blow, a cruelly spiked mace crumpling his cuirass, scoring down his side; Noah twisted to cut him down, the pain a distant burn behind his the cold fury of battle—

The world exploded; the earth under him shook, and he would have fallen, but Vaan's hand reached out to snatch his cuirass and jerk him back and down, behind the bend, because before them raged every hell imaginable.

A Quickening.

Vaan was panting beside him, pale and drawn and sweating, swearing, and the roar of the Quickening made a mummer of it even with Noah a handsbreadth away, Vaan's chest heaving in ringing silence as the pyroclasm heaved the world sideways.

Noah almost did not realize when it was over, the quiet pressing around him like a slow avalanche in its wake.

Vaan struggled up, and Noah with him, and they limped to see what had been wrought around the bend.

Noah's heart froze.
Vaan had decimated over half the company. But some thirty men remained.

And the machine.

Out of range, untouched, and with Gelmes furious atop it.

"Fuck," Vaan said.

Noah had no skill with Quickenings; he could not equal Vaan's feat, and there was the black despair of failure.

Vaan was muttering beside him, unsheathing his falchion and preparing, unsteady, to fight. Again, still, despite the exhaustion, and Noah's throat stuck. Vaan sank into a crouch, stumbling over his own words, the haste still upon him and warring with fatigue. "Time, we need time, just— dammit, just need enough magick, enough for Mateus, Mateus is easy, dammit dammit dammit—"

Noah's hand spasmed, towards the purse he still wore at his belt. Remembering. "An esper?"

Vaan turned to face him, and laughed, battle-crazy, fear-crazy, despair-crazy. "Quickening used me up. Don't have enough."

"I have an esper," Noah persisted. "I am fresh, nearly."

Vaan stared at him, the advancing troops forgotten.

"Shit," he said, heartfelt and melting with relief or anger or maybe both. "Use it!"

Noah clawed open the purse, took out the sigil, and something cruel and endless sang within him—"How?"

Vaan scrambled in front of him, between him and the soldiers and the machine behind them, even as the thing was juddering open, revealing the gaping maws of vast alchemical cannon, huge and dark — "Just— call it!" he shouted without looking back, "Tell it to live!"

Noah grasped the sigil, and the great rasping song was there again, and— he knew not what to do, but he called out into it, into the endless voice just beyond his hearing—

You call me now to live again, so I call down upon your world the endless winds of change and wrath.

The force of the summoning barrelled through him, and Noah could feel the sigil sucking him dry, all his magick: the unlocking of vast gates, the release of an eons-old spell, the call to life and power and then Chaos was there before them and the winds were starting, howling along the lengths of his great blades, and he was vast and endless and the winds came down around them, circles and circles and the endless potent rage of those scorned by the gods.

"Chaos?!" Vaan yelled, clapping his hands over his ears at the roar of the Tornado. "Basch gave you—Chaos?!"

Noah was beyond responding, as Chaos's great blades rained down around them, and Noah sank to his knees.

And then Vaan was there, hauling him up under his shoulders, cursing and heaving him through the whipping sands, closer to the great looming form of Chaos in his winds, and Noah thought dully that Vaan must be mad, to drag them closer—
And then the howl was gone, or distanced, and they were in the eye of the storm. Vaan had dragged them both inside, and there, at the center of the great wheel of Chaos's wrath, under the stationary axis of his fury, the winds did not touch them.

He could not see; there were vague forms crashing through the flying sand, and the winds shattered them against the canyon walls and picked up others, and went on and on and on.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun—

It was over, and Chaos shimmered and was gone.

Noah melted off Vaan's back, and sank into the sands.

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They collapsed by a rock outcropping about halfway back to the Strahl, and it was entirely the wrong side of midnight. False dawn would soon stain the horizon, but right then the night was desert-cool, the sand was soft, and summoning still sucked you dry like nothing else.

Really, it was Gabranth. Vaan had been watching him limping along, mouth set in a determined line, and was the man kidding himself? Vaan rolled his head skyward, just a little. And then he stopped, and announced that he needed a rest.

Gabranth halted without protest or prideful insistence that they could go on.

Good for him.

They sank down, and leaned their backs against the stone.

Vaan could feel the heat coming off him, licking against his skin, haste-heat and battle-heat and the exhaustion fever of summoning.

Vaan remembered his first summoning.

Though maybe he wished he didn't.

And that had been Mateus, one of the lowest-level espers. Chaos was one of the best, or worst, as bad as Famfrit. Nearly as horrific as Ultima.

And the man thought he would still be able to walk. Maybe he had a sense of humour after all.

Gabranth had been in no state to do anything but lie there and breathe right after, and even that was kind of iffy. Vaan had stared around at the absolute wreckage. Not everyone was dead; most had survived, though they might wish they hadn't. Being broken against a rock wall was not Vaan's idea of "lucky to be alive".

But at least none of them would be getting back up for a while.

He'd left Gabranth to lie there for a minute while he jogged over to their ship, the troop transport, and neatly disabled the glossairs. Balthier had taught him a trick or two, at least.

And now, they sat there, almost lying down against the rock, side by side and with the night spilling
slowly away around them.

Gabranth was still catching up on the breathing thing beside him, eyes closed and head tipped back against the cool stone.

"You're bleeding," Vaan said.

Gabranth glanced down at his left side, and a small dark laugh puffed out of him. Vaan reckoned Gabranth was as surprised by that as Vaan was. "So I am."

Vaan eyed the mace-crushed cuirass, the deep sword cuts, remembering the way the muscles lay thin and wiry on that torso after Gabranth took off his armour at the end of their sparring matches; the weeks in that hospital bed, as pale as Reks had been. Bleeding now, having saved the peace and probably some poor village on the Nebra. And Basch's nerves. And Ashe's temper.

Well. At least they were all saved from Ashe's temper.

Vaan thumped his head lightly against the rock behind him, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Come here," he said.

Gabranth darted a glance at him. Vaan rolled his eyes. "Here, I'll heal you. I know summoning takes pretty much all your magick, but Quickenings aren't quite that bad. I have a little left."

Gabranth looked at him for a long time, thick and heavy and uncertain, and Vaan knew what he was thinking, what Vaan was trying to not really think about that hard, because it wasn't that long ago when Vaan had healed him last time, on the Strahl, and everyone here knew how that had ended up.

With them here, in the middle of the desert. Yeah.

But in the end, Gabranth offered his side, so Vaan could unbuckle his cuirass. Vaan tried not to think about that either, and buckling Basch in while Gabranth lay there in the room like a corpse, his breathing gurgly-sick and the smell of all his hurts.

Vaan took a deep breath, of the cool clean desert air, still metal and blood upon the air but—it was something Vaan could fix, could do himself. Because he was here, and because he'd decided to, because he could.

He tugged at the straps, trying not to make the injuries worse in the process. The bloody leather was hard to work with, slippery and gummed up.

"Cut it," Gabranth said.

Vaan glanced up— Basch with the healers, telling them to spare the armour.

He sawed through the straps, carefully.

With that side free, the cuirass slipped off easier, and he set the ruined thing aside. The wound seemed clean, nothing in it that shouldn't be, really, except for the part where that much muscle and bone should probably not be exposed to air.

So he put his hands on Gabranth, and closed his eyes.

Gabranth's skin was hot to the touch, inflamed around the wounds but burning softer with the last bits of battle fever, too, and on top of that the slow-clearing rush of summoning. Vaan's hands were all pins-and-needles already, but they jerked back a little at the first touch, the itch in his palms
suddenly worse, his whole skin prickling hot-cold with it like he'd cast Firagas out of every pore.

Vaan concentrated on pulling together a Cura, and told his hands to kindly shut it.

He had enough magick, barely, and Gabranth hissed as it took hold, holding still until Vaan let go.

They fell back against the rock, Vaan feeling weird and hollow with the healing done, the contact gone, and they stared together at the stars growing fainter in the sky.

It was strangely easy there, with the Estersands' light off-season winds sweeping sand across them and the night air sparse and clear between them.

Vaan felt—empty.

Maybe he should still be mad. Or maybe they just all did whatever they had to, and sometimes it was the right thing. Sometimes it wasn't. Vaan knew all about doing wrong things.

And when they'd fought those bastards, they'd fought together, and Gabranth had let him hold his own without even thinking about it.

"Basch gave you one of his espers, huh?"

A pause. Surprise, maybe, that Vaan had said something to him. "He has others?"

"Yeah. He had Chaos and Zalera."

"Zalera. The Gemini. Amusing."

Vaan chuckled, surprising himself. "I wondered, when he volunteered to take it. I thought it was because Ashe already had Belias and he wanted to spare her." Vaan snorted. Ashe had had mixed feelings about the espers, as with everything else. And then, in the end, she had taken up Ultima. Typical.

"Spare her?"

"What, you haven't felt it, with Chaos? Them talking at you, wanting things, seeing you as just a way to get back into the world for a bit?"

Vaan saw Gabranth's lids slide shut out of the corner of his eye. "It has been... interesting. I begin to understand, I think, why Basch took up Chaos. And... why he gave him to me."

They were silent then, because Vaan was thinking about it, too. They fit, really. Basch had been so many things, and always the same thing, coming back from the dead... And Vaan had never seen a man come so close to death and live as Gabranth had. Vaan should know. He'd held the man's innards together, with his magick and his own hands.

"You speak as though you have some... experience."

Vaan snorted. "Yeah. I have Mateus. And—" a quick dart of the eyes at Gabranth "—Famfrit."

"Famfrit. That was Doctor Cid's."

"...Yeah."

And that was the first time we nearly killed you, you stubborn jerk. Yeah. It sounded half-hearted in his own head.
They were silent for a while under the stars, the time sliding by with slow ticks of Vaan's heart into
the uncertain air between them. He should have been tired, and he was; he was exhausted and dirty
and bloody and he hurt like hell in places. But he felt— alive, awake into the night, Gabranth right
there beside him, silent.

It startled Vaan, when Gabranth spoke.

"I'm sorry."

They didn't look at each other, and Gabranth said it like he was talking to the air, to the night, to the
entire Dalmascan desert. To Dalmasca. And maybe he was.

Or maybe he was just talking to Vaan, right there beside him.

He didn't really know what to say.

It wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

But sometimes there were just things that couldn't be fixed. And Vaan had put the past behind him
before, because it had been holding onto him like a dead weight, or maybe he'd been holding on to it,
and all the while he had forgotten to keep moving. Keep dreaming. Keep living.

Gabranth's voice was still quiet as his words slipped away to the horizon.

"The Empire seemed so powerful. It shattered Landis like... like we might shatter a glass for wine. I
saw no hope for Dalmasca."

Vaan didn't say anything.

"I should not have given up hope so easily. That is where Basch was stronger than I."

"Basch never lost hope," Vaan agreed. This, at least, he could answer. "Vossler did. But Basch
didn't."

"Hope... is a weakness of mine."

Vaan was missing something there, something else was behind those words. But Gabranth kept
going.

"I thought to buy for Dalmasca with two deaths what had cost Landis thousands. The bleakest
bargain. I am sorry, Vaan, that your brother was one of them."

They still hadn't looked at each other, and Vaan wanted to rub his hands against his pants, because
they were still bothering him, they felt hot and wrong and aware.

Vaan stared up at the sky, watching the stars twinkle their light away into the slow bleed of sunrise.

He was exhausted.

And he was tired of it. Tired of being angry all the time. Tired of seeing ghosts everywhere, as if
Reks haunted him whenever he looked at Gabranth, and so maybe Gabranth hadn't been wrong after
all: if Vaan could feel Reks there, and Reks was what Gabranth kept seeing...

Well.
"Do you remember what Penelo told you?"


"I can't forgive you. But... I can't keep looking back. I have to... keep going. I can't run away from it. But I can't... I can't let it be everything, either."

Gabranth didn't say anything.

But then, if he had, Vaan might have punched him.

They sat in silence, as the sun finished rising, washing away the night.

"Everyone calls you Noah," Vaan told the morning.

"'Gabranth' was our mother's surname." His voice was hoarse. "She was Archadian. I took her with me after Landis."

Noah. Vaan tried it in his head.

He hated Gabranth. But maybe Gabranth was dead, buried somewhere out there, maybe aboard a sky fortress that was now a beautiful ruin, or maybe in a hospital room in Rabanastre, or maybe wherever it was that Vaan had let him go and let him die.

Like maybe right here.

Noah.

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If Larsa was wroth with them when they returned to Archades, it was as nothing compared to Penelo's towering and merciless concern.

Noah realized that while she had been friendly towards him, he had never been faced with the full and terrifying force of her worry and exasperation.

Larsa was worried for them, too, but their arrival brought with it also tidings that pulled Larsa quickly away to suppress the diplomatic storm, keep Senator Gelmes' venture out of the public eye.

This left them alone in the Imperial Suite with Penelo, and Noah was forced to wonder what exactly her childhood with Vaan must have been like. Vaan bowed his head and let the storm of her concern roll over him; not meek but clearly knowing arguments and protests to be useless.

Noah decided to follow suit.

He was, in any case, too tired to do anything else.

She laid them both out on Larsa's couches, and a strange vigil that was, the both of them silent as she took it in turns to heal them. Her touch was gentle and cool, where Vaan's hands had been hot; he remembered those hands upon him, too clearly, and Noah tried to push that from his mind.

Vaan recovered first, after sleeping through most of the day. Noah had stayed awake, staring. At the
ceiling, out the windows.

At Vaan, sometimes.

He felt scoured, down to the soul.

As if Chaos's wind had reached him after all.

His hand crept to the sigil, near of its own accord. The stone wakened at his touch. *You wake to walk the wheel once more, and feel you now etern'ly's call.*

He let the stone go, and it dimmed.

*Begin again,* Basch had told him.

Larsa returned after that day had rolled into deep night again, and took his turn at ministry, the crinkle of potion packets sending small shivers down Noah's spine, remembering.

And Vaan ministered to him, too, and those were silent times; eyes meeting as magick slid warm out of Vaan's hands, and how those hovered, barely touching, and Noah would have to swallow, and look deliberately away, because Vaan would not.

Vaan did not sleep that night. Noah saw him between fitful slides into bone-weary slumber: sitting on the couch and staring out into the Archadian night.

Their eyes would meet sometimes, in the darkness.

In the twilit hours of the morning, Penelo and Vaan slipped away, to bear to Rabanastre reports written in Larsa's neat and flowing hand.

Noah came awake, finally and in full, on the evening of that second day.

Larsa was at his desk, writing. He looked up when Noah made his way off the couch and to the sideboard, where tea was already brewed and waiting.

"Are you hungry?" Larsa's voice sounded unnaturally clear. "I had dinner brought. The covered platter."

"Thank you," Noah said. He cleared his throat; his voice was dry and hoarse.

Larsa watched him as he carried the food back to the couch. "Gelmes was arrested by your agents last evening." He sighed. "We shall have to hold elections for a new Senator."

*Again,* Noah thought, chewing slowly. Chairman Gregoroth's death had not been that long past.

Larsa let him eat, finishing whatever he was writing.

"Are you well?" he asked finally, sanding the paper as Noah set down his empty plate.

"It is only fatigue. The summoning, with my wounds... I am fit to serve." He felt it, for all that had passed. Fit to serve.

"Good," Larsa said, decisive. He stood, and walked over the Noah, and handed him the freshly-inked parchment. "Then I am granting you leave. For a month."
Ashe, not unpredictably, was pissed. Fortunately for Vaan and probably everyone else, she was pissed at Gelmes.

Which still left plenty of work for Vaan and Penelo, and she had them hopping between Archades and Rabanastre like her very own messenger birds, and Vaan would have been annoyed by that if he hadn't agreed with her so completely.

Larsa, on the other hand—

Vaan was not sure he'd ever seen Larsa really angry. It was a little scary. It sat on him like a low, cold fury, and all that came out in public was clipped tones and hard, hard eyes, and maybe that was the scary part, because Larsa should have been way too young for that kind of control.

Gelmes, Vaan surmised, would not last long.

But even with that particular bastard's fate decided, there was still so much to do.

And much of it, again, fell on... Noah.

That was strange, too. Noah.

Larsa had threatened him with a vacation, or maybe it had actually been an order. Vaan wasn't sure. But all Larsa had succeeded in doing was banning Noah from the Judge Magister's office and assigning the investigations to his second. Nothing would stop Noah from coordinating patrol schedules with Basch, to ensure no more convenient gaps on their borders. Larsa despaired of getting the man to stop working, and Vaan thought privately that it was never, ever going to work. If Noah was at all like Basch, well. Vaan couldn't remember the last time Basch had taken a single day off, either.

So maybe Noah was banned from his own office, but he was still in Larsa's study more often than not, when Vaan and Penelo were ushered quietly in by his agents.

And Vaan wasn't sure if it made him want to kick the guy or just stare, a little in awe like he used to be of Basch and his intensity. They just never stopped, either of them, turning into whatever the world needed of them just then.

It was a little scary to watch. And Vaan realized that maybe this was how Noah was supposed to be — should have been all along. That same quiet intensity, like Basch, but more focused, sharper. Deadlier, maybe. Dangerous.

Like when they sparred.

They did that, still. Vaan wasn't sure why. It used to be— something for the anger, the confusion. Or a test, sometimes, to see what Noah was seeing, if he would dismiss Vaan or see through him or pay attention.

And he had, almost every time. Paid attention. When they sparred, at least, and maybe that's what it had been after all: a reminder. See me like this.

Always.
But they didn't look at each other with ghosts between them anymore. It was strange, and strained, because the past never went away. But mostly it was...

New.

The same tension still sang between them, except like it had been washed clean, still strange and hot and sometimes a little sick, but living and constant— their eyes would meet, and Vaan was always caught for a moment, because he kept expecting—

Something. The old anger, familiar but no longer comforting; or for Noah's eyes to go all mournful-distant again with Vaan right there in front of him. Something, something from how it used to be before Vaan had healed him twice, put his hands on him and felt the man knit together again, before somebody called Gabranth had finally been laid to rest out in a desert somewhere, by the lonely skeleton of an overgrown Saurian.

But their eyes would meet, and it would be— just them. No ghosts between them, just air that seemed too thick and close, and Vaan's palms would itch with the remembered feel of healing against skin.

And sometimes they'd all sit on the couches while Noah wrote reports, because the man just had to feel useful, and Vaan would tell Larsa stories and tell him all about the adventures he and Penelo were planning, and he would feel Noah listening, from his over-productive corner of the room. He made Larsa laugh, sometimes, but Noah's corner was always quiet, and Vaan wondered if the man ever, ever smiled when he wasn't battle-high.

And by the end of that month, Noah looked— better.

*Basch should see him*, Vaan thought one day, watching Noah suit up for a match.

He didn't look so thin, and his eyes were less— haunted. Ha.

Noah quirked a brow at him, and Vaan watched that, watched the expression change, and realized then that it was like Noah's face had been set in stone, for years and years, and he was starting to learn how to use it again. It looked so strange, to see his face like that.

They saluted, Vaan with his favourite falchion and Noah with a stave, a stand-in for his bladed staff.

And it was all still there, all the things he had noticed before: the stalker's deadly grace, and Noah's chest filling out the gambeson more and more, not so thin now, bigger and dangerous and smart. And all the heat and thrill of it, without the sick-making silent rage.

And Vaan grinned, and went for it.

They could read each other now, easy as breathing, and it made Vaan want to laugh, because he could feint, like this— and Noah wouldn't even flinch— counter, and Vaan would block, reading it off the way his torso moved, the shift of his feet, and in that a strange awareness of the motions, the understanding as it jumped from his eyes to his brain and to his hands, because he had never tried to read opponents like a book before, as if there was something there worth paying attention to. It had always been automatic, instinct, sometimes right and sometimes wrong. But with Noah he— paid attention.

They ended that time in a draw, Vaan's falchion at Noah's throat— and the butt of Noah's stave at Vaan's. They stared at each other over their half-tangled weapons, and lowered them slowly, and Vaan was hot and sweating from the bout, Noah big and steady and sweating before him.
And Vaan wondered, because Noah— Noah looked away too slowly, too.

"You seem— happier," Penelo said one day. They were flying the Strahl from Rabanastre, carrying Basch's latest troop schedules.

"Yeah," Vaan said. Because they were going to be sky pirates: they had plans and targets and supplies. And because the peace would hold, because Ashe and Larsa and Al-Cid and Ondore were all brilliant, and bastards like Gelmes or no, they just kept going. And because there had been no hesitation out there in the desert, when Vaan had known the right things to do and Noah hadn't.

They argued about that sometimes—or, not the night in the canyon but— tactics, strategy. Or, Noah would be trying to work, arranging patrols with Basch, and Vaan would stare over his shoulder and tell him all the ways a spell could break through this line or that, and Noah would throw platoons at him with words, and Vaan would argue back about where to hit and how, and Larsa and Penelo would sit and listen and make the strangest faces at them.

Probably that wasn't much for conversation. But it was better than hard confessions into the rising sun. And Vaan would lean over the chair and breathe, watching troop placements form under Noah's hand, and watch them change, because of him and his arguing and his nagging, and Vaan would just bask in that a little, being right there and breathing and mattering.

And sometimes Noah would look up, behind him, eyes widening for just a second as if startled that Vaan was there, except that couldn't be right because Vaan had been standing there arguing the whole time. But Noah would turn, tilt his head back, and say, "Thank you," and it would twist Vaan's stomach up inside, weird and hot and not unpleasant.

And Noah would mean it, and look him in the eye, and right there under his hands there would be evidence, that Noah would give to Vaan and Penelo to take to Rabanastre, where it would go to Basch's hands and then become reality, men spread across the border so no one could hide from them again.

And Vaan would breathe in the space between them, that heady feeling of being right there, being seen.

Then Noah would hand him the troop plan, and they would move apart, and Penelo would give him long strange looks.

And Vaan's heart would feel light and tight, and sometimes still an echo of something sick and strange.

And he would remember, sometimes, how it had felt that night, in the desert, like the air between was so thin, like he could actually reach out and touch the man and it would be okay—or that strange night, hot and tense, when Noah had carried Penelo to bed and Vaan had caught him in the hall, and it had been like something was about to happen, something dark and complicated—and it never did.

Vaan would remember, leaning over Noah's shoulder or sitting across from him on the couches or matching blades with him in the salle, and Vaan would want to laugh, those times, and he didn't know why, like maybe it would be an angry laughter, or just confused and loving it a little, like the worst and best airship ride, like fighting something fierce and big, like waking up in the sun.

And Noah would look at him so strangely then, and hold still, or back off a little, and Vaan would want to shake him then and just ask, what was happening, and get a little mad, because Noah was never, ever going to move. Vaan had learned that much, long ago, when he had first really watched
the man, really paid attention: Noah could wait outside an opponent's reach forever.

But mostly... he was happier. Happier, and wondering, or waiting, or just thinking, as if there was a decision to be made and all he had to do was reach for it.

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Noah had just finished a report and donned his helm, preparing to go out, when Vaan found him in Larsa's study. And that was new, too, that Vaan would seek him out. Noah had thought the three of them gone, about the gardens maybe, but Vaan seemed to have slipped away.

And come here.

It had been some weeks, this strange equilibrium. Like one long breathless pause, as if they were learning each other, deciding where they stood— but there was no uncertainty in it, no indecision: whichever way they faced was forward. Onwards. To the future.

*Begin again.*

He had thought, once, that the path to honour lay in the past, in making amends, in seeking forgiveness. It had taken him a long time to see that it lay... in the future. In what he made of himself, in what he wrought around him.

It had, indeed, taken long to see. As long as it had taken him to see Vaan.

Vaan came to him, and stopped— a sparring distance away, arm's length and a little more. "Penelo and I are leaving in a couple hours."

"Then I wish you a safe journey. I cannot be there to bid farewell."

"Yeah, I know. Larsa said you were allowed back on the job today." Vaan stepped in, then, and Noah stood still. "I've just... been wondering something."

Vaan reached up and removed his helm.

One sure, unhesitating motion, slow and deliberate. Noah's gaze slipped to the corded muscles moving in Vaan's arms under the weight of the thing—the boy had been tempered, could wield weapons and magick. A true sky pirate.

Vaan set the helm down on Noah's desk, the dull clunk of it against the wood sounding loud in his ears.

And Vaan reached up, took Noah's face in his hands; rough hands, working hands. Noah's breath caught, and he forgot to look away, to push away this child, this boy, this unexpected font of life and forgiveness, water in the desert.

Vaan's lips brushed his. A question, or an answer, to the strange tense peace between them.

Noah's arms jerked up, settled like hesitant birds on Vaan's back, and that seemed all the answer needed; Vaan wound his arms around Noah's neck and suddenly Noah's arms and mouth were full of him, alive and fierce against him. He felt Vaan's fingers bunching in his hair, and his own hands fisted in Vaan's shirt, careful of the heavy gloves he wore.
Vaan pulled away, eyes bright.

"I was wondering— why do you wear this thing in here?" He gave Noah’s cuirass a sharp, petulant rap with his knuckles.

And Noah chuckled, the sound bubbling up unexpected from his gut, light and unfettered and pure, and he could not remember the last time he had really laughed.

Larsa was leading Penelo back into the suite, their linked hands sharing a pleasant coating of dirt. They had planted the last of the fruit trees that day, and Penelo’s face was bright with the sunshine and the simple pleasure of growing things. Larsa was looking at her, and not into the darker cool depths of the suite, when she stopped, her hand flying to her mouth for the first time in months.

A soft "oh" escaped her, quiet and small.

Larsa turned to look.

And then he quickly and quietly tugged her out of the doorway to the study, and back into the sun.

They stared at each other for a moment in the bright light.

And then they started laughing, something relieved and wondrous, and simply happy in it.

It was, Larsa thought, time and past for Noah to shed Gabranth entirely, and be only himself.

He was fortunate, he knew, to be surrounded by such people— men who through the alchemies of courage and will would become anything he needed of them; men and women of honour.

But he knew, too, what is was to have someone see beyond those alchemical reactions, down to the core, down to the naked nature of a man.

And he was glad.

He was glad; for Noah, for Vaan— and for himself, laughing softly in a garden with Penelo, and right then, because she was there and saw each of them as they were— he was just a boy, happy for his friends.

End.

End Notes
**Story Notes:**
I did buttloads of canon research for this, and I hope I didn't screw anything up. Most particularly, I checked everyone's stats, so pretty much anything I say here about who's faster/stronger/a better caster is straight from canon. Yes, Vaan really is that awesome, statistically speaking, and I thought he deserved to be showcased for it a bit.

I also played around with the espers a bit. Per [lj]mithrigil's suggestion, I have rendered all their dialogue in blank verse — iambic tetrameter, which is the meter the Occuria speak in. I tried.

The espers I assigned to each character also have a bunch of canon/character tie-ins. Chaos and Zalera are the most obvious, but there are a lot of other little things I tried to add. Mateus's one spoken line, for example, references Emperor Mateus's famous quote about sin and forgiveness from FFII. Both of Vaan's espers are tied to water, for freedom and change and pirating. Shemhazai and Balthier are both gunners, and for some reason I really like the idea of giving something big and huge and manly like Hashmal to Penelo. In case anyone is curious, my esper list for this fic:

Vaan: Famrit, Mateus  
Penelo: Hashmal  
Ashe: Belias, Ultima  
Basch: Chaos, Zalera  
Balthier: Shemhazai  
Fran: Exodus, Cuchulainn, Adrammelech

The weapon I have Vaan favour for most of this story, the falchion, is the closest real-world equivalent I could come up with to describe his sword in his FFTA2: Grimore of the Rift official artwork.

Canonically, Gabranth/Noah uses what as far as I can tell is twin swords that can be joined together to form a bladed staff. Larsa, judging by his style and choice of parrying weapon, really does use a rapier. I have Noah use a parrying glove against Larsa's rapier for a while, because I think it is hot and because it's a way to keep his off hand sharp, for use in his dual wielding, dual-type weapons. Later, he also uses a parrying glove against daggers, which is pretty stupid and a good way to get your hand cut up, since daggers are way more maneuverable than longer blades. At this point, he's being a little stupid, about Vaan, mostly, though he can always excuse it to himself as good speed practice and also knowing he would never try that shit against live steel.

Mostly, I had a great deal of fun with this thing, even if it nearly killed me.

**Crit Notes:**
So, uh, point the first? This 38,500 word monster was written in a month and a half, start to finish, so I am really not sure how good it can possibly be. But I tried very hard to put a lot of thought and effort into it, so I hope it hangs together after all.

This was also a first foray into XII fandom. As such, any notes on characterization and/or language would be hugely appreciated.

That said—I consider this a redemption story, not a romance. I did try to make one part of the other, but to me, this will always primarily be about Vaan and Noah finding themselves first, and then each other.
First time trying much of politicking, and it being XII, I mean, come on, I felt like I just had to include politics. The politics form a kind of conveyor belt for the story, moving it along, while the characters and their development form what I consider to be the real plot. Feedback on either aspect is very welcome, including on general plot structure. This is the first story where I've found it downright necessary for me to actually make a scene-by-scene outline. Yeah.

This was also my first time really trying to juggle multiple POVs, and I hope that worked out well. I plotted this thing out, then tried to choose the best POV for each scene. Aside from POV choice, I'm also worried about everyone's narrative voices. There are kind of three general levels going on here. One is Basch, Noah, and Larsa. I tried to give them distinct voices, but they do all share more or less the same register, with Larsa a touch more convoluted and formal. The other type of narrative voice is Vaan's, which I tried to make WAY different from the first three; much more informal and rambly. Finally, there are the espers, who speak in blank verse. I feel like Vaan's voice turned out okay, but I worry a lot about the others, especially about there being enough difference between Basch and Noah, and if Larsa's voice is distinct from both of theirs.

And, lastly, I'd appreciate any feedback on the more minor character appearances, like Fran and Ashe. I'm particularly interested in any thoughts on Ashe. She's an important part of the story, but she's out of Noah's reach. So she's in the background, and she has a pretty big impact on Noah, but she's not onscreen much. I just hope that what screentime she has is well! Not fail XD

I think those are the major points I wanted to hit. Feedback on any other aspects is, of course, also welcome!

Works inspired by this one: tentatus est by eternalbreath, what we don't say by eternalbreath, Fallacies of Morning by seventhe

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